RAILWAY HERITAGE
IN BRITAIN

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Introduction

THANK YOU for inviting me to your conference to speak about Railway Heritage, which term evokes widely varying conceptions of the subject depending on the interests of the individual.

I would like to preface my talk by clarifying the areas I will touch on and importantly, those excluded. If anyone present is expecting me to discuss steam locos, or even diesels, or old rolling stock - “Kings” & “Castles”, “Stirlings” & “Staniers” - I suggest now is the time to leave for an early lunch. The Railway Heritage I intend to cover is concerned with stations, buildings, bridges, viaducts - most of which are either Listed Buildings, Ancient Monuments or have an historic importance or interest.

The history of transport through the centuries is reflected in the evolution of each mode by the infrastructure built for its operation.

In Europe the art of coach building virtually disappeared with the Romans and did not return in England until the sixteenth century with the introduction of the first stagecoach in 1555. Apart from the wealthier classes with personal transport, most journeys were on foot, exemplified by famous pilgrimages to holy places, and even armies marched vast distances before engaging in battle.

The spread of stagecoaches drew attention to the appalling state of the roads, which were maintained within their boundaries, by the Parish Council. “Turnpike” or “Toll Houses” were built, new bridges and viaducts constructed and coaching inns and stables for horses arose.

Similarly, coastal shipping led to ports and harbours, lighthouses, customs offices and sea defences. In the eighteenth century, canals and inland waterways developed due to the increasing demand for bulk transport of coal, stone, ores and wheat and, again, appropriately, locks, lock-gates and keepers houses, granaries and coal staithes were constructed.

By 1720, steam power was used by Thomas Newcomen for draining mines and his stationary engine was refined and improved by the Scottish engineer James Watt in 1765. Several other engineers were all working on steam engines but Richard Trevithick in 1802 produced a successful steam loco at Coalbrookdale, England for the coal industry there. Colliery railways were built solely for carrying coal and materials belonging to the individual colliery owner.

The Stockton and Darlington railways was designed to be the first public railway linking coalfields in the North East of England around Darlington with the port of Stockton on Tees some 40 kilometres away. In 1825, George Stephenson’s loco LOCOMOTION was used on the opening day to pull a train of coal wagons and was so successful that the public joined in the celebration and hundred rode on top of the coal at speeds of about 25 miles per hour.

The final seal on railway development occurred in 1829 when Robert Stephenson’s ROCKET won the Rainhill trials between Manchester and Liverpool and railway mania swept the country. Stations, tracks, bridges, viaducts, goods sheds and warehouses, engine depots, signal boxes, housing, hotels, together with a huge variety of other railway structures, were built to project this new industry into the van of Britain’s Industrial Revolution.
A key factor in the success of this revolution was improved transport and the invention of railways probably had a greater impact on society and the development of civilization than any other single innovation.

Background

In historical perspective, Australia celebrated its bicentenary last year, 1990, and HM the Queen is visiting Australia next year in connection with the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the City of Sydney.

As you are probably aware, railways in Britain are over 160 years old and were built by engineers and architects whose names are famous worldwide - George Stephenson, and son Robert, Isambard Kingdom Brunel of Great Western fame, and eminent architects such as Cubitt, Digby-Wyatt, William Tite and G. T. Andrews amongst others. The railway contractors and their armies of "navvies" were prominent in effecting the engineers' plans. It was a time of immense industrial activity - revolution - and men of burning ambition to create the best were competing with each other, with each railway vying to capture the trade and wealth associated with this new, quick and efficient form of transport.

This was Victorian Britain, an age of confidence and almost arrogance, in constructing railways throughout the country (and the world) - when it seems every small town and village aspired to be connected by rail to every other one. The UK railway map was laid in an incredibly short time and almost all the network was completed in 50 years, by hand and horse power.

Trains needed bridges, viaducts, tunnels and tracks (or rail-roads) with signal boxes required for control and safety of operations. Passengers were provided with stations and hotels, freight traffic needed warehouses and granaries for storage, locos and rolling stock were maintained and repaired in shed with coaling plants, water towers and turntables as essential equipment.

