



From a raitour to a rail show

Autumn is upon us with a vengeance, with a busy events programme here at *Modern Railways*.

I can't let the opportunity pass without reflecting on the success of our HST raitour, organised in partnership with CrossCountry, on 27 September. What a fantastic day this was – it really was a proud moment seeing No 43184 pull into Leeds just after 07.30 with a *Modern Railways* headboard on the front. The atmosphere on board throughout the day was one of celebration, as befitting the dual anniversaries of 40 years of CrossCountry HSTs and our own 60th anniversary.

After transferring onto Severn Valley Railway metals, the naming events for power car No 43366 (*HST 40*) and GB Railfreight's No 66799 (*Modern Railways – Diamond Jubilee*) demonstrated the joint working among many organisations – and thankfully the very mixed weather was kind to us for this part of the day! The HST on the SVR made a fine sight, as the many photos have attested.

You can see more coverage of the event on pages 18-19, but perhaps the biggest delight was to see the attention the event attracted. At a time when the railways are facing all manner of challenges, the raitour gave people reason to smile and to have a bit of fun, which is exactly what we wanted to do.

But we were also embarking on a fundraising effort for Railway Benefit Fund, and we hope to have raised many thousands of pounds. Thanks to all those who bought tickets to travel or who contributed in any way, including our rail industry supporters at Angel Trains, Beacon Rail and Porterbrook. The fact that the raffle on board the train alone raised approaching £2,000 is a mark of the generosity of those who were part of the day – so thank you to everyone. A final total will be announced soon, after one of the *Modern Railways – the first 50 years* nameplates from GB Railfreight's No 66745 has been auctioned for charity at the end of October.

Our thanks go to all our partners – in particular our hosts at the Severn Valley Railway and to GB Railfreight for generously allowing us another naming to mark our anniversary. But most of all our thanks go to our colleagues and partners at CrossCountry. The amount of planning which went into the day cannot be underestimated, but everyone involved worked to resolve the challenges which arose and to arrange an event which was really quite special. Having a robust train plan, having the train in the right place with the right power cars, the nameplates and the headboard, having the right people involved – none of this

happens by chance and all of it was the result of meticulous planning.


ONWARDS TO THE FUTURE

I had the privilege of riding up front on our raitour from Derby to Birmingham, during which we achieved the 125mph for which the HST is famous. This also afforded me a different perspective of the significant amount of work going on around Birmingham connected with High Speed Two – the scale of the project really is something else. Three recent site visits are reported on in our quarterly supplement which subscribers receive with this issue.

This brings me to our next major event – our Modern Railways EXPO show in Milton Keynes on 22-23 November, where we are looking to the future of Britain's railway. If you haven't already registered, I hope you will join us – plans for the show are evolving rapidly with details on our website at www.modernrailways.com/expo. With an exhibition, conference, networking opportunities, workshops and more, there is much to look forward to.

At this time when the industry faces perhaps more uncertainty than there has been for decades, looking to the future may seem like a challenge when the present difficulties feel like they will never end. But look to the future we must, and there is still cause for optimism.

We would do well to remember what railways do best, as I was reminded on my recent trip to Scotland to research features in this issue. Avanti West Coast has faced its share of difficulties in recent times, but my trips to and from Glasgow went well and serve as a reminder of what the railway can offer. I travelled in comfort and was able to spend my time productively getting on with my work while periodically gazing out of the window at the splendid passing scenery of the Lakes, Fells and Borders. And, as with my wider experience of rail travel over the last few months, the staff were polite and helpful – although no doubt a tad weary given the ongoing industrial relations dispute.

If the current troubles feel like they are weighing us down, let us remember what we are all striving for – to move people and goods and to provide an economic boost for towns, cities and the country. Even while the outlook may seem bleak, the railway can still do that – our challenge must be to secure that long-term future and do it even better, something we look forward to debating at Milton Keynes in November! 

