Contents

Introduction

The public image of British Railways is permeated by a series of clichés. Passengers were forced to eat 'curly-ended stale sandwiches' and their trains were delayed by the 'wrong kind of snow'.

Let's just dispose of these two famous tropes. While there may, in the early days of BR, have been some stale sandwiches which were made available on the counter of the various cafés, on display under a glass dome, they were disposed of at the end of the day, long before they could develop curly edges. For the most part, the staleness of British Railways sandwiches was just used as the butt of oft-repeated jokes from stand-up comedians and in sit-coms. In fact, British Railways brought in expert chefs and well-known foodies such as Clement Freud and Prue Leith, who actually became a British Railways Board director, and the organization pioneered the idea of shrink-wrapped sandwiches.

As for 'the wrong kind of snow', no BR executive ever uttered that much-repeated phrase. It originated in an interview by James Naughtie on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme in February 1991 after a spell of very cold weather had delayed trains across the network. British

Rail's Director of Operations, Terry Worrall, was asked to comment on the adverse effects of the heavy snowfall and explained that 'we are having particular problems with the type of snow, which is rare in the UK', because it was powdery and far colder than usual. Naughtie then cheekily suggested, 'Oh, I see, it was the wrong kind of snow', which Worrall refuted, merely emphasizing 'it was a different kind of snow'. This exchange was then picked up by the London *Evening Standard*, which splashed across its front page that 'British Rail blames the wrong type of snow', and it swiftly became a media cliché.

These are only the two most notorious myths surrounding British Railways. I mention them here because they are still important in setting the tone of much coverage of BR and yet bear no relation to any measured assessment of the organization's achievements and failings. Even as I wrote this introduction in the summer of 2021, Grant Shapps, the Transport Secretary, revived one of these tropes when announcing the restructuring of the industry, saying 'we won't be going back to the days of British Rail and its terrible sandwiches'.[1] There are plenty more similar myths examined in this book: the trains were never on time; the stations were dirty; the staff unhelpful; and the management out of its depth. These portrayals of a state-run industry that provided a vital service were important in creating the climate of public opinion which led to its privatization in the 1990s, just as the tales of straight bananas and banning double-decker buses influenced the referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016.

Despite this constant undermining of its efforts to provide a good railway service, British Railways was the last significant privatization of the Conservative era which ran from 1979 to 1997, because of fears that the public's affection for the organization would make it an unpopular move. And so it proved. The public may well have been critical of British Railways as an organization, but they did not really want their trains messed about with by some buccaneering capitalists who might slash and burn, as Beeching had done a generation previously. Therefore, despite the oft-repeated criticisms, British Railways remained relatively popular with the public and politicians feared a backlash if it were privatized. As a result, contrary to many people's recollection, it was not Margaret Thatcher who sold off the railway, as she had been aware of the particularly strong feelings that the British have about trains.

It was, therefore, left to her successor, John Major, to do the deed. The Conservative manifesto for the 1992 general election, which they were not expected to win, contained a few scant lines on the privatization of the railway, but contained no details as to how this would be done. The rushed sell-off that ensued dismantled an organization which had, after half a century of existence, created a workable structure that had delivered a much improved service. The unified integrated structure was split into more than 100 sections, governed by a system which was far more expensive to operate and ultimately proved unworkable.

It was such an embarrassment to its creators that in

John Major's 900-page autobiography, published almost a decade after he left office, there is barely a mention of what was one of his most contentious and high profile policies. In researching a TV programme on which I appeared, the producer wrote to Major asking for an explanation of the reasoning behind rail privatization. Surprisingly, the programme received a fairly comprehensive answer, in which Major set out the reasons behind the break-up and sale in a letter dated 15 May 2008:

> Some critics have claimed that British Rail was privatised for ideological reasons. This is nonsense. The impetus for privatisation was my wish to improve public services.
>
> I thought British Rail was inefficient; had been inadequately funded for 50 years; was hidebound by tradition; and poorly managed. In the aftermath of privatisation, the appalling state of the nationalised service is often forgotten.
>
> I believed a transfer to the private sector would improve British Rail through the use of private sector skills, thereby making it possible to raise funds for investment from the market, in sums a publicly-funded railway could never have managed. This was, of course, essential to the improvement of every aspect of British Rail's services. In short: my purpose was to produce a better railway.

