

## HOLDING THE LINE – HOW BRITAIN’S RAILWAYS WERE SAVED

**A talk to an invited audience at the University of Worcester on Friday 5 July 2013 by Richard Faulkner**

Let me start by thanking the University of Worcester for arranging this event this afternoon, in this wonderful iconic building. It looks great from the city, and even better from the railway bridge. And thank you all very much indeed for coming this afternoon. I hope you find what I have to say interesting, and please make any comments or ask any questions after I’ve finished speaking. There is absolutely no compulsion on any of you to buy our book, but if you do want one, my co-author Chris Austin and I will be delighted to sign copies.

I should start by saying that *Holding The Line* is not intended primarily as a book for anoraks and railway enthusiasts – not that I have anything against them. One of my favourite railway quotes is in Nicholas Whittaker’s book *Platform Souls: The Trainspotter as Twentieth Century Hero*, where he says:

***“Trainspotting has always been a democracy, embracing all men, from right scruffs to Right Honourables.”***

Because I have spent a lot of my life in the company of right honourables, politics and politicians play an important part in our story. This is a political and social history of the railway in the second half of the twentieth century.

Both Chris Austin and I had put in many years’ service working for the industry, and we had seen for ourselves much of what had gone on at the British Railways Board, and in government – or at least we thought we had. Against this background, we decided that a book about the British people’s love affair with their railways should be written – and also about the repeated attempts made during the second half of the twentieth century to destroy them.

The main threats lay in starving them of financial investment and drastically reducing the size of the network by extensive programmes of closures, which would have reduced it to little more than a small number of intercity routes and commuter services in conurbations – a similar outcome to what had occurred in most of the United States.

There was no single conspiracy to destroy the railways, but individuals from various parts of the political spectrum were drawn to the supposed holy grail of a much smaller network and a profitable ‘core’. They included right-wing free-market ideologues opposed to the concept of public transport, well-meaning but misguided social democrats who saw rail subsidies as regressive, beneficial only to the middle classes, and a variety of lobbying interests who would benefit from the expansion of road building, car ownership and road haulage – including trade unionists opposed to the development of rail freight services, and with a stake in the motor industry.

From the 1950s onwards, there was a widespread view that the nationalised railway was both badly managed and wasted vast amounts of money. The maximum threat to the integrity of the network occurred when at least

two (or more) of the negative forces I've just mentioned came together, as in the period leading up to the Beeching Report and the subsequent implementation of its closure proposals in the 1960s.

But the more we got into the research the more we uncovered. From the 1960s onwards it was self-evident that the railways were having to cope with decline and contraction. The British love affair with the private car was still at its height, and that, coupled with the success of the road haulage industry in lobbying for larger and larger lorries and fewer and fewer restrictions on their operation fuelled the motorway construction programme that had started in the 1950s and continued unabated.

But there had to be more to it than that. We wanted to find out what was really going on behind the scenes, and whether there really was a threat to the railways' very existence.

We needed though to be sure of our facts, and we spent many hours in the National Archive, the Bodleian library in Oxford, the National Newspaper Archive, the BBC archive at Caversham, and the People's History Museum in Manchester. We also tracked down the private papers of a number of the individuals whom we wanted to write about, and this research took us to Royal Holloway in the University of London, the London School of Economics, and Warwick University (for the trade union records). Much of what we found had never previously seen the light of day, and some of that was truly shocking.

We uncovered a succession of plots and conspiracies which aimed drastically to reduce the size of the railway network, in the most extreme cases to nothing at all.

You can hardly failed to notice, ladies and gentlemen, that in the last few months there has been a huge amount of interest in the Beeching report published in 1963 on The Reshaping of British Railways. That was indeed immensely important, and no areas of the country escaped entirely unscathed. In all 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of railway line were proposed for closure.

In this part of the world, as a direct consequence of Beeching, we lost the Worcester to Bromyard branch line, all the intermediate stations between here and Malvern, and most of the local stations on the main line to Oxford. There used to be direct trains between Worcester and Shrewsbury, through Stourport and Bewdley. That was closed as result of the Beeching report, but a significant part has reopened as the Severn Valley Railway, providing a marvellous tourism and steam railway experience between Bridgnorth and Kidderminster, and adding enormously to the economies of the region. The SVR attracts a high class of volunteers, including the Mayor's consort, often to be seen in a stationmaster's uniform at stations on the line.