Thus was built the enormous range of buildings and structures which British Rail inherited when all the former private railway companies were merged into one in 1948 - 43 years ago when the railways were nationalised.

The first railway stations were generally in keeping with the local architecture and would not have looked out of place in the high street of any small country town. Modest in size, using local materials and styles, they were plainly adaptations of existing building types - with speed and economy of construction being a major consideration in their design. There were a few notable exceptions where neo-classical, gothic or even Moorish style buildings were intended either to reassure nervous passengers or to impress prospective investors.

Thus, variations of the country estate "Gate-keepers Lodge" or Cottage Orné style, served for small stations and frequently adopted the design of buildings used on the large estates through which the railway passed e.g. The Duke of Bedford's estate at Woburn Abbey.

Larger stations were first cousins of the toll road coaching inns and early loco sheds were seen as "stables" for the "Iron Horse".

The second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth was a period of tremendous traffic growth for the railways and by 1914 they had reached a pre-eminent position. During this time their power and prestige were expressed in the many ambitious buildings and structures which were needed to handle the ever increasing business, there then being some 9,000 stations and 60,000 bridges. Today there are 2,600 stations and 44,800 bridges - many of the latter on closed lines but still BR owned.
This railway heritage is vast, reflecting the all-embracing influence of the railways on Victorian and Edwardian society. I have already referred to various types of railway buildings in BR’s portfolio, but, in addition, they acquired several historical oddities through land purchase. These include such items as a fourteenth century refectory pulpit (Shrewsbury), a medieval bridge (Ware), several sections of Roman wall (Antonine and Hadrians), and Anglo-Saxon cemetery (west of Ramsgate Station), a Georgian mansion (The Grove, Watford) and the site of a Roman Governor’s palace (Cannon Street).

Public and Government Attitude Towards the Heritage

The growth of road transport in the thirties challenged the railway monopoly and the Second World War, when the system was badly run down and suffered considerable bomb damage, marked the decline of the industry.

With nationalisation in 1948, a new look at the railway’s role was needed to overcome major arrears of maintenance and lack of investment and to meet the increasing competition from other forms of transport.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s - the Beeching era - many of the lines and routes which had not already died a commercial death were axed and old buildings were seen as an embarrassment when trying to present a modern railway image. Demolition of the old was often seen as the means of creating a way to be replaced by smaller ones designed for present day usage and clearly indicating that horse and steam power were relics of the past.

BR’s modernisation plan during the 1950’s provided diesel traction in place of steam. The continental railways introduced OHL electrification for their war devastated system which has proved a far superior and environmentally acceptable solution. BR is now catching up slowly. Even now BR has only 5,000 miles of track OHL electrification out of 23,500 track miles (including sidings in both figures) with a further 2,300 miles of third rail electrification on Southern Region.

In the post (Second World) war period, the poor condition and demolition of many fine buildings, e.g. country houses, town halls, theatres and railway stations generated an interest in conservation. This was reflected by Government action in creating lists of buildings of architectural or historic interest, in scheduling ancient monuments and in creating conservation areas and areas of special scientific interest. The grade of listing given to a building - ranging from the highest Grade I to Grade II as next most important, and finally Grade II - is used as a guide for prioritising the awarding of grants by the Trust.

Listing implies that alteration or demolition of the property is not possible without the approval of the local authority, which in practice, is not readily given. Therefore, if British Rail wishes to demolish a listed building which is no longer required, or to adapt it to meet present day needs, it can, at best, be subject to delay and additional cost in order to produce a scheme which is acceptable to operational, commercial and conservation interests. At worst, it may be forced to retain and maintain a building it no longer requires.

However, it is clearly necessary to ensure that buildings of quality are preserved and adapted in a sensitive way when they need to be altered to meet the needs of the modern railway. It is often forgotten that whilst the trains, track and signals may represent the best in modern technology, their related buildings are frequently over 100 years old. In order to make these buildings suitable for current needs calls for careful and imaginative design and a willingness to incur expenditure above that required for a purely functional solution.
Where a listed building is no longer required for the railway business then it is necessary to explore the possibility of finding an alternative use which will enable it to be preserved and maintained without incurring the railway in expenditure for which there would be no return.

