

70 BR remembered... years on

Railway writer and former editor of *Steam World* magazine **Barry McLoughlin** celebrates the 70th anniversary of the formation of British Railways

BRITAIN'S RAILWAY network used to be a vast adventure playground for my group of friends during our teenage trainspotting expeditions.

In the Sixties we scaled signals and bridges, climbed into goods wagons, put coins on the tracks... it was daft and dangerous but we were young and had to find something to do during lulls between trains.

Such activities would, rightly, attract the attention of the British Transport Police today, but somehow this seemed a more innocent era – the era of British Railways.

Although it lasted less than 50 years from its foundation on January 1, 1948, BR will have been a formative fixture in the lives of many *Choice* readers.

The butt of jokes about everything from its infamously curly sandwiches to late-running trains, BR nevertheless kept the railway on an even keel at a time when it was in decline as a result of social, demographic and

Below: With the early 'cycling lion' emblem on its tender, and the dignified lined black livery of BR mixed-traffic locomotives, preserved 'Black Five' No 45407 The Lancashire Fusilier stands at Bury Bolton Street Station on the East Lancashire Railway. It is 'double-heading' a train of mixed 'Rail Blue' and BR maroon carriages

economic forces – most importantly, the massive expansion of road travel.

It's easy to become misty-eyed about BR: it wasn't all gleaming green engines, spotless 'blood and custard' (red and cream) carriages and smiling porters. Like any massive organisation, it could be bureaucratic, inflexible and sometimes uncaring, and many of its engines were scruffy, smelly and unreliable.

Yet it inspired a camaraderie among both its workforce and users... and – albeit very remotely – it belonged to all of us. You didn't, for instance, have to worry whether your ticket only allowed you to travel on a certain operator's trains.

British Railways was a flawed but fully integrated national network, unlike today's fragmented regiment of competing companies.

And despite rail being seen in the Sixties and Seventies as outmoded and evocative of the Victorian era, BR pioneered some important developments in

railway technology, branding, marketing and organisation.

As with the NHS – founded in the same year – it was a substantial achievement after six years of total war.

The birth of BR

The Thirties have been called the golden age of Britain's railways, with sleek, stylish high-speed trains on the main routes and an astonishingly diverse network of lesser lines. Under the so-called 'Big Four' railway companies, however, there was also much needless duplication and competition for business.

The Second World War put paid to all that. From August 30, 1939 the network was effectively nationalised under the control of the Railway Executive Committee.

The war left the railways nearly



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Loco-spotting

You couldn't pass through a large station in the Fifties and Sixties without seeing a gaggle of school-uniformed boys (never girls) at the platform end scribbling down engine numbers.

Tens of thousands of boys spent all their spare time and pocket money in pursuit of elusive locomotives. Today, the rather sneering description 'anorak' is frequently applied to trainspotters. And yes, we did wear anoraks and we usually carried duffel bags crammed with Tizer bottles and sandwiches.

For my fellow 'gricers' and me, our favourite spotting location wasn't at a station but by the busy West Coast Main Line just south of Warrington. From our vantage point near the Twelve Arches bridge, we could see expresses hurtling down the incline from the viaduct over the Manchester Ship Canal. On the other side, meanwhile, shunting engines fussed about in the marshalling yards at Arpley and Walton. It was a trainspotters' paradise.

And the key to this paradise was a small but chunky book: the *Ian Allan abc Combined Volume of British Railways Locomotives*. In this we meticulously underlined our 'cops', compared them with our comrades and, like anglers, bemoaned the 'ones that got away'.

The craze survived the transition from steam to diesel and electric but most trains today are what is known as 'multiple units' – instead of being pulled by a locomotive, they are just a series of carriages with an engine underneath. Coupled with security fears and health and safety laws, it's made trainspotting the preserve of a dedicated band of mainly adult enthusiasts.

bankrupt, with locomotives and infrastructure devastated. However, the wartime nationalisation had shown how a unified system could pull all the railway's disparate strands together, and Clement Attlee's triumphant Labour government of 1945, with its radical programme of public ownership of vital industries, saw no reason to change things.

The Transport Act of 1947 received royal assent in August that year, and put the war-ravaged railways under the control of a new British Transport Commission (BTC).

British Railways came into being on New Year's Day 1948, inheriting a vast enterprise that also included subsidiary businesses such as shipping, ports, road haulage and even hotels. It immediately



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More British Railways station signs at the preserved Ribble Steam Railway in Preston

began the massive process of rebranding its thousands of locomotives, carriages, goods wagons and stations.

Harder to reform was the railways' culture: the Big Four companies had always jealously guarded their 'patches', and the six new BR regions – London Midland, Eastern, North Eastern, Western, Southern and Scottish – were in some ways re-creations of the pre-war situation. As late as the Sixties, BR enginemen would still refer to locomotives from other regions working in their areas as 'foreigners'.

BR was bequeathed an incredibly diverse collection of rolling stock, some dating back to the Victorian era, and around 20,000 route miles of track. Many of these were overlapping and competing, a legacy of the days before the Big Four were created in 1923.

