

JONATHAN BRAY



The geeks are taking over - and it's good

It's OK to be a geek, even a transport geek. So how can we make the most of this love that increasingly dares to speak its name?

► Being described as a geek or a nerd used to be indisputably a term of abuse. It conjured up a certain type that regular folk didn't want to associate with. Being passionate about one thing and knowing a lot about it was seen as a poor excuse for lacking a wider mastery of the social norms and compromises that regular people employ to get by. Not so much now.

Geeks can be heroes these days - from Matt Smith's Dr Who to James Bond's new Q. They can be the lead characters of the biggest rating sitcom (*The Big Bang Theory*) and they appear to be on the verge of ruling the world (from Bill Gates to Elon Musk). Self-identifying as a geek, or as having geek tendencies, is now something that more people are happy to do. Geek is good.

It looks like being a transport geek is now good too. *Trainspotting Live* was something of a phenomenon (with Tim Dunn the breakthrough star, whose disarming and destigmatising form of transport geekery has the added attraction of being grounded in a 21st Century metropolitan sensibility). *Trainspotting Live* even made the front page of *The Sun*. On August Bank Holiday a million people tuned in to watch a two hours no frills, commentary-free rural bus journey (*All Aboard! The Country Bus*).

The schedules are peppered with fly on the wall documentaries about bus companies (*On the Yorkshire Buses*), building Crossrail (*The Fifteen Billion Pound Railway*) or running the big railway (numerous). That's before we start on the travelogues and history

programmes - from Michael Portillo's plodding *Great Railway Journeys* to Chris Tarrant's roughing it on *Extreme Railways*.

Then there's Flying Scotsman mania - with people risking a violent demise through trespassing on the tracks in obsessive attempts to take not very good snaps of the world's most famous and storied locomotive. So much so that like some celebrity human being the Grande Dame of the railway scene has to be hidden from railway schedules, or tucked down remote sidings at the National Railway Museum, to escape the attentions of its adoring fans.

And all the while *Top Gear* is on the slide; - serves them right for all those fixed chases

where guess what... the car beats the train.

But what does this mean for public transport - and does it matter? I think it does. What it says is that by and large the public actually like public transport. More than liking it - it can bring out their inner geek. Although there is a caveat. Liking the idea of public transport doesn't always mean they like the actualité of their regular experience of it. Or in some cases the basis on which it is currently provided. Nevertheless it's not a bad thing for any industry to have a public that has warm feelings for it in principle. So how can the industry make the most of this love that increasingly dares to speak its name?

Behind the scenes

People like to know what's going on behind the scenes otherwise there wouldn't be all these fly-on-the-wall programmes. Glasgow Central (with its regular behind the scenes tours of the station), Merseytravel (with its Mersey Tunnel tours) and Transport for London (with occasional tours of disused Underground stations) are examples. But could there be scope for more? It's not as if there's any shortage of fascinating transport infrastructure out there and these kind of visits give public transport a human face.

People see with their own eyes what went into making this infrastructure in the first place and how it is for the people who make it work today. People remember it longer than any TV programme - and nearly always come away from those trips with more appreciation and empathy for the industry



Tim Dunn, the breakthrough star of *Trainspotting Live*, possesses a disarming and destigmatising form of transport geekery

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concerned. I often wonder why ports in particular don't do more of this in the UK. Go to Rotterdam and they have regular - and very popular - cruise trips round the mesmerising ziggurats of containers stacked on quays and ships - specifically so people can indulge their curiosity and fascination with what goes on behind a port's perimeter fences.

Train design

New trains are great in principle but in practice when you get on them many of them can be a bit of a disappointment. Sure they go faster - that's good. But why are they so uncomfortable? Why the hard seats (like sitting on a stone ledge) and the bolt upright seat backs (which means you have one sitting position)? Not to mention the limited legroom and poor alignment with windows. It feels like the public is saying “we like trains” and the rail industry is saying “that's good - now here is an uncomfortable plane on rails”. It's interesting that the first clear signal of a different approach has been written into the ScotRail franchise (driven by the Scottish Government) which is to put rolling stock on scenic lines where you can, er, see the scenery because the windows line up.