Legislation exists which enables the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission and Local Authorities to make grants for the repair of Listed buildings, or for work which will make a significant contribution to the preservation or enhancement of a conservation area.

In practice, grants for railway buildings tend to be made available only for the most important examples, i.e., those buildings with a Grade I or II* listing and the sums of money given are relatively small. However, whilst British Rail still has to find the bulk of the expenditure, the availability of grants has proved to be a most useful addition to its limited finances.

This rising interest in conservation by the public and pressure by government to complete the “Listing” survey which had dragged on for 20 years, led to a massive increase in BR’s buildings being so designated. In 1985 the total was 630 and this has now risen to 1,064 - i.e. 60% more in six years.

An essential requirement for efficient operation by BR of the “Listing” process is to have a register which records every such building by grade, location, operational status, listing details and local authority involved. In BR’s case, a book was produced and up-dated every year for issue to all involved with the building - manager, engineer, architect, Property Board etc. - and this has now been superseded by a computer record. The information is stored on a master disc, up-dated by the Architects Department and floppy discs of new information are sent to those concerned. Importantly, this work must be allocated as the responsibility of one person and not seen as part of a routine filing chore.

A valuable adjunct to the register is a library of photographs. Most buildings are recorded in black and white photos and these are now being revised in colour but it can be a slow and costly process.

Plans and drawings, many originals of Brunel etc., are still available in engineers’ and architects’ offices with the National Records Office, National Railway Museum and County Records Offices custodians of those no longer required for reference purposes.

BR commissioned a book to be written, “The Railway Heritage of Britain” by Gordon Biddle & O S Nock and published in 1983, which recorded details of its listed buildings and structures and was illustrated by photos. This has proved very useful in the work of the Railway Heritage Trust and a revised version is now under consideration.

**The Railway Heritage Trust**

The need for BR to respond to the prevailing environmental climate and to take a pro-active role in conservation issues led to the formation, in 1985, of the Railway Heritage Trust. At a conference in London, sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts, a variety of speakers from both private, railway and non-BR sectors illustrated opportunities for conservation of railway property. These ranged from the sale of lease of redundant warehouses as offices and workshops, a disused station as an exhibition centre, utilising unused space at a station and converting to restaurant/wine-bar and the restoration of operational buildings.

Encouraged by this support and enthusiasm, BR offered to fund an independent Trust with £1.0m to be used for the conservation of Listed Buildings or those having architectural or historic interest and in BR’s ownership. Initially the funding was for the operational portfolio but it soon became clear that the non-operational property would equally benefit from similar treatment and the BR Property Board offered a further £0.2m to the Trust.
Under an enthusiastic chairman, the Honourable Sir William McAlpine Bt., and with three other kindred spirits, the RHT Board was set up on 1st April 1985. A key role of RHT is to act as a catalyst between BR/BR Property Board and other interested parties in attracting funds for heritage related schemes which conserve BR’s listed buildings and structures.

To advise and assist the RHT Board, a panel of advisors was appointed, drawn from all parts of the country, whose members had an interest in the work of the Trust and were experts in their field: architects, journalists, academics, politicians, historians and archaeologists. They are our eyes, ears and sounding boards for railway heritage issues and are encouraged to alert us to any building/structure they observe in the course of their travels in need of our attention. This has enabled us to advise BR of such reports and encourage action by offering grants.

A measure of the success of this approach is that in six years some 290 schemes have received RHT grants from the £7.6m provided by BR, but a further £7.0m has been attracted from other interested parties to the work. For BR, the benefit is a concentration of effort and funds on selected projects supported by RHT and external parties, the genuine enthusiasm by the local staff who have an improved working environment, the opportunity to market an attractive historic but restored railway - tourists are particularly impressed - and to enhance BR’s competitiveness in the transport world of car, coach and air travel. Complaints and criticism of BR’s care for its heritage have reduced dramatically - many of its former critics are now members of RHT’s Advisory Panel - and the positive approach by BR is held up as an example for other such organisations.

Other parties who provide support can be Local Authorities whose community frequently identify with “their” station and are prepared to assist with station garden schemes or even maintaining and cleaning the fabric. To gain such interest is a good means of overcoming vandalism and graffiti which so often despoils the environment.