Another major problem was the massive network of secondary and branch lines, with tiny stations, some of which were used by only a handful of passengers every day. Competition from the expanding bus network was putting a further strain on their profitability. In the 15 years before the Beeching Report, some 3000 route miles were axed, though this was nothing

There's no mistaking the huge BR double-arrow logo on the side of this Class 37 diesel – one of the more successful of the Modernisation Plan locomotives – on an excursion to Blackpool last year

compared with what would happen under the Good Doctor after 1963.

As for traction, steam was still seen as the answer. In 1951 the BTC authorised the production of a dozen new classes of so-called 'standard' steam locomotives to rejuvenate the antiquated fleet. With hindsight, this decision turned out to be folly: steam traction on the main line had disappeared by the summer of 1968 and some of the new locomotives – efficient and modern by steam standards – had a working life of barely a decade. Happily, however, a fine selection of them are now still working on preserved lines.

The Modernisation Plan

As the growth of the road network continued to eat into railway revenues, particularly on the freight side, BR's finances remained precarious and in 1955 it posted its first operating loss.

The BTC grasped the nettle by publishing its much-vaunted Modernisation Plan early in 1955. It proposed investment of more than £1.2bn – £25bn today – in a 15-year drive to revive the railways' fortunes with new locomotives, rolling stock, particularly for goods trains, track electrification and signalling.

Just four years after the authorisation of the new standard steam locomotives, the report recommended the rapid replacement of steam by thousands of new electric or diesel trains. The new diesels that began to appear were a shock for a generation brought up with romantic but smelly and smoke-shrouded steam engines.



In the days before high-vis clothing, a group of BR workers takes a break outside Blackpool Central Station in 1963

They were clean (relatively) and, although not much quieter, they set a new tone for the railway with their smart green liveries and sleek lines. Sadly the old regional rivalries resurfaced, and each region opted for its own designs; some of the less successful diesel classes were withdrawn even before the last steam engines ran in 1968.

Others, though, such as the robust Class 37 and 47 locomotives, proved to have long-lasting value, and are still in use today almost 60 years on.

The railways had always been image-conscious, with big budgets for marketing, advertising and what we would today call brand identification. BR publicity teams had to condense the various distinct identities of the Big Four into a single, universally recognisable brand. A mass of literature was produced, from posters to timetables, bearing the new corporate identity.

In its early years perhaps the most ubiquitous logo was the lion astride a spoked wheel – the ‘cycling lion’, as it was nicknamed – which appeared on the side of locomotives and tenders. This was replaced in the mid-Sixties by the famous double-arrow symbol – one of the few parts of BR that has survived into the privatisation era (though cynics dubbed it the ‘arrows of indecision’ and the ‘coming or going’ logo because it was facing in two directions at once). This was accompanied by a shortening of the name to ‘British Rail’, to reflect a sharper, snappier image for the future.

Beeching and after

In 1961, Dr Richard Beeching, a brilliant, business-minded ICI executive, was recruited to chair the BR Board. He believed railways should be run as profitable concerns and not just public services, and in 1963 he published his

infamous report on the ‘Reshaping of British Railways’.

The statistics were telling. In 1938, fewer than two million private cars were registered; by 1961 there were around six million, and road haulage had grabbed more than 40 per cent of what had once been a railway monopoly. The railway’s problems were compounded by a spate of industrial action, caused by poor labour relations.

Beeching’s report proposed cutting about 5000 route miles – nearly a third of the network – and closing 2363 of BR’s stations.

There was a national outcry, particularly from rural communities which would be left isolated, but most of the cuts were implemented by the Conservative government and later by Labour under Harold Wilson (although the party had criticised the cuts when in Opposition). Nearly 70,000 railway jobs were lost.

The Beeching Axe did have a devastating effect on many communities. It also proved to be short-sighted: when rail traffic started growing again, there just wasn’t the infrastructure to support it.

But there are respected figures in the railway industry who insist that Beeching saved, rather than butchered, the loss-making railways. Indeed, there were some terrible inefficiencies: for example, I recall seeing scores of ‘holiday’ carriages parked up in Blackpool every summer which were only used on a handful of days a year. Much the same applied to the tens of thousands of antiquated goods wagons stored in sidings around the country.

Today Beeching has become a byword for economic short-termism and putting profitability before the public good – a criticism sometimes levelled at the



In BR’s heyday, happy holidaymakers from Oldham pack the platforms at Blackpool Central Station in 1963, a year before the closure of the terminus

privatised railway industry of the 21st century. Indeed, one of the main criticisms aimed at him is that he failed to take into account the social value of the railways. Post-Beeching, the railway rumbled along, with its market share being steadily eroded by road transport. Critics claimed it was in a period of ‘managed decline’, an acceptance that railway travel would inexorably dwindle.

But in many ways BR strove hard to adapt to and meet the demands of the modern era. With the phasing out of steam traction by 1968, it sought to present a more up-to-date image.

By the Eighties, BR’s locomotive and rolling stock liveries had largely been standardised into the all-embracing ‘Rail Blue’, though some sectors retained a separate identity.

