# Eleven Minutes Late

A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain

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Extract

## CHAPTER ONE

# NEWTON-LE-WILLOWS

The train that now runs between Liverpool Lime Street and Manchester Victoria, currently operated by a company called Northern Rail, is unprepossessing even by the standards that the British have come to expect.

A two-car diesel Class 150 is scheduled to do the thirty-one-mile journey in sixty-four minutes, which is faster than the two hours achieved in 1830, but somewhat slower than you would expect between two great cities whose conurbations merge into each other.* Especially these two.

For it was on this route, only slightly modified by the passing years, that it all began. And I do mean *all*. It is reasonable to argue that what happened here in 1830 marked the beginning of not just the railway age but of the modern world as we have come to know it. None of the inventions and developments in communication since then has transformed the way of life that existed beforehand as completely as this one did. Not the telegraph, not the telephone, not the motor car, not the aeroplane, not the internet.

There had been means of transport that might have been

* Slightly faster trains go from Manchester Piccadilly.

called railways for centuries before the Liverpool & Manchester. The Babylonians had roads with smooth stone blocks to ease the passage of vehicles; the Syracusans had roads with grooved tracks; copper miners in Cumberland were pushing wagons between rails in the 1560s. Probably some American intelligent-design theorist has concluded that Cain was run out of Eden on the morning express.

Dozens of experiments created the conditions that made the Liverpool & Manchester Railway possible; 375 miles of track were already open in Britain using a mixture of horsepower, manpower, gravity and a little steam. The most notable was the Stockton & Darlington, opened five years earlier by the chief begetter of this railway, George Stephenson. But even that was substantially dependent on horses. On 15 September 1830 Stephenson showed the world that it was possible to produce locomotives that could convey passengers and goods at speeds which even winged horses could never contemplate.

All this is recorded in (truly) thousands of other books. This is not a formal history of the railways. The outline of the story is here, but it is the footnotes of history that I find most fascinating and which seem to me to teach us something remarkable not just about the railways, but about Britain, about the world, about the way we are governed and where we might be going. Or, since we are talking about transport, not going.

And 15 September has an extraordinary footnote: a tragic one, yet also bathetic; from this distance, it has to be said, the story usually makes people chuckle rather than cry.

## *The Death of a Dithering Politician . . .*

Close to Newton-le-Willows station, south of the tracks and just on the Manchester side of a road bridge, there is a memorial. There was once a station here too, Parkside, but now the memorial is ludicrously placed since it is virtually impossible for the unprepared traveller even to glimpse it unless the train stops unwontedly. And the drivers – having moved lethargically through the Manchester suburbs – seem to take particular pleasure at speeding up round here.

The writer Simon Garfield thought the memorial looked like a railwayman's rain shelter. He studied it more closely than I did, but I thought it was instantly recognizable as a memorial: perhaps the local squirearch's family sarcophagus in a country churchyard. The only reliable way to get a better look is to approach it from the road and trespass onto the tracks. And the subtext of the inscription is that you really shouldn't do that.

The memorial commemorates 'THE RIGHT HON. WILLIAM HUSKISSON M.P.' who, on the opening day of this railway, was knocked over by an oncoming train as he tried to hold a particularly ill-timed conversation with the prime minister, the Duke of Wellington.

The accident 'deprived England of an illustrious Statesman and Liverpool of its honoured Representative', according to the inscription, which is indeed true. Huskisson was a figure of considerable significance in the development of nineteenth-century economic policy who pursued notably advanced free-trade policies as President of the Board of Trade. They were certainly too advanced for Wellington, who happily took advantage of a threat of resignation that was not actually intended and, in 1828, got rid of him.

As part of Huskisson's general philosophy in favour of international trade and industrialization, he was an early enthusiast for the development of the Liverpool & Manchester, at a time when there was a great deal of scepticism about the whole notion of railways. Unfortunately, Huskisson is one of those historical figures – like the archduke Franz Ferdinand – whose entire life has been eclipsed by the nature of his death. He is now remembered primarily as the first person to be killed by a train, although this is not exactly true. Indeed, there is a record of two boys being 'slain with a wagon' on one of the wooden pit railways in County Durham in 1650. An experimental locomotive blew up, also in Durham, in 1815, killing sixteen, and there are reports of pre-1830 fatalities on the Stockton & Darlington.

