

The Beeching Report

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It is now forty years since the publishing of the infamous report on the reshaping of British Railways better known as the Beeching Report. **John Crosse** revisits this interesting document.

The December 2002 Sheffield Railwayana postal auction catalogue included the following:-

Lot 595 **British Transport Commission “Beeching Report”**: “The Reshaping of British Railways.” A rare leather bound copy (1 of 3) specially produced by BRB for presentation to Dr Beeching and his two principal assistants. This is Mr J H Nunneley’s copy and is signed by Beeching, and the two assistants. It is accompanied by a letter of provenance and a few press cuttings. An extremely rare opportunity to obtain such an item.

For its effect on the lives and livelihoods of so many it is a very un-imposing document, the specially bound copy being covered in black leather, somewhat worn at the corners, with gold block title and owners name. It comprises 148 pages plus a number of fold out maps. Two versions of the report were produced back in 1963- a full edition for the government and a summarised edition for the press (and no doubt any member of the public who wished to purchase it).

The signing of the book by Richard Beeching and the two assistants (the other being Frederick Margetts) did not take place until some twenty one years after the publication of the report at the instigation of John Nunneley who wrote to Beeching with the request. Beeching willingly agreed but in his letter back to Nunneley he wrote: ‘Although unaware of the precise number of years that have passed since the Report was published, I had it in mind that it was about twenty years ago and that some of the recommendations in both it and in the second Report on ‘Rationalisation of the Trunk Routes’ are still being rediscovered! Such is the refusal to collaborate with the inevitable.’

So here we find that whilst the enthusiast world remembers exactly when the report that was to change the face of Britain was published, the author did not, probably because to him it was ‘just another job’.

Richard Beeching was born on April 21, 1913. At the Imperial College of Science and Technology London he studied for a PhD and in 1936 started his career by joining the Fuel Research Station. 1948 saw him joining Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) and by 1953 he had risen to be vice president of ICI (Canada).

In 1960 Mr Ernest Marples (then Minister of Transport) determined to apply modern management practices to the railways. A committee was set up chaired by Sir Ivan Stedeford composed of leading rail users of which ICI was one. Asked for a representative, ICI nominated Beeching. Marples was impressed by his work on this

committee and in 1961 asked him to join the British Transport Commission (BTC) as chairman designate with a brief to modernise the railways. The basis of this modernisation had been stated back in 1960 as 'The industry must be of a size and pattern suited to modern conditions and prospects. In particular, the railway system must be remodelled to meet current needs and the modernisation plan must be adapted to this new shape'.

To assist him in the specific task of preparing the report (in which his name does not appear at any point) he selected Frederick Margetts, a former general manager of the North Eastern Region of BR and then the board member for Operations and John Nunneley who had just joined the BTC as Chief Publicity Officer from Beaverbrook Newspapers. Margetts had the responsibility of gathering all of the data whilst Nunneley was put in charge of the physical production of the report. This task had to be carried out under conditions of great secrecy as the press, then as now, were hell bent on getting details in print ahead of their rivals. At the time of publication it certainly was big news with many papers carrying several pages of detail including system maps and the full list of stations being proposed for closure.

The fact that the railways could not go on as they were I think even the most die hard enthusiast would agree with. Indeed, station and branch line closures had been happening at an increasing pace for several years as the inexorable growth in road transport took its toll on the system. It could be argued that all Beeching did was to take an overall view of the system rather than the piecemeal approach that had applied up until then. Given the brief that he was confronted with most business men would have reached a similar conclusion.

Beeching gets all the blame but possibly the wrath of enthusiasts should have been directed at the politicians of the day. The old adage 'don't shoot the messenger' possibly applies here. Indeed in the Foreword to the report it states:
'...because the ultimate choice of what is considered the most advantageous must be made by the nation, it is the basic responsibility of the British Railways Board to provide, as objectively as possible, information which makes it clear the range and nature of the choice'.