Philip Sherratt
Editor

Attracting the photographers: CrossCountry's No 43184, with *Modern Railways* headboard, leads the 12.45 Kidderminster to Bridgnorth special along the Severn Valley Railway at Foley Park on 27 September 2022. Colin J. Marsden



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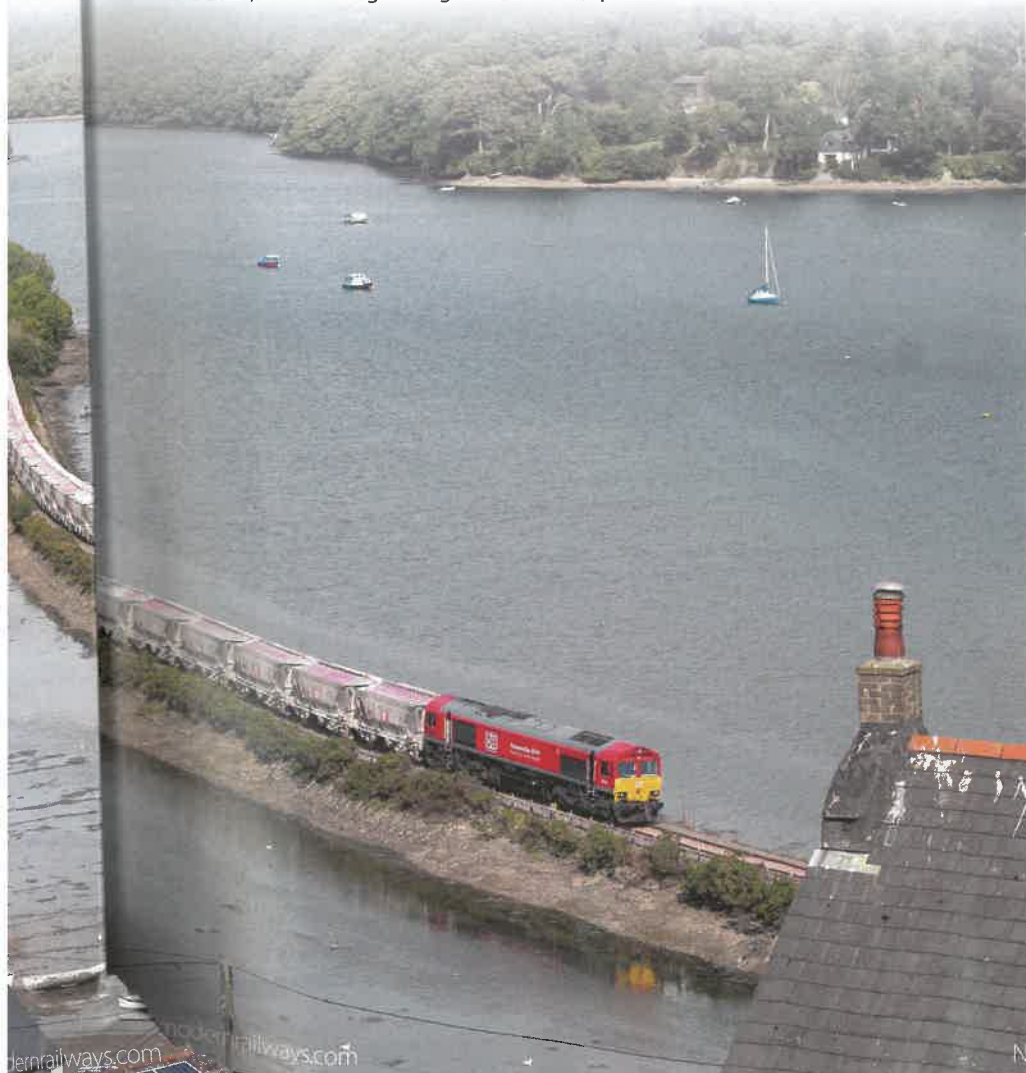
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Cover: On 27 September 2022, CrossCountry power car Nos 43184 and 43366 pass Elford on the *Modern Railways* 60th anniversary railtour from Leeds to the Severn Valley Railway. Ken Brunt
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Time for the great reset

In the four years since the Williams Rail Review was initiated, the railway, its markets and the national economy within which it operates have all changed radically. On the economic front, that change continues – for the worse.

