



Welsh Railways Hero and Villain?



One of the many things the Welsh can be proud of was its railway heritage. The Great Western, London North Western and Cambrian railways vied for control of the cross country routes, while everywhere you could find small industrial lines. In the North-West numerous narrow gauge lines wended their way out of the mountains down to bustling ports bringing slate for export across the world. As collectors of these stamps are aware the world's first passenger railway ran from Swansea to Mumbles pier, starting in 1802. Near where I live, in 1740, the Mancot Tramway was shifting bricks from the kilns in the small town of Buckley down to wharves on the banks of the River Dee. But 80 years before this there is evidence of a wooden trackway running to John "Iron Mad" Wilkinson's (the Godfather of the Industrial Revolution) blast furnaces at Bersham, just outside Wrexham.

But things were to 'all-change' in the 1960s. Dr Richard Beeching was appointed as Chairman of the British Railways Board. He had previously worked in the armaments and chemicals industries, focusing on productivity. Admittedly British Railways were in poor shape at the time, and running at a loss. Beeching produced his blue-print for the future, "The Reshaping of British Railways", commonly referred to as the Beeching Report. Its answer to the problems was a simple one. Cut out the supposed dead wood. More than one third of stations would close, 5,000 miles of track would disappear, and 70,000 jobs would be lost. Wales was hit hardest perhaps. Rural lines that had served small communities for decades were closed. Freight would focus on block trains, which did not suit those communities whose rail links survived the axe.

A second Beeching report was even more far-reaching. There would only be one railway line in Wales; the mainline from London through Cardiff and onto Swansea. Gone would be the North Wales line that connected England to Holyhead, where ferries run to Ireland. Gone would be the line that ran from Shrewsbury to the holiday resorts of West Wales, like Aberystwyth. And gone would be the slow tortuous but beautiful Mid-Wales line that veered off at Craven Arms and headed down to Swansea, picking up passengers at numerous request halts (stick your hand out to stop the train) along the way. Luckily that never came to pass.

The exercise was purely about saving money, and saving money quickly. The problems the railways were facing were never addressed. It was a quick fix, one that couldn't be undone. Only now, and after further re-organisations, are the railways running well and carrying record numbers of passengers. The problem with this is that because of the axe the railways have lost much of what endeared them to the public. They lost their heart and their soul. They were reduced to conveying people from A to B. Cold and clinical. You would no longer board a train to experience a rail journey. Passengers became the new freight.

All this was under-pinned by the other big change that had been introduced some years before. A change from steam locomotion to electric or even diesel power! 16,000 locomotives were to be scrapped. No-one can deny that steam locos belched black smoke into the towns and countryside, but for evoking an impression of controlled power they cannot be beaten. It is the smoke, the steam and the fire that turns these in almost living machines. Just watch an old film of a mainline express thundering past hauling 15 coaches at 100mph. The locos all had company liveries, even those that ran those short branch lines pulling trains made up of two coaches, a cattle truck and a milk wagon. It was what's now called corporate branding, but it came with style and elegance. Back at the depot, while preparing to go out for the day, the crew would be polishing the brass-work, and ensuring the loco looked its best. There was pride in the job. Passengers would not be greeted with a dirty or scruffy locomotive. And during these days the engine drivers were heroes. They were given the title 'Driver' much like the head of a Michelin starred restaurant is called 'Chef'. A newspaper report concerning a railway story would inevitably include a mention of the Driver.

A scrap metal company based in Barry, near Cardiff, won an initial contract with the Western Region of British Railways to scrap some locomotives. Woodham Brothers leased the huge but unused railway yards of Barry Docks, and the steam engines started to arrive in the late 1950's. Some 300 locomotives arrived over the years at Barry, but Dai Woodham found that it was more commercially viable to concentrate on scrapping wagons. There were many more of these and it was a lot less work to strip these down. Turnover would be much higher. So the locomotive sat in the sidings, side by side, nose to tail, for year after year. Train enthusiasts would journey down to south Wales just to view them.

It was then that the enthusiasts started to restore some of the railway lines that had been axed by Beeching. And for this they needed locomotives; and Woodham Brothers had a yard full of them. Under the terms of the scrap contract Woodham couldn't sell complete locos unless a levy to British Rail was also paid, but Dai Woodham set the price he wanted purely at the scrap value. The heritage societies could inspect the locomotives, find those that could be rebuilt, and choose those suitable for their restored line. And then pay a deposit while the society raised the cash to purchase. The owners were given the whistles and other non ferrous parts of the loco in case they were pilfered whilst funds were raised, and Woodham allowed the owners to source missing parts from others. In all this arrangement saved 213 engines from being cut up (though some only live on as donors in mechanical transplant operations), and returned to service. Many are still running on the many preserved lines across Britain, and many are the only surviving example of the class which has enabled a rich diversity of restored engine to be seen still. Without Woodham Brothers hundreds of thousands of individuals and families each would not be able to go back in time for an afternoon and take an unhurried journey along the restored lines and experience what is almost the 'real-thing'. Unlike a museum, you experience what it was like first hand.

There are still a few locomotives left there; The Barry Ten. They are the remainder after Dai Woodham retired in 1990 and are now in the care of Vale of Glamorgan Council. Despite slowly rusting away there are still restoration plans for these by heritage railways.



These stamps are my own way of marking these events. April 21st 2013 is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Beeching, and 2013 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of his report. Why commemorate him? It is **not** a commemoration; it is a reminder that there is more to life than efficiency and productivity; even in state run utilities. Beeching's report ripped the heart of the railway system like nothing else could. Surely there are lessons that must not be forgotten. Beeching could perhaps be forgiven as he was tasked to do a job and he did it. But some cannot forgive. Is it that smirk on his face that tells us he enjoyed doing what he did too much? The maps are self explanatory, except that some of the cuts actually got a reprieve. If Beeching had had his way there would have been just that one line remaining. All the locomotives pictured on the third stamp are hopefully now in the ownership of those who will preserve them forever. That at least is Beeching's legacy, but one he never anticipated/. True that these are not exclusively Welsh, but Wales suffered from the Beeching cuts as much if not more than other regions of the UK, and Wales has been the source of so many locomotives still chuffing along a few miles of track.

And in the lyrics to a TV show ..

*Oh, Dr. Beeching what have you done?
There once were lots of trains to catch, but soon there will be none,
I'll have to buy a bike, 'cos I can't afford a car,
Oh, Dr. Beeching what a naughty man you are!*