A little further afield the Gloucester to Hereford line was closed, depriving Ross-on-Wye of its railway, and the loss of the Great Western route from Birmingham to Cheltenham through Stratford some years later removed an important line which today would have relieved the overcrowding on the main Midland route up through Bromsgrove. One stretch of that has reopened as the Gloucestershire and Warwickshire heritage railway, and also does well. Honeybourne and Pershore on the Cotswold Line were both closed and reopened, as was

Ashchurch near Tewkesbury, and dozens of stations in and around Birmingham, all reopened since Dr Beeching left British Rail in 1965.

Other parts of the country suffered far worse than we did in the West Midlands and Worcestershire, and were cut off from the railway altogether.

One of the worst features of the Beeching legacy was the cuts he made in the capacity of the remaining network which has resulted in the congestion and delays we experience today when passenger numbers are well above what he forecast in 1965. In the great majority of cases, when lines were shut down, the track was ripped up, bridges and viaducts were blown up and the land sold off for shops, houses and new roads. It was not that Beeching did not look ahead – he did to 1984 – but the conclusion from the period of retrenchment is that forecasts are always wrong, and long term forecasts hopelessly wrong. The great economist John Kenneth Galbraith famously said that “the only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable”. He also commented that “Economics is extremely useful as a form of employment for economists.”

*The lesson we have learned is that you need to keep options open, and retain the flexibility for future growth. Never sell the trackbed. The point about land is that ‘they are not making it any more’, so it is a resource to be protected.*

But it needn’t have happened like that. Labour had come to power in 1964 with a manifesto commitment to halt major closures, and we wondered how it happened that many of the Beeching closures went ahead regardless. We found the answer in the Cabinet minutes of 11 March 1965 – marked “SECRET” - at which the Labour ministers spent some time considering what to do about the report.

What clinched the decision was a paper – which has never been published - from the then transport minister, who was called Tom Fraser, arguing that the programme of closures should go ahead more or less unmodified, despite the clear 1964 manifesto pledge to halt it.

Last weekend Chris Austin and I were in the Yorkshire seaside and fishing town of Whitby, signing books and giving an interview to a reporter from the *Whitby Gazette*, a splendid local weekly newspaper which played a huge part in the battle to keep the three railway lines to Whitby open in 1965.

The campaign failed because despite a letter from Harold Wilson to the local Labour Party chairman promising that the lines would not close, Mr Fraser was determined to ignore the party’s election manifesto and in his own words – which we unearthed in the National Archives – “to stand firm”. We cover this shocking story in some detail in the book, because our researches unearthed what really happened with the implementation of the Beeching closures after 1964.

Beeching had not happened by accident. Cutting the size of the railway drastically was government policy from about 1960. A body called the Stedeford Committee was set up by the government which met in conditions of total secrecy, with Richard Beeching one of its members. This planned for the abolition of the British Transport

Commission, the establishment of the British Railways Board, and the appointment of Beeching as the first chairman.

The politics were left to a strange minister of transport, called Ernest Marples. He owned a controlling interest in a motorway construction company, called Marples Ridgway, which won numerous government road-building contracts such as the Hammersmith and Chiswick flyovers. When it was pointed out in Parliament that Marples the minister was effectively awarding contracts to Marples the road-builder via his own company, he announced that he would sell his shareholding.

What he didn't say was that the purchaser was his wife. His political career came to a bizarre end in 1975 when the recently-ennobled Lord Marples was pursued by the taxman and did a flit to Monaco by the Night Ferry, leaving loads of his belongings strewn around his London flat. He owed the Inland Revenue £10 million and never returned to Britain.

Even taking Ernest Marples into account, we tried to be fair to all the characters who played roles in the events of the last half century. We found that they tended to fall into categories of hero, villain and victim – some fulfil two of those roles, and one or two all three.

Some of the most sensational revelations came not from a public record source but from a colleague of mine now in the House of Lords who had been present during a weekend held secretly (and without the knowledge of Sir Peter Parker and his BR board colleagues) at the government's conference centre in Sunningdale in 1977 prior to the publication of the transport white paper later that year.

A large part of that weekend was devoted to examining how vast swathes of the railway could be closed with the minimum of public fuss, and their services replaced by buses. The department of transport permanent secretary Sir Peter Baldwin came up with the novel proposal that only the lines on which BR had installed continuous welded rail should be retained – a handy but astonishingly naive formula for getting rid of about 4,000 route miles.

It was interesting that by 1977 officials were worried about public opinion and the likely reaction to further major closures. Their difficulty was that the final decision on what to close lay with ministers, who were inconveniently responsible and accountable to Parliament, and thus to the public.

