

Responses to Ian Hedley's presentation on Beeching and the Car industry

Geoff Kennedy

Yes, a thought-provoking piece. Thank you.

Like Matthew, my limited reading about the cuts suggests that they went too far and about 10% of the network should have been retained (I think that that represents about a quarter of the cuts).

My main thoughts are:

a) Beeching happened under public ownership; nationalised industries have to fight for limited Government investment funds and have always come off worse in competition with health, education and other services. The Chiltern Line is a good example- now thought to be probably the best in the country- BR ran it down over decades and tried several times to close it. Nationalisation is no panacea.

b) lack of investment after the war, especially electrification, was probably a setback from which the railways never recovered.

c) action was needed, but in typical British style, there was no context to the remit; to save money, yes, but to produce what?

d) linked to this, nobody has ever developed a proper strategy for the industry, which has just had to muddle through. It is sorely needed, but seems as far away as ever from being produced.

e) Beeching was a bad choice and probably did a bad job, but nobody else in the Government was really bothered. They saw the railways as a dying industry, so he was a fall guy. Selling off the land, whilst perhaps understandable is now a problem. There have been some line reopenings e.g. the Lothian line from Edinburgh, Kenilworth station and there is talk about trying to reopen the University line (Ox-Cam), but it would be easier if the routes had not been built over.

f) whether HS1 or HS2 would have been conceived without it is beyond me!

To finish, on your point of WW1 closures, the line which connected the Stratford line at Henley-in-Arden to the Chiltern Line, which passed through Lowsenford, was taken up during the war to be used in France. Unfortunately, the ship taking the rails to France was torpedoed and they have been rusting at the bottom of the Channel ever since!

Matthew Stephens

Thanks Ian for your introduction notes which I found really interesting.

From the little I have read on the subject there appears to have been a common view that cuts were necessary but perhaps not on the scale of Beeching's plan. As you question, looking back was it really necessary to also sell off the land rendering the later reintroduction of routes with modern light rail options impossible. I am sure that the many rail enthusiasts will have much stronger views on the subject of the Beeching Plan!

Beeching decreed that "the car would replace the train" and it was no coincidence that this was followed by the vast motorway network expansion in the 60's and 70's. What also staggers me is the blatant conflict of interest involving Marples as the then Conservative Minister of Transport responsible for appointing Beeching. Not only at the time was he MD of

his road construction business, in later years he fled Britain for Monaco to avoid prosecution for Tax Fraud!

In hindsight the financial payback for the cuts appears to have been at best modest. Much of course followed with privatisation etc. Our rail network today does not compare well with our continental neighbours but that is really a subject in itself!

Thanks again Ian,

Matthew
Matthew Stephens

Stephen Gill
Thanks Ian for your readable and cogent presentation.

A few thoughts occur.

1. As Geoff has noted, public ownership of the railways had no material benefit to the industry in the first 20 years of the post-nationalisation period. BR inherited a declining asset that suffered from under-investment for years before the war, had suffered significant infrastructure damage during the war, and then made a series of catastrophic decisions, including as noted the preference to sustain steam and not pursue a switch to diesel or electric locomotives, but also by creating local autonomy or competition within the network between regions that undermined its ability to manage and plan a national network.
2. Successive governments were unable and unwilling to make the required investment yet they required the industry to remain economic despite e.g. restrictions on its ability to generate income via fare increases at or above the inflation level. The result was net disinvestment in the railway network between nationalisation and 1955. Thus even before Beeching, the network had lost over 1500 miles of uneconomic branch lines closed between 1945 and 1955, compared to 19414 miles BR inherited in 1948.
3. Some of the criticisms of Beeching have been made in the presentation and in other comments. But the most salient seem to me to be:-
 - a. his remit was to make the network profitable - yet he did this not via investment in a better system and infrastructure to generate productivity but by closing 'uneconomic' lines. Echoes of the response of the Coalition government to the wider economy in 2010, and look where that has led!
 - b. his report reflected what was established thinking (insofar as the government thought about the railways in those days) that the rail network was of a secondary order of importance to that of the road network socially, and economically
 - c. because there was a lack of strategic planning and longer term thinking in the report, lines were closed which either were subsequently re-opened (examples others have given) or stations closed which were subsequently re-opened (300 between 1970 & 2000)
 - d. options to remove current or future bottlenecks in the system were closed e.g. the inland route between Exeter and Plymouth avoiding the coastal line at Dawlish
 - e. most fundamentally the report failed to understand the inter-connectedness between branch lines and the inter-city network. It also assumed that passengers on the closed lines would just use buses instead, assuming these existed! Instead, it probably fuelled additional traffic in rural communities

- f. by the focus on closing uneconomic lines the report failed to identify areas where BR could be more efficient and profitable e.g. by more strategic procurement of trains and carriages, changes to working practices (e.g. Firemen were still employed as such in 1970s long after steam trains had been taken out of service!) and investment in service provision.
 4. Yet for all the issues I think the background remains that perhaps up to the present day, the railways have been seen since the war as the poor relation to the car and lorry in our economic and political discourse. One salient point I read was this: yes, branch lines were in many cases uneconomic and not used very much, yet if the same analysis were applied to many local and rural roads, it would be deemed absurd that these should be either made to pay their way or be closed! We as individuals pay to use the train, but only very rarely directly (toll motorway e.g.) and otherwise only very indirectly via taxation for use of the roads.
 5. The rise in vehicular traffic was remorseless in the period after the war, both in terms of numbers of private cars and miles travelled, but significantly also in commercial traffic, which provided the impetus for the motorway building programme. One statistic I found interesting was that the number of commercial lorries on our roads increased by 12% between 1958 and 1980, yet the number of tonne-miles of road freight transport increased by 343% in the same period, suggesting more, but also heavier and longer lorries.
 6. So there is an argument that the government in commissioning the Beeching report and acting upon its recommendations was in part responding to both a public shift and commercial shift to roads and away from rail.
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Geoff Kennedy

Stephen

I agree with pretty much everything that you say in your email.

On Beeching, it does seem that he was expected to produce cuts, rather than a blueprint for the future; there was no political desire or will to invest, because the railways were seen as a dying industry. Before long, of course, the replacement bus services, sold as the alternative when lines were closed, were also withdrawn, leaving cars as the only option.

Peter Calver

Thank you Ian for a detailed information from the early days of the Railways up to modern times.

The "Beeching era" was one we lived through and probably did not question the plan at the time. I think we accepted it as the only way to make British Rail profitable

When analysing the events that Ian highlighted there are a lot of "What ifs"

What if early railway builders had not been hell bent on competing with other, building parallel routes.

What if the British Rail management had invested in Electrification and Diesel power earlier

What if they had not kept ordering new steam locomotives as late as 1960.

What if ASLEF had not become so powerful.

What if they had not sold the land off when routes were routes were ripped up.

Would it have been a different story, regarding the car industry, if the Railways were efficient and profitable.

I look forward to Monday's virtual meeting