The inscription also says that Huskisson was 'singled out by an inscrutable Providence from the midst of the distinguished multitude that surrounded him'. This is not true either. He was singled out for being a bloody fool.

Huskisson, Wellington, three future prime ministers in Grey, Melbourne and Peel, and a whole host of other celebrities of the time were travelling in the first train to leave Liverpool, pulled by the engine *Northumbrian*, driven by Stephenson himself. Seven other locomotives also made the journey, on the parallel track.

Huskisson was no longer in the government; indeed he and Wellington were barely on speaking terms, and he evidently saw the day as a chance to patch up relations. The north-west was Huskisson territory. The previous night he had spoken to a huge crowd in Liverpool, telling them what prosperity the railway would bring, and had been rapturously received. He had marked the success by drinking a fair quantity of wine and was now evidently rather hung over.

When the train stopped at Parkside to take on water he got out and walked towards the duke's private carriage,

'dripping with gilt and crimson drapes'. Some of the trappings of stagecoach travel would remain part of the railways for years to come, likewise the etiquette and habits. It seemed quite normal for the guests to take a stroll on the road – even this new iron road – when the opportunity arose. Huskisson may have been emboldened by the success of the previous night; the duke, however, was very much off his normal territory. He was famously wary of modern innovations, and was also on difficult political ground: with the pressure for electoral reform growing, Manchester, a city without an MP of its own, was expected to give him a mixed welcome.

Huskisson clambered up to the carriage, and Wellington greeted him cordially enough. At that moment the shout went up: 'An engine is approaching. Take care, gentlemen.' (Even at moments of alarm, nineteenth-century man seemed to find the time to be long-winded.) Nearly all the guests on the track either got back into their carriages or took refuge on the embankment. Two did not.

The engine was the *Rocket*, driven by Stephenson's associate Joseph Locke, later to become a famous engineer in his own right. Locke responded by using the only means of braking available to him: throwing the gear lever into reverse. Huskisson, along with his companion William Holmes, was left clinging to the side of the duke's carriage. Had he stayed completely still, as Holmes did, he would have been safe – just.

Huskisson was always considered a bit sickly and accident-prone, with one foot permanently damaged after an unfortunate accident in the Duke of Atholl's moat. And that morning at Parkside, he was suffering from an unpleasant inflammation of the kidneys and bladder, compounded by the ancient curse of gout. The hangover might not have helped either. According to Garfield, who has provided the most complete modern description:

> Huskisson doubted his judgment and began to move about. He manoeuvred his good leg over the side of the carriage, but those inside failed to pull him in. Holmes cried to him by his side, 'For God's sake, Mr Huskisson, be firm!' at which point Huskisson grabbed the door of the carriage. Unable to bear his weight, the door swung wide open, suspending him directly into the path of the engine. The *Rocket* hit the door, and Huskisson was flung beneath its wheels.

In my fancy, the explanation is slightly different. Confronted by the need to take a decision involving transport, Huskisson suffered precisely the same mental block that was to afflict just about every British politician from that day to this. He dithered, he panicked, he got it spectacularly wrong. The death of William Huskisson was to be a motif for nearly two centuries of British policy-making, which has left the country with a staggeringly inadequate system of transportation.

Huskisson did not die instantly. The *Northumbrian* rushed him towards Manchester, past oblivious, cheering crowds. He was taken off the train at Eccles, still conscious, and carried to the vicarage. There he was placed on a sofa, given brandy, laudanum and the best available medical attention. The wound to his leg was beyond the resources available in Eccles in 1830. He died at 9pm, the very moment when guests were sitting down in Liverpool to begin the kind of banquet (turtle, Dee salmon, stewed partridges, roast black game; the works) that would be a regular feature of railway opening days across the world for the next seventy years and more.

