

The Regional Impact of Heritage Railways

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Abstract:

Acknowledging the significance of heritage railways as key local attractions contributing to sustainable tourism, the paper presents an ‘in-progress-exercise’ aiming to arrive at some quantifiable measure of their impact on regional development.

Key words:

Tourism; Heritage Railways; Regional Impact; Development Indicators.

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As industrial archaeology, abandoned railway lines leave a long trail. Apart from the track itself, engines and carriages that failed to find some use in another part of the network and yet were spared the ignominy of the scrap yard, stations and depots, engineering facilities and maintenance sheds, energy systems and fuel tankers, not to mention industrial buildings and infrastructures, factories, quarries and mines from which the railway gained its original *raison d'être*, lie ingloriously along its route. They represent the relics of an epoch, the material evidence of a society's past. Throwing light on a community's former productive base and economic fabric, types of mobility and social constitution, technological expertise and know-how, cultural and aesthetic orientation, they are invested with extensive symbolic value. Indeed, far from representing a liability to be expunged, calling for the costly rehabilitation of the adjoining natural environment, former railway lines can provide, if effectively redesigned and promoted as visitor attractions, an ideal booster to an area's sustainable development.

Almost by definition, abandoned railway lines are to be found in areas whose productive profile has undergone significant shifts, the decline of mining and/or heavy industrial activity often explaining to a large extent the railway's initial demise. An emphasis on tourism and the tertiary sector quite often appears as the only possible refuge from the ravages of de-industrialisation. Local communities are able to retain their standard of living, nay improve their quality of life, by attracting visitor-generated income through the development of appropriate, locality-focused, tourist activities. Such an approach involves the promotion, in the form of accessible tourist products, of aspects of a community's past and present cultural, economic and social life, in conjunction, perhaps, with a valorisation of its natural environment and scenic locations. Avoiding the type of development premised on externally designed and imposed, locality-insensitive, undifferentiated tourist packages, enables a community to maximise the benefits accruing to it from tourism, ensure their more even spread among its members and establish a more congenial rapport between visitors and host community. The imperative of sustainability is thus served in its triple economic, social and environmental

manifestation. And, on numerous occasions, the redevelopment of an abandoned line into a heritage railway proved the best possible vehicle for the transformation of a community's prospects, for its exit from a spiral of decline into the daylight of tourism-based sustainability.

The economic and social potential of heritage railways, their ability to recuperate materially, to the benefit of local communities, the extensive symbolic value they exude, can be gauged from the figures regarding their operation in the United Kingdom, released by the Heritage Railway Association, a lobby for the sector to which most of Britain's heritage railways and railway centres are affiliated. It is thus claimed that throughout the UK and Eire there are 108 operating heritage railways and 60 steam centres, covering a total route mileage of 384 miles with 279 stations - more than the London Underground system and exceeding the distance between London and Glasgow. "New railways and planned extensions to existing lines", it is argued, "could increase this total to 600 miles" - the major extension of the Ffestiniog Railway line in North Wales being a case in point. "During 2002, heritage railways received 5.4 million visitors of whom 4.6 [actually] rode on ... trains", resulting "in 12 million passenger journeys and 1.7 million passenger train miles". They earned "39 million pounds, 60% of this being from train journeys, 15% from catering, 14% from shops and the remaining 11% mainly from workshops and charter trains". Significantly, "heritage railways directly employ 1,099 people and also benefit from the work of 11,636 volunteers - the equivalent to 1,880 full time staff".¹ The HRA's equivalent at European level, FEDECRAIL, the European Federation of Museum and Tourist Railways, claims that every year around 20 million people visit Europe's heritage railways - almost twice the visitor intake of Disneyland Paris.

Yet, the significant multiplier effects of investment in heritage railways have not been properly assessed in either the UK, which appears to possess the densest railway heritage network, or elsewhere in Europe. Its impact on local communities in terms of income generation, job creation, youth training scheme places, skills development, etc. has not

¹ <http://ukhrail.uel.ac.uk/facts.html>

been comprehensively evaluated, nor have any attempts been made to gauge some of its more qualitative (non-quantifiable) impacts in terms of the 'local distinctiveness' advantages characterising a location with such a particular asset or the sense of pride shared by a community whose past transport modes and vehicles, production methods and industrial skills, cultural aspects and social traits are being acknowledged and appreciated, cherished and consumed both by locals and visitors from afar.

The questionnaire below is used in an 'in-progress-exercise' attempting to establish some quantitative indicators of the regional / local impact of heritage railways. They should be incorporated in a broader project on the cultural aspects of European heritage railways, co-financed by the European Commission's Education and Culture Directorate-General as part of its 'Culture 2000' programme, and involving the Industrial Heritage of Steam Railways Co-operation Network (SteamRail.Net).

Questionnaire on

The Regional Impact of Heritage Railways

Railway:
Location:
Gauge:
Length of line at its heyday:
Length of line today:
Year of initial operation:
Year of closure (if applicable):
Year of re-opening (if applicable):

A. The railway's original 'raison d'être'		
Your railway was initially developed as a:	passenger line serving the local community	
	part of a main line network	
	freight / industrial line - specify type of main product carried (e.g. coal, iron ore, agricultural produce, etc.)	
	tourist line	

B. The railway's present economic characteristics	
What do you consider was your railway's total fixed capital expenditure (investment) over the past 10 years?	
What were your railway's running costs over the past financial year	
What was your total income over the past financial year	
Can you estimate your railway's total expenditure over the past financial year on goods and services provided by local suppliers?	

C. The railway as a tourist attraction	
Your railway and/or railway museum is open months per year
Your railway operates as a passenger carrying attraction days per year
What was your railway and/or railway museum's total number of visitors over the past year?	
What was the total number of passenger journeys?	
How many extra day visitors to the area do you estimate the operation of your railway has attracted over the past year?	
How many extra overnight visitor stays in your locality do you estimate your railway has generated over the past year?	

D. The railway as local employer	
What is the total number of people - both full-time and part-time - employed by your railway?	
What is their full-time equivalent?	
Is your railway offering places in government sponsored youth training / skills development schemes? If affirmative, reply by stating number of last year's trainees.	
What is the total number of people participating in your railway's activities as employees, trainees or volunteers, i.e. in a capacity other than that of paying visitor, over the past year?	

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