

The ghost of Beeching still haunts rail

Network may appear to be thriving but will HS2 push it off track? asks Andrew Gilligan.



Public spending on the railways last year, including the Underground, was at least £7.6billion Photo: Reuters

By Andrew Gilligan

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Over the Science Museum audience, lit as unflatteringly as possible, loomed a vast picture of Dr Richard Beeching: bald, double-chinned, amply-waistcoated, a nasty smirk on his face as he held up the most notorious document in the history of British railways.

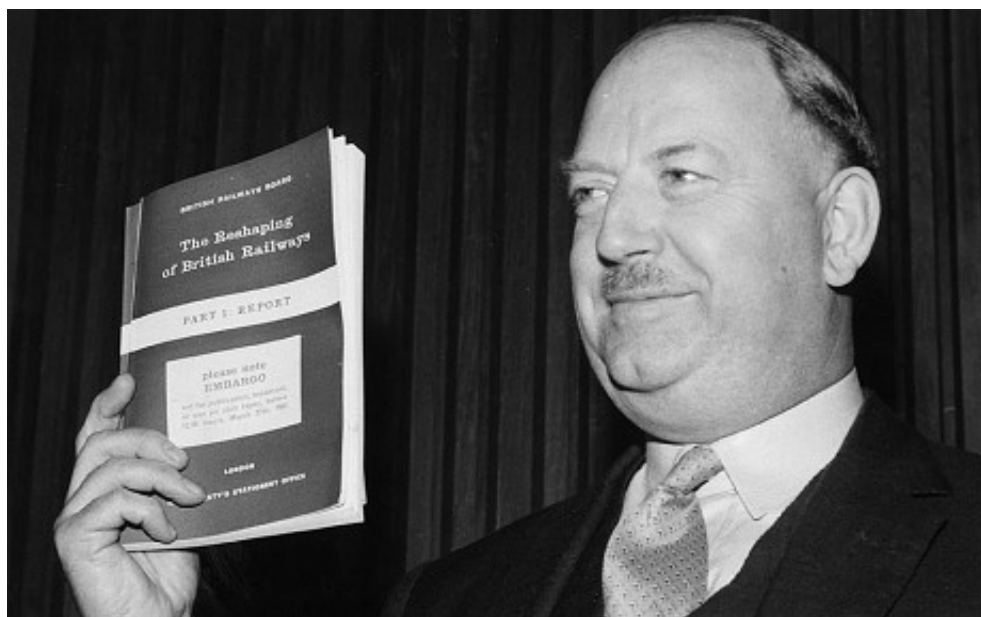
Almost precisely 50 years since the Beeching Report was published, the crowd, from the Railfuture campaign group, had gathered to hiss the devil and celebrate the extraordinary turnaround in the railways' fortunes since the dark days of his cuts.

Michael Palin, the former Monty Python star, called the report, which recommended the closure of more than 3,000 miles of track, "infrastructural vandalism" that left a "psychological and emotional scar" on the country.

Beeching, he said, "ignored the special place of the railways in British lives" and failed to realise that "hacking away at the railways was never like closing a factory or a steelworks".

Lord Adonis, the former transport secretary, told how, as a 13-year-old, he and his friends did their own passenger counts to expose the fake figures used to justify closing the Cotswold line from Oxford to Worcester. The line survived, thrived, and now boasts an hourly service, the best it has ever known.

Sir David Higgins, the chief executive of Network Rail, talked about the huge investment plans — electrification of the Great Western and Midland main lines, station expansion, the reopening of two major routes closed in the 1960s. It was now more difficult, he said, to get a Network Rail apprenticeship than to get into Oxford or Cambridge. More than 10,000 young people applied every year.



Beeching, and the politicians who directed him, saw the railways' decline as inevitable. But it wasn't. In 1963, there were 938 million passenger journeys by train. Last year, there were 1.46 billion, even though the network has shrunk by a third. Growth seems to have been almost unaffected by the recession.

