Walk the line

Re-imagining the way we travel 50 years after Beeching

bread PRINT roses

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bread PRINT roses

radical simply means 'grasping something at
the root'

Angela Davies

Introduction

Almost from the start…the railways manipulated the landscape on a grand scale. Nothing like their earthworks had been seen since the earlier Iron Age of pre-Roman times. We take the railways so much for granted. Indeed we see little of their grandeur.[1]

My heart is warm with the friends I make,
And better friends I'll not be knowing
Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take
No matter where it's going

This year is the 50th anniversary of the first Beeching Report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, which changed the face of British transport forever.

In this short pamphlet we want to remind people of the world the railways built – through engineering, craftsmanship, aesthetics,

enterprise, and the democratizing of travel. We do this by signposting some of the cultural history and politics of the railways, but also by encouraging readers to 'walk the line' for themselves. Thousands of disused railway lines are now accessible as foot and cycle paths; many more rely on volunteers to reclaim them so that they can be enjoyed again. We have included one recommended walk – the Brampton Valley Way from Market Harborough to Northampton - as an indicator of just how much is revealed when we walk the line. We hope that readers will discover similar walks in their own localities.

Ours is not an uncritical examination of the railway age. The cost of building the railways was large in terms of loss of life, corrupt business dealings, and the irreparable impact on communities, sometimes against their will. But the politically resonant point is that the coming of the railways represented an epic era of mass investment: in the infrastructure of Britain, of confidence in engineering, and an ability to make lasting structures of utility, and sometimes quite extraordinary beauty.

In just twenty years alone, from 1830-50, some six thousand miles of railways were opened in Britain. According to the historian Eric Hobsbawm, this was a revolutionary transformation of modernity which had a profound effect on the lives of ordinary citizens across the country because

> [i]t reached into some of the remotest areas of the countryside and the centres of the greatest cities. It transformed the speed of movement – indeed of human life – from one measured in single miles per hour to measured in scores of miles per hour, and introduced the notion of a gigantic, nation-wide, complex and exact interlocking routine, symbolized by the railway time-table (from which all the subsequent 'time-tables' took their name and inspiration). It revealed the possibilities of technical progress as nothing else had done, because it was both more advanced than most other forms of technical activity and omnipresent… They appeared to be several generations ahead of the rest of the economy, and indeed 'railway' became a sort of synonym for ultra-modernity in the 1840s.[2]

We urge readers to discover (or rediscover) the remarkable story of the railways, to include the people who built them; not just the famous names - the Brunels and the Stephensons - that bestride their history, but also the innumerable nameless craftsmen who made the railway world possible. We are reminded here of Thomas Hardy's central character in *Jude the Obscure*, who when admiring the buildings of Christminster, sought to be less 'artist-critic of their forms than…an artisan and a comrade of the dead handcraftsmen whose muscles had actually exercised those forms.'

In doing so, there is also an opportunity to think more imaginatively about the transport system we want in the twenty-first century. This is particularly pertinent as we face the unavoidable challenge of re-shaping the way we live and travel (and produce and transport goods) for a low-carbon future, and at a time when Government and local authorities plan to build almost 200 new roads, including 40 routes that have previously been abandoned or defeated at public inquiries on environmental grounds. Choices made now will determine whether we are locked into ecologically and socially damaging modes of transport for people and freight.

Transport campaigners argue that investments in public transport, better maintenance of our existing infrastructure, safer routes for walking and cycling, and more intelligent use of technology can deliver better results economically, environmentally and socially. So we pose a basic question: if the way we travel helps shape our culture, our environment and our economy, should we not also reflect on the kind of *sustainable* culture we want to create thereby?

To explore these issues, we call on people around the country to use the opportunity of the Beeching anniversary year to walk the lines, and to organise cultural events which help us to reflect on the way that travel shapes the ways we live, work, love and dream today. Doing so, we think, will do more to inform decisions about the future of transportation in the UK than the confines of current socio-economic ideologies.

Kelmarsh Tunnel, North Portal. Photograph, David A. Wragg, 2012.

