
Volunteer Railways in Britain

BY JAMES L. PAYNE

In 21st-century England you don't expect to find a fireman shoveling coal into a steam locomotive, but that's what 59-year old Paul Rimmer does. During his shift on the North Yorkshire Moors Railway, he heaves two tons of coal from the tender of engine 45212 into its roaring firebox, a tougher job than almost any in modern Britain. If encountering a real live locomotive fireman is unusual, consider this second surprise: Paul is a volunteer, devoting one week a month to his backbreaking, fiery labors. He's part of the modern British movement relying on philanthropy and volunteerism to save historic railroads.

In 1948 the British government took over ownership of all the railroads. Socialist theory had it that government management would make for greater efficiency, but the reality proved to be the opposite. The railroads drowned in a sea of red ink, and the government responded by closing branch lines, one after the other. In the period between 1962 and 1969, active railroad mileage dropped from 17,500 to 12,100.

The affected communities protested the loss of service, but when political means failed, local activists and philanthropists stepped in to buy and operate the railroads themselves. They formed nonprofit organizations, or "charities" as the British call them, to preserve a distinctive part of their local history.

Today, there are scores of these "heritage railways" in the country, some 57 standard-gauge lines and 42 narrow-gauge ones. The North Yorkshire Moors Rail-

way (NYMR), founded in 1973, is one of the largest and most successful. It runs eight trains a day on a regular schedule throughout the year on a standard-gauge line, climbing from the seacoast town of Whitby on the North Sea through the Yorkshire Moors National Park to the town of Pickering, an 18-mile route. Like most heritage railways, it relies heavily on volunteers who serve as engineers, firemen, conductors, station managers, and signal operators. Each station also has a volunteer maintenance crew that repairs and paints equipment and buildings.

When I visited the Pickering station last summer the volunteer maintenance crew was refurbishing the baggage shed, painting it white and green, the official colors of the railroad back in the 1930s. In addition to some 200 volunteers, the NYMR has a substantial paid staff of workers in management, marketing, gift shops, and track and engine maintenance.

Another railway I visited, the Bolton Abbey and Embsay line, is almost entirely volunteer-run. It has only three paid staff members, including a manager, a shops manager, and a part-time secretary; all the other jobs are done by some 60 volunteers. The day I visited I found the volunteer crew in the carriage-restoration shop hard at work. Their supervisor is Peter Barry, a firefighter in Leeds before he took early retirement. He has been volunteering for nine years, working three days a week in

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the carriage shop, as well as working at night doing paperwork for the operation. I asked him about his motivation for volunteering.

“I always loved trains,” he said. One experience especially moved him. Several years before he started volunteering, he took his grandson to ride a steam train. He saw that the boy was enthralled by the sights, noises, and smells (the dominant odor, by the way, is the smell of your mother’s steam iron). “I tell you, tears came down my eyes,” he said, drawing his fingertips down his cheeks. “And I was just so grateful that somebody had gone to the trouble to save these trains, so that my grandson and I could have this experience.”

Another motive for the volunteers is the camaraderie, which I could see as the men worked and joked together. They often gather in the evenings at the pub, Peter said, where they stand out as an unusually convivial group.

“One night the barmaid asked me—she couldn’t understand why we were carrying on so—‘what do you have in common, you seem to be such good friends?’”

Heritage railways are part of the tourism and entertainment industry. The startup and acquisition costs are covered by fundraising, subscriptions, and major philanthropic gifts, but once operational, they get most of their income from the tourists and railroad fans who want to ride them. On a typical road like the NYMR and Bolton Abbey lines, this business amounts to several hundred thousand riders a year. They further cater to the tourist traffic with restaurants and gift shops in the stations, luxury dining trains, and special events like Thomas the Tank Engine day (when the smiley-face locomotive, made popular in the children’s books, is brought in).

Another significant source of income are filmmakers. Steam engines make great visuals, and studios filming period dramas hire the railways to shoot

footage. The North Yorkshire Moors Railway has been used for *Brideshead Revisited*, *All Creatures Great and Small*, and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

In general the heritage railways get no tax funds to cover operating costs. Sometimes, government or quasi-governmental units make grants for property acquisition and capital projects. For example, the Bolton Abbey line got \$600,000 from the European Community Development Fund to build an engine shed.