The inscription is right on another point. The tragedy 'changed a moment of noblest exultation and triumph . . . into one of desolation and mourning'. Indeed, the day was pretty dire even for those who yet knew nothing of Huskisson's

fate. Wellington quickly decided he did not care for the mood of the Manchester crowds and ordered that he be returned to Liverpool as fast as possible. It was a grim journey back, though. Among the spectators, the disgruntled now outnumbered the excited: one train hit a wheelbarrow, apparently placed on the line deliberately; some were pelted with missiles thrown from bridges; the locomotives were starting to fail. Wellington had had enough and got out short of Liverpool, staging a strategic retreat to the Marquis of Salisbury's house at Childwall.

Only twenty guests sat down, two hours late, for the turtle, Dee salmon and all. Most of the others were still stuck on the railway, unable even to yell 'Nightmare!' down their mobiles to their loved ones, as their descendants would do after far less nightmarish journeys on Northern Rail or Virgin. And yet, before there was time to bury Huskisson, the success of the railway became an established fact. Anyone who read the story understood that the tragedy was not the railway's fault. All the fears that had assailed the public while railways were being discussed in the 1820s now melted away. The locomotives did not explode. The noise did not stop nearby hens laying or send cattle insane. The speeds did not send the passengers into paroxysms of shock.

Even at the conservative official speed limit of 17mph (though the train carrying the stricken Huskisson had touched 35mph), the railway was almost twice as fast as the quickest stagecoach. Within weeks the coaches were being forced to slash their fares. On 5 October the *Liverpool Times* carried five adverts promoting further railway companies. By the end of the year the railway was carrying the mail and running excursions. Other parts of the kingdom, the Continent and the world rapidly took an interest. Railways 'burst rather than stole or crept upon the world,' said the American writer C. F. Adams.

The Liverpool & Manchester was a stunning success, and a British success. Throughout the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, British engineers and British capital crossed the planet to hand this great boon to the world. It *was* a boon too. Railways gave markets to farmers and traders who previously had none. They brought fresh food to cities that had previously known none. They brought knowledge where there had been ignorance. Public enthusiasm for the railways as a means of transport would not be in any doubt for nearly a century until the private car came along to issue a challenge as devastating – and as unexpected – as the challenge that the railways, in their turn, had delivered to the poor old stagecoaches and canals. All that was as true in Britain as anywhere else.

### *And the Birth of a Very Strange Relationship*

Yet from the start there was always something odd about Britain's welcome for the railways. It was as though the bizarre dichotomy of that opening day – the triumph and the tragedy, and indeed the rather ludicrous nature of that tragedy – had left an indelible mark.

Commercially, no one had any doubt whatever. Railways were seen as the transport of the future, which they undoubtedly were – and therefore a surefire means of making money, which they undoubtedly were not. This attitude survived the collapse of the 'railway mania' of the 1840s, one of the great boom and busts of history. After a short period of recovery, investors piled back into railway shares. And towards the end of the century – by which time every route that could conceivably be profitable had long since been built – local businessmen continued to put money into schemes to

link remote locations to the national network. By then they were largely motivated less by greed than by pride, optimism and a powerful belief that their trade and their community could not thrive if they remained isolated.

Among intellectuals, the attitude was decidedly different. The response in both art and literature was far more muted and wary in Britain than in other countries, a point I will come to later.

And among politicians, confusion reigned from the start. Huskisson's indecision – do I climb aboard or run away? – produced immediate echoes. By the time the young Victoria came to the throne in 1837, it was clear that the infant industry was about to become a dominant force in the life of the nation. Yet parliament could not form a coherent view about its own duties. It had to balance the prevailing philosophy of laissez-faire against the case for regulating such an extraordinarily powerful industry.

Until the closing years of the century, it opted almost invariably for non-intervention except when public pressure became irresistible. Parliamentarians had their own angles too. By the 1860s more than a hundred MPs were directors of railway companies, and the 'railway interest' was very adept at steering governments away from interference. Trailing behind the British gave other European governments a chance to learn from the pioneers' mistakes. And each of them, to a greater or lesser extent, rejected the British model and opted for a system of government control.