The re-shaping of Britain

The only way of catching a train I have ever discovered is to miss the one before it

G.K. Chesterton

Dr. Richard (later Lord) Beeching (1913-85) produced two reports into the state of British railways in an attempt to tackle the problem of an increasingly loss-making industry. The first of these, *The Re-Shaping of British Railways* (1963), advocated the closure of about a third of the 18,000 miles of existing routes, involving the loss of 2,363 stations. *The Development of the Major Trunk Routes* (1965) argued that only 3000 of the 7,500 miles of such routes should be retained. The result is pretty much the rail network that we know today, to include the rationalization of freight transport, which was a major reason for the expansion of railways in the UK. Beeching's analysis found that the system was sufficiently unbalanced to merit a drastic overhaul, concentrating resources on main lines and their major stations, so that only financially sustainable routes would survive.[3] The prevailing ideology was one of *rationalization*: the railways had to be more efficient, fitter, faster and self-justifying – concepts that have come to dominate political rhetoric in the

debate about how best to organize a capitalist economy which cannot be seen to tolerate waste or idiosyncrasy, grounded in neo-Darwinian principles of social organisation and all the problems that go with it.

While the 'Beeching axe' has rightly been seen as a watershed in the ethos of rail travel, a longer history shows that the railway boom of the nineteenth century was already running out of steam, with many lines removed from the timetable, stations closed, and track taken up. Beeching was notable for his wide-ranging and innovative assessment of what railways could realistically achieve as the twentieth century progressed, not least as private transport became increasingly dominant after World War 1. When grouping took place in 1922-3, the four big rail companies looked hard at economically inefficient (especially rural) services, to include freight operations, in the light of competition from the roads. With more goods being moved with greater locational flexibility, and with the rise of buses and the private car, it made sense to re-think the rail system. In fact, four times as many closures took place between 1922-47 compared to the entire nineteenth century, amounting to over 1600 miles of passenger services, with 20% of these in Scotland alone.

These actions exemplify the problems involved when an ideal of public transport runs up against one version of economic reality. The train companies even invested in running buses in an attempt to generate revenues, but the central competitive issues were never really addressed, and when the railways were nationalized in 1948 the British Transport Commission was left to ponder a set of seemingly intractable issues. Further closures followed: between 1948 and 1953 nearly 1200 miles of passenger services ceased to exist, with most of these lines closed to all traffic. Over the next twenty years arguments about the social necessity of otherwise economically unnecessary railways were batted back and forth, even as closures continued.

When the Labour Party was returned to power in 1964 these arguments were re-contextualized by Barbara Castle's appointment as Minister of Transport. While the Government

led by Harold Wilson reneged on its promise when in opposition to maintain most of the existing network, Castle cemented a subsidy policy which kept lines open in defiance of mere economic logic, so that some stability was achieved between 1973 and 1993, especially on lines which could demonstrate viability when measured against the costs of establishing comparable road networks. The attention then shifted to getting more out of what was left after closures in the name of greater efficiency, until what many already recognized as the inept 'solution' of re-privatisation was introduced under the Thatcher administration, and carried through by John Major, her successor. The rest, some would say, is a history which repeated itself as farce, when 'free' market competition returned to make nonsense of the very idea of a coherent and co-ordinated rail transport system. To a large extent, the history of the railways after Major's Government defaults to the overriding ideology of our times: viability is a matter of making a profit, often at the expense of the travelling public who, at the time of writing, are facing cumulative fare increases well above the rate of inflation in times of austerity, brought about by a crisis in the very economic system the ethos of 'free' market profit is designed to promote.

The remains of Kelmarsh Station. Photograph, David A Wragg, 2012.

The culture of the railways

Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel is a train

Anon

There are complex arguments about the interactions between culture and economics which lie beyond the scope of this pamphlet. Suffice to say for the moment that if the word 'culture' denotes precisely those interactions (in the sense that we cannot adequately separate notions of economics as a 'base' for progress and 'culture' as the superstructural response thereto) we can list some examples of 'responses' which contribute to what might be described as an 'ethos' of modernity, to include different views of what that modernity represents. Our brief list is not intended to be especially representative, but rather indicative of how elements of culture dealt with the railway age, in their different forms.

The railways bestride Victorian literature, with numerous references to the world they were shaping in Thackeray, Trollope, Gaskell and Eliot, also Hardy, Jerome K. Jerome, Kipling – and perhaps most poignantly in that documenter of the Condition of England, Dickens.

