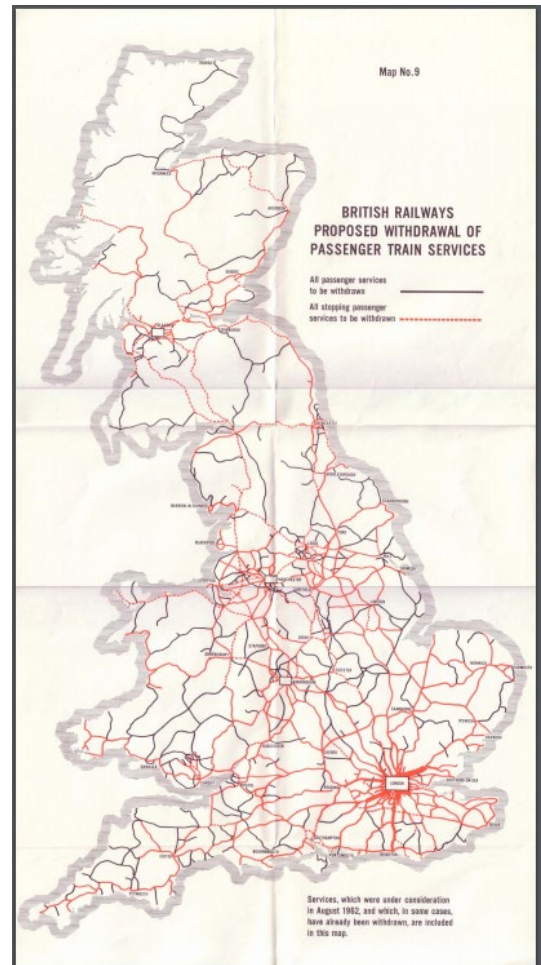




Reversing the Beeching Closures: Full Steam Ahead?

Summary

- The Government has recently [announced plans](#) to fund the reopening of some rail lines closed in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, has [invited](#) MPs, working with local authorities and community groups, to come forward with proposals.
- However, the Labour Party has [criticised](#) the Government for overselling the extent to which the announced funding package of £500 million will support the reopening of lines.
- To put the announcement in context, the UK's rail network has [roughly halved in length](#) over the last 100 years. Line closures began after the First World War, but the pace of line closures increased dramatically following a report published in 1963. This report, entitled [The Reshaping of British Railways](#), earmarked 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of track for closure.
- The name of the report's author, the then chairman of British Railways, Dr Richard Beeching (later Lord Beeching), is now synonymous with the report's recommendations and the following closures.
- In recent years, there have been calls from across the political spectrum for some of the lines closed following publication of the Beeching report to reopen. This has been in the context of the increasing number of passenger journeys being made each year—now more than double the number 40 years ago.
- This briefing provides background information on the length of the UK's rail network and the number of passenger journeys made each year over the past 100 years, before providing a brief timeline of closures to add context to the figures provided. It then summarises the Government's recent announcements and subsequent political reaction.



British Railway Network in 1963 (British Railways Board, [The Reshaping of British Railways: Part 2—Maps](#), 1963, p 9)

