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8 ways railway travel changed everything for Britain

As commuters brace themselves for the possibility of the first national rail strike in two decades, James Attlee, the author of a new book charting the history of the Great Western Railway, reveals how rail travel has transformed Britain's relationship with the rest of the world...

This article was first published in May 2015

Tuesday 17th November 2015 Submitted by: Emma McFarnon

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London & North Western Railway 2-4-0 locomotive, 1848. The railway operated between London & Glasg
(SSPL/Getty Images)

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The impact of rail technology on the 19th century was so extensive that the only comparison might be to that of the internet today. Like the web, railways forged previously unimagined connections and opened up new opportunities for comm while at the same time destroying long-established industries and the communi around them.

Far from being consigned to history, railways in Britain are going through a per remarkable expansion, touted once more as the transport of the future.

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1) Rethinking geography

The arrival of the railway meant it was suddenly possible not only to travel, but also to transport goods and information from one end of the country to the other in a matter of hours rather than days.

Such a shift in lived experience required rethinking the nation's very geography Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1850: "Railways are shifting all Towns of Britain into r places; no Town will stand where it did, and nobody can tell for a long while yet will stand… I perceive, railways have set all the Towns of Britain a-dancing".

Cities that had for countless centuries stood in proud independence found them reach of each other, dragged into the same time zone, in thrall to the station clo

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2) A second rail revolution

Since the dramatic cuts of the 1960s following the Beeching Reports in 1963 an [massive railway line closures laid out by Richard Beeching, who was briefly chairman of the British Transport Commission], the railway network in Britain has remained largely the same size and shape.

However, the building of Crossrail and other proposed developments such as HS2, HS3 and the Western Rail Access to Heathrow project may yet require adjustments to our own mental map. The Berkshire town of Slough is one example of a place that may be transformed by a new rail connection in ways unseen since the 19th century.

Satirised in Betjeman's eponymous poem in 1937, and more recently in TV comedy *The*

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Office, in the next few years Slough will become one of the best-connected places in Europe: a mere 30 minutes from Bond Street by Crossrail on the newly electrified Great Western line by 2018, with access to three motorways and only six minutes by rail from Heathrow.

3) Movement of peoples?

For the many thousands of us who commute by train, it is easy to think that transporting people to their place of work has always been the raison d'être of the railways. Robert Peel certainly seemed to indicate as much in the late 1830s: "Whatever improvement in communication will enable the poor man to carry his labour, perhaps the only valuable property he possesses, to the best market… must be a decided advantage, not only to him, but the community at large".

The priorities of the merchants of Bristol – the initial funders of the Great Western Line – were somewhat different. Their primary motivation in investing was to connect their city to London, enabling them to move goods between the two ports faster than was possible by canal, thus regaining advantage over their rival Liverpool in the transatlantic trade.

4) First class and 'goods passengers'

In its early days, the Great Western Railway (GWR) catered for an aristocratic and well-to-do clientele, even providing a special waiting room at Paddington for the royal family travelling to and from Windsor. It was was less keen on transporting working-class travellers.

These 'goods passengers' – reduced to the status of things rather than people – were forced to ride in open freight cars pulled by much slower trains, leaving Paddington at 4.30am and Bristol at 10pm. On Christmas Eve 1841, a train pulling two crowded wagons along with 17 heavily laden freight cars was derailed by a landslip at Sonning Cutting, near Reading. Thrown from their seats, eight passengers died and a further 17 were seriously injured.

Public outrage at this, and other similar incidents, led to the passing of a law in 1844 that required companies to provide at least one 'workman's train' of covered carriages per day at the rate of no more than a penny a mile.

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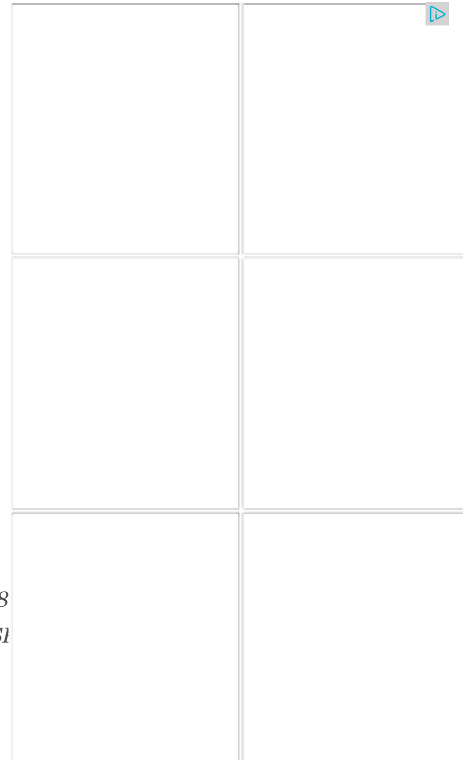