What the officials wanted to do was to take ministers out of the picture altogether and give the decision to local councils instead. They came up with the idea of handing to them the money that was going to subsidise the railways, saying that if they wanted to spend it on buses instead, that was OK by them.

Fortunately by then the tide had started to turn and there was a public mood against more railway closures, and virtually none of the lines that were threatened in the 70s were closed, and most remain open today, with more services, modern carriages, and some of them even electrified.

One of the questions we tried to answer was why were governments – both Labour and Conservative – so anti-railway? The former transport minister and British Rail chairman, Richard Marsh, was quoted in an interview with the *New Statesman* in 1976 “Some civil servants are so anti-railways that I can only assume that something nasty happened to their mothers in a steam train”.

I am not sure we really found the answer. I can remember it being said in the railways board in the 70s and 80s that there are three eternal lies – statements that are always untrue. The first was “There’s a cheque in the post.” The second: “Darling, I’ll respect you even more in the morning.” And third, “I’m from the department of transport and my job is to help the railways.”

As far back as 1960 The Road Haulage Association said this in its journal:

“We should build more roads, and we should have fewer railways. This would merely be following the lesson of history which shows a continued and continuing expansion of road transport and a corresponding contraction in the volume of business handled by the railways...”

“A streamlined railway system could surely be had for half the money that is now being made available... We must exchange the "permanent way" of life for the "motorway" of life... road transport is the future, the railways are the past.”

The DoE, from the first, employed vastly more officials on roads than it did on public transport – in 1975 there were some 1,700 working on highway planning, with some 70 on railways and public transport. Building roads was what mattered to the DoE.

Over the years there were numerous attempts to solve “the railway problem”, in a search of the profitable railway; all of them involved closing more lines, “rationalising” routes that were to stay open (such as the short-sighted decision to reduce large parts of the Cotswold Line to single track), putting up fares, getting rid of staff, and in some cases ripping up track to make way for road schemes and town centre commercial developments. The most extreme proposition – put forward by Margaret Thatcher’s guru Sir Alfred Sherman (who we discovered from reading his papers at Royal Holloway almost daily wrote mis-spelt and ungrammatical memos to her on an ancient typewriter on every subject imaginable) – was for all the railways to be concreted over and turned into busways.

Sherman was paid by the National Bus Company and he persuaded them to produce a glossy brochure outlining plans for the conversion of Marylebone into a bus station and for what is now the Chiltern Railways mainline into a road.

It was pointed out that buses would need to run together at high speeds to provide capacity equal to that of a train. After they had been running for a few months, they would be so close together they could be linked and then all one would have to do would be to remove all the drivers apart from the front one, and lo and behold, at vast public expense, we would have reinvented the train.

Although Margaret Thatcher was receiving this barmy advice from the now forgotten Alf Sherman, and she herself was hardly ever to be seen on a train, there were members of her government who had a strong affinity with and sympathy for the railway.

One unlikely hero of ours is Norman Fowler, now Lord Fowler, scourge of media intrusion into people's private lives and supporter of press regulation. Soon after he became minister of transport he was faced with a well-informed report in *The Guardian* that his officials and British Rail had drawn up a list of 41 services for closure.

Not entirely accidentally that story appeared on the morning that Fowler was due to answer transport questions in the Commons. To the utter dismay of his civil servants, he ignored the brief they prepared for him and made it clear that he would not sanction "another Beeching", and gave instructions to British Rail that they should abandon plans for closures.

That's why Norman Fowler is one of our heroes, and he repaid the compliment by writing a really kind and complimentary review of our book in the parliamentary journal, *The House Magazine*.

Another hero from the Thatcher era was her deputy prime minister, William Whitelaw, whose grandfather – who was also called William Whitelaw - had been chairman of the London and North Eastern Railway, and had had an A4 steam locomotive named after him – sadly not one of the six which were preserved and are this week on display at the National Railway Museum to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 126 miles per hour run by Mallard.

On one memorable occasion Whitelaw had been guest of honour at one of the dinners Parker used to host during the Conservative Party conference.

During a brief after-dinner speech Whitelaw recounted how as a boy of 12 he had caught the sleeper train from Aberdeen to London. He had sent word ahead to the station that William Whitelaw was travelling, and found that the station-master was there in his top-hat ready to escort the great man to the train.