Thomas Brown | 6 February 2020

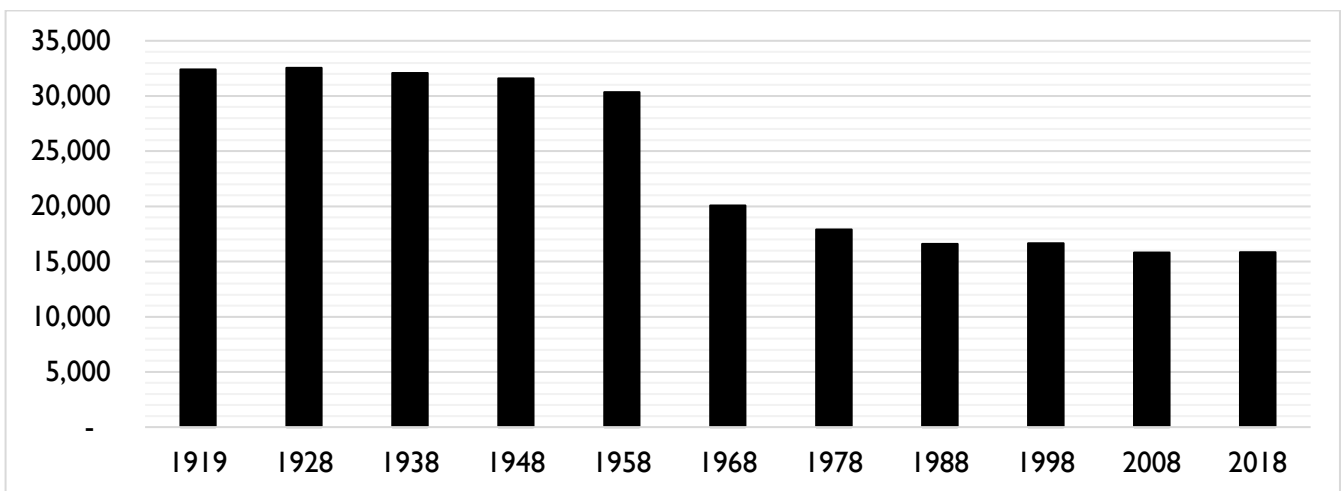
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I. Changes in Track Length and Passenger Journeys over the Past Century

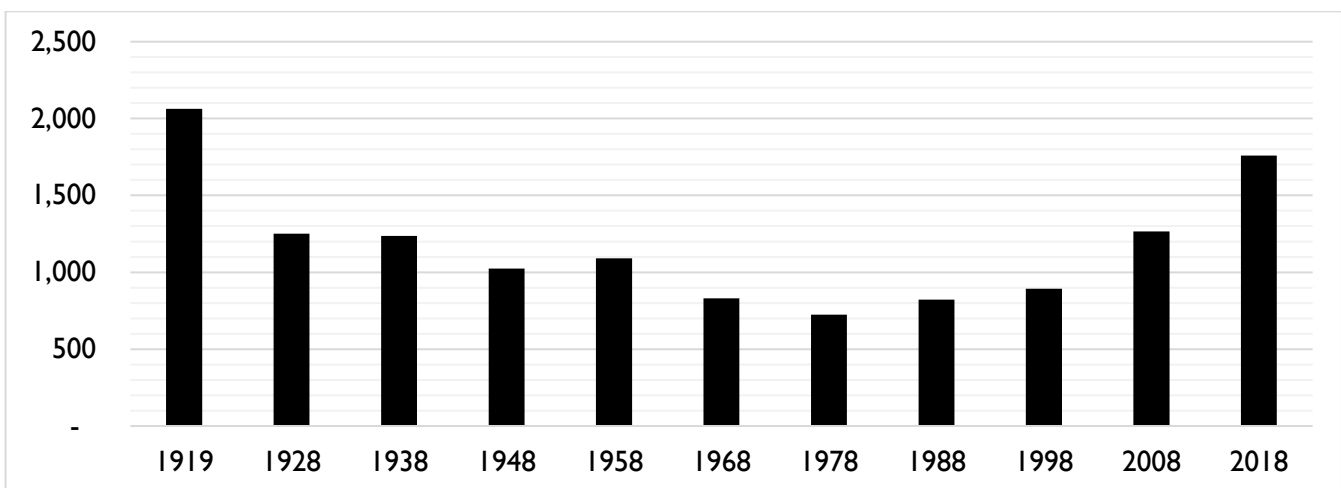
The total length of the UK's rail network has roughly halved over the last 100 years.¹ As Chart 1 below illustrates, the national rail network began to reduce in length from the late 1920s. However, the network was later shortened much more drastically as a result of line closures instituted in the 1960s under the Beeching proposals. This reduced its length by a third within ten years. The UK's railway further reduced in length over the following decades, but not at the same pace.

Chart 1: Length of National Rail Route (km)



Changes in the recorded number of passenger journeys have not paralleled the reduction in the total length of the network. From a peak of over 2 billion in 1919, the number of passenger journeys made each year fell steeply to 1.77 billion in 1923 and 1.25 billion in 1928. The figure followed a downward direction until a low point was reached in 1982, when only 630 million journeys were made. From 1983, annual passenger journey numbers began to pick up and by 2018 the figure had recovered to 1.76 billion—around the number of journeys recorded just under a century earlier.