Workmen waiting at the Great Eastern Railway's Liverpool Street Station, 25 October 18 Workmen pose by the 12.55pm train, waiting to take them to Enfield Town. (Photo by SSI Images)

5) Rebranding the nation

As today, in the 19th and early 20th centuries railways in Britain were run by cc private companies, although without the generous levels of state subsidy paid n

In their efforts to attract passengers, companies developed a sophisticated publ relations industry, advertising their routes through posters, brochures and books. Apart from Bristol, the GWR had no major cities west of London to draw on for clientele. They therefore targeted holidaymakers, designating themselves 'The Holiday Line' and rebranding areas of Britain, with consequences still apparent today. Cornwall became 'The Cornish Riviera'; North Wales 'The British Tyrol'; the Thames Valley and the Chalfont Country 'Rural London' – the last was the name of a 1924 publication that described it as "within easy reach of those who may need a brief period of rest or change, or be in quest of a permanent residence away from the din and smoke of London, but within a convenient distance of the scene of their labours".

6) Train vision

Trains have changed the way we perceive the world. Napoleon crossed the Alps in May 1800 at much the same speed as Hannibal: the fastest way to travel before the train was on the back of a galloping horse. But by 1840, rail passengers were moving at terrifying speeds of up to 60 miles an hour, experiencing for the first time the phenomenon of 'optical flow' – the rushed blurring of objects close to the track, and the apparently slower, statelier movement of scenery further away, which revealed a new and previously hidden narrative in the contours of the landscape.

But not everyone welcomed this dramatic change. The great Victorian artist and critic John Ruskin, whose skills as a draftsman were honed through sketching tours made on foot, despised the flickering, jolting view afforded by the train. He described the railway as "the loathsomest form of devilry now extant… destructive of all wise social habit and natural beauty".

7) Railway transport as muse

Despite Ruskin's gloomy prognosis, modern transport technologies had a profound influence on the art, film and literature of the half-century before and after his death in 1900. Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), in which the train is characterised as "a type of the triumphant monster, Death", provided an eerie foreshadowing of his own involvement in the train crash at Staplehurst in 1865.

Monet's depiction of *The Gare St-Lazare* (1877) explores the atmospheric and lighting effects created by smoke and steam, while Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) argued the racing car was superior to classical art. The soaring aeropittura paintings of Italian futurists from 1929 onwards exulted in the new viewpoints afforded by flight.

Trains have also featured in the realm of popular culture, appearing in songs made famous by performers including Howlin' Wolf ('Smokestack Lightning'), Johnny Cash ('Folsom Prison Blues'), James Brown ('Night Train'), Kraftwerk ('Trans-Europe Express') and Elvis Presley ('Mystery Train'), to name but a few.

c1800, 'On the dark road'. Illustration from the Charles Dickens novel Dombey and Son by HK Browne known as Phiz. (Photo by Universal History Archive/Getty Images)

8) The connected train

"A crowd flowed over London Bridge" wrote TS Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922),"'so many, I had not thought death had undone so many". By the time he wrote these words, it was already commonplace to portray commuters as care-worn drudges, yet there has always been a counter-narrative to complaints about the frustrations implicit in the commuting lifestyle: trains were the first form of transport smooth enough to allow reading.

In his book *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1910), Arnold Bennett encouraged travellers to use their time on board for self-improvement through the study of philosophy, history and poetry. Today's passengers are in an even better position to do so, being able to work, listen to music, play games or watch movies as they travel. The carriages they occupy are nearer to being offices or mobile entertainment palaces than anything Victorian travellers would have recognised.

Station to Station: Searching for Stories on the Great Western Line **by James Attlee will be published on 14 May by Guardian Books. To find out more, click here.**

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