He goes on to make points about the structure of the industry:

> This structure was determined after widespread consultation. Initially I was in favour of a vertically-integrated rail system, but persuasive arguments encouraged me to move away from that concept. I was influenced by the fact that the safest transport industry in the country was also the most fragmented: namely Civil Aviation. The Airlines lease their aircraft; Airports are in multiple ownership; Air traffic control is another separate entity. Overall, the airline industry is sub-divided into far more component parts than was the railway following privatisation.
>
> I did not believe the British Rail monolith was the best model for the industry. These days, every part of industry is disaggregated with more specialisation, subcontracting and flexibility than ever before. It would have been odd if British Rail had not followed a similar structure.

Major goes on to blame the Labour government elected in 1997 for 'the very hostile environment that ultimately brought about the collapse of Railtrack', the organization which had taken over all the infrastructure of British Railways, such as stations, signalling and tracks, and concludes:

> The main argument against returning to a national railway is an obvious one: in the future – as in the past – no Government would ever provide the railways with adequate funding. This was, of course, one of the principal reasons for the calamitous state of the service pre-1993, and the one which encouraged me to privatise it.

There is a lot to dispute with that description of the network under British Railways, as I set out in this book. The suggestion that the railway was in a 'calamitous state' before privatization is simply wrong. Yes, it had suffered from a loss of passengers, as always happens in times of economic hardship, and investment levels were far below what was needed, but much of that was the result of decisions taken by Major's own government. However, as this book explains, the railway was, indeed, in a 'calamitous state' – but in 1948, when BR was created, not fifty years later, when it was dismantled.

In the final chapter, I set out the chaotic process of privatization and how it was, contrary to Major's argument, motivated purely by ideology. The ultimate structure came not of some well thought-out process but rather from a government that embarked on a policy without any idea where it would lead.

As to the explanation of why Major omitted to mention rail privatization in his autobiography: I bumped into him at a County Hall event in London in 2014, held to celebrate the twenty-first anniversary of the passing of the 1993 Railways Act that laid the groundwork for privatization. I asked him about the omission, and he merely responded that there had not been sufficient time or space to include it. This seemed an unconvincing answer, to say the least, given that he had had a long time to write his autobiography and that the controversy over the railway often featured on the front pages of the newspapers at the time.

In setting out what I see as this corrective to the

history of British Railways, I would like to emphasize that I am not motivated by nostalgia. For me, steam engines are rightly consigned to history, and rattling along branch lines at 30 mph is not something I miss. Indeed, in writing more than a dozen books about the railway I have never indulged in melancholic moans on the theme of 'it was so much better in the old days'. Rather, my deep affection for the railway stems from the sheer pleasure of what is undoubtedly the best form of travel – apart from the bicycle for shorter journeys – and in learning about the role it has played in its near two centuries of existence.

Therefore, this book about British Railways does not seek to suggest the organization was without fault. Rather, it explores how British Railways was a victim of its history and of the whim of politicians who had little understanding about its achievements and, indeed, its real failings. Many of Major's arguments will be assessed. As the privatization experiment is now a quarter of a century old – half the time of BR's existence – it has been given a good opportunity to prove its worth. In fact, as I write, and indeed since early March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic began to reduce numbers using the railway, the industry has been in a state of turmoil unprecedented in peacetime.

The railway is in a state of chaos, wrecked financially by the pandemic and by the subsequent government messaging, which turned a crisis into a long-term disaster by terrifying potential passengers about the risks of taking the train. The franchising arrangement, created a quarter of a century ago in order to stimulate competition, is now dead,

and finding a replacement structure has proved difficult for a government motivated more by ideology than by a desire to do the best for the industry and its passengers.