Chart 2: National Rail Passenger Journeys (million)



¹ Department for Transport, [‘Rail Usage, Infrastructure and Performance Statistics: Table RAI0101’](#), 17 December 2019.

2. Background: Brief Timeline of Line Closures

1920s and 1930s

The 1920s saw the closure of a number of lines following pressures caused by road haulage operations and the increased popularity of buses.² The 1930s saw the closure of more lines due to falling traffic. These included branch lines in Yorkshire, the north-east of England and Scotland. Lines in other areas of the country also closed: from Inverness-shire to Devon, and Shropshire to Sussex. In total, over 1,300 miles of unprofitable railway were closed by railway companies between the wars.³

1940s, 1950s and the early 1960s

The railways were used extensively during the war effort, but closures continued after 1945. According to Network Rail, between the nationalisation of the railways in 1948 and the early 1960s a further 3,000 miles of railway were withdrawn.⁴ This included not just branch lines across the country, but also large networks such as the Midland and Great Northern regional network in East Anglia.⁵ At the same time, hundreds of stations and goods depots were closed throughout the UK.⁶

1963: The Reshaping Report

By the early 1960s, the railways were losing significant sums each year—almost £68 million in 1960 and nearly £87 million in 1961.⁷ In 1960, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had informed the House of Commons of his government's plans to reform the railways to make them more economical:

First, the industry must be of a size and pattern suited to modern conditions and prospects. In particular, the railway system must be remodelled to meet current needs, and the modernisation plan must be adapted to this new shape [...]

Secondly, the public must accept the need for changes in the size and pattern of the industry. This will involve certain sacrifices of convenience, for example, in the reduction of uneconomic services.⁸

The Transport Act 1962, passed while Mr Macmillan's Conservative government was in office, reorganised governance arrangements within the nationalised rail system.⁹ It abolished the British Transport Commission and replaced it with the British Railways Board.¹⁰ Dr Richard Beeching, who until then had served in senior roles for Imperial Chemical Industries, was appointed chairman.

² Lord Faulkner of Worcester and Chris Austin, *Holding the Line: How Britain's Railways Were Saved*, 2012, p 13.

³ Network Rail, '[Dr Beeching's Axe](#)', accessed 31 January 2020.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Lord Faulkner of Worcester and Chris Austin, *Holding the Line: How Britain's Railways Were Saved*, 2012, p 22.

⁶ *ibid.*, p 19.

⁷ British Railways Board, *The Reshaping of British Railways: Part I—Report*, 1963, p 3.

⁸ [HC Hansard, 10 March 1960, col 643.](#)

⁹ Harold Macmillan received a hereditary peerage in 1984, becoming the Earl of Stockton. He died in 1986.

¹⁰ National Archives, '[Cabinet Papers: Beeching and the Labour Government](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

In 1963, Dr Beeching published a report entitled *The Reshaping of Britain's Railways*.¹¹ It identified profitable and unprofitable services and recommended the widespread closure of uneconomic routes.¹² In total, the report earmarked 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of track for closure.¹³ It led to the closure of a third of the UK's railway lines in all, including many rural stations, in an attempt to make the railways profitable.¹⁴ It was highly controversial, and its legacy remains contested to this day.¹⁵

After the Beeching Report

The UK's railway network continued to reduce in length in the 1970s and early 1980s, before somewhat stabilising.¹⁶ Since the Beeching closures, some new lines and stations have opened in areas of the country.¹⁷ In recent years, there have been calls from across the political spectrum to invest in rail routes, by either reopening closed lines and/or opening new ones.¹⁸ These include a call from Lord Adonis (Labour), a former Secretary of State for Transport and chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, for the reopening of over 100 stations in large towns and city districts that were disconnected by earlier closures.¹⁹



Dr Richard Beeching, later Lord Beeching (National Portrait Gallery, '[Richard Beeching, 1st Baron Beeching: by Elliott & Fry \(Bromide Print\)](#)', 1961)

3. Reversing Beeching: Policy in the New Parliament

Recent Government Policy

The Conservative Party's 2019 general election manifesto included a commitment to restore some of the lines closed under Dr Beeching's chairmanship of British Railways:

To help communities across the country, we will restore many of the Beeching lines, reconnecting smaller towns such as Fleetwood and Willenhall that have suffered permanent disadvantage since they were removed from the rail network in the 1960s.²⁰

¹¹ British Railways Board, [The Reshaping of British Railways: Part I—Report](#), 1963. Dr Beeching received a life peerage in 1965, becoming Lord Beeching. He died in 1985.

