

WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY MAIN LINE RAILWAY? — THE MANAGEMENT/BUSINESS STRUCTURE ASPECTS

by Grahame Boyes

Leaving aside the enthusiasm for the steam locomotive, until the 1960s British railway historians were primarily concerned with establishing how the country's railway network was created. The pattern was set by the first company historians — Grinling, Tomlinson, MacDermot¹ — who devoted much attention to railway politics: the battles outside and inside Parliament with landowners and between groups of railway promoters; and the later inter-company rivalries, alliances and amalgamations. After the British Transport Commission opened its archives in 1951, the post-WW2 generation of historians continued to pursue the chronological development of the infrastructure network, but in greater detail.

However, the launch of the *Journal of Transport History* in 1953, the Railway & Canal Historical Society in 1954 and David & Charles (Publishers) Ltd in 1960 provide evidence that this was the decade that saw the beginnings of a change of direction, or a widening of the vision, of railway historians. Broader-based historical studies began to become more common. Of particular importance for us are the studies of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway by Donaghy and Thomas,² from which we know how this first main line railway was managed and operated in quite some detail, including the problems, weaknesses and deficiencies. But thereafter we have only a fragmentary or partial understanding of how this evolved into the mature railway of the 1850s/60s. The academic studies that have covered this period have focussed mainly on the external context of the railways — their financing, their relationship with government and their contribution to the national economy.³ Information on the internal workings of the railways, particularly how they developed as commercial enterprises, is generally to be found scattered, in varying degrees of detail, in works dealing with a particular company over a much longer period. This context tends to preclude comparisons between companies or consideration of how ideas were transferred between them.

All this is, of course, a sweeping generalisation. The two major studies of railway management by Gourvish and Braine, both specifically about the London & North Western Railway, must not be ignored; nor Kingsford's paper on labour relations.⁴ Most importantly, attention must be drawn to the writings of Jack Simmons. There are few aspects of railway history that he didn't consider in his five books. It is almost

¹ Charles H. Grinling, *The history of the Great Northern Railway 1845-1895* (1898); William Weaver Tomlinson, *The North Eastern Railway: its rise and development* (1915); E. T. MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway* (1927-31)

² Thomas J. Donaghy, *Liverpool & Manchester Railway operations 1831-1845* (1972); R. H. G. Thomas, *The Liverpool & Manchester Railway* (1980)

³ For example, Henry Parris, *Government and the railways in nineteenth-century Britain* (1965); G. R. Hawke, *Railways and economic growth in England and Wales 1840-1870* (1970); M. C. Reed, *Investment in railways in Britain 1820-1844: a study in the development of the capital market* (1975)

⁴ T. R. Gourvish, *Mark Huish and the London & North Western Railway: a study of management* (1972); Peter Braine, *The Railway Moon: some aspects of the life of Richard Moon 1814-1899, chairman of the London & North Western Railway 1861-91* (2010); P. W. Kingsford, 'Labour relations on the railways 1835-75', *Journal of Transport History*, vol. 1 no. 2 (1953) pp. 65-81

always worth reading what he has to say first, before embarking on a literature search. His books are a good indicator of what we know, and conversely the topics where the proposed Early Main Line Railways Conferences could usefully encourage further research.

The following is a suggested list of subjects that would merit studies in greater depth:

- The evolution of private legislation (e.g. the influence of the 6th Earl of Shaftesbury, the powerful Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords, 1814–51); the legal status of railway companies
- Railways and the common law
- Organisational structure: board of directors – officers – servants – labourers; roles and responsibilities
- Management/administration; board and management committees; communication of instructions and information
- Financial control: accounting methods; cash security; surety bonds
- Staff: recruitment (sources); salaries/wages; conditions of service; training; discipline; welfare; the beginnings of the trade union movement
- Operating methods: timetabling; railway time; rules and regulations; safety; government regulation; accidents; liability and compensation
- Commercial practices (passenger/parcels/goods/mineral); passenger classes; fares and charges; ticketing methods; documentation; demurrage; byelaws; development of passenger traffic (hiring of special trains, excursions); publicity; canvassing
- Organisational and procedural models provided by older organisations (road coaching and carrying, the canals; the army)
- Standardisation of operating and commercial practices to facilitate inter-working; the early work of the Board of Trade's Railway Inspectorate and the Railway Clearing House
- Postal services
- Forms of working/operation of railways/railway services other than by the railway company
- Station facilities (waiting, toilets, catering)
- International comparisons and influences.