The attitude of Victorian passengers was ambivalent too. As the railway ceased to be a novelty, their own lives changed and became increasingly dependent on the railway and the companies that ran it. Public attitude soon assumed a very British hue: tolerance, patience, exasperation, good humour, even affection. This was shown in the way the companies' names would be unofficially translated:

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|---|---|
| S&D | Somerset & Dorset<br>*Slow & Dirty* |
| M&GN | Midland & Great Northern<br>*Muddle & Go Nowhere* |
| S&MJ | Stratford & Midland Junction<br>*Slow, Mouldy & Jolting* |
| L&B | Lynton & Barnstaple<br>*Lumpy & Bumpy* |
| LC&D | London Chatham & Dover<br>*Lose 'em, Smash 'em & Turn over* |
| MS&L | Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire<br>*Money Sunk & Lost* |
| (which became the) | |
| GC | Great Central<br>*Gone Completely* |

All these were very apposite. I suspect the alleged nickname of the Great Western Railway – God's Wonderful Railway – was the creation of the company's highly effective public relations machine rather than a popular witticism.* The GWR's twenty-first-century successor, First Great Western, became known as Worst Late Western, without any affection whatever. There were other nicknames too, like the Scratter in Northamptonshire (local slang: scratting about, which is self-explanatory really); the Tiddlydike (origin unknown) from Cheltenham to Andover; and the Crab and Winkle (two of them, one in Kent, one in Essex).

These days train travel has a different, greatly reduced, role in the daily life of the nation. And yet the British still maintain their unique, and uniquely perverse, relationship

* The GWR's early routes to Wales and the south-west were circuitous, and Great Way Round seems to have been the popular choice.

with the industry they invented. We find the railways a kind of exquisite torment.

The idea of trains as an enthusiasm and a hobby began in Victorian Britain, reaching its peak in the years after the Second World War. But at that time the appeal lay with the main lines and the throbbing power of the great locomotives. By the early 1960s, however, railways were going out of fashion, both as a means of transport and as a hobby. Politicians were anxious to annexe the word 'modernization'. It was a word that meant whatever the speaker wanted it to mean, like 'revolution' in the mouths of student activists later in the decade. But in utter contrast to the 1830s when railways were the epitome of modernity, they were seen now to be its very antithesis.

It was against this background that Dr Richard Beeching, the chairman of the British Railways Board, was able to carry through his programme of line closures with no coherent national opposition and often very little at local level either. This period was very brief. The bulk of the closures had been effected by 1967 and steam trains vanished from the British rail network the following year. Very quickly after that, the mood changed.

The 1970s saw a swing back to more traditional British values, i.e. a misty-eyed nostalgia. Country cottages, which previously could hardly be given away, became more desirable than new homes. The modern British Arcadian dream took shape: living in a cottage (always 'with roses round the door') close to an oak-beamed pub serving real ale, and cricket on the green. And the vanished branch lines and steam trains became an important part of that make-believe idyll. The railways as such were no more popular than they had ever been, but they now had a fixed place in the landscape of the imagination.

Further closures became politically impossible, and if the

railway line no longer existed, people would do everything possible to recreate it. By 2008, the European Federation of Museum and Tourist Railways (Fedecrail) included 102 passenger-carrying preserved railways in Britain and Ireland among its members. In the rest of Europe combined, there were 117. Its meetings were said to be totally dominated by the British.

Britain became dotted with heritage railways, from Keith & Dufftown in the Highlands to the Lappa Valley in Cornwall. On a summer's day in some parts of the country (e.g. rural Norfolk) it might be easier to catch a steam train than a bus, let alone a train on the former network. This attitude exasperated Edward Heath, prime minister from 1970 to 1974, who was what you might call an old-fashioned modernizer. He referred disparagingly to those who believed there was an alternative to expansion: 'an England of quiet market towns linked only by steam trains puffing slowly and peacefully through green meadows'. But that was *precisely* the England which many of those who could afford it did now want, provided their own train was somewhat faster, if still peaceful.