It had been recognised as early as 1953 that 'something had to be done', hence the modernisation plan of 1955. However such was the lack of investment in the infrastructure over the previous 15-20 years combined with the rapid growth of road transport that by 1960 the annual loss was £67.7 million rising to £86.9 million in 1961 despite economy measures being put in place.

In coming to their conclusions the team used financial data mainly from 1961. This showed receipts in that year for passenger traffic of £157.5 million and freight £306.7 million. This reflected the importance of freight to the system at that time, at least in respect of its cash flow but not necessarily its profits. Some basic categories used for further analysis in the report were as follows:

| | Receipts (million) | Overall profit/loss (million) | Train miles (million) |
|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Passenger | | | |
| -Fast & Semi fast | £91.2 | -£21.8 | 80.0 |
| -Stopping | £30.8 | -£55.9 | 91.4 |
| -Suburban | £39.8 | -£28.0 | 58.2 |
| Freight by pass. train | £57.3 | +£6.8 | |
| Freight | | | Wagon Miles(m) |
| -Coal | £108.3 | +£2.8 | 913 |
| -Minerals | £44.5 | -£3.7 | 459 |
| - General Merchandise | | | |
| - Wagon Load | £64.8 | -£53.8 | 1139 |
| - Sundries | £38.0 | -£21.3 | 462 |

Other than coal and 'freight carried by passenger train' none of the traffic flows turned in a profit.

The system in 1961 comprised 17,830 route miles of which some 5900 were single track. One third of the route mileage carried just one percent of the total passenger miles. Similarly one third of the mileage carried one percent of the freight ton miles. Half of the total route mileage carried four percent of the total passenger miles and five percent of the freight ton miles. The report states then that total revenue from this fifty percent of the route mileage was £20m with the costs of simply providing the track as £40m. The remaining 50% of the system had earnings which covered track provision costs by six times.

Some 7000 stations were open as at April 1961. One third of these produced just one percent of the total passenger receipts and fifty percent generated just two percent. At the other end of the scale, the top 34 stations generated twenty-six percent of all receipts. A similar situation applied on the freight side of the business.

The report drew the inevitable conclusion from this data: 'There can be no question therefore that the railways would be better off financially if a high proportion of the stations were closed, even if it resulted in a total loss of the traffic passing through them'.

Amongst the report's pages, many statistics are presented, most of them key in reaching the right conclusions for the future of the industry but not that interesting to the readers of this article. From the enthusiast view point it is items such as rolling stock and stations for closure that grab the attention. Before looking at closures- which are the inevitable ultimate conclusion the report analyses the various traffic flows in some detail.

Looking at inter city services- yes even in 1963 that was the terminology used- the report clearly identifies the potential borne out today for the major arterial routes but highlighted the threat of air travel over the longer distances. The main target of its proposed cuts was the peak summer services which were already in decline. Of 18500 carriages allocated to fast and semi-fast services only 5500 were in year-round service and 6000 were used less than twenty times per year. These 6000 carriages cost £3.4m annually but earned just £0.5m.

Stopping passenger services were estimated to need 7000 passenger miles per route mile per week to break even when using a DMU. Never mind less efficient forms of motive power.

Freight movements were analysed in even more depth due to the multiplicity of goods carried. In 1946 some 1.25million freight wagons were available for use. This had reduced to 848,600 by 1963. 40 million wagon loads were moved in 1946 but this had declined to 22.5 million in 1962. Unfortunately the fall in traffic had outstripped the withdrawal rate of the wagons and efficiency had fallen accordingly resulting in each wagon being loaded once every twelve days.

The report strongly advocated that the freight of the future should be carried in 'liner trains' operating out of a small number of hubs around the system. Trains dedicated to carrying the goods of single customers (today's block trains) were also highly prized and it was foreseen that these two plus the trainload coal traffic would account for at least 50 percent of the freight moved by rail. By definition the elimination of single wagon consignments was to be eliminated.