To this distinguished railway servant's great credit, he turned not a hair, and gravely showed the boy to his sleeping berth. He wished him goodnight, but reaching under the pillow removed a bottle of whisky, saying "I don't think you'll be needing this, sir". To gales of laughter Whitelaw said he then didn't hear anything for a few days, and then his grandfather wrote to him. "Don't ever travel under my name again, but here's half a crown so long as you don't tell the family about the whisky."

I can vouch for the accuracy of this story because I was there, and indeed was one of the organisers of the dinner.

We also uncovered evidence of collusion between the BRB and the department of transport in closing lines in favour of substitute bus services (a cause supported by Sir Peter Parker, despite his many successes in fighting

the railway's corner), of secret unpublished maps showing various smaller sizes of network, and an ideological approach (also by a Labour government) to try to eliminate rail subsidies by massively increasing fares because it was believed that only the well-off middle classes travelled by train.

We were reminded as we unearthed all this material of John Kenneth Galbraith's comment "Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable".

The question of whether it is legitimately in the national interest for confidential information to be passed to the media in order to expose and influence public opinion is too complex for me to be able to deal with this evening. It is particularly relevant at the present time when so much media attention is being devoted to the activities of so-called whistle-blowers who are disclosing some very uncomfortable information about the surveillance activities of the American secret service.

I can though say this. I do not believe that British public opinion would have turned so substantially against further rail closures had there not been people within the railways themselves and in the civil service willing to take risks and share what they knew with journalists, politicians, and through them, the public.

In our book we cover a number of examples. The first was the so-called Blue Paper leak of 1972, when the *Sunday Times* received a copy of a confidential 61-page report, entitled "Rail Policy Review".

On 8 October 1972, the paper led its front page with a story across four columns headed "Cut trains by half, says secret report".

There would be no railways west of Plymouth, nothing in Scotland north and west of Perth and Aberdeen, only a line to Great Yarmouth in East Anglia, with no services north of Cambridge, the whole of Wales would lose their railways apart from the main lines to Holyhead and Fishguard, the direct Great Western line from Reading to Taunton would close, as would the Southern main line from Woking to Exeter...and much more of the same.

Many services regarded as "main lines" would have to go if the department was to achieve its target of lopping the rail network from its present 11,600 miles to a mere 6,700 miles..."The officials believe the railways should be skinned to the bare bones – the main revenue-earning lines." I hardly need make the point that the plans included the loss of the Cotswold line and the links to Hereford and Kidderminster.

As you can imagine there was a huge row. Worcester's MP, Peter Walker, who was secretary of state for the environment, ordered a leak inquiry. Numerous people were interviewed, including the chairman of British Rail, Richard Marsh. Accusing fingers were pointed in various directions, the offices of the respected magazine *Railway Gazette* were raided and their phones were tapped – but in January 1973 the Attorney-General announced that there was insufficient evidence to charge anyone.

Astonishingly the truth about who had leaked the document did not come out until earlier this year, when Richard Hope who was the editor of the *Railway Gazette* back in the 70s wrote an obituary for a man called Reg Dawson who died last September and had been a senior official in the ministry. He was also a member of the Talyllyn Railway society, as is Richard Hope.

It turns out that Dawson was so outraged by what he read in the rail policy review – particularly the fact that the line that served his beloved Talyllyn Railway along the Cambrian Coast was listed for closure – that he felt it was his duty to give it to the *Railway Gazette*, which in turn passed it to the *Sunday Times*.

As a direct consequence of the leak, and the public outcry that followed the *Sunday Times* report, Peter Walker's transport minister, John Peyton, announced that there would be no programme of closures and that the network would be maintained at the 1974 level. Which is where more or less we are still are today, but with a large number of reopenings and service improvements.

The next example occurred just three years later, in 1975, under a Labour government. One of the consequences of the Blue Paper leak was the decision of the NUR leader Sidney Weighell – undoubtedly one of our heroes - to create a broad-based coalition encompassing the railway trade unions and environmental bodies which became known as Transport 2000 (still around as the Campaign for Better Transport). Michael Palin, whom I recruited on Leeds station after we both complained about late running trains, is president.

Weighell was the driving force behind the successful No Rail Cuts campaign of 1975, which alerted the travelling public via one and a half a million leaflets mainly distributed on stations and trains to the threat to the network posed by the government's decision to freeze investment. The leaflet contained a map showing a skeleton network and said:

“Towns losing their existing service would include Middlesbrough, Harrogate, Huddersfield, Lincoln, Newmarket, Weymouth, Worcester, Shrewsbury, Stratford-on-Avon, Fishguard, Blackpool, Barrow, Aberdeen and Inverness.”