In 2007 the magazine *Country Life* judged Kingham in Oxfordshire to be 'England's Favourite Village'. The concept was of course absurd – if it was England's favourite, it would be overrun and thus unliveable. Never mind. What distinguished Kingham above hundreds of other contenders (and raised its property prices as well) was that it still had its own railway station, making it a suitable place from which to commute to London.

The *Thomas the Tank Engine* books were modestly popular in my childhood in the 1950s, rather went out of fashion during the Beeching era in the 1960s before returning with a vengeance to become a publishing and marketing phenomenon. And the media remained fascinated by trains, on the

public's behalf. In the nature of things, this manifested itself most obviously whenever anything went wrong. From the start rail travel proved itself remarkably safe (astonishingly so, given how rudimentary the procedures were in the early days, and how reluctant boards of directors were to invest in improvements). There have been horrible disasters, of course, but Huskisson was emphatically not the harbinger: indeed no one quite as famous has been killed on a British railway in nearly two centuries since then.

Since the end of the Second World War about 9,000 people have been killed on Britain's railways, less than a third of them passengers. The comparable figure for roads is above 340,000. Roads now account for about twenty times as many passenger miles as the railways, which still makes railways, by my reckoning, about twice as safe. Yet the media attention and fearfulness generated by each of those accidents is entirely out of proportion to the risk involved. At Grayrigg in Cumbria, on the West Coast Main Line, a Virgin train with 111 passengers derailed in February 2007, causing the death of an 84-year-old woman. Contrast the headline news caused by that incident and what would have occurred had she died in a car crash. This is not a new phenomenon, as we shall see. It is one that will require some explanation.

A prurient fascination with train crashes is considered normal; yet it is considered strange to be fascinated by trains themselves. In 1955 the chairman of East London juvenile court, Sir Basil Henriques, told a 15-year-old boy – accused of stealing to fund a trainspotting trip to Harrogate – not merely that it was 'abominable' to steal but that he should have grown out of such a 'babyish' hobby.

Later, the word 'trainspotter' became (along with 'anorak') a generic term of abuse for anyone seen as over-interested in any subject, instead of following the more socially acceptable national trait of languid apathy. This has frightened many

insecure people – young men, especially – away from pursuing what interests them, for fear of seeming uncool. Particularly if that interest really is trainspotting.

The journalist Jonathan Glancey, in an introduction to a recent volume about John Betjeman on trains, said that a colleague had warned him he should steer clear of writing about railways. It smacked of childhood, he implied. 'Do your career no good, old chap.' (One has to take a deep breath and remember that it worked well for Betjeman.) Nonetheless, the media remain – on behalf of the public – fixated with trains. Above all, railways remain, as they have been from the start, an ever-reliable source of wry, bleak humour. A cartoonist's delight. A national joke.

But the railways are not a national joke. They are a national disaster.

Creating a viable transport network in the twenty-first century is one of the most complex responsibilities of a modern government. It requires long-term planning and financial commitment. There is political risk because projects go wrong (remarkably often in the case of Britain). And the reward may be so far in the future as to be invisible to politicians concerned with tomorrow's headlines, next week's polls and next year's election.

The British response has always been to let events take care of themselves. Alone in Europe, Victorian governments stayed aloof from planning the railway system. Though Hitler was building *Autobahnen* in the 1930s, the British failed to begin to accommodate the desire for inter-city travel on fast roads for another twenty-five years. Aviation policy has been a mishmash of confused responses, characterized most spectacularly by the saga of the Third London Airport that, after a search for an acceptable alternative lasting decades, finally ended up on the site (Stansted) where Whitehall intended to plonk it in the first place.

There are reasons for this, some of them good ones. This is an overcrowded property-owning democracy, full of fractious, private people guarding their lives against intrusions of all kinds. No one wants roses round the door *and* a motorway at the bottom of the garden. (A railway might be slightly different, but only if it was there in the first place.)