Charles Dickens was involved in a train accident at Staplehurst on the South Eastern Line in 1865, which profoundly affected him, and which may have shortened his life. His much anthologized short story 'The Signal-Man', first published in 1866, is probably based on an accident at Claydon Tunnel in 1861. The narrative concerns the appearance of what seems to be a ghost at the tunnel entrance, which stands in a deep and oppressive cutting. The signalman receives telegraph warnings of danger before the ghost's appearance, which heralds tragic consequences. On the final occasion it turns out that the ghost is the signalman himself.

As we move into the twentieth century, a very different kind of railway experience is recorded in Edward Thomas's poem 'Adlestrop', of 1917:

Yes, I remember Adlestrop -
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop - only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Thomas's lines seem prophetic of the station's closure in 1966, while they also represent an epiphany – a Wordsworthian spot of time - in which the mechanized world is held at bay by an unexpected event; a strangely sublime re-connection between the railway and the expanded sense of the landscape through which it travels.

Famous examples in visual art include William Powell Frith's *The Railway Station* (1862) which shows a crowded scene at Paddington station. In his influential essay 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' of 1914, the art critic Clive Bell criticised the anecdotal aspects of this work for their *aesthetic* irrelevance. Bell's remarks are important as they helped to establish a formal-aesthetic paradigm for modern painting, not least when photography could do the job of mimetic realism more conveniently. The turn away from 'anecdotalism' towards painting's concentration on its own means can be seen as a critical reaction against industrial modernity, of which the railways were a part.

One of the icons of railway painting must be J. W. M. Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (c. 1844). The work probably depicts Maidenhead Railway Bridge, looking East towards London on the Great Western Railway, the line pioneered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Readings of the painting's meaning include the suggestion that a hare, as a symbol of Nature's speed in the pre-railway world, is menaced by the onrushing engine. Turner was certainly interested in representing the sublime, which many artistic movements have held to be connected to the experience of Nature, although the Italian Futurists considered that railways, as part of machine technology, were the real sublime of modernity. Turner's painting can be held to anticipate some elements of Futurism (see, for example Umberto Boccioni's *The City Rises*, of 1910 for the way in which pictorial elements are blended to convey a sense of modern dynamism), though it can also be interpreted as an exercise in the kind of aesthetic sensibility favoured by Clive Bell. 'The Manifesto of Futurism', by F. T. Marinetti, published in 1909 includes among its eulogies: 'the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with electric moons; greedy railways stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts…'

Railways are key players in the scripts of any number of movies. One of the first moving pictures to be made in France (the birthplace of the cinema – the medium of modernity) was the 50

second real-time *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (The arrival of a train at Ciotata station) in 1895 by Auguste and Louis Lumière. The audience was supposedly terrified by the sight of a train coming towards them, but if this happened it more likely occurred later when an experimental 3D version was shown.[4]

All four adaptations (films in 1935, 1959, 1978, plus a 2008 TV series), of John Buchan's 1915 novel The *Thirty-Nine Steps* depend on a railway journey to Scotland when the narrative's protagonist Richard Hannay is forced to flee enemy agents seeking to start a World War. In Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 version Hannay escapes the police, who are chasing him for a murder he did not commit, as his train crosses the Forth Rail Bridge, a classic landmark of railway engineering.

The denouement of Jacques Tourneur's underrated 1957 horror movie *Night of the Demon* (*Curse of the Demon* in its 83 minute cut-down USA version) occurs on a boat train: the location of the final passing of the runes which condemns the black magician Julian Karswell to death, mauled by a demon he previously conjured up to act against others attempting to ridicule his claims about supernatural powers. The film is based on an M.R. James short story 'The Casting of the Runes' (1911).

The first *Mission Impossible* movie (1996) has its special effects climax on the roof of a Eurostar train as it is implausibly chased through the Channel Tunnel by a helicopter. The Channel Tunnel is, of course, one of the outstanding monuments of contemporary railway engineering, enabling a long cherished dream of a stable connection with the continent to be established. It is worth mentioning here that Sir Edwin Watkin's Great Central Railway (the last main line to be constructed in Britain, and a superb piece of engineering which finally fell victim to Beeching in 1969 after a mere sixty years of use) had its eye on the possibility of a tunnel to France when it was designed as the fastest connection between London and the north of England.