Which ever way the figures were cut the conclusions from a financial point of view were inevitable- some 50 percent of the infrastructure, and thus the services that ran on it, was not earning its keep. In order to come to its decisions on which services were viable and which not, complex calculations were done including estimating the effect of lost revenue on main line services when a connecting branch service was axed. Of course assumptions had to be made to reach these conclusions and this is where all the arguments start. There also did not appear to be anything in the brief to direct that the strategic importance of lines as diversionary routes should be considered. Neither was there a requirement to look very far ahead. It is easy in hindsight to say that this and that line should never have been closed but circumstances change and what would be a really viable link or station today clearly was not being used as such at the time of analysis.

Whilst many of the thousands of stations listed did indeed close, many survived and by 1965 the political climate was changing with a labour government in power. The previously mentioned report 'Rationalisation of Trunk Routes' came out in that year but as Labour government strategy and policy was pro public transport little was done with it and likewise with the lines and stations earmarked for closure in the report which made it into 1966 many are still with us today.

The report listed fifteen specific recommendations as follows:

- 1) Discontinuance of many stopping passenger services.
- 2) Transfer of the modern multiple unit stock displaced to continuing services which are still steam locomotive hauled.
- 3) Closure of a high proportion of the total number of small stations to passenger traffic.
- 4) Selective improvement of inter-city passenger services and rationalisation of routes.
- 5) Damping down of seasonal peaks of passenger traffic and withdrawal of corridor coaching stock held for the purpose of covering them at present.
- 6) Co-ordination of suburban train and bus services and charges, in collaboration with municipal authorities, with the alternative of fare increases and possible closure of services.
- 7) Co-ordination of passenger parcels services with the Post Office.
- 8) Increase of block train movement of coal by inducing the National Coal Board to provide train loading facilities at collieries and the establishment of coal concentration depots.
- 9) Reduction of uneconomic freight traffic passing through small stations by closing them progressively, but with regard to the preservation of potentially good railway traffics, and by adjustment to charges.
- 10) Attraction of more siding to siding traffics suitable for through-train movement by operating such trains at the expense of the wagon forwarding system and by provision of timetabled trains, of special stock, to meet customer requirements.
- 11) Study and development of a network of 'liner trains' to carry flows of traffic which, although dense, are composed of consignments too small in themselves to justify through-train operation.
- 12) Concentration of freight sundries traffic upon about 100 main depots, many of them associated with Liner Train depots, and carriage of main flows of sundries on Liner Trains, probably coupled with passenger parcels, and possibly Post Office parcels and letters.
- 13) Rapid, progressive withdrawal of freight wagons over the next three years.
- 14) Continued replacement of steam by diesel locomotives for main line traction, up to a probable requirement of at least 3750/4250 (1698 already in service and 950 on order).
- 15) Rationalisation of the composition and use of the Railways' road cartage fleet.

"These various lines of action are strongly interdependent. If the whole plan is implemented with vigour, however, much (though not necessarily all) of the Railways' deficit should be eliminated by 1970".

Today's readers are left to draw their own conclusions as to how many of the above recommendations were fully implemented.

As mentioned earlier- whilst everyone knows the report as 'The Beeching Report' neither his name nor that of his assistants appears within its pages. Baron Richard

Beeching, as he subsequently became, died on March 23, 1985. Fred Margetts, in a letter to John Nunneley following the death wrote of Beeching: '....he was the best thing which happened to the railways in my time. I consider that I was very fortunate to be associated with his drive to drag BR into a business like approach. Unfortunately politics proved too strong for ultimate attainment. There was also another adverse factor which I wonder whether you ever appreciated. Very few senior practical railwaymen agreed with the main feature of the report i.e. curtailment of the system.

Margetts died in April 1989 leaving just John Nunneley to ponder on the validity of the proposals forty years on.