The publication of this book is indeed timely. In May 2021, the government led by Boris Johnson finally set out its vision for the railway in a White Paper entitled *Great British Railways*. This was the result of a process set in motion by the previous administration, led by Theresa May, when a wide-ranging timetable change in May 2018 resulted in chaos and thousands of cancellations because the various parts of the railway had not been coordinated in the absence of any overall 'guiding mind'. As a result, the new timetable proved unworkable, as parts of the infrastructure were unable to support the extra trains which were scheduled to operate. The review was led by Keith Williams, a former British Airways chief executive and, later, chairman, but its publication was delayed first by internal wrangling and then the pandemic. Eventually, the document was published as the Williams–Shapps review, with the name of the Transport Secretary added, and with the status of a White Paper setting out a series of radical changes to the structure of the industry, notably the ending of the franchising system created at privatization. The franchises will be replaced with a series of management contracts whose scope is far more limited, giving the newly created Great British Railways direct control over the timetabling and operation of passenger trains. It is, therefore, a part renationalization to add to the taking back into state ownership of Network Rail, Railtrack's successor, in 2014. Great British Railways

will incorporate Network Rail, as well as allocate the contracts to run services, devise the timetable, take a strategic view of the railway and coordinate investment plans.

However, there are many details of the change which will need primary legislation passed through Parliament, and decisions still need to be made over precisely how much autonomy the new organization will have, notably in relation to the Department for Transport. The new structure of the railway is by no means a re-creation of British Rail, but it is undoubtedly a partial retreat from the fully privatized model created when British Rail was broken up.

There is much ground to make up in terms of understanding the history of British Rail, as demonstrated by Grant Shapps's frequent references to sandwiches during media interviews at the launch of Great British Railways. If the discussion is defined by simplistic references to a myth about an aspect of BR services that has nothing to do with its core purpose of enabling people to travel round the country, then it is clear that the politicians pushing through the reform of the industry in the 2020s have not learnt the lesson of history. The debate over the future shape of the railway should be better informed than that. There is much to be gained from taking a deep and unbiased look at the achievements and failings of British Rail, which is what this book sets out to do. I hope it offers precisely that and contributes to the discussions about the future of this great and much-loved industry.

Christian Wolmar, summer 2021

PART ONE

British Railways

1

The Sparks Effect

It was a moment of awe tinged with nostalgia. On 18 April 1966, the first electric passenger train left Euston station bound for Manchester. The unseasonal snow, which had fallen just four days previously, had fortunately just melted and the crowds around the train were able to enjoy the sight of the rather ungainly electric locomotive hauling its long train of carriages up the Euston incline on which previous generations of steam locomotives had always struggled. It was the culmination of nearly a decade of work to electrify the route, which had been delayed a number of times by ministerial indecision as well as by doubts over whether the scheme was worthwhile. While the watching crowds were indeed excited, there was, too, a sense of loss because no longer would great powerful locomotives bearing names of long-dead duchesses and princesses stutter amid clouds of smoke and steam as they began their journey northwards. There was something soulless about the box-like electric locomotives whose greater power was exerted quietly, almost apologetically, in contrast to the loud excess of the steam engines they were replacing.

The switch from steam to electric heralded other significant changes. There had been sacrifice, too, notably the Victorian-era Euston station, which had just been demolished to accommodate the longer and more frequent trains. Out, too, went many named trains, the 'Expresses' and 'Mails', and instead all the fast services running between Britain's main centres of population were branded as Inter-City (later, in a grammatical lapse, renamed InterCity), which was to be the flagship of British Rail.

Among the crowd of watching railway managers, there was nervousness, too. This scheme had to prove its worth. It wasn't just the key West Coast route out of Euston to Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow that depended on the success of this new modern form of traction; the entire newly developed Inter-City brand required electrification to be a triumph. BR was relying on the 'sparks effect' to be the railway's saviour. 'Modernization' was the watchword and electrification was seen as the key to creating a railway fit for the latter part of the twentieth century. The West Coast Main Line had been selected because it was so obviously in need of improvement. Not only was it the oldest and busiest main-line railway in the world, it was also responsible for more than 10 per cent of BR's passenger income.