In lighter vein, *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, the first Ealing comedy of 1953, has acquired greater resonance in the era of preserved railways. The story concerns the attempt by a group

of villagers to keep their branch line open after British Railways decree it to be surplus to requirements. It had its source in the preservation of the Welsh Talyllyn narrow gauge railway (the progenitor of all preserved lines in Britain) by volunteers, who were helped by L.T.C Rolt as honorary manager of the group or a couple of years. Rolt was already a noted author on this history of railways, and his book Railway Adventure (1952) was a source of inspiration. (Rolt's *Victorian Engineering* of 1970 remains a basic source on the industrial developments of that age). Location filming took place on the Camerton branch line in Somerset, which had already been used in *The Ghost Train* of 1931. The final act of closure occurred pre-Beeching in February 1951, with the track lifted in 1958.

'The Ballad of John Axon', composed by Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker, was first broadcast on 2nd July 1958. It recounts the incident on Saturday the 9th of February 1957, when the steam brake on the 11.05 am freight train from Buxton to Arpley failed on a steep incline. In a collision with the rear of the 8.45 am freight train from Rowsley to Edgley, the driver, John Axon was killed, along with the guard of the other train. Axon was posthumously awarded the George Cross for staying with his engine, and for attempting against the odds to stop its progress. The ballad uses a number of stanza forms, to include this opening example:

John Axon was a railway man to steam trains born and bred.
He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed.
For forty years he followed and served the iron way.
He lost his life upon the track one February day.

The famous 1936 GPO documentary 'Night Mail' uses an edited text by W.H. Auden, with music by Benjamin Britten. It focuses on a London, Midland and Scottish mail train running from London to Scotland. Auden's poem is more than a description of what happens as the mail is collected, sorted and dropped; there is a subjective element which attaches value to the act of sending and receiving mail, for which the train is the overnight vehicle. The poem contains some memorable lines:

This is the Night Mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner and the girl next door.
Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb:
The gradient's against her, but she's on time.
Past cotton-grass and moorland boulder
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,
Snorting noisily as she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.

Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from the bushes at her blank-faced coaches.
Sheep-dogs cannot turn her course;
They slumber on with paws across.
In the farm she passes no one wakes,
But a jug in a bedroom gently shakes.

Having mentioned Benjamin Britten in the context of 'Night Mail', we are also reminded of his setting of Thomas Hardy's poem 'At the Railway Station, Upway', included in what many believe to be his finest song cycle 'Winter Words', for tenor and piano of 1954. The poem makes an interesting comparison with Adlestrop since it records another kind of incident, whose conclusion is brought about by the train's arrival:

"There is not much that I can do,
For I've no money that's quite my own!"
Spoke up the pitying child -
A little boy with a violin
At the station before the train came in, -
"But I can play my fiddle to you,
And a nice one 'tis, and good in tone!"

The man in the handcuffs smiled;
The constable looked, and he smiled, too,
As the fiddle began to twang;
And the man in the handcuffs suddenly sang
With grimful glee:
* "This life so free*
* Is the thing for me!"*

And the constable smiled, and said no word,
As if unconscious of what he heard;
And so they went on till the train came in -
The convict, and boy with the violin.

The remains of a railways worker's hut. Photograph, David A. Wragg, 2012.

The impact of privatisation

Railway termini are our gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass out into adventure and sunshine, to them, alas! we return

E.M. Forster

The decline of the railways during the 1920s and 30s can be directly attributed to the rise of private transport (primarily the motorcar). But in recent years, and despite some of the more disastrous aspects of the 1994-97 privatisation of British Rail (not least fare increases), the railways seem to be enjoying something of a Renaissance, leading transport writer Christian Wolmar to declare that 'the future is rail'[5]

The ideology that lay behind the privatisation of British Rail is worthy of a pamphlet in its own right, and reflects the continuation of a profound assault on the state and its infrastructure that resonates across our contemporary political landscape. The cheerleaders for privatisation were and are driven by a commitment to the idea that nothing good can come from the collective enterprise of state design and support, and that competition and 'free enterprise' are always the best

way to provide services (despite much evidence to the contrary). As John Maynard Keynes once remarked '… once we allow ourselves to be disobedient to the test of an accountant's profit, we have begun to change our civilization. And we need to do so very warily, cautiously, and self-consciously'.[6]