Yet beneath the overall picture of revival lurk some cautionary facts. Railways are still extraordinarily expensive — for both tax and fare payers — while meeting only a tiny fraction of the country's transport needs.

Public spending on the railways last year, including the Underground, was at least £7.6 billion. That was 38 per cent of all public expenditure on transport even though the rail and tube networks account for just nine per cent of passenger journeys by distance, and only 4.5 per cent of goods journeys by tonnage lifted.

However, that nine per cent of journeys include large numbers made by politicians, journalists, celebrities, Londoners and other such opinion-formers. Partly because the fares are so high, rail is

disproportionately used by the middle classes. Far more journeys, for instance, are made by the humble bus — but it gets a fraction of the political attention and subsidy.

Nor does the £7.6billion figure include the £28billion debt run up by Network Rail, essentially a public corporation backed by the taxpayer, though conveniently not classed as such, meaning that the liabilities do not appear on the nation's balance sheet.

There is a strong case for accepting rail's disproportionate share of public spending: it is significantly cleaner, safer and less disruptive than road traffic. In cities at least, it is hard to see how roads could ever cater for the growth in demand.

But the railways' absurd structure and the high salaries of their private managers make for the worst of all worlds: very high fares, yet also near-record levels of public subsidy, and improvements that are costly and slow. For a decade after privatisation, the consistent investment under British Rail ground to a halt. Virtually no new trains were bought and little was done to increase capacity. The improvements Higgins boasted of are the first significant schemes in almost 20 years, and will cost taxpayers far more than under British Rail.

And nor does the calculus include the white elephant in the room: HS2, the high-speed train from London to the West Midlands and North, which will add at least £34billion to a public debt that David Cameron is supposed to be trying to cut.

HS2 largely survived a High Court challenge last week, if only by some of the most contorted reasoning ever seen in a British courtroom.

Opponents argued that the Government had not performed a proper consultation, seriously evaluated the alternatives or looked fully at the environmental impact before deciding to proceed with the scheme.

Mr Justice Ouseley essentially agreed, but said it did not matter because the Government's actions were not really a decision to proceed at all. Meanwhile, on the steps of the court, the rail minister, Simon Burns, was proclaiming it the "green light" for HS2, which would now "press ahead without delay".

"It is completely bizarre," said Martin Tett, the leader of Buckinghamshire county council, which opposes the scheme. "For all who watched the Cabinet announcing the routes to Manchester and Leeds only a few weeks ago the claim, accepted by the judge, that there has been 'no decision' feels like some kind of parallel universe. We will obviously appeal this ruling, as it defies common sense."

Some of the campaigners who fought hardest to save the railway after Beeching are deeply worried that HS2 will undermine not just the finances, but the entire rationale of subsidised public transport. John Whitelegg, the professor of transport at Liverpool John Moores University, led the successful campaign against the last major proposed railway closure, of the Settle-Carlisle line, in the mid-1980s.

For Britain's railways, that was perhaps the key turning point. Now, however, Whitelegg is pessimistic about the future.

“High-speed rail is a rich person's folly,” he says. “Spending public money on something that simply will not be used by the bottom 50 per cent of income bands is a reverse Robin Hood strategy, a socially regressive project to transfer cash from poor to rich.”

The billions, he says, would be far better spent on improvements to the humbler local services that people actually use. Instead, however, local buses — almost entirely unnoticed by the London media — are experiencing a Beeching of their own as subsidies and services are slashed to pay for HS2 and other vanity items.

In the 50th year of the Beeching report, there's another railway document with more ominous parallels for the present. In 1955, the Government published a railway “Modernisation Plan.” Vast sums were invested in the wrong schemes — huge freight marshalling yards when freight traffic was disappearing, first-generation diesels that kept breaking down.

Aghast at the waste, the Government brought in an “efficiency expert” to chop back the railways. His name was Dr Richard Beeching. Let's hope history doesn't repeat itself.

