

Railways in the North East

The North East is inherently linked to its railways. Through the transporting of coal and ore they shaped the industrial landscape of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

But the decline of those industries hit the railways hard, with many regional lines lost well before the infamous Beeching Report of 1963.

In the last 60 years the network has passed from private companies to British Rail, through privatised Railtrack and back to public owned Network Rail. For the region, it has meant line closures, conversion to other transport and handovers to volunteer enthusiasts. The rest have gone from strength to strength under the Train Operating Companies.



Original Ownership

North East railways, as with the rest of the UK, were originally private companies. Some were built for carrying passengers, others served agriculture, forestry, coalfields and other industries, with some doing both. Gradually the majority were taken over by four main companies – Southern Railway, the Great Western Railway, the London, Midlands and Scottish, and the London and North East Railway, which served our region.

During the Second World War these were managed jointly for the war effort. Great demands were placed on them with little maintenance of track or rolling stock. It came as little surprise when they were nationalised in 1948, becoming part of British Railways (later renamed British Rail).

After 1948 a programme of track and station renewal was started, to be completed in 1954. However that same year saw the privatisation of the road haulage industry, ending the formal co-ordination of transport. A profitable railway in 1948, British Rail became unprofitable as costs rose and revenues fell. The replacement of steam rolling stock with diesel and electric trains was begun in the late 1950s and not completed until 1968, at considerable cost. However this failed to arrest the decline in freight and passenger use.

While Governments continued to drip feed investment, a major shift in policy was taking shape. The result was the ‘Reshaping of Britain’s Railways (The Beeching Report)’, which was published on 27th March 1963.



Decline of the NE Rail Network

Prior to the 1950s, the railway network in North East England was extensive, beyond comprehension with what remains today. This is illustrated in the photograph of the North Eastern Railway, taken from a poster board at Morpeth Station, as shown overleaf. Note the lines to more remote towns such as Alston and Rothbury.

Car ownership was very low in the North East with the railways being popular for both leisure and work purposes. The coal industry in particular, built lines throughout Northumberland and Durham to take ore and coal to the rivers and coast for shipment. Agriculture and forestry also used rail, and a line ran from Scotland through Kielder and Reedsmouth to connect at Morpeth and Hexham.

By the 1950s, the once extensive network was already in decline, reflecting the national picture. There were many regional casualties, including the loss of passenger services at Reedsmouth to Morpeth, Scots Gap to Rothbury and Ferryhill to Hartlepool (all 1952). Durham to Scotswood and Newcastle to Blackhill followed in 1954 and 1955, respectively. The picturesque, but little used Riccarton Junction to Hexham met the same fate in 1956.

In the 1960s the pace of closures accelerated, with many regional lines succumbing to the 'Beeching' cuts. Routes that had remained open for freight traffic were now also closed, with track removed and property

sold for other uses. Further decline in mining and heavy industry in the 1980s and early 1990s signalled the end for the majority of the surviving freight lines.

Building a railway line had originally required an Act of Parliament, to gain access to land for track, stations and sidings. This was often resolutely contested, by the landowners at the time and, in many cases, resulted in conditions placed on the acquisition that returned land to its original owners, should the railway be disbanded. Thus when lines were closed the land was lost to public use. In rural areas many former lines are fenced off as fields for cattle or sheep.

However, significant parts of many lines remained in public ownership and have reverted to rights of way; footpaths or later cycleways. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases, the stone track beds and drainage systems were removed by the outgoing railway, and former tracks in cuttings often became quagmires.

In urban areas in particular, some former lines have been upgraded to high standard footpaths and cycleways, with appropriate surfaces and drainage.





More Recent Changes

The 1970s saw a major change on Tyneside with conversion of the suburban railway to the Tyne and Wear Metro system, bringing a light transit system to around 25% of the population. The original Metro was completed in 1984, extended to Newcastle International Airport in 1991 and the line to Sunderland and South Hylton completed in 2002.

Mainline passenger services experienced a renaissance with the introduction of the high-speed **Intercity 125** trains in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1955 the fastest Newcastle to London train was the Tees Tyne Pullman at 4hours 32mins but most services were between 5 and 6 hours. By 1980 the Flying Scotsman service had reduced this to 2hours 59minutes with another 11 direct services taking a maximum of 3hours 22mins.

The 1980s saw cuts in government funding to the railways and above-**inflation** fare increases. There was intensive pressure to make services more cost-effective. This was achieved, to a degree, with the electrification of the East Coast Main Line in the late 1980s, which provided faster, more reliable journey times.