The problem of this mind-set is doubly ironic in the case of the railways, as many of the early fault-lines and failings of the national railway system were driven precisely by the sporadic nature of their planning and funding as private enterprise. The dash for rail, exemplified by the so-called 'railway mania' of the 1830s and 40s, in many ways exposed the fundamental weakness at the heart of a competitive approach to planning an efficient 'public' service; a debate that has never really been resolved. What should the balance be between state support and subsidy, and private profit? How can the emergence of monopoly be avoided? These remain crucial issues. As Wolmar remarks:

> [F]ar from solving the thorny issue of the relationship between the state and the railways, privatisation has made it even more complex and, even more strangely, the requirement for government subsidy has been far greater than ever before...It was a tragedy that just as British Rail had entered something of a golden age, with a structure that was robust and commercially minded, the organisation had to be broken up on the basis of false assumptions – that BR was inefficient and cost too much – and broken promises – that the railways would cost less in subsidy and be free from government interference...Politicians, as usual, were motivated by ideology rather than a desire to improve the system and the result was years of chaos...[that would] eventually cost the taxpayer billions.[7]

The economic case for the railways, particularly as a transporter of people rather than freight, is somewhat disputed. But both physically and culturally, railways were transformative social spaces which combined social *difference* with the experience of a *collective* journey. We have already outlined some of the more subtle cultural conversations thereby engendered. But what can be said about the more overtly political and economic aspects of present-day thinking about railways?

According to the Campaign for Better Transport, rail travel is steadily increasing, 'with demand for rail now at its highest level since before the Second World War'.[8] Growth has increased despite the recession, leading many transport campaigners to argue seriously for the re-opening of lines closed by Beeching.

Understanding the economics of the railway system, particularly post-privatisation, is complex, and inevitably affected by vested interests on all sides of the transport debate. After privatisation in 1994-97, Railtrack took responsibility for infrastructure and track, and passenger operations were franchised to private companies. As things currently stand, despite receiving a £3.9bn subsidy from the UK taxpayer,[9] the UK rail system is still run as a series of private companies. Analogies with the banking system are tempting; the more so given that rail privatisation was driven through by free-market ideologues who are too often unaccountable to public interests, simply because privatisation presupposes 'solutions' to a debate about the values of the socio-economic system the debate itself may call into question.

Under the present system, rail companies bid to the Department of Transport for franchises to run different sections of the UK railway system (usually for a period of 15 years); franchise holders agree to pay a fixed sum to the Treasury in exchange for running the franchise, thereafter the Treasury returns some of that money in the form of subsidies of varying amounts to the different train operating companies. At time of writing it was not possible to ascertain how much this process costs; but it would appear that there is very little penalty exacted on franchisees which overbid, or which fail to meet their commitments.

If the world of the nineteenth century railway represented a certain narrative of modernity, with its attendant social and cultural impacts (and fair share of myth-making), our current way of managing the railways, surely tells its own tale of a botched and unaccountable economic system which perpetuates its fairytale of enterprise on the back of enormous state subsidy. So at the moment the railways are neither privatised fish nor state controlled fowl, but a curious amalgam which satisfies nobody, and which is sustainable only on limited, and perpetually fraught, terms.

Derelict iron footbridge near Draughton Crossing. Photograph, David A. Wragg, 2012.

Walk the Line

Ever since childhood when I lived within earshot of the Boston & Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it

<p align="right">Paul Theroux</p>

Going by railroad I do not consider as travelling at all; it is merely "being sent" to a place, and very little different from being a parcel

<p align="right">John Ruskin</p>

The railways remain one of the most important components of social development. As an index of industrialisation, they mark a particular kind of modernity. They made it feasible to travel much further in a short time, shrinking distances beyond normal experience. They produced a culture – a way of life – which continues to structure our awareness of how to get from here to there. They generated particular kinds of architecture. They changed the face of the landscape to an extent we now take for granted. They were a motor for unprecedented technological and organisational experiments. In the era of steam they polluted, while giving rise to a romanticised view of

travel. They produced their own literature, their own music and their own visual art. They remain a significant source of employment, though the workforce is greatly reduced from that of the railways' heyday before Word War 1. In short, modern history is unthinkable without a consideration of how the railways have contributed to it, and shaped it.