Practical utopias

Britain's stations are a mixed bag. At one extreme are the spectacular pinnacles and show-stopping Victoriana of St Pancras and its ilk, whilst at the other extreme there are the sad bus shelters of many local stations. In between there are all sorts of rather wonderful repurposing of redundant station buildings at stations big and small across the network - including some that no longer have trains anymore.

There's the Edwardian exuberance of Wemyss Bay station on the Clyde Coast which now contains among its curves and swirls access to second-hand books, beer, cakes and pictures of its past. There's Alnwick in Northumberland which is no longer home to trains but to Barter Books, the best second-hand bookshop I've ever been to, complete with a cosy cafe and real fires in former waiting rooms. Or the unsung glories of Tynemouth on the Tyne & Wear Metro with its markets, footbridge art gallery and eateries.

When Sir Ernest Hall bought the former largest carpet factory in the world in Halifax

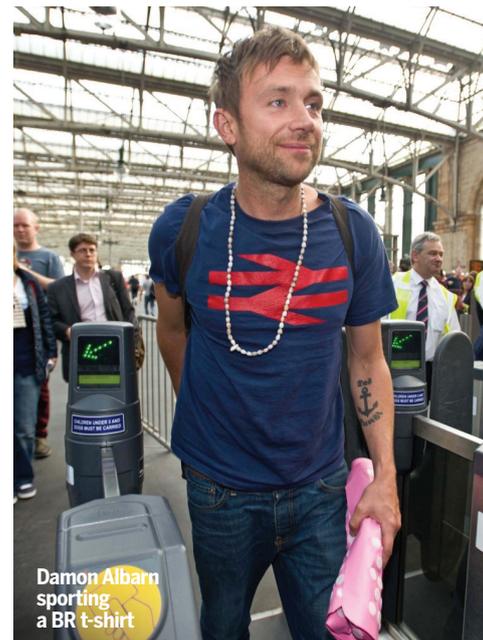


he decided to turn it into a 'thriving, dynamic, practical utopia' with art on the walls, and space for both business and culture. And he did. It's an amazing place. There's something about railway stations that also lend themselves to the creation of practical and self-contained utopias. And the good news is there is plenty of scope for the application of more imagination to create new wonders across the network.

Modernism and brutalism are back

The railways are lauded as the high watermark and most resonant symbol of Victorian resourcefulness, excess, ambition and, well, genius. From towering train sheds to clever mechanical signalling that still operates today, when people think of railway history then it's the railway's “origin story” that is most told. But there's another more recent phase of the railway's history which was reviled and is now the subject of reappraisal. The jackhammers that destroyed the Euston Arch and the cement mixers that made the modernist and brutalist railway stations of the 1960s and 1970s were manifestations of the last time there was a vision so complete and so routed in the idea that places, society and travel could and should be transformed. Not tinkered with but utterly changed.

From the clapped-out, old built environment, and the malfunctioning class and industrial system that inhabited it, would come a clean, efficient, modern social democratic world. A world that worked. This



was also part of an era where new cities were built where dirty old cities used to stand, and when the civic crests of the old municipal bus companies that served them were painted over in favour of the PTEs' modernist ambitions. From the battles to save surviving brutalist buildings (Preston bus station as the transport cause célèbre) to the Co-op's latest retro rebrand, and from *Blur* frontman Damon Albarn sporting a BR double arrow t-shirt to modernist societies springing up across the north, there's something more than nostalgic about the growing appreciation of these physical manifestations of those ambitions to remake the world in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps more geeking over, and channeling of this era, on public transport is overdue?

If the geeks are taking over the world then this is an industry that should be a good place to channel that geekery in a way that feels contemporary and which can help attract a younger and more diverse range of people to want to work for it whilst tapping into the public's latent empathy. Geek is good. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.