¹² National Archives, '[Cabinet Papers: Beeching and the Labour Government](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

¹³ Network Rail, '[Dr Beeching's Axe](#)', accessed 31 January 2020.

¹⁴ National Archives, '[Cabinet Papers: Glossary—R](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

¹⁵ See, for example: BBC News, '[Beeching: Railway Vandal or Visionary?](#)', 7 June 2013.

¹⁶ Department for Transport, '[Rail Usage, Infrastructure and Performance Statistics: Table RAI0101](#)', 17 December 2019.

¹⁷ Lord Faulkner of Worcester and Chris Austin, *Holding the Line: How Britain's Railways Were Saved*, 2012, p 118.

¹⁸ For recent examples from the 2019 general election, see: Labour Party, [Labour Party Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 20; Liberal Democrats, [Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 48; Plaid Cymru, [Plaid Cymru Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 26; and Green Party, [Green Party Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 16.

¹⁹ IPPR, '[Reshaping Britain's Railways for the 21st Century: A Speech by Lord Andrew Adonis](#)', 6 June 2019; and UKPol, '[Andrew Adonis—2019 Speech to the IPPR on Reversing Beeching](#)', 7 June 2019.

²⁰ Conservative Party, [Conservative Party Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 27.

Earlier during the general election campaign, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had announced that this undertaking would be backed by a £500 million 'Beeching Reversal Fund'.²¹ It was reported that this could benefit towns such as Ashington and Blyth in north-east England, whose freight-only line does not currently run a passenger service.²² Other towns, such as Skelmersdale, near Wigan, were reported to have been lobbying for their lines to be reinstated and their stations reopened.

On 28 January 2020, the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, visited Fleetwood in Lancashire to announce further details about the fund.²³ It would be "aimed at kickstarting reversal of the Beeching cuts", and informed by applications from MPs working together with local authorities and community groups across England and Wales. The Department for Transport stated:

The Transport Secretary has invited MPs, local authorities and community groups across England [and Wales] to come forward with proposals on how they could use funding to reinstate axed local services. £300,000 has been committed to an 'Ideas Fund' to kickstart the process to encourage innovative ideas that will then be considered for further funding in the future [...] The £500 million fund will help develop these proposals and accelerate the delivery of schemes that are already being considered for restoration, making possible the rapid reopening of certain stations and lines.²⁴

The department also issued guidance on how funding decisions would be made:

We will hold events providing advice on how to bid for funding. The department will listen to proposals, prioritising projects that offer the greatest potential, viability and economic benefits [...] Funding is not limited to communities affected by closures.²⁵

On the day of the launch in Fleetwood, Mr Shapps announced that £1.6 million in funding would be allocated initially to "develop proposals for reopening two lines in the near future". This would be split as follows:

- £1.5 million to the Ashington-Blyth-Tyne Line in Northumberland.
- £100,000 to the Fleetwood line in Lancashire.²⁶

He also announced that £20 million would be made available to support a new round of the New Stations Fund. Two earlier rounds were reported to have helped develop ten new stations across England and Wales since 2013.²⁷

²¹ Rajeev Syal, '[Boris Johnson Announces Spending Package for Neglected Towns](#)', *Guardian*, 15 November 2019. See also: Grant Shapps, '[Personal Twitter Account](#)', 28 January 2020.

²² George Parker, '[Tories Pledge £500m Towards Reversing Beeching Rail Cuts](#)', *Financial Times* (£), 15 November 2019.

²³ Department for Transport, '[Government Pledges £500 Million to Bring Back Historic Rail Lines. Improving Connectivity for Communities Across the Country](#)', 28 January 2020.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Department for Transport, '[Reopening Beeching-era Lines and Stations](#)', 29 January 2020.

