

SPEECH TO THE FEDECRAIL CONFERENCE NMS EDINBURGH 20 APRIL 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a huge pleasure and privilege for me to be invited to make this speech to the FEDECRAIL conference.

We British have a rather complicated relationship with our railways. Our 19th century Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli prophesied that “The railways will do as much for mankind as the monasteries.

The relationship can sometimes be a bit hostile, particularly when things go wrong. But it’s generally pretty positive, and evidence of that has been the extraordinary growth in the number of passengers on our trains – doubled over the last 10 years, with totals now higher than at any time since the 1920s.

The railway created by our 19th century ancestors has never ceased to play a vital role in the life of our country – whether it’s the standardisation of time, the development of seaside resorts, giving working people the opportunity to take holidays, the invention of commuting, allowing people to live in pleasant suburbs some distance from their places of work and travel in each day, essential logistical support in times of war, and right up to today when they provide popular and environmentally friendly alternatives to carbon emitting gas guzzling short haul aircraft and unnecessary car driving.

We take a particular pride in their history, and that is one reason why our heritage railways are popular and successful. The public seem to appreciate the services that they provide, as the around 11 million visitors and 8 million passengers a year on these railways and tramways. I'll say more about the contribution they make to our tourist and regional economies in a moment.

First though I want to explain how we protect our railway heritage by using laws passed by our Parliament – I believe Britain is the only country in the world that has passed legislation specifically to ensure that we secure the preservation of evidence which is significant to the railway's history. Rail is the only industry in the UK which is viewed in this way.

Enshrined in the legislation which privatised Britain's railways in the 1990s is a series of requirements about the treatment of railway items of historical interest.

In the days when we had one large state industry, life was simpler. Britain's national record offices and the National Railway Museum could readily judge what they considered important for their collections; and simply request the British Railways Board to hand items over once they were no longer needed.

But that approach could not work with the privatised network. For one thing, The National Archives has no remit – other than in special circumstances – to take the records of private companies. A new approach was needed.

The solution lay originally in the creation of a new statutory body called the Railway Heritage Committee. The Committee was given

the power to 'designate' – and subsequently agree the disposal of – significant railway records and artefacts that justified long-term preservation, which since 2005 have included the military railways owned by the Ministry of Defence. These powers are set down in the 1996 Railway Heritage Act. Its mission is to secure the preservation of evidence which is significant to the railway's heritage.

The range of items and records designated – and thus saved from unauthorised sale or scrapping – is enormous. There are over a thousand artefacts protected in this way.

It nearly went wrong in 2010. We had a change of government in Britain in that year, and the new administration were determined to abolish the Railway Heritage Committee, as they wanted to reduce the number of public bodies sponsored by the Department for Transport.

Fortunately though I was able to persuade ministers that even if the RHC were abolished, it was vital to retain the powers of designation. The powers were passed to the trustees of the Science Museum group, which has within its family the National Railway Museum in York. I am deputy chairman of the board of trustees and chair the Railway Heritage Designation Advisory Board.

We have significant power and authority given to us by Parliament and can insist that an item is preserved, and that it can't be got rid of without our approval. We use these powers carefully, and I hope with commonsense.

We have the job of agreeing which institution will hold designated records or artefacts when no longer required by the railway business that owns them, and the terms under which they will be offered to those institutions. Often we direct that they are put in the hands of tourist and heritage railways, and thus enhance their appeal to their passengers.

We have no budget to acquire artefacts or records ourselves. Neither do we run a single heritage railway.

What we have is something much more powerful than a big budget. We have influence, authority, and the backing of the British Parliament.

The relationship between the railway heritage movement and Parliament is something we have worked hard to create. In 2011 we held a reception in the House of Commons whose purpose was to bring Heritage Railway Association members and their Members of Parliament together.

That was such a success that we decided to establish the heritage rail all-party parliamentary group, with officers mainly from constituencies home to heritage railways and tramways, and with members drawn the House of Commons and the House of Lords and from all political parties.

The value of these groups is that they allow members to go into detail on a subject that interests them, or is important to their constituents. They can do this in much greater depth than they would otherwise be able to do, and can also call upon expert

advisers to help. It is also a unique opportunity for interested members of the public to attend and to participate in the discussion.

In our case the HRA supports the work of the group and an HRA volunteer acts as our secretary. We encourage HRA members from individual railways to join in the discussion and provide evidence for the two big inquiries we have undertaken.

The group's first significant initiative was to launch an inquiry into the value of heritage railways. This had the various objectives listed, of which the four most important were:

- To establish the current and future value of heritage railways to the local and national economy.
- To identify the contributions they make to their local community including education and training, employment, sustainable tourism and health and wellbeing.
- To establish best practice amongst heritage railways.
- To identify and advise on current and future Government policy affecting the heritage railway industry.

