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A reversal for the great railway robbery



By Matthew Engel

The 50th anniversary of Beeching is being marked in surprising fashion

This week Bruce Reynolds, supposed mastermind of the Great Train Robbery, Britain's most resonant non-murderous crime of the 20th century, died – a few months before its 50th anniversary in August.

This month comes the 50th anniversary of the Beeching report, produced by Richard Beeching, the chairman of British Railways, which proposed and secured the slashing of railway mileage by a third, and the closure of 2,000 stations.

Despite its violence, the robbery is remembered as a jolly caper. Beeching, however, has been damned in folk memory as the evil genius who wrecked our trains. When I started telling people I was writing a history of the railways, many responded: “Oh, you mean Beeching!” – as though nothing else had ever happened.

By pure chance, the date is being marked in an unexpected and unprecedented fashion: the reopening of a rural branch line from the bottom up. In the years since it was expelled from the national network, the Swanage Railway has been delighting visitors to Dorset as one of the most enterprising of the 150-odd private heritage lines in the British Isles (as many as the rest of Europe put together).

Now it has secured a grant to reconnect its line to the system and run trains into Wareham station for connections to Bournemouth, London and the world. The aim, after what the railway company's chairman Peter Sills calls “a soft opening”, is a full year-round service within four years. No outsider has attempted anything like this since (another anniversary) 1953, when Stanley Holloway led a group of villagers in a similar escapade in *The Tenthed Thunderbolt*. And that was only a film.

Lord Beeching, as he inevitably became, is unavailable for comment, having died in 1985. He would not be happy. He was a physicist with an accountant's mind, plucked by the government for this specific task from the corporate ladder at the old monolith, ICI. It is fair to say that an accountant's mind was what the nationalised railways needed in 1963.

His report was received with something approaching rapture by Westminster and the press, and phlegmatic acceptance by passengers. “Modernisation” was the buzz word of the time.

Out with fuddy-duddy trains! In with the spanking new motorways!

Indeed, many of the lines that were axed should have gone decades earlier or, better still, never have been built. The problem, which has had catastrophic consequences for Britain's economy and infrastructure, is that while Beeching thought he knew what the railways should not be doing, he had no vision of what they should do. His later vilification was not unjust.

He envisaged the continued rise in car usage, but not its consequences in terms of congestion. Thus he closed commuter routes into leading provincial cities that several of them are now recreating, at vast expense, as tram lines. He closed the Great Central Main Line from Marylebone, against little opposition. Had it survived, the planned High Speed 2 route would be largely irrelevant.

Beeching also wanted to axe the North London Line, linchpin of the triumphant new Overground. As late as 1981, long retired, he called for the closure of the main line from Newcastle to Edinburgh, which bordered on lunacy. And he certainly did not see how important a railway line was to a seaside town such as Swanage. Nor did government.

Oddly, Swanage was not on the original hit list – the bus service was considered too useless to make closure feasible. But in 1972 Beeching's successors got rid of it. Mr Sills, aged 14, was on the last train to Wareham with his dad, who told him he would never have the chance to make that journey again.

It was like a soldier being shot just before the armistice. By this time closures had virtually ceased, and the English railway system (less true in Scotland and Wales) has remained almost wholly preserved as a pickle ever since. Since privatisation in the 1990s the processes of either closing a line or, worse, reopening one have grown convoluted to the point of near impossibility. Swanage is feasible only because of a very rare degree of agreement by "stakeholders" – including regional train operator South West Trains, because its stretch through Wareham is, unusually, not overcrowded and it could do with the extra business from a feeder line.

What also seems unique is that, after the initial investment, Mr Sills intends to run the business without handouts. This really is what Prime Minister David Cameron would call the Big Society, if he dared use the phrase these days. One factor is that the line will have old rolling stock that is far more flexible than the modern equivalent: if the train needs four carriages on a summer Saturday, fine; ditto, in midwinter, if it needs only one.

Another factor is that the business plan depends on a core of paid staff being supported by hundreds of volunteers ("properly qualified", says Mr Sills hastily), including guards and signallers. Anyone who has watched the active pensioners who run Britain's heritage lines will not worry about their conscientiousness. But one can imagine one lot of stakeholders, the rail unions, growing rather agitated if this marvellous idea spreads too far.

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