The completion of the scheme and the grand opening marked a new era for British Railways as Chris Green, who joined BR's management trainee scheme after graduating from Oxford University, recalls: 'My parents did not understand why I wanted to join an industry with no future. But this showed that the railway did have one.'[1]

The electrification of the West Coast Main Line was the centrepiece of British Railways' Modernisation Plan, which had been announced in 1955. It had set out a fifteen-year programme of bringing the railway up to date and, crucially, making it financially self-supporting. The plan included a phased introduction of electric and diesel vehicles to replace coal-fired steam engines, which were seen as dirty, inefficient and old-fashioned. In fact, the Modernisation Plan had foreseen a much wider programme of electrification across the network but this was stymied somewhat by the reluctance of many senior BR managers, who were concerned about the temporary upheaval caused by putting up overhead wires, which was by then the established method of electrifying lines, rather than the third rail used mostly on the Southern Region. While reluctantly recognizing that steam was no longer viable, many of the old hands preferred the less disruptive adoption of diesel traction. Therefore the East Coast Main Line, from London King's Cross through Peterborough to Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh, was a few years later provided with the most powerful diesel locomotives ever used by British Railways – the Deltics – rather than having the wires put up. These Deltics, far more akin to the steam locomotives they replaced than the quiet, box-shaped electric locomotives, were a great favourite with rail enthusiasts, until the electrification of the line was belatedly completed in the early 1990s.

Diesel was undoubtedly better than coal, but it failed to deliver all the advantages of electricity. It was still a rather dirty and inefficient fuel, but allowed one person, rather

than two, to drive the train. Although the capital cost of electrification is high, given the need to install wiring and other infrastructure, such as substations and connections to the National Grid, in the long term it offers greater savings than diesel because of the higher efficiency of electricity as a power source. Moreover, it is cleaner, allows for far faster acceleration and is environmentally more sustainable, especially when obtained from renewable sources. The Modernisation Plan was supposed to be the turning point for the railway, paving the way for this nineteenth-century invention to finally be updated to twentieth-century standards, but sadly the electrification of Britain's railway is a typical tale of dither, hesitation and lack of courage.

The electrification of the almost 500 miles of line on the West Coast route cost £175 million (about £4,100 million in 2021 money) and caused significant disruption, with weekend closures and speed restrictions being a regular feature during the four-year construction period. The British Transport Commission had decided in 1956 that, apart from the Southern Region, where the third-rail system had been introduced throughout the electrified sections, all future projects would use twenty-five kilovolt (kV) overhead wiring, which was deemed the most economic for long-distance routes. This was more powerful than the system used in previous schemes and had been widely adopted in Europe. Electrification was carried out in stages, starting in the North with a pilot scheme, the eight-mile Styal loop line between Manchester and Crewe, being opened first. This was quickly followed by the rest

of the route between Manchester and Crewe, which was completed in 1960, and by Liverpool to Crewe two years later. This low-key start to the project, away from the prying eyes of Whitehall, was part of a deliberate and astute strategy by British Railways, designed to bounce ministers into agreeing to electrify the entire route.

Although these initial schemes were presented as trials, it would have been illogical to electrify such a large part of the network in the North-West unless the intention was always to continue southwards all the way to Euston. According to Michael Bonavia, a senior rail manager at the time, the British Railways Board had cleverly pulled the wool over the eyes of ministers in pushing forward the electrification scheme. The Ministry of Transport appeared not to notice until too late that a substantial part of the scheme was already being worked on before full permission for the whole project had been given. Bonavia notes: 'This number of bites at the cherry [the three early sections] annoyed the Ministry of Transport, which criticized the way in which extended commitments were being incurred without an overall scheme based on clear financial justification, and a comparison between the expected results from electrification and those from a changeover to diesel traction.'

