

Rural Railways—The British Experience

David Morgan

At the peak of their operation, railways in Great Britain extended over 22,000 route-miles (about 33,500 route-km). After the establishment of the core trunk network, every town wanted to be included and a large number of branches were added to the network, sometimes duplicating a service offered by another company. Many of these lines were unprofitable and losses accelerated as the advent of the motorcar enticed travellers off the trains.

Railways in the UK were built, owned and operated by commercial companies until 1948 when the Labour (Socialist) government of the day nationalized all standard-gauge lines (1435 cm). During the era of austerity that followed WWII, trains remained the prime mode of transport, but in the late 1950s and early 60s, the country started to prosper and an increasing number of families became car owners. As a

result, patronage of the railways declined and the taxpayer had to shoulder an increasing share of the bills.

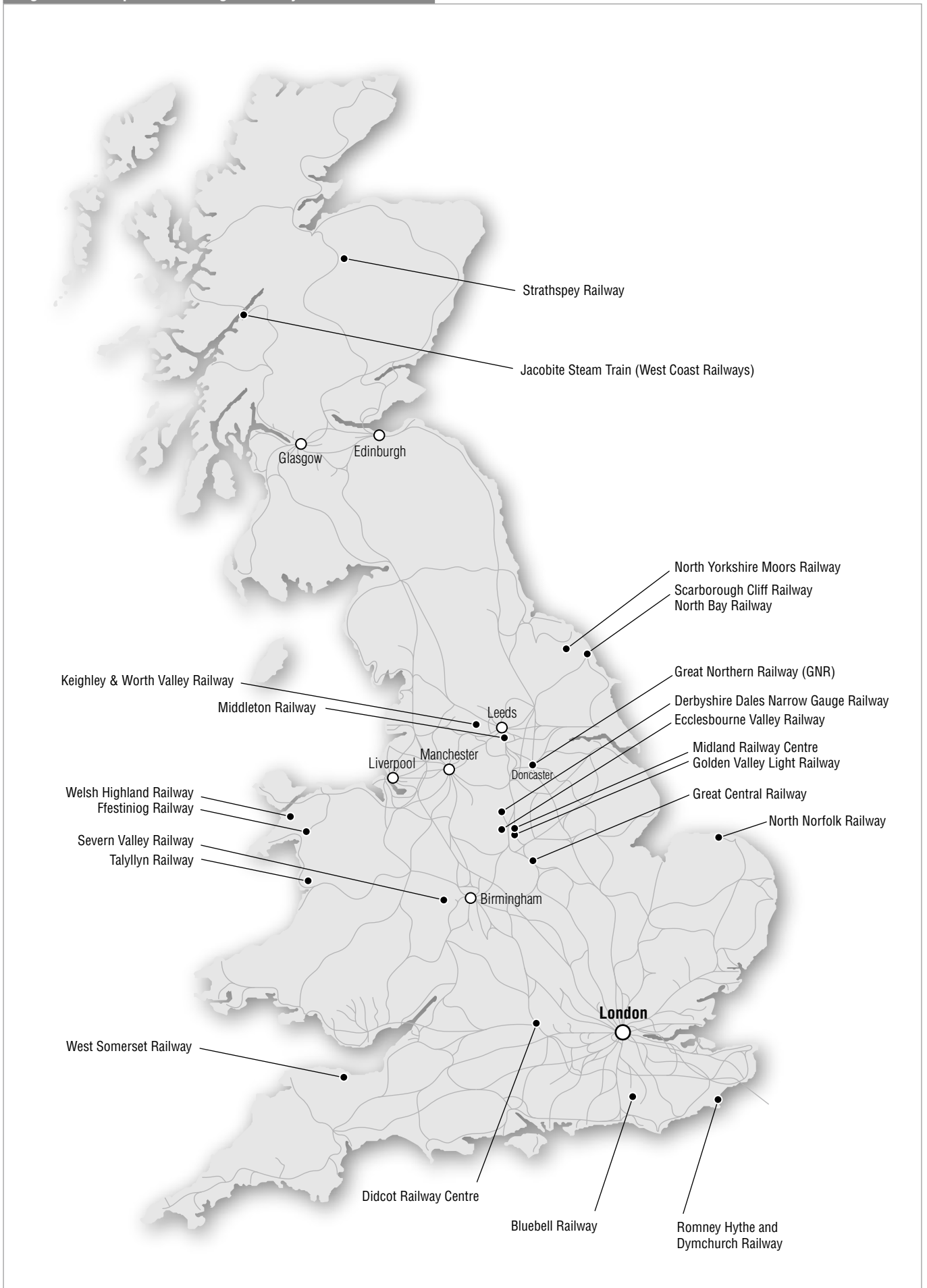
Because of the huge war debt that had accumulated by 1945, British Railways (BR) did not have enough money to invest in conversion to diesel traction or electrification, so, excluding electrified suburban services in major conurbations like London and Manchester, most trains were steam hauled until the 1950s and BR continued building steam locomotives until 1960 when *Evening Star* was the last one built.

Steam is, of course, very labour intensive and the big rail trade unions were very strong. Understandably, the government of the day was looking for ways to save money so they appointed the industrialist Dr Beeching as Chairman of BR with a brief to 'modernize' the railways. He prepared a report that predicated the rapid replacement of steam by



GNR Stirling Single at Doncaster

Figure 1 Examples of Heritage Railways in Great Britain





Didcot Railway Centre



Golden Valley Light Railway



A4 Union of South Africa at Doncaster

diesel and/or electric traction. He also proposed reducing the national network to a few main lines, mainly by closing nearly all branch lines unless a 'social' case could be made for a government subsidy by showing that undue hardship would ensue if the line were closed.