We published our report in July 2013, and this was something of a milestone, partly because it is the first ever produced by a parliamentary group on heritage railways, but also because it was effectively the report of the heritage railways themselves. Whilst it represents the views of us - MPs and lords - who make up the group, it is based on evidence provided by HRA members and other experts with a great deal of practical experience of heritage railways and their effect on the communities they serve.

The report's value is that it provides an authoritative reference point for discussions with local authorities and politicians, and enjoys the status of a paper by a parliamentary group. The railways are making full use of it when debating their value to the community, or in making the case for planning consent or for funding for a project. The material is there to be used.

There are eight main findings, and I'll mention just five.

The first, and most important one concerns the economic benefits of heritage railways. We make the point that they make a huge contribution to the economies of the areas they serve, both in terms of attracting tourists and in stimulating spending on local services. Research undertaken for a number of railways told us that for every pound that is spent on a heritage railway there is a benefit to the local economy of around £2.70.

This suggests that the economic benefit nationally is just under £250m. That is a great figure to use when talking about what they contribute to the nation.

Secondly, we drew attention to the part heritage railways play in providing employment and skills training - especially apprenticeships for young people. We make the point that heritage railways are typically in areas of the country where employment opportunities, particularly for skilled workers, are low. They also offer a productive use of the time of 19,500 volunteer supporters who devote their own time and money to running, maintaining or developing their railway.

Third, for some younger volunteers, they provide a valuable training ground for subsequent jobs on the main line network or elsewhere. For older volunteers, they offer a sense of achievement and the health benefits of steady exercise – something we could all benefit from.

Fourth, we show that heritage railways are not a drain on the taxpayer. From railway preservation's beginning in the 1950s it's been subsidy free and self sustaining. Over 100 railways operate throughout the United Kingdom today with no financial support from central or local government.

One further recommendation we made was about the role of heritage railways in providing public transport. We were impressed by evidence that the transport role is not necessarily about providing a "commuter" service to take people to work but may be to provide a "tourist transport" service to take people, without their cars, into sensitive areas such as national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty or small coastal towns that are gridlocked with traffic.

The report had a good response from Government, and we discussed it with four separate ministers.

One of the benefits of an all party group is that dialogue can be two way. The report tells heritage railways what we think. Equally, it's a chance for parliamentarians to know what they think, so that if they have any issues that they would like us to consider in the

future, or any successes that they want to tell us about, then they get in touch.

One notable success – on the Helston Railway in Cornwall - was to hear the planning inspector quoting from the report in his decision to support planning consent for an extension of the railway.

Following the production of that first report we turned our attention to young people and heritage railways, and the evidence we received revealed some interesting and important issues.

Looking around me now, I can recognise the venerable grey heads of so many colleagues who have helped to create the amazing range of heritage railways and museums that we have in all Fedecrail member countries. But, of course, all of us need a lot more younger people to carry the baton forward in the future, and to engage with them for the long term health of the sector.

On the positive side, our report found that most of our member railways actively encourage the interest of younger people and many are able to provide an interesting and varied programme for them, with a clear career path to training in the competencies required when they are old enough.

Most railways have examples of young volunteers who have gone on to permanent employment on the national network, and it is clear that heritage railways are a great recruiting base for tomorrow's railway men and women.

Our work with volunteers supports social cohesion in the divided and fractured society we have in Britain. Most revealing has been the evidence given of the social benefits for young volunteers. For many, their time with a heritage railway has taught them important life skills including self discipline, team working, interpersonal skills and has provided them with a sense of purpose and direction.

On the down side, we heard how out of date legislation from 1920 is a constraint on involving 14 to 16 year olds in volunteering on our railways, and the evidence we have shows that this is an important period when many young people decide which interests they want to follow.

At this stage, working on a preserved railway – as many of us did at that age – is closed to them. The law does allow work experience for this age group, but we need it changed so that it extends to volunteering generally.

Unfortunately, there is no appetite within Government to change the law, or to make room for future changes in a legislative programme that is dominated by the government's efforts to leave the European Union, so we have to explore what else can be done to deal with this problem. I have myself introduced what we call a private member's bill to change the 1920 Act, but this won't be achieved easily or quickly. So this is very much a work in progress.

Having the all-party group report will certainly help though, and provide the basis for taking the issue forward with ministers.

Apart from volunteering, our report will also highlight the important role that all heritage railways play in encouraging school visits and the sort of links that can be made between our railways and the school syllabus. The all-party group's chairman, Nicky Morgan MP, is a former education secretary and much enthused by this aspect, as railways can offer such a rich variety of experiences all linked to the syllabus. History and geography are of course part of this, as are the STEM subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths.

As a trustee and deputy chair of the Science Museum Group and a member of the National Railway Museum's advisory group, I know that STEM is high on the list of priorities, and at York and Shildon railway museums 45,000 youngsters take part in organised school visits each year. The NRM's expansion plans will encourage this further with a special focus on engineering. There is scope here for many member railways to follow a similar path and enjoy the benefits in terms of higher visitor numbers and, all being well, plenty of return visits too.