There was a lengthy but, as Bonavia puts it, 'unsatisfactory' correspondence between the ministry, the London Midland Region of British Railways, which was responsible for the scheme, and the British Transport Commission, which oversaw the British Railways Board: 'The Ministry never quite shook off the feeling that it had been pushed

into authorising a huge scheme before receiving satisfactory answers to all the questions it had raised.'[2] Indeed, the way the ministry had been well and truly bounced into the scheme by British Railways was demonstrated by the fact that it did not give its approval until January 1961, by which time electric trains were already running between Manchester and Crewe. The next section, Crewe to Liverpool, was completed in early 1962, and the line between Euston and Manchester was fully electrified for testing by 1965, with the route through Birmingham finished a couple of years later. This episode is a cameo of the way that British Railways interacted with government throughout its history. While it was quasi-independent and able to operate without constant oversight, its overall finances were subject to government whim, as we will see in subsequent chapters. The same trick was played by the section of the ministry dealing with roads, as civil servants would give permission for a series of bypasses on a particular route which then, logic dictated, might as well be connected by nice new sections of dual carriageway through the countryside in between.

The construction work was carried out by a private company, British Insulated Callender's Cables (BICC), which later became Balfour Beatty. BICC's widespread knowledge of electrification projects both at home and overseas, in places as diverse as Australia, Brazil and India, was an important factor, because Britain's tardiness at adopting rail electrification meant there was not enough experience within British Railways to carry out the work.

The long history of the project ensured that the opening

of the newly electrified route from Euston to Manchester and Liverpool was a big moment for both British Railways and Britain's railway, representing a historic change in a country which had been slow to modernize its network. This scheme, which was an attempt to boost revenue through investing to create a better service, was a significant move away from the long-standing attempt to get the nationalized rail company to balance its books solely by focusing on reducing costs and closing lines. Indeed, in the previous decade the industry had yo-yoed between two contrasting attempts at achieving commercial viability. The Modernisation Plan had been conceived as a one-off investment programme but, as we shall see, it had failed to meet its transformational goal. When Richard Beeching arrived in 1961 to run Britain's railway, he executed a sharp U-turn, as he envisaged making major cuts to the network as the only route to profitability.

Now, at last, technology was being harnessed to boost passenger numbers. 'Electrification', according to Bonavia, 'was beginning to be seen as the most important single element in a modernised railway system and one that might not merely help to retain existing traffic but attract new business by offering a faster, more reliable and cleaner service.'

It was, he added, the 'sparks effect', which may have been impossible to quantify but which, he said, 'never failed to appear once electrification had been carried out'.[3] Indeed, much of the Southern Railway network had been electrified between the two world wars – albeit using the third-rail system – and the newly transformed

routes had invariably thrived, with passenger numbers increasing significantly while the costs of operation fell sharply. This had been true more recently, too, of the Liverpool Street to Shenfield commuter line, which was electrified in the aftermath of the Second World War, resulting in passenger numbers increasing by almost 50 per cent in the first year after the wires went up.

The transformation of the West Coast Main Line was, therefore, much more than the adoption of new technology. Ivor Warburton, another management trainee of the period, who later was in charge of services on the West Coast, believes that 'the start of regular operations on the route on April 18th, 1966, was the only time that I can recall the BBC and all the rest of the media doing a positive story on British Railways. It was the first day of 100 mph operation on the West Coast, which gave a time between London and Manchester of just over two and a half hours.'[4]

The West Coast was the first line to be improved as part of a wider strategy to develop the Inter-City brand for Britain's long-distance rail journeys. In addition to electrification, several major stations, such as Birmingham New Street, Manchester Piccadilly and Coventry, were rebuilt, and in all eighty-nine stations were reconstructed or refurbished. It was, as mentioned above, in London that the most controversial change was made. Euston, the London terminus since the completion of the line in 1838, was demolished and replaced with a soulless, modernist passenger hall, which was widely said to be like an airport lounge – except far worse, because there

were not even any seats for passengers waiting to board. The old station had contained two features of enormous architectural merit: the Great Hall, which was by far the most impressive railway waiting room in Britain, with a classic double staircase by which passengers reached their trains, and which John Betjeman described as 'one of London's finest rooms'; and above it, away from public view, a Baroque boardroom big enough to hold 400 people, which possessed a 'deeply-coffered ceiling embellished with massive curved consoles and plaster bas-reliefs in each corner, the whole beautifully lit by attic windows'.[5] Both these, along with the Doric arch or *propylaeum* that had stood outside the station as a mark of the grandeur of the Victorian railway, were swept away as a demonstration of British Railways' determination to modernize the network. There was, indeed, no place for sentiment, or for old buildings whatever their architectural merit, in BR's modernization programme.