Though their financial support comes from a variety of sources, volunteers are the soul of the preserved railways. Some 23,000 volunteers nationwide founded

them and direct them. Like Paul Rimmer, some shovel coal; others man ticket booths, work in gift shops, repair carriages, and inspect track. On occasion, volunteers have constructed roadbed, taking up pick and shovel to clear a path for their beloved trains.

There may be a larger social lesson here. The usual debate over how to provide public services sees only two possible systems: capitalism or socialism. In their

200 years of history, the railroads in Britain have followed a shifting mixture of these models, and neither one has proven to be entirely satisfactory. Both have faced an underlying political dilemma: How do you get customers to pay for monopoly-type services without suspicion and resentment?

Under socialism railroads are subsidized, that is, paid for through taxation. People don’t like that because they don’t like having money taken from them against their will, and they get especially resentful when their tax money supports inefficiency, featherbedding of workers, and overpaid administrators. It was this dissatisfaction that led, after some 40 years of state control, to the privatization of the railroads in 1993.

Capitalism has the advantage of being efficient, but that doesn’t make the public any happier. The problem



The North Yorkshire Moors Railway, one of Britain’s most successful heritage railways. (Photo by Rob Lyne)

is that the premise of capitalism is financial self-interest: everyone involved in the enterprise is expected to be selfishly extracting the maximum benefit for himself. Hence, the consumer sees his money going to seemingly excess profits for investors and lavish salaries for administrators. This resentment is especially noticeable on British railways today. The private companies that have leased the railways run them fairly well, but their complex fare schedules and seemingly high prices lead many travelers to believe they are being gouged by private firms trying to maximize profits. The result is that many Britons look fondly at the idea of re-nationalizing the railroads, believing that that would take greed out of the picture. But of course it would bring back the inefficiency of having no bottom line.

The heritage railways have bypassed this dilemma. They represent a third system, which we might call voluntarism. This model has generally not been recognized in the debates on social and economic organization because of the complexity and breadth of the motives it involves. Socialism and capitalism are easier to theorize about because they rest on simple, narrow motives. In the case of socialism, the motive is fear. The government is assumed to know what is best, and it forces people to obey its decisions by threatening them with violence against their person or property. It's easy to understand how the fear of going to jail will make people pay taxes to fund government's railroads.

Material Self-Interest

With capitalism, the motive is also simple and basic: material self-interest. Again, we can readily grasp how the desire for money will motivate businessmen to provide a public service.

Voluntarism, on the other hand, rests on the complex and rather subtle motives we might characterize as self-expression. These include idealism, generosity,

sociability, and a sense of achievement. These motives are hard to define and measure, so we tend to discount them when thinking about social organization. We tend to be skeptical that an organization based on "mere" charity or enthusiasm or friendship could accomplish anything significant. But, as the volunteer railroads demonstrate, these impulses certainly can have important, socially useful effects.

Do the heritage railways point the way to a brighter future when more public services will be based neither on the coercion of the state nor on the economic self-interest of owners? It's an ideal worth working toward,

but optimism needs to be tempered with caution. The problem is, as we just noted, that the world has yet to recognize and value voluntarism as an independent approach. Hence voluntarism, when it occurs, happens unintentionally, by default. This was how the heritage railways got started. Their founders did not reject socialism and capitalism and consciously devise organizations based on self-expression. They turned to voluntarism because they didn't have enough political clout to get subsidies and could not interest investors in these uneconomic small lines.

Lacking a philosophic commitment to voluntarism, the heritage railways may be unable over the long run to sustain their volunteer character. It is possible that several generations from now these groups will have lost their idealism and become income-maximizing commercial firms or tax-subsidized branches of government.

But for the present, these railways provide a remarkable, real-world demonstration that human beings are capable of operating a public service grounded on motives of self-expression. And, judging from the enthusiasm I saw on faces in the stations and on the trains, these organizations have found a way, for perhaps the first time in British history, to make passengers love their trains.



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