From all this you can see that in its eighth year of operation the all-party group is in excellent health.

We have regular programme of meetings in Westminster, and this has been supplemented by well-attended visits to heritage railways around England.

The principal economic benefits of heritage railways derive from tourism and it is here where heritage railways have been so successful. Today, the railways are the principal tourist attractions in numerous areas in Britain, and even in popular tourist areas such as the North York Moors, Exmoor or Norfolk, heritage railways are a mainstay of the local economy.

As an example of how important they are, let me tell you about the experience of the Severn Valley Railway in the English West Midlands. It's one of our UK's longest established heritage railways.

The line was closed in the 1960s but has since been reopened in stages and now extends to a length of around sixteen miles through attractive countryside in the English West Midlands. It is a railway which has an air of prosperity and permanence.

But all that was undermined – literally – in June 2007 when storms and heavy rain hit the area. Embankments were completely washed away in several places leaving track spectacularly but expensively suspended in mid-air. Elsewhere, landslides left stretches of track buried under debris. All but a short section of the line had to be closed altogether and early estimates put the cost of restoration at around £1.5 million.

A public appeal for funds to carry out repairs was launched almost at once. But even as the money started to come in, the cost of repairs was being revised upwards and eventually stood at nearer

£2.5 million. I never underestimate the ability of the railway preservation sector to raise unlikely sums for causes dear to its heart, but this was clearly a daunting sum.

It was at this point that the towns in the area began to make their voices heard. They had all begun quickly to feel the effect of the line's closure. And they began to realise, perhaps for the first time, just how important the railway was to the local economy.

Such was the level of concern that it came to the attention of Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency for the area. I don't need to take you in detail through their deliberations. Suffice to say that they eventually came up with a contribution of £750,000 towards the cost of repairs.

I don't think you can have a much more graphic illustration of the extent to which government organisations can be made to realise the importance of heritage rail projects to their regions. And, crucially, this was not simply a case of the railway itself asking for money. Local businesses and others in the area realised what they stood to lose if the railway folded. And Advantage West Midlands – an organisation with an economic remit but no explicitly heritage one – recognised the case for making a very significant financial contribution.

I am pleased to say that the story has a happy ending. The line reopened throughout in March 2008 and is now faring as well as it has ever done.

And here's a slide demonstrating what the value is in engaging with your parliamentarians.

These as:

- Greater political profile for your heritage railway
- Engagement with ministers
- Raising awareness of benefits
- Supporting work of HRA
- Encourage local MP to come along
- HRA members always welcome to attend APPG meetings.

So to conclude, I would say this. Just as railways were Britain's gift to the world, so too was the concept of the heritage railway. We have more heritage railways and steam museums than other countries, the season tends to be longer and the scope of the operation tends to be more ambitious, quite apart from the programme of main line steam excursions, involving over 500 trains a year on the national network. It is something that Britain does particularly well and attracts a lot of overseas visitors.

This is a strong platform on which to build, but I believe there is a lot of building to do, and I am sure this applies to many of your railways too. We have a very good product to offer visitors although we can always think of ways of improving it. This is demonstrated by the long list of projects to extend lines, build new stations and restore more locomotives and rolling stock to meet growing demand.

But I believe we are still only at the starting gate, and that the potential remains huge. We have to be smart about this and we

have to get better at marketing ourselves. A few railways do this well, and most have improved enormously since the arrival of the world wide web, but there is still a long way to go. Websites need to improve, and in particular to offer other languages for overseas visitors.

In the near future it will become essential to be able to offer versions for foreign language speaking visitors, for example. 'Virtual tours' can give a really good idea of what will be a different experience to many overseas visitors. We need to get better at offering packages with local hotels, restaurants or other tourist attractions. For many visitors there needs to be more than just the train ride.

We need to give more thought as to how people are going to get to us other than by car, and help them with through rail tickets or bus links.

These are good times for heritage railways, and I am determined to do all I can to help ensure that they get better. You have great stories to tell, are immensely important to your tourist and regional economies, and are playing a huge part in introducing young and the not so young to the delights of train travel, to the history of the greatest invention in most modern societies, and to a family which is overwhelmingly a power for good in our society.

The more you can demonstrate how important you are to the economic life of the areas you serve, the stronger will be your case for support – financial, material and political – from the people who take decisions and influence opinion in areas which affect you.

I want our successors, perhaps 50 years from now, to be able to judge our stewardship, and say that not only did we succeed in preserving the best of our own railway heritage, and in ensuring that we also made a difference to the way that railways were generally perceived, but also our efforts encouraged others to realise what a vibrant, important, and ecologically sound form of transport they are. Tourist railways are an essential part of that heritage.