

The railways during the reign of HM Queen Elizabeth II

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Inside Track's Richard Clinnick reflects on the railways over the last seven decades and Her Majesty's long tradition of supporting the railways

The railways changed dramatically in the 70 years that HM Queen Elizabeth II ruled this country until her passing on 8 September.

When Elizabeth ascended to the throne, steam locomotives were still being constructed in this country, indeed steam was the dominant form of traction for our railway and it was to be another eight years before the final steam locomotive, Evening Star, was built in Swindon.

The rise of the private motor car was only just beginning in 1952, although ownership was to increase five-fold by 1970. This was accelerated by the end of petrol rationing and the economic recovery in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In the early to mid-1950s the immediate threat to the railway was not the car – but instead road haulage and the development of motorised public transport. Buses were increasingly popular, while the

introduction of more lorries and vans meant some routes, particularly rural ones, were becoming increasingly less economically viable. Trains were unable to compete with road's ability to deliver from door-to-door. This was to become a major problem. While the economics of the railway steadily deteriorated costs continued rising, particularly around staff. Fares and freight charges were consistently frozen by government to control inflation.

In 1955 the Modernisation Plan was published. This was set against state policy which wanted the railways to be more commercially viable. By this point the market share of transport in Britain from railways had dropped from 16 per cent to 5 per cent.

The plan envisaged replacing steam locomotives with diesel and electric traction as a way of modernising the railway. It was estimated that more than £1.24 billion would be spent (the equivalent of £34.6bn today), however it was predicted that the railways would be back in profit by 1962. However, the British Transport Committee (BTC), which at the time was responsible for the railways, reported a £104 million loss, the equivalent of £2.36bn in today's prices.

British Railways set about developing, building and testing many designs of trains with varying degrees of success. The aim was to create a faster, more modern system that could compete with the increasing importance of roads.

However, the losses continued to mount up, and this eventually culminated in the infamous Beeching report, published in 1963. This recommended closing up to 9,000 miles of the country's 18,000 miles of railway. Eventually that was reduced to 7,000 by 1970, although around two-thirds of the country's stations were axed, and the workforce decimated.

The final steam trains were retired on 11 August 1968, at the same time as electrification was being delivered across the country.

If the 1960s was about closures and modernisation, then the 1970s was about the iconic High Speed Train. The industrial designer Kenneth Grange, who was later knighted in 2013, was tasked with producing a livery for the prototype HST. However, unhappy with the specified shape, he redesigned the external styling himself. Kenneth didn't just design trains, he is also responsible for the Kenwood food mixers, Kodak cameras, Parker pens and the TX1 London taxi, but it is the HST power car for which he is best known, and which he says has given him the most pleasure.

HSTs, known as InterCity 125s, entered service from London Paddington in 1976 and remained on long-distance routes from the station as late as until 2019. They expanded their operation to other routes including London to Scotland.

A variant was also exported to Australia. The HST was to break the world speed record for a diesel train in 1987 when it reached 148mph, a record it still holds today.

The 1980s saw the railway was split into sectors which helped make the railway more cost-effective. Modernisation also happened with new diesel trains ordered to replace ageing trains on many provincial routes.

The 1990s saw huge changes, not least privatisation from 1994 until 1997. A total of 25 franchises were created, while six freight companies were created, although five were sold to the same company. The franchising model has been controversial ever since with suggestions of shareholders putting profits first. Most of the franchises have changed hands or been remapped from the original operations of the mid-1990s.

In 1994 the Channel Tunnel opened, enabling passengers to board trains in London destined for Paris and Brussels. Car and lorry carrying shuttles operate through the tunnel between Cheriton and Coquelles, and freight also runs through under the English Channel although nowhere near the levels envisaged.

The revival of trams in Britain also began in the 1990s with the opening of the Manchester Metrolink system in 1992. This has expanded rapidly and, prior to the pandemic, it was carrying more than 44 million passengers per year.

Sadly, the 1990s will also be remembered for two major crashes, at Southall in 1997 and Ladbroke Grove, near Paddington, in 1999. The latter saw 31 people perish and severely damaged public confidence in the railway.

A year after the Ladbroke Grove accident, four people were killed at Hatfield when an express derailed. Disruption across the network followed for several months as safety checks were carried out after it was found that the cause of the crash was rolling contact fatigue, where the rail had failed. This eventually led to the demise of Railtrack, which was placed into administration and replaced by Network Rail.

In February 2007 a Virgin Trains Pendolino derailed in the Lake District, with one passenger killed. However, until August 2020 that was the last time a passenger was killed, as Britain's railway became, statistically, the safest major network in Europe. Indeed, the UK rail industry is now sharing its extensive knowledge and expertise on major infrastructure projects across the world.

But there was positive news for the railways in the 2000s. High Speed 1, the new line connecting London with the Channel Tunnel opened in phases, with the first in September 2003 and the second, into the Capital, in November 2007. This means trains can run at speeds up to 186mph through the Kent countryside which vastly reduced the time taken to reach Europe.

Passengers also continued returning to the railways – a theme that was to continue right up until Covid.

In February 2017 Royal Assent was finally given for the construction of High Speed 2. Britain's newest main line will run from London to Birmingham, and eventually Manchester and Leeds. Construction work is now underway on hundreds of sites on Phase One of the route to the west Midlands, and it is hoped that Royal Assent will be granted for the next phase next year.

And so, into the current decade. The headline, of course, has been COVID. Until the pandemic hit in early-2020 passenger numbers were at a record high with almost 2 billion journeys made per year. The vast majority of these were in London and the South East as commuters continued flocking into London, as well as other major cities across the country.

Prior to the pandemic, hundreds of new trains were being introduced across the country, ridding parts of the network of the dreaded Pacer trains so derided by politicians and local media alike.

New British-assembled intercity trains were introduced on the East Coast and Great Western main lines, replacing the iconic Intercity 125s, and adding extra capacity to these busy railways.

Local services across parts of northern England were transformed following the introduction of new state-of-the-art trains delivered as part of some of the biggest investment in the region for decades.

During the first lockdown, railway employees kept the system running in order to provide services that would take the nation's essential workforce such as doctors, nurses and other professions we rely on in society, to work. The sheer dedication and amazing work of railway employees during the pandemic was a major component in ensuring the railway could still run. One operator, Govia Thameslink Railway, had more than 50 hospitals on its vast network.

Rail freight was also tremendously important. There was an increase in the number of trains, and the introduction of longer trains, to ensure vital supplies such as food, construction material and toilet rolls continued to be delivered, to keep the shelves fully stocked and to make certain that when we were able to leave our houses again, the products we wanted and needed were available.

The Government has announced plans to spend £96 billion on the railways, and while this has been criticised for scaling back some of HS2 to the north and not all the money being 'new', it still represents a show of faith in this country's railway, and a desire to continue to see it flourish.

Finally, the central London section of Crossrail between Paddington and Abbey Wood was officially opened by the Queen on 17 May, a week before the first passengers were able to travel on the new £19 billion railway. This was the ideal way for the railway to celebrate 70 years of Queen Elizabeth.

To think back to 1952, through to the major projects today that will transform how we travel in this country – the UK's railways have taken a huge journey in becoming among the safest, most sustainable, and most revered in the world.

Photo credit: Great Western Railway