The replacement of steam locomotives by modern traction required only a management decision, albeit requiring investment and negotiations with trade unions, but the closure of stations and railway lines had to run the gauntlet of long procedures, public enquiries and much political opposition. Indeed, not all the lines nominated for closure did close. Sometimes long-standing rights were invoked, such as in the

case of Badminton, a village station built on land originally owned by the Duke of Beaufort, whose descendants and their guests had the right to stop trains there until the right was overturned by act of Parliament.

Another example of such rights being exercised related to a line in Sussex where opponents of closure discovered that the act of Parliament authorizing building of the line had a proviso requiring a minimum of four trains a day to call at stations on the line. BR was taken to court and ordered to re-open the line and reinstate four trains each way until they obtained statutory authority to close the line. This delay provided the breathing space to allow a support group to be



Keighley & Worth Valley Railway

formed and to raise money for the purchase of the line, which is now operated as the Bluebell Railway, one of the country's most popular heritage railways.

The Bluebell Railway was not the first to be reopened by volunteers and credit for that goes to the Talylyn Railway, a narrow-gauge line in Wales that was purchased from its former owners and reopened by volunteers in 1951. As far as I know, this is the first line in the world to have been rescued in this way but was quickly followed by the Puffing Billie Railway in Australia in 1952. In 1953, a similar volunteer takeover occurred on the Ffestiniog Railway in Wales, which has become well known for its development of the Welsh Highland Railway that ceased traffic in 1936. It is arguable whether these lines are truly 'heritage railways' because some of the rolling stock has been purpose-built since reopening and some lines could be described as tourist railways. However, the volunteers are motivated by the desire to preserve something of our railway past and of course steam is the great attraction. Narrow-gauge railways were cheaper and easier to reopen and operate and cynics doubted whether a standard-gauge railway was within the ability of volunteers to run. Today, there are 87 standard-gauge heritage railways proving them wrong.

Heritage railways in the UK now carry over 9 million passengers each year and patronage is not restricted to railway enthusiasts and is indeed dependent on the family market. People mostly travel on these trains for leisure purposes but there are a few who travel for other reasons. The Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway has a contract to carry over 1000 schoolchildren to school everyday, all on a 15-inch gauge track, or one third of the normal gauge.

If you check the location of these railways on a map of the UK, you will soon realize that they run almost entirely through countryside rather than urban areas. There are several reasons why. First, rural lines were more likely to be loss making, leading to closure in the first place. Second, the cost of buying a countryside line was invariably cheaper than buying an abandoned line for redevelopment. Third, one of the great advantages of train travel is the ability to see over hedges and walls while riding in comfort. There is no doubt that scenic lines attract passengers in their own right—as commercial railways have discovered—and several lines are promoted because they run through beautiful countryside.

It is questionable how much these lines serve the local community as transport providers. Although the staff are largely volunteer, steam railways are still costly to operate



Jacobite Steam Train (West Coast Railway)



North Yorkshire Moors Railway at Pickering



Scarborough North Bay Railway



Quad-Art (Articulated) set at Holt

and commonly a heritage railway will not run over the entire length of the original line. Furthermore, few—if any—run 365 days a year. The lines with which I am most closely connected as a director operate 245 days on average. We do try to encourage local patronage by offering discount cards to local residents but we find that these are mostly used when entertaining guests that they bring to the line to show they are in some way connected.

However, it is fair to say that a heritage railway does create a tourist attraction of great economic benefit to the area and to the community that the line runs through. A recent survey by Manchester University showed that for every £1 spent on the West Somerset Railway, an additional £1 was also spent in local businesses, such as restaurants, petrol stations, etc. The wider benefit generally appears to be about £10 for every £1 spent and, although operating staff are largely volunteer, there is also a small nucleus of paid staff living in the locality.

There have also been spin-offs for commercial railways connecting with a heritage railway. As an example, the line between Norwich and Sheringham that was scheduled for closure in the 1960s was kept open largely for visitors to the North Norfolk Railway and patronage has doubled in the last 7 years, resulting in a regular service through the day.

As some readers may know I am President of FEDECRAIL, the European Federation of Museum and Tourist Railways, representing railways in 27 different countries through Europe. The UK has the largest number of railways and carries far more passengers than on mainland Europe, but they are quickly catching up. In particular, we have encouraged promoters of schemes from former Soviet bloc countries to visit the UK so they can see how we have grown the market. The most successful so far are in the Baltic States where we have persuaded operators of narrow-gauge railways in Latvia and Lithuania to adopt some of our practices and encourage tourism in areas that would

receive few visitors otherwise.

This is partly why I am involved actively in the working group launching the International Association of Heritage Tourist Trains and Trams (TINHATT) at the next world congress to be held at the Queensland Rail Museum in Brisbane, Australia, on 15 to 17 October 2009.

During the last few years I have visited different countries worldwide and in Argentina was able to persuade the Minister of Tourism that tourist railways and trains not only generate tourism in their own right but also help protect the environment by getting people out of their cars and also by preventing them from straying across areas with fragile flora and fauna, such as national parks. Tourists also contribute to paying for the local infrastructure by ticket purchase, unlike coach visitors whose buses damage local roads to the cost of the local authority.

Even in this world recession, I am optimistic that our museum and tourist railways are very resilient and for the time being at least I can only say 'full steam ahead.' ■

**David Morgan**

David Morgan is an international lawyer based in London. Besides his worldwide professional activities, he is serving as a top manager of various heritage railways in Britain. He also contributes actively in preserving old ships such as Cutty Sark. While serving as Chairman of Heritage Railway Association in UK and President of European Federation of Museum and Tourist Railways (FEDECRAIL), he is also organizing heritage railways all over the world.