Apart from the demolition of Euston station, there were numerous other, and much less controversial, improvements. Most notably, the new rolling stock, consisting of Mark 2 carriages (so named because they were the second generation of coaches developed by British Railways) proved enormously popular from the start. They boasted air conditioning, which was considered a luxury at the time and greatly boosted their appeal, even if it meant that opening the windows was no longer possible. The timetable was also transformed. While previously there had been three or four trains at most to each destination daily, now there was at least one every two

hours, and soon on the London–Birmingham route a half-hourly service was introduced to meet demand. The process of turning trains around was radically altered as well. In the past, carriages at Euston were always taken out to the depot a few miles up the line and then brought back later in the day when needed. Trains might have half a dozen carriages or twice that number, depending on demand, but now they were in 'fixed formation', always the same length and no longer hauled off to the depot at the end of every journey. While this may seem like a technical detail, it was the sort of change that allowed trains to be run far more efficiently and frequently.

For the first time, British Railways set about seriously marketing its new product, even using TV advertising. The notion that traffic levels were static and people could not be attracted to the railway was abandoned. As one long-standing rail manager put it to me: 'In the past, marketing had been considered to be fluff around an elephant's arse. Now they started actively selling tickets.'[6] Pricing, which once had been fixed in stone, now became more flexible, with affordable return fares and special deals designed to attract people to visit London for the day.

There was, too, an unprecedented marketing campaign. As soon as the first section of the line was electrified, British Railways promoted the scheme with a poster showing a new electric train speeding past railworkers, and boasting of 'Forging Ahead' with what it called 'this vast scheme'. Then, to mark the improvement in train services between London and the North-West, British Railways produced a glossy booklet, *Your New Railway*,

partly funded by various suppliers who took out advertisements, but still priced at the considerable sum of *2s. 6d.* (12.5p). The regional general manager, H. C. Johnson, proudly proclaimed in the introduction that this was 'A fast, modern highway for passengers and freight, running through the industrial heart of the country, [which was] the result of eight years' hard work by railway civil, electrical and signal engineers.'[7] In a lengthy account of why electrification had been chosen over diesel (a far more detailed explanation than you would expect to see today), one of the authors, Colin Jones, said: 'It requires a greater capital outlay than dieselization to get going but incurs a smaller wage bill to run'; and there was even the justification for why this particular type of electric technology had been chosen, which was because 'experimental work by French Railways had revealed the considerable advantages to be gained by adopting a new system altogether – the 25-kilovolt alternating-current 50-cycles system with overhead collection'. There was also a little boast in the conclusion: 'The whole scheme, originally scheduled for completion in the early 1970s will now be in full operation by early 1967.'[8]

The pamphlet also stressed the importance for freight of the West Coast improvements:

> The impact upon freight working will be even greater, for electric working forms part of a wider revolution now taking place on this side of the railways' business. Traffic is being concentrated in full train loads, rather than wagon loads, and moved at high uniform speeds

> along the nation's main trade arteries. In this way, the railways can exploit their inherent advantages over road transport and, by providing fast, reliable, bulk transport they can best serve the needs of the nation.[9]

This was a further indication of the way that British Railways was beginning to change.

While today it might seem obvious that such a scheme should be accompanied by a publicity campaign, this was new ground for British Railways, which hitherto had been 'production-led' – in other words, focused on providing train travel without much thought given to why and who for. Even something as simple as producing a publicity brochure extolling the virtues of the scheme marked a departure from the past. There was, though, no doubting that BR's management were right to stress that the West Coast electrification scheme, along with all the other improvements, marked the beginning of a new era for their industry. Chris Green, who later rose to become boss of InterCity, was a marketing assistant on the West Coast when it was electrified: 'It transformed people's view of the railway. It was no longer seen as only an industry in decline.' As for the demolition of Euston station, Green says that the new passenger hall was a deliberate attempt to make taking the train more like air travel:

> We wanted to be seen as an industry with a future. British Railways wanted to be associated with the same modern approach and thought it ought to provide the same sort of service as an airline. And it worked. Passenger