Transport minister has always been a job for ambitious politicians to avoid. 'It's the most miserable job in government,' said Sir Malcolm Rifkind, a former incumbent. 'Anything you do right, no one's going to know for fifteen years. Anything you do wrong, they know immediately.' Since the election of the Thatcher government thirty years ago, twenty different politicians have held the job. Even before that, the only politician who actually used the post to enhance her reputation was Barbara Castle (1965–68) although Ernest Marples (1959–64), of whom more anon, certainly enhanced his visibility. One transport minister, Alistair Darling (2002–06) is believed to have been specifically told to keep his department out of the headlines. A grey man to whom dullness came instinctively, Darling followed his instructions admirably.

The problem with this as a strategy is that the consequences do mount up over a couple of centuries. It might be possible to argue that every single major decision or indecision taken by British ministers since the railways began turned out to be wrong. Huskisson's mistake was merely the first. That would be stretching the truth a little too far, but the general principle holds good. And it has never been more true than now. For the moment, let's take one incredible example.

In 2007 a transport white paper was very sceptical about the benefits of railway electrification, which currently covers around 40 per cent of the British network, far lower than in

comparable countries.* In 2008, as oil prices shot through the roof, the then transport minister, Ruth Kelly, began to show some tentative enthusiasm for the idea. 'I can see great potential for a rolling programme of electrification,' she said. However, she added that this could not start to happen before 2015. That will be 158 years after George Stephenson reportedly predicted that electric power would supersede the steam engine. ('I tell you, young man, I shall not live to see it, but you may, when electricity will be the great motive power of the world.') It will be 131 years since the emergence of electric traction as a viable means of powering trains. It will be 84 years since a government-appointed body, the Weir Committee, recommended a comprehensive programme of electrification. And that assumes the projects actually got under way in 2015, which experience suggests is implausible.

Britain continued to build steam locomotives until 1960. Meantime, a third of the British route miles that are electrified use the third-rail system, first described as obsolete in 1904.

Two of the main lines from London, those out of St Pancras and Paddington (God's Wonderful Railway), are by some distance the most important non-electrified railways in Western Europe. It will be difficult and expensive to upgrade these routes as they stand because other countries abandoned diesel high-speed trains long ago, and Britain would have to bear all the costs of developing a new version.

We don't yet know how Britain will be able to generate electricity, if at all, by the second half of the twenty-first century, though it seems safe to rule out diesel fuel as an option. We don't even know how we might be able to get around. It is, however, very likely that in a densely packed

* China and India are expected to overtake the British percentage in 2010.

area like Europe, the most effective and sustainable method of inter-city travel will be something that looks very like a train.

In a country as small and crowded as Britain that is doubly true. By 2050 the automobile industry may well have refined the technology to produce a motor car that neither depletes the planet's resources nor pollutes its atmosphere. Non-polluting cars cannot, however, solve the problem of congestion. Despite the plodding progress of the railways and the artificially low fares offered by budget airlines, internal air travel within England has become an absurdity. And that is increasingly becoming true of travel between London and Lowland Scotland.

It would be hard to design a nation better suited to modern rail travel than Britain: it is a natural hub-and-spoke country. London is an overwhelmingly dominant power in the land. The trunk lines radiate out from there; so do the major suburban lines; the need for complicated cross-country journeys is much less urgent than in, say, Germany, where as in the US, there are plenty of cities contending for influence.

Yet a high-speed railway map of Europe is already taking shape. Britain is represented by one remote spur, the line optimistically known as High Speed 1, connecting London to the Channel Tunnel. This was finally completed in 2007, a mere 205 years after the idea of a tunnel was first mooted. By early 2009, the government had experts researching the idea of High Speed 2 from London to the North. There was no prospect of it happening in anything other than an unimaginably distant future: 2027, according to the Conservative Party even from the comfort of opposition.

One must allow for three factors: the difficulties of building through the British countryside; the weary fearfulness that afflicts a governing class with a long record of

disastrous management of major public projects; and the temptations of short-termism that inevitably afflict here-today gone-tomorrow politicians whose main aim is not to be gone until the day after tomorrow at least.

Britain has never been able to reconcile the past and the future. That's the disaster.