

Rail freight in Britain: shaped by Beeching, despite his reputation

Freight companies say man whose report axed passenger lines was on the right track when it came to containers

Gwyn Topham, transport correspondent
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Rail freight in Britain has been revolutionised by containers, as Beeching wanted. Photograph: Colin Garratt/Corbis

The damage wrought by the Beeching report is an article of faith among rail enthusiasts, not to mention millions of would-be passengers living near branch lines closed down its wake.

But within one section of the rail industry, there is a great degree of appreciation for other foundations that Dr Richard Beeching laid even as he brandished his axe, 50 years ago this month. That may seem heretical to many: at an event held by the Campaign for Better Transport at the Science Museum in London last week, its president, **Michael Palin**, said Beeching "left a psychological and environmental scar unmatched by the scaling down of any other industry."

Palin was pleased to note a mark of rail renaissance: that he now sees freight trains go past his Hampstead home bearing the logo of Eddie Stobart, a firm first associated with trucks on motorways.

Yet those involved in rail freight say that this is because of, not in spite of, Beeching. This, for once, was Beeching the visionary, who dramatically modernised the service and, they say, championed freight traffic as all-important to the future of the railways as a nationwide system.

Archive footage of Beeching himself shows a portly man, bald bar a slicked comb-over, grey at the temples, with what rail fans might not hesitate to describe as a Hitler moustache. In a crude public information film that now seems faintly ludicrous, he thanks his audience for watching with a smile reminiscent of Gordon Brown's infamous effort on YouTube, before cutting to images of coal wagons in sidings. "Waiting," he intones. "Waiting."

The wagons, affirmed Beeching, underlined what was wrong with the network: an old-fashioned, complicated structure whereby each unit was laboriously reattached to a train and which meant that goods faced a long, stop-start journey to their eventual destinations. In the brave new world of motorways – at that point unclogged – the lithe lorry was an easy winner.

Instead, he argued, quicker, higher capacity trains were needed, serving the main routes, transporting greater loads to hubs – something that could be done not on traditional wagons but with new supertrains able to be loaded with containers.

Philippa Edmunds, manager of Freight on Rail, says: "Beeching is a much maligned figure for what he did to passenger rail services. It's easy to forget that he dramatically modernised freight, with containerisation and the promotion of rail for long-distance haulage. It's a system which has served the industry well and allowed it to thrive."

According to Lindsay Durham, head of strategy at Freightliner, the evolution of freight transport on rail has unfolded partly according to Beeching's vision in terms of direct, high-capacity transport of goods to markets. Only now, instead of that being primarily an internal exchange, the prevailing traffic in Britain 50 years on is in containers unloaded from abroad at our major ports.

The former transport secretary Andrew Adonis says his earliest experience of politics was due to Beeching, as a schoolboy outraged by the threatened closure of his local line. He later expanded the line when he was in government. Adonis has a more nuanced view now: he believes the retrenchment imposed by Beeching was inevitable at the time, even if the axe was wielded more brutally than necessary. "Even Beeching's bitterest enemy should recognise he was visionary on the reform of freight transit."

Rail freight's supporters say it offers a reliable, cheaper alternative to lorries. In the past five years, even in a time of recession, consumer rail freight has grown by 29%.

Edmunds adds: "One of Beeching's legacies is a rail freight sector that can transport goods in a cost-effective way, helping tackle road congestion and reduce the environmental impact of haulage. He recognised that it needed to be containerised, and that different modes should play to their strengths, with rail doing the long haul and roads taking over the end. You needed economies of scale – a trainload going to one hub was more practical than a wagon load."

Despite Beeching's freight success, most will still agree with sentiments expressed at the CBT's London event by Lord (Richard Faulkner), co-author of *Holding the Line*, who raged against the selling off of railway land that for ever fragmented the network: "That remains the main Beeching legacy, for which I can't forgive him."

Yet some are wistful for the other Beeching. Edmunds claims planning constraints are blocking vital infrastructure, such as new interchanges, that could help rail freight: "Government now needs to support the industry and help it grow."

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