Passenger ridership recovery is patchy across the operating companies. On the East Coast main line, the revival of leisure travel has seen passenger journeys on LNER and open access operators Grand Central and Hull Trains restored to pre-pandemic levels, according to the latest figures for April to June released by the Office of Rail and Road (p14). In contrast, the collapse of the commuter market sees South Western Railway and Southeastern ridership still at only two-thirds of its former peak.

Meanwhile, as reported elsewhere in this issue, the Bill containing the powers for the creation of Great British Railways has lost its slot in the new Government's programme of legislation (p8).

When, or if, it might be revived remains unclear. But already the phrase 'dead in the water' is being heard in some quarters.

Would this loss of the Williams-Shapps Plan be a disaster? We would suggest not.

Keith Williams was appointed on the basis that the railway was broken and its repair could not be left to the industry. As a result, the report, as distinct from the resulting plan with the various accretions introduced by the former Transport Secretary, was strong on the changes needed – a single guiding mind, fares reform, greater customer focus and so on – but gave no thought to how they would be implemented.

Then came the pandemic. The railway that emerged – in hock to the Treasury, riven by industrial strife, micromanaged by the Department for Transport as never before and lacking clear leadership – is in no state to implement an ill thought-out 'Plan' while fighting for its future

in an increasingly difficult market environment. Public spending is also under severe pressure.

BUSY TEAM

True, the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) has been doing its busy best to fill in the blank spaces in the Williams-Shapps map of terra largely incognita on the way to the brave new world. But, led by Network Rail senior management, and everyone is adamant that GBR mustn't be Network Rail 2.0, the approach is inevitably coloured.

This is not to criticise the GBRTT. The competence and enthusiasm of its members bring back memories of the British Rail young Turks which Franchise Director Roger Salmon brought in to staff his Department. However, their efforts need to be directed by those who will be responsible for creating and leading the desired entirely new national railway.

Whether GBR has only slipped or is slowly sinking, swamped by other government priorities, the

delay provides the opportunity to reset the implementation strategy. It is time to return to first principles based on, we believe, the central message from the Williams review.

Giving his maiden speech as Rail Minister at the Rail Forum conference on 11 October, Kevin Foster said we must 'put our shoulders to the wheel and meet the challenges Keith Williams set out in the Plan for Rail'. Apart from the unsurprising absence of Grant Shapps' claimed joint authorship, this appears to suggest the Government remains committed to the spirit of the plan, although whether that extends to the detail remains to be seen.

It is welcome news that the Whole Industry Strategic Plan (WISP), commissioned on the back of the Williams-Shapps Plan and intended to provide a 30-year forward look, has been rebadged as the Long-Term Rail Strategy. While not creating such a user-friendly acronym, the concept of planning for 30 years ahead when so much has changed in the last three years alone is absurd.



However, having a strategy to set the industry's direction is a must.

FIRM HAND

Central to the future of the railway is the need for a single management team, with responsibility for both cost and revenue, to reintegrate railway operations and infrastructure (which were separated by privatisation). This requires forgetting such cosy notions as a 'guiding mind'. Creation of a new railway requires a firm controlling hand, as was the case when Network Rail brought Railtrack out of administration.

As we have remarked in the past, the fatal error was to rush ahead with the creation of GBR on the assumption that the management to run the new show would be found later. What should have come first was the creation of a Shadow GBR with a Chair and Chief Executive who would then be responsible for guiding the creation of the business they would run. The GBR Transition Team would have been transferred to the shadow organisation with the opportunity of taking up operational posts when their work was done.

These appointments should still be DfT's priority. The then Transport Secretary Grant Shapps told us in May

that the recruitment of the Chair had begun. There is an assumption that Keith Williams is the man for the job. Given the woolly nature of his review, plus his record at British Airways and now Royal Mail, we hope not.

TAINTED

Great British Railways was a politically inspired name aimed at avoiding accusations of a Conservative Government 'returning to British Rail'. Add in Mr Shapps' antics over the location of the putative headquarters and we suggest GBR is a tainted brand.

