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Regional railways: Destination Growth

Despite low levels of investment, the regional rail sector has seen astonishing levels of growth. What could it achieve if we back it?

► I remember in the eighties, a day after a rail strike, being on a dog-eared but dogged unit on the Wharfedale Line into a wintry and gloomy Leeds. The heaters competing with the draughty rattling windows to achieve some kind of fuggy equilibrium, squealing round the curves into Leeds station and thinking that this was it. This was a network that might never fully regain consciousness. One bad week for rail too many. Another industry that was damned - like coal and football - to be taken on by the government before being shut down for being irredeemably collective and recalcitrant.

But regional railways proved to be the great survivor - dodging existential threats from various Beeching Mark IIs, kept alive by a fleet renewal of mixed quality in the nineties by BR and the faith and determination of local government in general, and the PTEs in particular. And now those who kept the faith have been vindicated. Because look at where regional rail is now.

Despite by far the lowest levels of investment of any rail sector, the regional rail sector has seen astonishing levels of growth. Over the last 10 years passenger kilometres and passenger revenue have grown faster than either intercity or London and the South East, and until recently passenger numbers were growing faster too. At many individual stations demand has grown by double the national average - or more.

And one train operator - TransPennine Express, has the second highest number of

passengers per available train seating in the country (after London Underground).

What's particularly remarkable is that this growth has been achieved in a sector where it's common to have timetables where all that changes is the date of issue. Impervious to the demands of changing and growing markets - train frequencies remain the same. On some lines frequencies are still worse than BR was operating in the eighties.

A sector with museum-ready signalling systems on key routes and where easily justified better off-peak provision is off limits because of the need to pay staff to sit in rail side huts opening and closing gates on empty rural roads.

And of course it's also the sector with the most famous trains on the national network these days: the Pacer train. Now the unofficial and less than adorable mascot of the North-South divide.

Yet despite all this the punters can't get enough of regional rail and are voting with their feet in ever greater numbers. How come? Because regional rail's fundamentals fit with some fundamental changes in regional economies. More people commuting longer distances to reach the opportunities that are increasingly concentrated in urban

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centres, where car commuting is increasingly unattractive and unacceptable. A mini London effect if you like.

And facilitating the daily commute is a job that rail does well - even with (or perhaps despite of) Pacers. Away from the cities, the lines that were spared the Beeching blitz were often kept because road access was poor - and that fundamental hasn't changed either. From the Esk Valley to the west Cumbrian coast people in rural areas need to get around too - particularly young people who don't have access to a car. Combine this with Brits' love of both trains and a grand day out and you have the success of lines like the Settle and Carlisle.

Of course the regional railway network is not just an essay in enforced decrepitude to a soundtrack of Pacers screeching and bouncing their way down jointed track. Where there has been investment we have seen additional rocket boosters put on high levels of background growth. The aforementioned Wharfedale Line whose future looked so precarious in the eighties ('be cheaper to send the passengers in chauffeur-driven cars' I remember it being said) was revitalised with electrification, quality rolling stock and better stations. Now it has 77% of the Leeds market from Ilkley. On the similarly overhauled and parallel Airedale Line, rail now has 80% of the Leeds market from Keighley. The potential to do something similar on commuter routes into Leeds that haven't seen the same level of investment is clear given rail's share from Harrogate is 37% and 36% from Pontefract.

The other big factor in regional rail's comeback that needs to be underlined is devolution. The PTEs were in part set up by Barbara Castle in the sixties to see what could be done with the remnants of urban rail networks that had survived the Beeching cuts. This degree of devolution over local rail networks meant they weren't all rotten days for the West Yorkshire rail network back in the eighties - there was WYPTE's Metrotrain with its fares offers, station and line openings. Similar fightbacks were happening in the other PTE areas.

More comprehensive devolution has followed since. On ScotRail, Merseyrail Electrics and London Underground. Every time followed by higher investment, better performance, and higher passenger satisfaction. This is because local control of local rail

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A train at Saltaire on the Wharfedale Line. The line has shown what could be achieved across great swathes of the wider regional rail network

networks jacks those rail networks directly into local imperatives around local needs - more attention to detail and funding support follows.

More homespun devolution in the form of the Community Rail Partnership movement has also been essential in knitting local rail lines and stations into the fabric of local communities in a way that makes ripping them out almost impossible. No longer is the local station just another form of transport provision dictated from somewhere on high and far away - unstaffed and unfriendly. Now the platform flower beds are tended by the locals and the station building hosts a local business, cafe, museum or shop.

So the fundamentals are clearly right for regional rail to kick on further - and pile up further patronage growth in support of local economic growth. How do we do it?

Firstly, the devolution dimension needs to be front and centre of the current multi-dimensional debate about where Network Rail and the wider structure of the railway goes from here. Whether the railway is ultimately owned by Jeremy Corbyn's Department for Transport, Angela Merkel's Deutsche Bahn or a sovereign wealth fund in Abu Dhabi, it still needs to map onto the realities of a devolving

Britain and remember that local control over local rail networks beats remote control from Whitehall any day of the week.

Secondly, we need to cut the regional railway network some slack and stop dumping a disproportionate share of the railway's wider costs on regional rail in a way which bends the its economics way out of shape. Those figures on the high costs of regional rail which are so often quoted are based on a construct rather than reality. A construct that means freight trains don't pay their full costs, in terms of track impacts (for very good and justifiable social and environmental reasons) but no such dispensation is given to regional rail. A fix that means regional rail trains pay more than their fare share of an investment programme that they see little of. Regional rail is a marginal user of the network and should be treated as such rather than as a convenient place to dump costs to ensure that other parts of the network look more commercial than they really are.

Thirdly, we need to move from a grudging investment programme in regional rail (where every modest upgrade is treated like an unearned favour by Whitehall) to a rolling programme of electrification and new trains which detonates the explosive potential of the

network, line by line creating jobs, supporting growth, opening up access to opportunity and cutting congestion on the roads as it does so.

Given what we know of how regional rail fits with where our regional cities, towns and rural areas want to be and what a safe bet investment in regional rail has proved to be then a new deal for the network adds up to a wider statement of intent about how a devolving Britain can develop in a sustainable way.

A train journey into Leeds down the Wharfedale Line today, when compared with the journeys I took in the eighties on the same route, shows what could be achieved across great swathes of the wider regional rail network. Time for these good examples to become the norm and for the last vestiges of eighties-style regional railways miserablism to be a subject for nostalgia rather than a business plan. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is director of the PTEG Support Unit. Before joining PTEG in 2003, his background was a mix of transport policy and transport campaigning.