

Rail lines chopped by Beeching's axe are being brought back to life



Alton railway station in Staffordshire is now owned by the Landmark Trust Dave Thompson/FA

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From the Scottish Borders to the West Country, via aspiring commuter towns in between, engineers are working to reopen rural branch lines severed by the Beeching Axe 50 years ago.

Lines previously abandoned to nature are being revived by local authorities seeking to relieve congestion on the roads and restore public transport. Figures published last week showed that despite years of above-inflation fares rises, train travel is expanding to record levels.

Where 50 years ago the political challenge was how to manage decline, the dilemma today is how to accommodate more passengers and achieve the Government's aim of lower state subsidies.

Next week, railway enthusiasts will mark the 50th anniversary of the Beeching cuts when the chairman of the British Railways Board published a report recommending the closure of 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of track. Dr Beeching saw a future in which the car was king and recommended that more than half of all stations be closed and a third of the railway be junked to staunch heavy losses on the state-run railway.

Local protest movements were cast aside and the 1960s saw many rural areas cut from the public transport network. But the diggers have returned to some lines, clearing vegetation and buildings that had taken over.

Work has begun south of Edinburgh on a £300 million scheme, the biggest currently under way. Network Rail, which took over the project to build 30 miles of track and seven stations last year, hopes that trains will return to the old Waverley line between Edinburgh and Carlisle in 2015 for the first time since 1969.

In Devon, the county council is consulting on proposals to revive the Tavistock line. It is planning a 9km (5 mile) single-track line through cuttings and embankments abandoned by Beeching to reconnect Tavistock to Bere Alston. An hourly service to Plymouth is seen as a way of easing congestion on the A386 from a 750-house development on the outskirts of Tavistock.

Last week, North Somerset Council hired contractors to clear the disused Portishead line as supporters prepare plans to rebuild the railway to Bristol. The 17-minute train journey would be far more convenient than the hour-long rush-hour drive, they claim.

And Network Rail is waiting for government funding to rebuild part of the old Varsity Line between Oxford and Cambridge in a £250 million scheme that would restore passenger services between Oxford and Bedford for the first time since 1967. The plan to relay track between Bicester and Bletchley would provide a link between the Great Western and West Coast Main Lines in a move which supporters claim would boost the local economy.

Sir David Higgins, the Network Rail chief executive, said that one of the greatest challenges for the railway was how to cater for growth.

Figures from the Office of Rail Regulation showed 385 million passenger journeys in the three months to January, 14 million more than for the same period last year and the highest number yet on the privatised railway. Revenue rose by 8 per cent to £1.96 billion in the quarter.

After a decade of above-inflation fares rises there is still no relief in sight for passengers. Network Rail's blueprint for growth to the end of the decade is based on another five years of rising ticket prices.

Michael Palin, the broadcaster and president of the Campaign for Better Transport, welcomed the reopening of lines. "There was a time when there was a lot of sentiment about the railways and everyone had to have their own little line. Now there is a business case to be made. The more the merrier," he said.

But Lord Adonis, the former Labour Transport Secretary, said that the priority should be investing in the existing railway. "There are a few Beeching closures that should be reversed, like Lewes-Uckfield and Oxford-Cambridge, but the big demand for investment is in the existing network, not in reopening rural lines of marginal benefit," he said. "Increasing capacity on the major commuter lines into the big cities and developing high-speed rail is the key priority for investment."

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 **James Primavesi** 4 days ago
If the lines genuinely make a net economic profit then fine. But we don't need to be subsidising any more rural train lines that only 100 people an hour use.

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 **Philip Poole** 4 days ago
Just in case anyone reading this has a few million to invest in making life a lot easier for many many folk how about reestablishing the Colne (Lancashire) to Skipton (Yorkshire) route and completing that short stretch that is a real alternative to a lengthy drive for many folk. No mention of Leyburn to the Settle Carlisle!!!!

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Mr James Smith 4 days ago

Bit of historical context required here - Beeching was actually continuing the work that many of the pre-nationalised railways had already started when they found that there just wasn't the demand for even a single coach train on lots of rural lines.

Bear in mind also that the railways were losing traffic to both cars and road transport, and that until the mid 1970s freight generated around 60% of railway income. They were beyond bankrupt due to the government not re-imbursing them for the cost of supporting the war.

He made what was the right decision at the time, based on the information he had to hand and the likely predictions. Read any book written about those times and you'll find that he had a great deal of respect from professional railwaymen as he understood what was practical.

Since Beeching, we have seen an explosion in both population from 40m in 1960 to 60m in 2010, and the commensurate growth in private car ownership, which has dramatically outstripped as resulted in massive overcrowding of the roads.

In 1979 I used to drive regularly from Sussex to Manchester and do so in around three and a half hours, without any of the 'car parking' that now affects the M25, M6, M42 etc. Today I wouldn't dream of driving that distance and regularly jump on a Virgin, which does the job perfectly.

The challenge for local services is to provide a service that gets people there as quickly as a car, which for many rural lines isn't going to happen. My daily (18 mile) commute to Brighton is 35 minutes by car, but even if they re-instated the old rail line, I'd have a 15 minute drive to the nearest station, plus all the waiting around for a train, followed by a half hour journey.

It's not going to happen, so the railway needs to focus on mid-range journeys, and increase capacity so that a single train going wrong doesn't paralyse the network.

Full steam ahead for railway revival



Embay & Bolton Abbey Steam Railway now runs as a heritage line

Portishead to Bristol



Contractors clear vegetation on the line

Key

- In progress
- Proposed
- Proposed but have no official backing

Varsity line

(Bicester to Bletchley section of Oxford to Cambridge route)

£250m



Overgrown line at Swanbourne, Buckinghamshire



Sir Richard Beeching axed 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of track



Waverley line

(30 miles of track and seven stations between Tweedbank and Edinburgh)

£300m



The Waverley express ran from Edinburgh to Carlisle through Stow, far left