

BRANCHING OUT: THE COMING OF THE RAILWAYS

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Steam railways were not only a result of the pioneering work of locomotive engineers. They originated as a result of economic pressures and technical developments over many years. The West Midlands pioneered many changes before and during the era of steam and helped to shape today's railway network.

Railways probably came to Britain in 1565 when a German engineer, Daniel Hochstetter, used trucks running on wooden planks to transport copper in Lake District mines. Within a few years, these wooden railways came out of the mines into the open. The first may have been in 1603 in Nottinghamshire, which hauled coal for a distance of two miles, but recently, a line which moved coal from Broseley in Shropshire to the River Severn has been cited as

the first. In any case, by the early seventeenth century, the east-Shropshire coalfield had acquired a network of wooden rails.

Early Technology

In 1729 the first cast-iron flanged wheels were made at Coalbrookdale for local colliery lines. By the mid-1730s the Coalbrookdale Company were supplying hundreds of iron wheels. Similarly, in 1767 the Company initiated the use of iron as a more durable substitute for wooden rails. These two developments had a dramatic impact on the way in which railways operated and were a product of local skill and inventiveness with iron.

Mining was the stimulus for these developments, but as industrial pressures grew, there was a need to improve transport



Shrewsbury Station, Shropshire, Lithograph by J W Giles after L N Henshaw, 1849. The coming of the railway helped to revive Shrewsbury's economy in the nineteenth century.

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over longer distances. For centuries the navigable rivers of the region, including the Severn, had been improved to allow large vessels to ply their trade, and in the late-eighteenth century, canals were built as extensions of the rivers. Railways were adjuncts to the canal system whose role it was to move items a short distance to the nearest wharf.

But the canals were insufficient to meet economic demands. In 1808

William James planned a railway to run between Walsall and Erdington and began to think of the advantages of a nationally owned and operated railway system. Nothing happened, but his ideas of a 'general' railway were developed by Thomas Gray who, in 1825, published *Observations on a General Iron Railway*. It advocated a railway system that linked Birmingham with London, Bristol, Holyhead and Liverpool. This plan however did not materialise.

Steam technology began to be applied to railways. Richard Trevithick pioneered steam locomotion for the Coalbrookdale Company in the early 1800s, but the Worcestershire engineers, Foster, Raistrick and Company, formed in 1819, were also innovators. In 1828, they built the *Stourbridge Lion*, which in 1829 became the first locomotive to run in the USA.

Main Lines

The 1830s witnessed the coming together of the steam locomotive and the railway line in the West Midlands. On 6 May 1833, the London & Birmingham (LBR) and Grand Junction Railways (GJR) were incorporated by Act of Parliament. The former connected the Midlands with the capital while the latter connected Wolverhampton and Stafford to Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. By the late 1830s, Birmingham was at the centre of a 190-mile-long network.

The Railway Mania of the 1840s saw an explosion in the number of proposed railways but many had no prospect of ever being financially viable. Many of the larger railway companies bought up smaller, less profitable lines in a strategic attempt to expand their territories. Railway maps of the region show how complex the situation became in the late-nineteenth century.

Branching Out

Despite over-rapid expansion, railways enabled industrial centres such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton to thrive, but other places also benefitted. Shrewsbury had suffered in the early-nineteenth century as its traditional industries migrated into Wales, but the town was transformed into a provincial railway centre with a carriage works that provided much-needed employment.

Branch lines joined the smaller towns and villages throughout the region and ensured that railways became an integral part of the landscape. While passenger numbers on branch lines were never high, they often made their money by transporting goods and livestock from rural to urban areas. Raw materials and finished products could be transported with ease and in relative safety. Local people had often opposed railway construction in the 1830s, but by the 1860s residents of towns and villages clamoured to be joined to the network.

Travel by Rail

The train gave people the ability to travel in a way never before experienced. In 1851 more than six million individuals visited the



Post-1875 Midland Railway carriage with first- and third-class compartments.
Displayed at the National Railway Museum, York.

James E. Pettis

Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London; the majority of them travelled by train.

Conditions for passengers on the railways varied from the luxury of first class to the hard bench seats of third class, but in 1875 the Midland Railway abolished second class. The uncomfortable third-class carriages were removed and the more comfortable second-class carriages were re-branded as third class. Companies became legally obliged to run an affordable third-class service but not a second-class equivalent. Passengers were certain of a degree of comfort.

Visual horizons broadened as well. Allegedly, Queen Victoria requested that the blinds in her carriage be drawn when passing through the West Midlands by train as the sight of such an industrial landscape offended her sensibilities. Her early diaries show that she was not a fan of the 'desolate' and 'blasted' Midland towns. Passing through Jackfield in Shropshire on the train in 1865, H.P. Dunnill exclaimed that the area was so run down that it appeared to be 'a very poor bit of the rag end of [the world]', but Jackfield is where he ended up as co-owner of one of the local tile manufacturers, Craven-Dunnill.

From the seventeenth century, railways had been a vital part of the West Midlands industrial landscapes. This region, perhaps more than any other in Britain, had shaped, and been shaped by, the railways. ●

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Further Reading

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M.J.T. Lewis *Early Wooden Railways* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1970).

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