

PRESIDENTS' ADDRESS TO EAST SUFFOLK TRAVEL ASSOCIATION AGM MAY 20TH 2023

Now in my 90s, I intend to look back as well as forward. Most of my childhood was spent during World War II so little opportunity for bus or rail travel and we did not own a car. I did not leave Norfolk (Swaffham) until I was 14 – a memorable holiday with my parents and 3 younger sisters to stay with an aunt and uncle at Dovercourt, Essex, by train via Norwich and Manningtree. It was memorable partly because I was able to enjoy a proper bath with hot running water instead of a restricted bath in front of a coal fire on Sunday nights.

I was 16 before I visited London – totally unnecessary as it proved. I had applied for a clerical position on British Railways, who had sent me to Liverpool Street to take a clerical examination, but on arrival I was told this was unnecessary as I had passed the Cambridge University's Lower School Leaving Certificate in several subjects.

During my 40-year rail career I spent the first 12 years on the network in Norfolk, including 2 years of this doing National Service in the RAF. I was employed as a booking clerk, stationmaster (Walsingham and Narborough & Pentney) and relief stationmaster (over 30 different stations). My experiences were that, relative to Dr Beeching, there was little contributory revenue (earnings relative to local stations on and off the network) many wayside stations had fewer than 10 passengers booking tickets daily, even after the introduction of DMUs, and many stations had little freight except for domestic coal. Freight changed drastically on the national network since railways began in the 1840s. Freight revenue exceeded that from passengers until 1999 and then it was the reverse. Our local revenue before BR, the London & North Eastern Railway earning nearly two thirds of its total revenue from freight, resulting in it being the richest of the Big Four (LMSR, GWR, SR and LNER).

After the rural railway, I worked in divisional offices at Cambridge, Liverpool Street and Kings Cross – before entering the management staff grades in the London Midland Region and British Railways Board. At Cambridge one of my jobs was to obtain information for passenger closure actions, including the Mildenhall branch (a hopeless case).

The East Suffolk Line was an unfortunate case which was saved by the efforts of ESTA and others. In the official history of BR, written by Professor Terry Gourvish, he records that the Transport Minister Barbara Castle, when announcing the closure of the last remnant of the old Great Central Railway, wanted some good news to announce at the same time, so she also announced the retention of the East Suffolk, except for the Aldeburgh branch. This was not entirely good news, because a period of disinvestment in the line followed. Eventually significant expenditure was invoked : the radio electronic scheme, authorised in 1983 at a cost of £1.83 million. It included substantial track replacement as well as 40% singling, controlled from one signal box, at Saxmundham (Westerfield Junction closed under a later scheme) and de-manning of all level crossings. It saved the line.

However, ESTA recognised that it was still possible to improve line capacity and has recently compiled a paper to do just that – something which will be referred to at this AGM, on which those involved stand to be congratulated.

I live opposite a bus stop on one of the routes which serve the centre of Lowestoft. It is concerning that it is now so sparsely used. It would be interesting to know the break-even figure as the buses are often empty.

Some years ago I wrote to a parish council clerk suggesting we would conduct a survey of all parishioners to establish how their transport requirements were being met, or not met. All costs would be met by ESTA and they would be supplied with the final report. Neither the initial document nor the repeat letter were answered. Perhaps we should try again at some time.

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