To avoid yah-boo politics obscuring the reset, you could call it the New Railway Executive to be going on with, on the assumption that few politicians' or commentators' memories extend back to 1948. With management directing the Transition Team, the reset could begin.

However, in the railway's current parlous state, a reset has to be seen to be resolving the industry's many immediate problems in the current environment. Optimists have told us much can be achieved by behaving as if GBR was already with us. Even with a New Railway Executive in place, in a fragmented industry separated by contracts

and licence terms, that may not be as easy as it seems.

ACTION

So what can be done to improve the rail users' lot pending a 'single guiding mind'? Given the progress with 21st Century Operations at Anglia Route ('Informed Sources', May issue), Network Rail can drive its Regions even harder to operate a boringly reliable, not to mention resilient, railway. For example, there is a reluctance to use bi-directional signalling facilities, stemming we suspect from a lack of confidence.

DfT must have retained the ability to modify the terms of the train operators' National Rail Contracts. Instead of placing ridiculously low limits on operational expenditure, affecting, for instance, replacement parts in rolling stock maintenance depots, operators could be directed to maintain driver knowledge on diversionary routes to reduce the use of rail replacement buses and coaches.

In his speech on 11 October, Rail Minister Kevin Foster called for improvement in major projects, to the customer experience and for the tackling of fragmentation – principles with which we cannot argue. But he also repeated a trope which has been doing the rounds ever since the Williams-Shapps Plan was published – broadening private sector involvement. The big problem with the proposed Passenger Service Contracts has been the ideological obsession with wanting to have the private sector more involved in the railway but not being sure how to make the best of that involvement. The danger that this presents a distraction to achieving the optimum outcome is ever-present; our repeated refrain of 'structure not ownership' refers.

STRIKES

Of course, the greatest challenge to restoring a boringly reliable railway is the current plague of industrial relations disputes. As they say in football, management has 'lost the dressing room'.

Even in the good times, the difference between an OK journey and a good journey depends on the enthusiasm of staff. And picking a prolonged fight with the people who actually make the railway run clearly affects staff attitudes.

We recall Chris Green observing at the start of the early 1990s recession that managing InterCity's response to the commercial impact was more demanding because the strikes in 1989

meant management had lost the previous support of the staff.

One of the current problems is that the trade union leaders are responding to a confused message from management. Is the casus belli reform of maintenance practices or closure of staffed ticket offices? Drivers' terms and conditions, or dependence on rest day working?

DEAL OR NO DEAL

New Transport Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan seems to have taken a less abrasive approach than her predecessor, even meeting union leaders, but the strikes continue. Restoring labour relations is currently the priority for a reset, but how it is to be achieved is beyond even the quasi-omniscience of a *Modern Railways* leader writer.


Clearly things cannot continue as they are and something is needed to break the impasse, where the union leaders clearly believe they are winning. In part this is down to the ongoing opportunities for 'divide and conquer' which have benefited union members in the fragmented railway.

ORR research suggests that in some areas of the rail industry, pay and conditions are favourable when compared with the wider labour market. Total reward at Network Rail is largely within plus or minus 10% of market rates, with the significant exception of maintenance staff, who were 18% above the market median.

Similarly, the total reward at passenger train operators is also largely within market rates. At one extreme, station staff were paid 12% above the market median while, at the other, operational management were being paid 11% below.

Before any reset can get under way, a peace deal needs to be achieved. With the Government holding the purse strings, its direct involvement in a resolution of the disputes is unavoidable. Someone in Whitehall needs to come down to the coalface and get their hands dirty.

But we need a resolution that settles the dispute for the long-term – not a short-term fix that averts the immediate threat of strikes but kicks the can of reforming working practices down the road. There may be a temptation in some quarters to find an easy way to end the dispute, but with ridership still recovering it is better to tackle these issues now, once and for all.

Only once all this has been achieved will a united industry get on with creating a modern railway meeting the various aspirations of the Williams Review. 

Peak ridership recovery: LNER's No 91101 *Flying Scotsman* leading the 14.03 King's Cross to Leeds at Wakefield on 28 September 2022. Rob France