²⁶ Department for Transport, '[Government Pledges £500 Million to Bring Back Historic Rail Lines. Improving Connectivity for Communities Across the Country](#)', 28 January 2020.

²⁷ *ibid.* See also: Network Rail, '[New Stations Fund](#)', accessed 4 February 2020.

Mr Shapps and his ministerial team held a first meeting for MPs to discuss potential Beeching line reversals on 4 February 2020. Ahead of the meeting, Mr Shapps said it would be an “opportunity for MPs to learn about bidding to reopen lines to reconnect left behind communities”.²⁸

Reaction to the Announcement

During the general election campaign, Andy McDonald, Shadow Secretary of State for Transport, criticised the Conservatives’ announcement as a repetition of an earlier promise:

This isn’t new, the Conservatives announced it two years ago to try to distract from the collapse of the East Coast franchise which ultimately cost taxpayers £2 billion. Unsurprisingly not one of the Beeching cuts has been restored.²⁹

Responding to the Government’s policy launch in Fleetwood in late January, Mr McDonald later also contended that the announcement oversold the impact that a £500 million funding package would have. Mr McDonald said that to “herald the Tories’ re-announcement of a £500m fund as the reversal of the Beeching cuts is a joke”.³⁰ He added: “£500m would reopen just 25 miles of railway. Beeching axed 5,000 miles. This is a stunt to distract from the collapse of the privatised rail system”.

Groups such as the Campaign for Better Transport have long supported proposals to reopen closed lines.³¹ Its chief executive, Darren Shirley, welcomed the £500 million funding figure as a “great start”, but added “we hope to see more government funding in the future to ensure that as many former lines as possible can be reopened”.³² In addition, a number of regional newspapers either welcomed the Government’s announcement in their editorial pages or carried articles or letters featuring supportive voices. Examples include the *Yorkshire Post*, *Cornish Guardian*, *Western Daily Press* and *North Wales Daily Post*.³³ However, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union, which represents workers in the transport industry, was reported to have described the funding allocated as a “drop in the ocean”.³⁴

4. Further Information

- British Railways Board, [The Reshaping of British Railways: Part 1—Report](#), 1963
- British Railways Board, [The Reshaping of British Railways: Part 2—Maps](#), 1963

²⁸ Grant Shapps, ‘[Personal Twitter Account](#)’, 31 January 2020. See also: House of Commons, ‘[Written Question: Railways: Wales](#)’, 3 February 2020, 9621.

²⁹ Labour Party, ‘[Beeching Cuts—Andy McDonald Responds](#)’, 15 November 2019.

³⁰ Andy McDonald, ‘[Personal Twitter Account](#)’, 28 January 2020. See also: Henry Dyer, ‘[Sorry, Tories, But £500m Isn’t Enough to Reverse the Beeching Axe](#)’, CityMetric, 2 December 2019.

³¹ See, for example: Campaign for Better Transport, [Reopening Railways: The Case for Growing the Rail Network and How it Can Be Achieved](#), July 2012; and ‘[Report Calls for Fund to Reopen Lines Shut by Beeching](#)’, 4 July 2012; and ‘[Campaigners Welcome Announcement of “Beeching in Reverse”](#)’, 28 November 2017.

³² Campaign for Better Transport, ‘[£500m for Reopening Rail Lines a “Great Start”](#)’, 28 January 2020.

³³ *Yorkshire Post*, ‘[HS2 Should Become the British Bullet if We’re to Mean Business After Brexit](#)’, 30 January 2020; *Cornish Guardian*, ‘Government Pledges to “Undo the Damage” of Beeching’s Rail Cuts’, 5 February 2020; *Western Daily Press*, ‘We Need Our Branch Lines Back Again’, 2 January 2020; and *Daily Post (North Wales)*, ‘Councillor Backs Reopening Rural Route Shut by Beeching Report’, 5 February 2020.

³⁴ BBC News, ‘[Beeching Rail Cuts: Fund to Help Restore Lines Goes Ahead Amid Criticism](#)’, 28 January 2020.