

# DISCONNECTED!

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**Broken Links in Britain's Rail Policy**



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# INTRODUCTION

*'The only function of economic forecasting  
is to make astrology look respectable.'*

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH<sup>2</sup>

This book looks at the contraction of the British railway network over a 50-year period and its subsequent expansion and development from the mid-1990s onwards. In particular, it reviews lines that were lost and that today would have formed a valuable part of the national rail network. It includes some positive stories where lines have been restored, and some unhappy stories where lines have been lost for ever. It chronicles the seismic changes in the approach to rail planning in Britain over the last 60 years and draws some lessons for the future.

It is not a criticism of Dr Beeching<sup>3</sup> or his report, which we subjected to detailed analysis in our first book, *Holding the Line*. Indeed, it draws on some of his prescient words reflecting a clear view on his part of the railway's strengths and weaknesses. Its purpose is to set out the facts on some of the most significant examples of disinvestment in transport infrastructure from the 1950s to the 1980s. We then move on to record the steps taken to reinstate the routes or the capacity destroyed, and readers may draw their own conclusions on the merits or otherwise of the original closures. We also identify those routes and stations that would have brought real benefits to passengers, freight customers and to the British economy today, and, perhaps more controversially, identify a few key routes that we believe fail the test and would not justify reinstatement.

In general, our aim here is not to criticise those railway managers who brought forward the proposals for retrenchment, for they could not foresee the subsequent revival in the fortunes of the railway or the huge latent demand that would develop for rail travel. Criticism could rightly be levelled at some of the decisions made, notably those on the closure of Birmingham Snow Hill, which had to be recreated at huge expense just 16 years after closure. We should also criticise the lack of strategic direction that was a failing by ministers, civil servants and the British Transport Commission. Perhaps the most significant failure throughout the period of British Railways' existence was that of civil servants and ministers who never identified the role of the industry that had been nationalised in 1948. Throughout the period we review the railwaymen were working in something of a policy vacuum. The main point though is to learn the lessons of history, the most significant of which is that it is impossible to forecast the long-term future with any degree of accuracy, and that this leads inevitably to the conclusion that the only tenable strategy is to keep options open to deal with change that may be unexpected, or contrary to the trend of previous years. One example is the way in which smaller market towns lost their self

sufficiency from the 1960s onwards, and became ever more dependent on a nearby major town or city. Supermarkets replaced local shops, schools and hospitals were concentrated in ever larger units and local manufacturing was lost as Britain moved to import its basic requirements. The story of the Minsters' Line in chapter five is an illustration of this phenomenon and the significance of this change is that it creates the need for more trips between towns which, in the absence of a railway, tend to be made by car on increasingly inadequate roads.

We also pay tribute to the whistleblowers, the courageous people who put their careers on the line or risked prosecution to bring the secret plans on clandestine rail closures to the attention of the press and the public. Without them, we would have a smaller network to develop today.

One of the surprises in researching the material for this book has been the large number of lines that would today form a valuable part of the national network. They might add access points to the network in areas currently remote from a station. They might provide a useful alternative route during engineering work or train or infrastructure failures. They might provide relief for a busy route that can then accommodate more services itself. Or they might serve two or even all three of these functions.

The national network run by Network Rail was 10,625 miles in 2014, of which 780 miles were freight only.<sup>4</sup> The conclusions of our study, described in this book, would increase that mileage only by 530 (5%), and is a modest aspiration that would deliver a big improvement in accessibility and resilience for the current network. Our analysis also suggests that a further 680 miles would have formed a useful part of today's network but are probably not capable of restoration. If the 330 miles of high-speed route are added, that brings the total of new mileage to be built to 860, which would increase the network size by just 8% to 11,485 route miles, an entirely achievable figure. Adding in those that are beyond recall would have made the ideal network size just under 12,200 miles. The actual list of lines we think would have value today is set out in Appendix A.

In saying this, we know (from past experience) that our figure will be wrong, and that the requirement may be for more or less than this. We therefore conclude that action needs to be taken to safeguard the routes that will be required, and plans drawn up for their protection. For tomorrow's planners, the rail link has to become the basic building block for today's development and regeneration, just as the 'spine road' or trunk road junction improvement was seen as essential in the past.



It is significant too that most of the lines that would be useful today are those that were excluded from Dr Beeching's first report, and their closure came later, after Beeching had left BRB. In some cases they were put forward when the Department declined to pay support for the lines concerned, and in others by BR managers who were desperately trying to shed costs to meet Government financing limits.

