

Ladies and gentlemen, first may I add my congratulations to all this morning's award winners. The range of projects recognised is truly amazing, and is further evidence of the railway's renaissance and growing self-confidence. I sometimes rub my eyes in disbelief at how an industry which appeared to be in terminal decline 30 or 40 years ago has transformed itself into what in many respects is one of the finest in the world, in terms of passenger numbers, safety, frequency of services, and even customer satisfaction.

Some you will be aware that I am fond of quoting the distinguished city journalist, Christopher Fildes, who served on the Railway Heritage Committee with me. Writing in the *Spectator* in 2001, Christopher said:

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

Happily we've stopped trying to drive them away, and passenger numbers have doubled since 1995 and are at their highest level ever, with further amazing growth forecast for the next decade as well.

What has been particularly pleasing has been the way that in the search for growth and investment the heritage of the railway has not forgotten – indeed in much of what is being done, it is being embraced with an enthusiasm and dedication that reflect really well on today's railwaymen and women.

This is in keeping with a long tradition on the railway. There have been times when the vandals and the destroyers held sway – remember the Euston arch, and the attempts to close St Pancras and Marylebone – but the mood in recent times has been one of sensitive restoration and preservation, as today’s celebrations demonstrate.

Having said that, it was as recently as 2010 that I had a huge battle in Parliament to persuade ministers that there was something sufficiently important about the nation’s railway heritage that the statutory powers granted by the 1996 Railway Heritage Act to ensure the preservation of artefacts and records that form a significant part of Britain’s railway story should be retained.

They were determined to light what became known as the “bonfire of the quangos”, and the Railway Heritage Committee and its statutory powers were destined for the flames. I recall that one of the respected veterans of the railway heritage movement, whom I am pleased to see here today, referred to the then – and short-lived - secretary of state for transport as “Philistine Phil”.

Happily that battle was won – in the much-criticised House of Lords, I might add. Whilst the RHC disappeared, the statutory powers were transferred to the Science Museum, and the railway remains the only industry whose heritage is protected by law. I chair the museum’s railway heritage designation advisory board, and I am delighted to see a number of my fellow members here today.

In addition to my responsibilities as the Science Museum’s deputy chairman, I have the privilege to be the president of the Heritage

Railway Association and vice chair of the heritage rail all-party group in Parliament.

Last week we jointly hosted a very successful reception in the Lords, attended by representatives of over 100 HRA members and a large number of parliamentarians – many of them MPs who came to meet their heritage rail constituents.

Our guest of honour was Claire Perry, the railways minister. Her speech demonstrated a great advocacy of the value of heritage railways - in economic terms, for employment and skills training and for volunteering. Her department has also shown fresh interest in encouraging train operators to acknowledge the rich history of Britain's railways and to work more closely with heritage lines to promote tourism. I am sure there will be new opportunities to offer a quality travel experience using heritage stock on the national network, or extending franchised services on to heritage lines.

None of this is going to be easy, but it does open up some interesting opportunities for HRA members and reflects a fresh new approach by the department whose predecessors were not always too keen to transfer lines to heritage operators or to allow steam on to the main line. Or indeed, if you go back to the 70s and 80s, encourage rail travel at all – there have been a couple of books written on this subject which modesty forbids me from mentioning from this platform.

For many years now, the National Railway Heritage Awards have brought together the best from the national rail network and the heritage rail movement. During this time, heritage railways lacked a sponsoring department in Government, and one of the recommendations of our all-party group in its report on the value of heritage railways – which I am pleased to say is extensively quoted and has been translated into Spanish, Russian and Romanian - was that the Department of Transport should be the lead contact - our gateway to Government.

As we saw at last week's parliamentary reception, Claire Perry embraced that recommendation with enthusiasm.

I shall, if I may, conclude with another quotation, this time from the creator of Thomas the Tank Engine, the Reverend Wilbert Awdry. He spoke about the parallels between the railway and the church.

“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”.