The source for this information was a man called Michael Harbinson, our second whistle-blowing hero. He was the Chief Rail Planning Officer at BR headquarters. I'd been to see him and asked what the network was likely to look like in 1981 if there were no increase in levels of investment, and did he have a map of the system which illustrated that? “We have maps depicting every possible size of network,” he said, and produced one based on the frozen investment level of £281 million a year.

The leaflet encouraged people to write to the transport minister, and 20,000 did so. There was a lobby of Parliament and a vast rally in Central Hall, Westminster. The *Guardian* reported that “2,600 rail workers filled every seat in the hall.”



The environment minister, Tony Crosland, tried to get his retaliation in first by dismissing the campaign as “codswallop” in a rushed-out parliamentary answer. Weighell responded by calling him “a bloody liar” from the platform at Central Hall and said that Crosland didn’t know what was going on in his own department.

“It is riddled with people who planned for roads, prayed for roads, and have a vested interest in roads. As for the minister of transport, we change him as often as I change my shirt. This Government is on the point of betraying every policy undertaken in the transport field by the Labour Party since the turn of the century.” Our third example of how whistle-blowing can be very much in the public interest was the Serpell report of 1983 - the most extreme official attempt ever to shrink the railway map. Serpell was a long-standing transport civil servant who was seconded to the railway board. He had form, because we first came across him as secretary of the Stedeford committee in the early 1960s – that’s the one which led directly to the Beeching report.

The Serpell report of 1983 set out a series of options which purported to show what sort of railway could be delivered, depending on the level of support made available.

Unfortunately for Serpell – but immensely helpful to BR – virtually every option contained a fatal political weakness. One option was to propose huge fare rises for commuters – perhaps as great as 40 per cent in real terms. British Rail subsequently said that to cover the true costs of providing commuter services on some routes fare increases of above 100 per cent would be required.

Another option was a basic network of just 1,630 route miles (down from 10,500 miles), consisting of just two major trunk routes plus five London commuter routes. The nearest railways to Worcester would have been those to Birmingham or Bristol.

A third option was to save money by reducing the railways’ very high level of safety, specified by its engineers. Official publication date for the review was 20 January 1983. Media comment, which was well informed because of expert and professional briefing of journalists by board officials (of whom I was one) was almost uniformly hostile. The credibility of the report was not enhanced by the revelation that two members of the committee had conflicts of interests as firms for which they worked had both been engaged by the government during the conduct of the review.

The *Guardian’s* leader on 21 January was headed “A really rotten report”. It began like this: “There is always a danger with reports which are well leaked in advance that the leaks are selective and that the report is damned unfairly. Not so with Serpell on the railways. Its ponderous whole lives up to, nay even exceeds, the doleful expectations created by leaks. The best thing that could happen to the Serpell report would be a short, sour journey along the branch line of no return.”

Which happily is where it went.

I'd like to leave you with the following thoughts.

The railway continues to touch everyone's lives. About half of the population travel by train during the course of one year, while most of the other half benefit in terms of reduced road congestion or delivery of goods by rail – whether the white goods in their kitchen, the food in their fridge or the coal that produces the electricity they use.

Most people hold a view about the railways and many long to see them play a greater role in meeting Britain's transport needs. After a period of decline the network is now busier than ever, with levels of passenger use never before seen in peacetime. Indeed, the railway has been transformed over the space of 20 years, both in the way it is run and in the levels of service provided.

I am going to finish with three quotations. The first takes us back to July 2001, when the distinguished city journalist Christopher Fildes was able to write in *The Spectator*:

*“Railways are a growth industry. Their most sustained attempts to drive away their customers have not succeeded.”*

My second quotation is attributed to “Anon” and is quoted by John Francis, *A History of the English Railway*, 1851:

*Railways will remain safe in the midst of panic; and though times of pressure, severe, hazardous, ruinous pressure, have been felt in this country, and unfortunately must be felt again, yet it will only prove them to be part and parcel of the genuine sources of wealth and avenues for labour, in which this country lives and moves and has its being.*

And finally, here is the creator of Thomas The Tank Engine, the Reverend Wilbert Awdry writing about the parallels between the railway and the Church of England, which you might feel is particularly appropriate in a great cathedral city like Worcester:

*“Both had their heyday in the mid-nineteenth century; both own a great deal of Gothic-style architecture which is expensive to maintain; both are regularly assailed by critics; and both are firmly convinced that they are the best means of getting man to his ultimate destination”.*

Thank you for coming and thank you for listening.