> numbers doubled in three years when the Ministry of Transport had said we would not see any growth.[10]

Indeed. And the public was won over too. O. S. Nock, who was a prolific author of railway books at the time, was commissioned to write the story of the electrification and found himself surprisingly impressed:

> The new services are not merely fast in a relative sense, they are really fast. At one time a journey between London and Liverpool, or London and Manchester, would have been considered as 'long-distance' travel; but in this era, when cities such as Zurich and Rome are within two hours' flying time to London airport, the new railway services have been geared to the tempo of this modern age.[11]

This was important in ensuring that British Railways would be able to invest in future schemes. The government may have been somewhat finessed into supporting the West Coast electrification, but its success made it easier for the Board to push through other schemes that required investment to boost patronage. But attitudes both within and outside the railway did not change overnight. The West Coast electrification was a triumph, but while it was clear that the conversion to electric power provided numerous direct and indirect benefits, it was still the subject of much argument within BR. It would take another fifteen years before the big Deltic diesels introduced a few years earlier on the East Coast would be replaced with electrically powered trains, because of

struggles both within and outside BR about the future direction of the railway. The West Coast modernization demonstrated how railways could be improved, but it was some time before everyone was convinced that the railway did have a future and that this really was the 'Age of the Train'.

2

The Inheritance

By the time the Modernisation Plan which led to the electrification of the West Coast Main Line was launched in 1955, British Railways had been in existence for seven years, during what was a particularly fraught period in the history of the nation's railway network.

The manifesto of the Labour government elected in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War had promised nationalization of the railway and therefore it could be argued that the project was driven by politics. That would be a mistake since, in reality, nationalization was born of necessity. No one but the state would pay for the rebuilding of a system which was on its knees and which had been starved of investment during the conflict. The war had destroyed the railway, not as a direct result of the efforts of the Luftwaffe, but rather because the system was exhausted by the depredations and requirements of warfare, as well as suffering significant underinvestment at a time of overuse.

Interestingly, given the fierce debates about railway

ownership in subsequent years, the decision to nationalize the network, taken by the Labour government elected in 1945, was relatively uncontroversial. At the time, there was far more cross-party consensus about the need for strong government involvement in industry. This was the era of big state-owned organizations, such as the BBC, the Central Electricity Board and London Transport, which had all been created by Tory-dominated governments in the interwar period. Another major transport industry, aviation, was already in public hands, with the creation just before the war of BOAC, the British Overseas Airways Corporation. As Terry Gourvish, the official historian of British Railways, explains, 'An increasing body of opinion in all parties certainly favoured a greater measure of governmental control in the interests of both industry and the consumer.'[1] The most fervent opposition, unsurprisingly, came from the private owners of the various railway companies.

The system of the four private regional companies had been created in the aftermath of the First World War by consolidating more than 100 disparate railway companies, but even this simplified structure was no longer relevant in a war-ravaged country struggling to meet the demands of post-war reconstruction. A unified national system was widely accepted as the only viable solution. Even before the war, the Big Four, as they were known, had struggled financially, and of the four only the Great Western had paid a dividend in 1938. During the conflict, the railway was run into the ground carrying 50 per cent more freight and operating many additional passenger trains to

keep up with both civilian and military demands. The rolling stock was outdated and the locomotives time-expired, with no fewer than 40 per cent having been constructed before the First World War.

A unified and integrated system owned and controlled by the state, a model which had been widely adopted elsewhere in Europe, was clearly the way forward. The Big Four merged to form British Railways, an enormous organization with about 640,000 staff (in truth, no one was certain about the exact number); 20,000 steam locomotives (almost exactly one for every route mile); 56,000 coaches; and more than one million freight wagons. A further half million freight wagons had to be bought by the nascent British Railways from their private owners at a fixed price, even though many were outdated or in a poor condition and had to be scrapped immediately. These weren't the only assets that moved into public ownership. The Big Four had essentially been transport conglomerates with interests beyond running trains. Between them they owned fifty-four hotels, numerous manufacturing and repair workshops, ships, ports and harbours, several major bus companies and a huge fleet of road vehicles to collect and deliver goods at stations. There were, too, no fewer than 7,000 horses, some of which were still in harness fifteen years later.