BR’s publicity whizz-kids came up with snappy advertising slogans such as ‘This Is the Age of the Train’, ‘Let the Train Take the Strain, and the perhaps less triumphalist ‘We’re Getting There’.

BR’s engineering advances were also to have a lasting effect on the development of the network.

In the mid-Seventies, what has been dubbed ‘Britain’s best train’ was introduced. This was the InterCity 125 High Speed Train – or, more simply, HST – which is still in operation today, though rapidly being superseded by more modern traction.

The HST was a diesel train but, long-term, BR believed the future lay in electrification. The completion of the electrification of the Anglo-Scottish West Coast Main Line saw a transformation in the speed and comfort of trains on this hilly route. Other key

routes electrified included the East Coast, South Western and Great Eastern Main Lines. Coupled with an intensive TV advertising campaign, the ‘Sparks Effect’ attracted thousands of new passengers to the electrified network.

One much-publicised mis-step, however, was the tilting Advanced Passenger Train, introduced in the early Eighties to rival continental and Japanese high-speed trains. This proved an expensive failure, though some of the technology from the ill-fated project was used successfully in future trains.

These technical advances and the effective rebranding and publicity campaigns ensured the railway was in a fairly robust position, though it was still losing money. It also saw off the proposals in the Serpell Report of 1983 whose cuts would have made Beeching look benign.

Preparing to privatise

However, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative governments in the Eighties were determined to undo Labour’s nationalisation programme of 40 years earlier, and began a period of selling off public utilities to the private sector.

BR managed to survive the privateers’ pruning forks throughout the Eighties, but it was split into various sectors in what was seen as a foretaste of the big sell-off.

And that came as a result of the 1993 Railways Act, passed by John Major’s Tory government after his 1992 election victory. This came into force the following April, though it was to be a couple of years before the Great Rail Sale was in full swing.

Some argued for a wholesale privatisation of the entire network to create a ‘British Rail plc’. Sadly, however, the Government plumped for what turned out to be perhaps the worst of all the options – franchising, splitting the passenger services between no fewer than two dozen train operating companies.

The principal flaw of this piecemeal privatisation, apart from its complexity, was that the companies actually owned... nothing. They paid state-owned Railtrack (now Network Rail) to use the tracks, and hired their locomotive and coaches from the three so-called ROSCOs – rolling stock companies, which raked in money from the leasing charges. With no real stake in the network, they were playing



The Ian Allan ‘ABC Combined Volume’

what the respected railway commentator Christian Wolmar has described as “pretend capitalism”. They enjoyed the profits of a free-enterprise organisation with little of the concomitant risk.

Overall, the network was broken up into more than 100 companies, some of which were soon sold on for big profits. The sheer number of companies also led to a complex web of contracts and interfaces.

Today the privatised operators have been slimmed down from the 1996 figure to around a dozen, and subjected to much tighter regulation and Whitehall control.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that much of the privatised network is now run by state-owned overseas companies; it has effectively been part-renationalised by foreign states. The Germans, Dutch, French, Chinese and Italians are now responsible for half the 1.7 billion passenger journeys made in the UK each year, though some commentators believe Brexit could help reform the situation.

Mick Whelan, leader of the train drivers’ union Aslef, claims: “Ministers say they don’t believe in state control, yet are perfectly happy to allow Britain’s train companies to be run by state-owned railways – as long as it’s another state.”

However, Paul Plummer of the Rail Delivery Group insists franchising has meant “rail companies from around the world bring new ideas and innovation to Britain’s railway”.

Since the Nineties usage of the passenger railway has risen has more to do with road congestion, increased commuting and the general economic revival of the early 2000s than free enterprise. Most telling is that so-called privatised railway receives around twice as much in public subsidy (in real terms) as its state-owned predecessor in its last full year of operation.

The fires go out on steam

Fifty years ago this summer, in August 1968, the final main line steam locomotives ran on BR. Steam had powered Britain’s railways for 150 years and BR had inherited some 20,000 steam locomotives; now there were none.

As the BR board sought to modernise the railways’ image, it had dramatically telescoped the original 30-year timeframe for getting rid of steam and by January 1968, there were just 13 steam depots left in the country. Then these were gradually whittled down to a tiny enclave in Lancashire. By August 1968, just three steam sheds remained: Carnforth in the north of the county, Lostock Hall near Preston, and Rose Grove outside Burnley.

Enthusiasts decorated some of the trains on the final day, August 4, with makeshift headboards and chalk messages on their boilers.

A week later, the ‘Fifteen Guinea Special’ ran between Liverpool, Manchester and Carlisle on August 11, and attracted droves of onlookers. Most of these tearful observers thought they would never see steam again, but the success of the railway preservation movement has ensured there is a heritage railway within reach of virtually every major town and regular tours on the main line.



Enthusiasts through the platform to see the last steam-hauled train Preston to Blackpool train on August 3, 1968. It was the eve of the final day of scheduled main line steam on BR. The train is hauled by ‘Black Five’ locomotive No 45212...



... which is now preserved and is seen in tip-top British Railways condition at the East Lancashire Railway, Bury