A number of organisations are prepared to assist in such work, on a voluntary basis, and a competitive spirit can be engendered this way.

As previously indicated, railway buildings are often of outstanding design, workmanship and grandeur and can be the most dominant structure in a town or village which, when restored, gives a sense of civic pride and is a tourist attraction.

Railway Preservation Societies

From the early 1950’s restoration by a group of railway enthusiasts of a Welsh slate railway - narrow gauge - a host of preservation societies have been formed throughout the UK, ranging from the small clubs with a few locos, a short length of track and a shelter for passengers to very large societies who have taken over disused BR lines and own full sized fleets of locos, rolling stock and all ancillary equipment and who operate a timetabled public service. They are all keen and their restoration work on stations and stock, usually in the original authentic livery and colours of the former pre-grouping railway companies - GWR, SR etc - is of a high standard.

Under the umbrella of the Association of Railway Preservation Societies Ltd, co-ordination of some 150 societies with a membership each of approximately 2,000 (300,000 total), is effected and has caught public imagination with its enthusiasm for railway heritage.

BR and RHT work closely with the ARPS in promoting competitions for station restoration and the results are widely published and provide good publicity. Some items surplus to BR’s needs find an outlet with these societies e.g. listed signal boxes - modern Colour Light Signalling by BR supersedes signal boxes - and by allowing ARPS to remove a redundant box from a BR site and re-erect it on the society’s own property with the help of a small grant, ensures all concerned achieve their objective - BR loses and no longer maintains a listed building and a club gains an authentic signal box.
Conservation Options

Museums are the best known way of exhibiting artifacts and the railway is well served in Britain by a large number of excellent museums displaying a wide spectrum of items of interest. The National Railway Museum at York (500,000 visitors a year and over 16m since 1965), part of the Science Museum, has examples of every aspect of railways from locos, rolling stock, equipment, track, timetables, drawings, photos, lithographs, uniforms etc, covering the industry over the past 160 years.

It has recently acquired a site at Swindon - in Brunel’s Great Western Railway buildings - and intends to exhibit more of its vast stock of railwayana. This new site will enable a display of working exhibits to be shown to a large number of potential visitors in London and the South.

Despite this extension, the sad fact remains that only some 10% of the museum’s treasures are seen by the public and 90% are in store. The director, Dr Neil Cossens, is concerned to widen the opportunities for public viewing by decentralising exhibits but the problem of how to do so to satisfy the public and maximise revenue is not easy to resolve.

Other major museums with a “Transport” theme are popular e.g. London Transport Museum, Ironbridge, Glasgow Transport Museum, Darlington North Road, and now a new one at Cardiff, with many smaller ones often in connection with Railway Preservation Society lines.

Local authorities and enthusiasts associated with conservation schemes for disused railway buildings all too often see the future use of the property as a “museum” and there is a danger that too many will emerge with too few worthwhile attractions and so dilute the quality of the better, more progressive establishments.

Major stations, buildings and bridges are not always suitable for “museum” treatment and restoration in situ is preferred. Ideally, such structures should remain, renovated, in operational use where the quality of architecture and materials can be seen and appreciated by both public and passengers alike. Too few of the latter are aware of the history of their stations and one of RHT’s aims is to inform, by means of plaques, an interested public of the important features of the building they are using.

Promotional Techniques

The usual marketing activities are employed by museums, preservation societies and similar bodies – advertising, train rides, publicity material, specialist shops etc and encouraging “club” membership with involvement and subscriptionentrance fees.

The RHT has one main source of publicity, its annual report. This has been the means of highlighting the schemes where renovation has been effected by use of high quality “before” and “after” photographs with short factual commentaries on the building concerned e.g. Engineer/ Architect, dates, special features to look for and often an enlarged photograph to illustrate the detail. These reports are distributed to M.P.’s, Local Authorities, media, staff and a wide range of other organisations and people.

Examples of Conserved Buildings

The 1960’s was the age of modernisation - demolish the old regardless of its historical or architectural significance and build something new in its place.

The 1980’s saw the change of attitude by railways, under pressure from public and government alike, which led to the present awareness of our heritage and the fact that retention of the old,