And such a history is being re-contextualized, as people question accepted narratives of progress, efficiency and inevitability. One example is the recent interest in 'edgelands', and the possibilities of liminality. This country is criss-crossed by redundant railway track beds; those areas where the old (mainly steam) trains used to run which have now been converted, absorbed or abandoned in various ways: as farm land, cycle tracks, bridleways, nature reserves and linear parks. Some have become permissive paths under private ownership; some have all but disappeared into the bedrock on which they were built. But whatever their status – made into roads, grassed over, built upon, blocked by brambles or farm equipment, ruled unsafe, or just forgotten – they testify to an age of public transport which has always been full of contradictions, and often subject to heated debates.

There is a wealth of published material about the old lines, often geared to the reader's exploration of what remains. In the spirit of this kind of landscape archaeology the present pamphlet suggests a few ways in which one might walk through railway history, with larger histories in mind. We therefore suggest a couple of locations where disused railways might be enjoyed for what they tell us about the past, the present, and even the future…

The Brampton Valley Way

We have chosen the Brampton Valley Way (hereafter referred to as the BVW) because it has a particular resonance for our personal relationship to the landscape and history of the East Midlands. Not least, the house we depart from to walk this line, used to be on a street called 'Station Road'; renamed 'Church Lane' in 1981 after the railway closed.

John Gough's *The Northampton and Harborough Line*[10] sets out the detailed history of this enterprise, which is now the Brampton Valley Way, a 16 mile (26 km) linear park for walkers and cyclists to enjoy most of the original route from Market Harborough to Northampton. The BVW passes through tunnels at Great Oxendon and Kelmarsh, which are the most enduring architectural remains along the way. Most of the old buildings have gone, though traces remain: bits of platforms, the site of the signal box at Draughton Crossing, a rusting iron footbridge sans steps a couple of hundred yards South, and there is a short length of preserved steam railway near Church Brampton. The route roughly follows the line of the present A508, crossing it at the bottom of Lamport Hill, while giving access to the delights of the local countryside via intersecting footpaths. It is an easy route to negotiate, though the path itself is in need of attention here and there, and the tunnel floors have a few potholes for the unwary.

Today, all that remains is the East Midlands Trains main line coming down from the North, via Leicester, to St. Pancras and Eurostar. This line was built to the East of Northampton, through Kettering and Wellingborough (whose stations have retained their attractive ironwork): plans for electrification are well advanced at the time of writing. Northampton has always been somewhat isolated from main railway routes, and this was one of the major reasons for building the NMH line. Parts of the other lines radiating from Market Harborough can be walked (to include a permissive path near Hallaton on the old LNW line, still spanned by some fine helicoidal arch bridges), and it is to be hoped that more of these routes will be opened up in time.[11] The NMH line opened in February 1859 and was finally closed to all traffic in 1981, though it was running down before the Beeching cuts. Intermediate traffic was always fairly sparse (some of the stations being a good distance from the villages they were intended to serve – often a bane of rural railways), so that by 1960 the stations for Clipston/Great Oxendon, Kelmarsh, Spratton, Brixworth and Lamport were gone. By 1964 it was a freight through route only, with the exception of a Midland Line sleeper service from 1969, which for practical

reasons ran from Euston via Northampton to Leicester, thence to Scotland. The line also served the odd excursion by the Royal Train.

Gough's book makes it clear that the construction of the line was based on arguments about route planning, financial opportunity, notions of progress in public transport, environmental resource considerations (an ironstone field had been discovered in Nottinghamshire), rail company rivalries, and developing ideological investments in developing an interconnecting national railway system. Many of these arguments are relevant to the post-Beeching era, and the accelerated pace of modern life: for example, plans for the HST line from London to Birmingham trade on arguments for rapid intercity connections, and the economic and cultural improvements these are held to bring. Building the NMH line was supposed to keep ideas of public transport and private profit in some sort of equilibrium. A related logic informed Beeching's wish to close down rural routes because they could not be financially justified, at the apex of a trend which was inevitable once the railways became vulnerable to competition by other modes of travel. The closure of the NMH line is therefore an indicator of socio-economic order in which the idea of public transport has become increasingly problematic. In the case of rural routes, the issue was always one of how to configure the connections between centres and marginalities, as one expression of the debate between private and public which defines capitalist modernity, more recently in its crises-ridden neo-liberal forms.