It is also significant that the decline of the network and its rapid reduction in size took place under BR, while the growth has taken place since privatisation. Latterly BR, to its credit, did reopen many stations and lines, the greatest number being through the initiative and funding of the PTEs<sup>5</sup>. The great surge in demand, however, and the more ambitious expansion programmes to deal with growth have come with the privatised railway, and this too has changed the attitude of Government to the industry. This is not so much a political polemic as an observed fact, and is discussed in more detail later.

#### **MEMENTOES**

So many towns still have a Station Road although they have not seen a train for 50 years. This example is at Clevedon, which had two stations.

*Chris Austin*

Our conclusion has to be that Beeching's 'Reshaping' report was less damaging than is sometimes claimed. The real damage came from the second report, which identified selected lines for development and condemned the rest of the network to a twilight period of no investment or development, and during the dark days of the decade after Beeching's departure in 1965 many withered and died.

It is also worth noting that a number of these later closures were of lines that have subsequently become successful heritage railways for at least part of their length.

demonstrated, together with the need for a second platform at stations and fully accessible footbridges.

The first part of the Okehampton route, from Exeter to Yeoford, is in a flood plain and would require work if it were to become the resilient all-weather alternative route that is required.

In July 2014, Network Rail published its study<sup>110</sup> into providing a resilient rail link west of Exeter and considered a number of options including:

- Providing greater protection for the existing coastal route
- Rebuilding the Teign Valley line as a double-track railway
- Restoring the Okehampton route
- Five options for a new line bypassing Dawlish, a similar approach to that for which the Great Western secured powers and on which the company started work in 1939, stopping short on the outbreak of the Second World War

The estimated cost of providing a double-track main line from Cowley Bridge Junction to the junction at St Budeaux was £875 million, although this includes a 66% contingency, making the base cost £527 million. The cost of a single-track route with dynamic loops to allow trains to pass at speed was estimated to be £655-700 million (£395-422 million without the contingency).

The estimated non-stop running time for a Class 220 'Voyager' between Exeter and Plymouth via Okehampton would be only 53 minutes, just 4 minutes longer than the run via Dawlish. A time penalty would apply for reversing trains at Exeter, however, and at Plymouth for trains continuing to Cornwall.

Clearly, the first priority is to protect the existing Great Western route with its large population centres. However, the added value of the Okehampton route is clear and, had it not closed, it would today be both a valuable line of regional significance serving areas of Devon and Cornwall that are today remote from a railhead. With rising sea levels, and the need for higher levels of maintenance of the coastal route, it would also have had a clear added value as a diversionary route.

Apart from that, Plymouth with its population of a quarter of a million is the only city in Britain of that size with just a single rail link with the rest of the country. In 1968 that was not seen as an issue. In 2015 it is, and a second line is needed, not just because of the vulnerability of the single route at Dawlish, but because from time to time it will be closed as a result of failure or incident, and quite frequently for maintenance. Something better than the present arrangement is needed for the 21st century.

#### Salisbury-Exeter

The eastern end of the Southern main line to the West remained open and has prospered. East Devon and Dorset are thriving and the line from Exeter Central to Salisbury and Waterloo is busier than ever with passenger trains. It was not listed for development in the second Beeching Report, and was singled between Pinhoe and Wilton in 1968, after the local stations had been closed (in 1966). The Western Region wanted to provide a good semi-fast service to London to remain competitive with road (the A303 was to be upgraded and parallels the railway), and allocated 'Warship' diesels to achieve this. Local opposition to retrenchment left too many

stations and a rather slow and definitely second-class service. Gerry Fiennes<sup>111</sup>, the General Manager at the time, recorded his frustration in his autobiography:

'We drew up timetables to introduce as soon as the small stations were closed, accelerating the expresses by up to 20 minutes and giving the remaining stations an express to and from London every two hours. Dorset started to manoeuvre. Keep Yeovil Junction open as well as Crewkerne and Sherborne within three or four miles on either side. Templecombe must stay... Tisbury, of course... I got fed up with them; and they have got what they deserved: an express service far slower than before: and to my belief uncompetitive with road.'<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, in 1968 the best time between Waterloo and Exeter was 3hr 23min with eight intermediate stops. In fact, road speeds deteriorated faster, while rail speeds have subsequently improved, and the railway now enjoys double the level of service – an hourly service to London. Interestingly, the present service takes 3hr 17min from Waterloo to Exeter Central, with 14 intermediate stops, a little quicker than the 'Warship' service of 1968 and just 12 minutes longer than the 'Atlantic Coast Express' in 1959, which made just two stops at Salisbury and Sidmouth Junction. The market is probably large enough now to contemplate two trains an hour, one fast and one semi-fast, to meet local and long-distance markets, not only to London but also for South Coast destinations via Salisbury.