Public support saved some further lines from closure. Despite the multi-million pound cost of restoring the Ribbleshead Viaduct, the Settle to Carlisle now admirably performs the dual function of working railway and tourist attraction across some of England's most breathtaking landscape.

Stephenson Railway Museum

Stephenson Railway Museum is managed by the North Tyneside Steam Railway Association and is located off Middle Engine Lane in North Tyneside. The area had a number of lines built by different mine companies to carry coal to the Tyne. Later, as British Rail lines, they were gradually closed, the last in 1983, and the tracks lifted. This was despite a short interlude in 1975 when the newly planned Metro system established a test track at the site.

At the time, there was virtually no experience of building and operating such a light-rail transit system in the UK. To test the viability of Metro, a 1.5 mile track was laid and a two road workshop built, which now



forms the rear half of the museum. The test track closed in 1979 and all equipment removed, leaving only the sheds. Between 1982 and 1984, North Tyneside Council acquired the as the nucleus for a transport museum.

Visitors can see the fascinating collection of steam, electric and diesel locomotives, including George Stephenson's 'Billy', a forerunner of the world-famous 'Rocket'. There are also train rides on Sundays and most Bank Holidays, hauled usually by a Pecket 0-6-0 steam engine, though occasionally a heritage 08 or 03 diesel is used.

Weardale Railway

The railway from Darlington to the Wear Valley first opened in 1847. Passenger services ended in 1953 but it continued to carry bulk cement for Blue Circle from Eastgate until 1993.

The Weardale Railway Preservation Society was set up immediately to prevent the railway's removal promote its future use. The company Weardale Railway Ltd was established and the 18.7mile (30km) track from Bishop Auckland to Eastgate in Weardale, acquired from Railtrack. In 2002, under the Transport & Works Act, permission was granted to recommence passenger and freight services.

Repair started almost immediately, and was carried out solely by volunteers and enthusiasts. It was a mammoth task, involving line clearance and repairs, including station restoration at Eastgate, Stanhope, Frosterley and Wolsingham. The work was not completed until 2010. In the meantime, the first limited operations commenced in July 2004 with hired locomotives and carriages. However this proved short-lived and financially unviable.



To keep the railway operational, a new Partnership was established – the Weardale Railway CIC.

The CIC – a Community Interest Company – is commercially run, with a 75% stake by British American Rail Services. The remaining share is held equally by the Weardale Railway Trust, who provide the volunteer workforce and skills and Durham County Council who retain the local authority interest following the abolition of Wear Valley District Council.

The line re-opened in August 2006 with both diesel and steam heritage services. A regular passenger service was attempted between May 2010 and December 2011 but withdrawn through lack of support, perhaps emphasising the stark reality of running a commercial rail operation in the early 21st century. Heritage services however flourished, and are now run throughout the year.

Current Ownership

British Rail was privatised and ownership of track and infrastructure passed to the new company Railtrack on 1st April 1994. Passenger operations were franchised to 25 individual Train Operating Companies (TOCs). Freight Services were sold outright.

Under the new arrangements, Railtrack let infrastructure maintenance contracts to private companies. However the separation of track and services to different organisations proved difficult to manage. Costs spiralled, train punctuality plummeted and a series of high-profile incidents, culminating in the Hatfield accident, meant public confidence in rail travel collapsed.