Encountering the BVW today one is inevitably conscious of the labour that went into the creation of the NMH line, even as one reflects on the strengths and limitations of the age of which it was a part. Standing before the North portal of Great Oxendon tunnel one can only admire an architectural view that passengers would never see, and which was strictly off limits to walkers when the line was in use. The BVW is now part of the Midshires Way, a 230 mile (370km) route for horse riders, walkers and cyclists running from Bledlow in Buckinghamshire to Stockport, Greater Manchester. Thus, a line which was seen

as an important link between different railway company agendas is now a rural relic; its purpose transformed by the redundancy of its original conception.

Walking or cycling along the BVW is therefore an act of cultural memory, and it can be hard to imagine the line's affect on its early travellers. As Nicholas Faith reminds us in *The World the Railways Made*, the experience of rail travel (and it must be remembered that those in the villages mentioned above were part of largely closed communities, where a journey into town was a significant event) was both novel, and *questionable*. By comparison with horse-drawn carts and carriages rail travel was smoother (if still bumpy by today's standards), *and/but* also *faster*. Even if the best 'express' time between Market Harborough and Northampton was, at about 25 minutes, no quicker than the journey along today's A508 (at least outside of the rush hour), when the line was young even slow trains altered a person's perception of the landscape, and of one's passage through it. If rail travel opened up new horizons, it could also be a form of imprisonment when a degree of control over the journey became regulated, mechanised (steam engines are implacable 'living' objects), and ruled by timetables. John Ruskin said that travelling became 'dull in exact proportion to its rapidity'[12] (quoted 41), while an anonymous person remarked as early as 1838 that '[a]t a certain period you are compelled to place your person and property in the custody of a set of men exceedingly independent and who have little regard for your accommodation' (ibid.). Faith sees remarks like these as expressions of a modernity the railways were helping to transform in ways which are now familiar, even though rail journeys have long lost their novelty value. Using a vocabulary ('alienation', 'dehumanisation') which might be taken directly from Marx and his followers, Faith quotes Paul Theroux in *The Patagonian Express*:

> Just as the path of travel was transformed from the road that fits itself to the contours of a land to a railroad that flattens and subdues land to fit its own needs for regularity, the traveller is made over into a bulk of

weight, a 'parcel' as many travelers have confessed themselves to feel…mechanized by seating arrangements, and by new perceptual coercions (including new kinds of shock), routinized by schedules, by undeviating pathways, the railroad traveller underwent experiences analogous to military regimentation – not to say 'nature' transformed into 'commodity'. He was converted from a private individual into one of a mass public – a mere consumer.[13]

Whether early travellers on the NMH line thought in these terms is debatable, but the larger point holds: railroads imposed themselves on consciousness in ways that echo down the years in debates about the industrialization of the countryside. Railways are in this sense linked to urban sprawl, the denaturing of landscape by 'efficient' farming methods, new road schemes - especially motorways - wind turbines, or anything else which is deemed to be *necessarily* out of scale with its surroundings, or a set of values from which we take ourselves to be separated. In this sense, the railways are the original sign of a conjunction between industrialization, efficiency, travel, speed and *loss*.

But this leads to another issue: that of railways as items for nostalgic reflection. If our ideas of the countryside are an amalgam of reality and myth, it is easy to forget that the 'age of steam' was also the age of pollution, of back-breaking and often mind-numbing work for railway and other labourers, of class-bound notions of proper accommodation (travelling and otherwise), a top-down order of social organization, rigid hierarchies, long working hours[14] and subservience to those who knew best how to shape the future. We are, in all these respects, the inheritors of a world the railways literally constructed, and which they ideologically mediated, and our arguments about contemporary socio-cultural structures are carried on in the light of these things. This is why the Beeching report (the notorious 'axe') is both a punctum (March 1963), a milestone on the road (literally and symbolically) of capitalist expansion, and metaphoric of some entrenched problems in a society which depends so much on rapid *movement*, with all its

implications for 'progress'. We are now getting used to a world in which fraught questions about energy consumption figure large when personal transport has become ubiquitous, and when moving commodities, including foodstuffs, over large distances is taken so much for granted as a sign of civilized life. The contradictions in all this are palpable.