The right decision was taken to retain the line in the 1960s, and only with the benefit of hindsight could one criticise the lack of capacity resulting from the singling. In 1968 nobody expected the business to grow, and everyone thought, together with Gerry Fiennes, that the A303 would make further inroads into rail passenger numbers.

The pattern of loops left was matched to the requirements of a locomotive-hauled 2-hourly service, a solution designed for the technology of the time, but setting the service pattern in aspic. More frequent services required the additional loop at Tisbury, while the newer generation of Class 159 units, with faster acceleration, meant that the loops were in the wrong place. This has been addressed with a new 3-mile loop at Axminster, but inevitably further increases in services or the next generation of trains will mean more investment in future capacity.

This was a feature common to all the singling schemes such as the Cotswold line, East Suffolk, Bolton-Blackburn and the Glasgow & South Western route via Dumfries. All have proved inadequate and significant investment in the first and last have been needed to meet the requirements of today's business (and in the case of the Cotswold line, more is needed to complete the redoubling between Evesham and Norton Junction, and Wolvercote to Charlbury).

#### \* Through the Vale of Evesham: Cheltenham-Honeybourne-Stratford \*

The lost opportunities of Cheltenham's stations are set out in Chapter 10, but the route to Honeybourne and Stratford is a story of incompetence and prevarication that would strain credulity, even as an episode of *Yes, Minister*.

Like the Great Central, the Great Western's route from Cheltenham to Birmingham via Stratford-upon-Avon was a late

arrival on the scene, opening throughout in 1906, with through expresses starting in 1910. It was one of a series of cut-off lines in which the company invested to reduce journey times and provide for expanding business. Like the Great Central, it was a competitive route designed to give the company an edge over a rival, in this case the Midland Railway.

In terms of intermediate traffic, the new line only served a string of small villages in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, although Broadway generated quite a bit of traffic for the local auto-train. However, it was as a through route from the West Midlands to South Wales and the South West that the line had real value. While not a fast route, it provided plenty of capacity and avoided the constraint of the Lickey incline on the Midland route. While linked to the North Warwickshire line, the through trains ran via the Hatton north curve, giving them a fast run into Birmingham over the four-track section from Lapworth. Its high point was in the 1930s when it carried a substantial service of expresses from Birmingham and Wolverhampton to the West Country and South Wales, some of the latter being operated by the streamlined Great Western diesel railcars. Between 1952 and 1962 'The Cornishman' used the route between Wolverhampton and Penzance.

Local stations on the route south of Honeybourne had closed in 1960, with the through express trains, including 'The Cornishman', being rerouted via the Midland route in 1962. The residual through passenger service on the line (two trains a day each way between Leamington Spa and Gloucester) was finally withdrawn in 1968, with

the useful Worcester-Honeybourne-Stratford service coming off in 1969. By 1971, though, the route was still being used by five freight trains daily each way and was a diversionary route for passenger trains between Cheltenham and Birmingham while engineering work was taking place on the route via the Lickey incline. With the freight contracts then in place, a future for the line was seen at least until 1974. Other developments on the Lickey route were the planned introduction of HSTs on the cross-country service, with a 125mph capability, and the expected subsequent introduction of the gas-turbine APT with a capability of 155mph. The West Midlands PTE had also started to plan the cross-city service, originally intended to run from Lichfield to Frankley, but later cut back to Longbridge, with some trains going through to Redditch. All these developments meant that capacity on the Midland route was going to be tight.

In September 1971 minds were concentrated by a proposal from the Department of the Environment to use part of the line at the southern end for a Cheltenham relief road. For BR, closure of the line would mean a grant of £136,000 from Government for eliminating the surplus capacity, £104,000 for the scrap value of the

#### CORNISHMAN AT CHELTENHAM

Coming off the Stratford line at Lansdown Junction in June 1960 behind No 5031 *Totnes Castle* of Stafford Road shed, this express has come from Wolverhampton Low Level and is going to Penzance. It is taking the line towards Gloucester, and the diverging route in the foreground is that for Andoversford and Kingham. *John C. Baker*