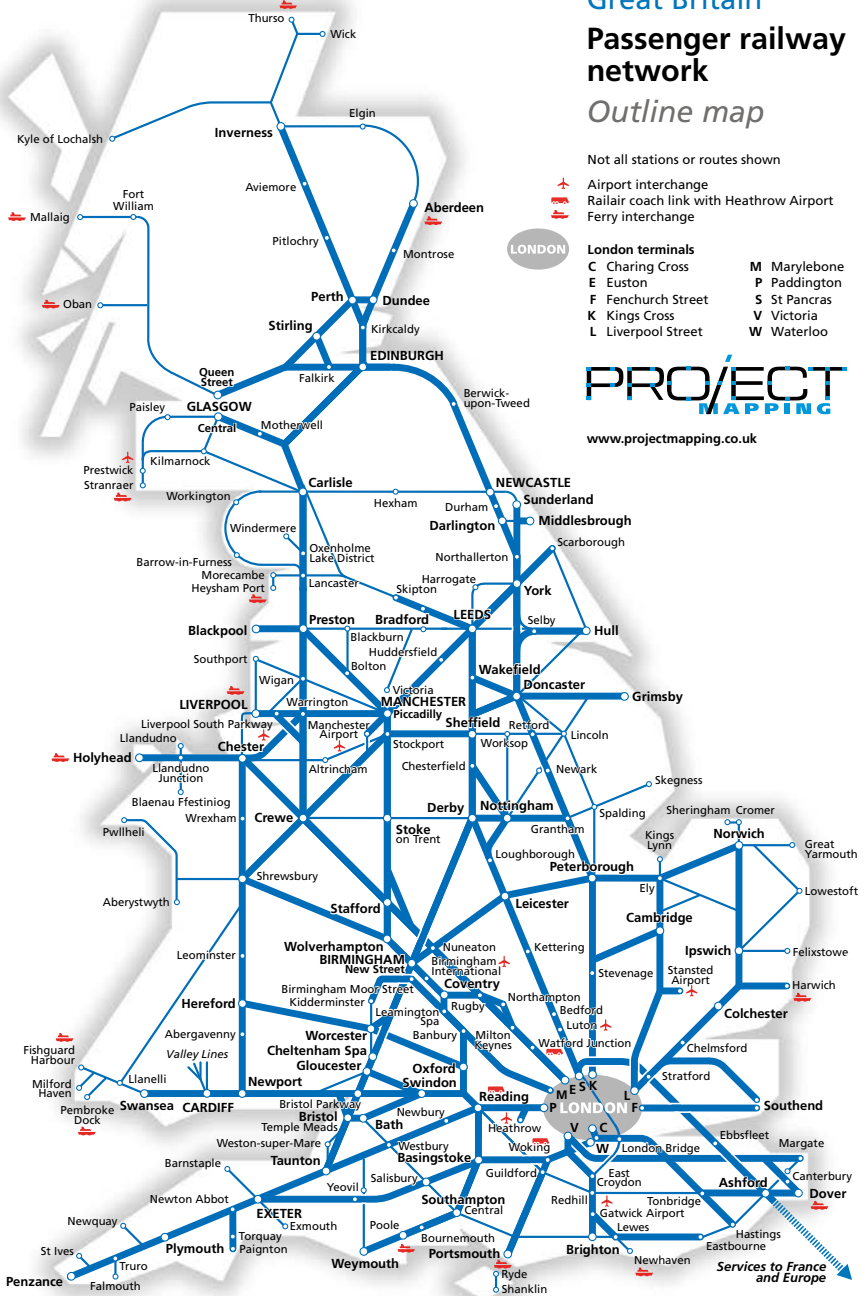
The establishment of Network Rail, a not-for-profit organisation, essentially renationalised the network. Operations however are franchised, usually for a term of around 15 years. Upon renewal, the **Department for Transport (DfT)** invites tenders for the franchise, specifying the level of service required and judging bids on several criteria. However bidders are now expected to offer substantial sums to run franchises on the ‘premium routes’, with public subsidy still required on less profitable franchises.



Great Britain

Passenger railway network

Outline map





Network Rail still receives public money from Government, meaning they don't have to levy the full access charge to the Train Operating Company (TOC) for use of the infrastructure. In September 2010 these subsidies were broken down as:

Long-distance franchises £693m (25%)

London/South East franchises £760m (19%)

Regional franchises £1,873m (61%)

Current Train Operators

Four TOCs currently operate in the region:: East Coast, Cross Country, Northern Rail and First TransPennine Express. There is also Grand Central which operates a Sunderland to London service. However this is referred to as an Open Access arrangement as it was set up outside of a franchise, without subsidy or payment to Government.

East Coast is the Government operated inter-city service between London, Leeds and Scotland which took over the franchise following successive withdrawals from GNER and National Express.

Cross Country connects the North East to the south and south-west, via the Midlands, as well as to Aberdeen.

The Transpennine franchise is run by First Group, who operate express services between connecting Newcastle and Liverpool, via Leeds and Manchester.

Northern Rail, owned by Serco-Abellio, is the TOC for the Northern franchise. It provides regional rail services, from Chathill, Northumberland to Whitby, North Yorkshire, as well as across to Carlisle and west Cumbria. First Scotrail also run a service to Glasgow, via Dumfries.

In addition, national freight services continue in the north east. EWS and Freightliner trains can often be seen rolling through Central Station, Newcastle.

With all the above passenger franchises up for renewal between 2013 and 2016, there could be change on the horizon for north east train users. In any event, competition to run rail services is likely to be fierce.

The high profile failures on the East Coast Main Line, controversy with the DfT's bidding process, as seen in the West Coast Main Line fiasco, and headline grabbing fare increases, ensure our railways are not far from the national headlines.

Further information on Train Operating Companies and route maps can be found at www.projectmapping.co.uk.

Thanks to Gordon Philpott of the CIHT North Eastern Branch, for preparing this article.

Related Links

www.weardale-railway.com

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