Though the BVW is a locally valued recreational recourse and nature reserve, it calls to mind all these issues, and more in the larger contexts of which it is an index. To walk the BVW is to take part in a history – a history of industrial settlement *and* of change – which we do well to keep in mind. Taking Market Harborough station as a small scale *locus classicus* of railway development can pay dividends when the signs of old railways radiating from it constitute a rich legacy of rural and cross country movement. We trust that those of you who are able to visit this (still underappreciated) area of Britain are stimulated by what they find.

Things to see and do

Elements in Blue indicate websites which can be easily located, and which contain additional information.

The Northampton and Lamport Railway Society runs train rides along a short section of line, which can be found at the former Pitsford and Brampton station.

The BVW can be accessed on mountain bike from Brixworth Country Park, which has a café, a car park and toilets. Cycle hire is available from Pitsford Cycles, Brixworth Country Park, and George Hall's Cycles, Northampton Road in Market Harborough (near the town centre).

There are free car parks for the BVW at the following locations, which are also access points:

• Boughton & Church Brampton (Boughton Crossing)
• Pitsford and Spratton
• Brixworth and Spratton
• Maidwell and Draughton
• Arthingworth and Kelmarsh

Limited informal car parking can also be obtained at the site of the old Clipston & Great Oxendon Station. There is no immediate available car park at the Market Harborogh end of the BVW on Scotland Road. However, there is a footpath and cycle way which continues into Harborough, though to car parking at supermarkets. There are picnic sites at the Brixworth, Maidwell and Kelmarsh car parks.

Directions

- By car: the BVW can be accessed from the A508 (Northampton to Market Harborough road) – see websites.

- By bus: a regular service operates between Market Harborough and Northampton with stopping points along the A508.

- By cycle: the BVWay is part of the Sustrans National Cycle Network, Route 6. A route selector can be downloaded from the Sustrans site.

Local attractions include:

- Kelmarsh Hall

- Cottesbrooke Hall, Northampton

- Lamport Hall

Endnotes

1 Hoskins, W.G.: *The Making of the English Landscape*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1955, p.198

2 Hobsbawm, E: *Industry and Empire*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, p.110-11

3 We quote from Christian Wolmar's *Fire and Steam: How the Railways Transformed Britain*, Atlantic Books, 2007: 'A quarter of fare income came from just thirty-four stations (0.5 percent of the total), while at the other end of the scale, half the rest produced just 2 per cent of the income and generated just 4 percent of the parcels business. Only 5,500 out of 18,500 maine line coaches were in use all year round, and coal trucks, on average, stood idle for two days out of three. Half of BR's 17,830 route miles carried only 4 percent of the traffic. And so on.' (p. 283).

4 The original is now available as a free download at the Internet Movie Database.

5 Wolmar, ibid, p. 300.

6 John Maynard Keynes, 'National Self-Sufficiency', *The Yale Review*, Vol. 22, no. 4 (June 1933), pp. 755-769.

7 Wolmar, ibid, pp. 300-301.

8 See 'Re-opening Railways: the case for growing the rail network and how it can be achieved', Campaign for Better Transport (www.bettertransport.org.uk)

9 See http://dataportal.org.gov.uk/displayreport/report/html/8725da4c-fe20-4c1c-8a3d-5afd402f3f1d

10 Railway and Canal Historical Society, 1984.

11 For more details see Geoffrey Kingscott: *Lost Railways of Leicestershire and Rutland*, Countryside Books, 2006, and *Lost Railways of Northamptonshire*, 2008, which contains a chapter on the NMH.

12 Quoted in Nicholas Faith: *The World the Railways Made*, Pimlico, 1994, p. 41.

13 Ibid, pp. 41-42.

14 In writing about that part of the Great Central Railway which has been preserved between Birstall, Leicester and Loughborough, Geoffrey Kingscott cites the example of Madge Sleath, a porter at Rothley during World War I. 'Sleath worked six 12-hour shifts, and alternate Sundays, a 72-hour week, for which she received 19 shillings. On one occasion, in a pause between helping load and unload coal carts, she picked up a bit of rope and started skipping. Some officious railway high-up must have seen her from a passing train, because a telegraph message was went to the stationmaster: "Female porter seen skipping on goods yard stop had she nothing better to do stop".' (2006, p. 134)

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