Many of the hotels, along with much of the marine business, were hived off to other parts of the British Transport Commission, which had been created by the Labour government as a huge state-owned transport conglomerate. The Commission also embraced long-distance

road haulage, canals and London Transport in an attempt to create an integrated, state-owned transport system for the whole country. Inevitably, however, the Commission struggled to establish an equilibrium between the different modes of transport, not least because of the fundamental conflict between road and rail. Moreover, from the outset, the nationalized railway was denied the resources it desperately needed to recover from the war because the Commission's primary focus was on roads.

While the railway was supposedly run by a Railway Executive that reported to the Transport Commission, this extra layer of bureaucracy resulted in a lack of clarity about who was in charge. Was it the Commission or the Executive? No one seemed sure. The Commission, led by Sir Cyril Hurcomb (later Baron Hurcomb) – a long-serving senior civil servant with extensive transport experience – clashed frequently with Sir Eustace Missenden, who had been given the chairmanship of the Railway Executive. Hurcomb not only had the upper hand in terms of the hierarchy but he was also a far more experienced and accomplished administrator. Missenden, who had headed the Southern Railway, the smallest of the Big Four, reluctantly became chairman of the Railway Executive, a job no one else wanted. He was stolid, competent, but completely out of his depth. Suspicious of civil servants and politicians, he accepted the role only on condition that he could retire at the first possible opportunity. As a result, Hurcomb, at the Commission, was able to direct most of the available resources to the other industries under his control.

The divide between the two organizations, whose offices were just three miles apart (the Commission was at 55 Broadway, the huge London Transport headquarters over St James's Park Tube station, while the Railway Executive was located at 222 Marylebone Road, opposite Marylebone station), led to dither and inaction in the early days of British Railways. BR was not an organization that hit the road running, and the structure was widely perceived as being worse than the pre-war arrangement, as Gourvish suggests: 'In contrast to the way in which the railways had been run during the war, British Railways appeared to most railwaymen to be an enormous formless body, with the chiefs miles away at 222 Marylebone Road and the Commission even further away in its ivory tower at 55 Broadway.' This bad start was to dog the initial years of British Railways and helps to explain why its early history was marked by mistakes and poor planning. There were also long-term implications, according to Gourvish: 'The nationalisation period got off on the wrong organisational foot, and the structure erected in 1947 was the first of several defective solutions offered in [BR's first] quarter century.'[2]

The ability of British Railways and the larger Transport Commission to attract the right staff was hampered by the Labour government's reluctance to allow them to pay salaries that matched those in the private sector. Hurcomb was on just £7,000 (£260,000 in 2021 money), reduced by £1,500 to take account of his civil service pension. Similar sums were paid to other state industry bosses, such as the men (they were all men) heading the National Coal

Board or British Electricity Authority, and meant that these jobs tended to be filled by retired businessmen and civil servants with generous pensions, rather than up-and-coming, ambitious young executives.

As ever in British politics, the new structure was not designed with careful consideration of how best to run a railway, or how to attract enough people of sufficient calibre. Rather, as Gourvish succinctly describes the nationalization proposals, 'What mattered was political and administrative expediency. Discussion of the implications of the legislation for the economic operation of road and rail transport was conspicuously absent.'[3] Despite the dilapidated condition of the network, the owners of the Big Four had fought hard to ensure they were generously compensated by the state for the loss of their assets, even though profitability was minimal, and achieved only by not investing sufficiently to bring the railway back to its pre-war condition. Both passenger and freight traffic had fallen dramatically in the immediate post-war period, which was hardly surprising as few people had much money to spend.

Even though little of the war damage had been repaired in the two and a half years between the election of the Labour government and nationalization on 1 January 1948, the vociferous lobbying by shareholders of the Big Four proved to be successful. The result was that the newly created British Railways was saddled with a historic debt of £900 million (£33,500 million in 2021), on which it was required to pay a fixed interest of 3 per cent annually to the owners of the private assets it had taken over,