

## 6

# THE 'SPELLER' LINES – REVERSING THE DECLINE

*'Acts of Parliament do not, as a rule, afford entertainment to the general reader, especially those relating to such prosaic and sternly business-like operations such as railways and other works of public utility.'*

AMMON BEASLEY, 'HOW PARLIAMENT HARASSED EARLY RAILWAYS',  
WITHIN *THE RAILWAY MAGAZINE*, VOL XXIII, 1908

The election of the Conservative Government in 1979 under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher was greeted with alarm by many in Britain's railway. She had shown little interest in the industry, rarely travelled by train, and was known to be antagonistic to state-owned monoliths heavily influenced by powerful trade unions. In addition she was receiving consistently ferocious anti-rail briefings from her personal guru, Sir Alfred Sherman<sup>139</sup>, who lobbied for their conversion into roads.<sup>140</sup>

But it was not all gloom. On 7 November 1979 the Transport Secretary, Norman Fowler, faced with a newspaper story that 41 services were threatened with imminent closure, responded to a question in the House of Commons, saying that it was untrue and he saw 'no case for another round of massive cuts in the railways'<sup>141</sup> and other ministers gave similar commitments.

Not only were very few lines and stations closed by the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1997, but a remarkable programme of reopenings was undertaken, initially thanks almost entirely to Antony Speller<sup>142</sup>, a little-known Tory MP who had been elected in 1979 for North Devon, defeating the former Liberal Party leader, Jeremy Thorpe<sup>143</sup>.

Using the 'Ten Minute Rule bill' procedure, he introduced a private member's bill that had the effect of amending the 1962 Transport Act in a way that allowed British Rail to reopen a line or station experimentally, so that if the reopening failed it would be possible for BR to close it again, without going through the expense of a full closure procedure, which involved TUCC hearings and an eventual ministerial decision.

Remarkably – and unusually – Speller's bill received a second reading without a debate in the Commons on 27 March 1981. It was then sent to a committee of the whole house and considered in a single day, 15 May.

He opened his speech with these words:

'In bringing this measure to the attention of the House, let me first explain how it came into being. It is common belief that

this is the age of the train<sup>144</sup> and that it is time that, wherever possible, we got people off the roads and back on to trains. Moving into a new house, I discovered without surprise that adjacent was a railway line that carried a fair amount of goods but no passengers. It goes from Barnstaple to Bideford and on to the constituency of my hon Friend the Member for Devon, West (Mr Mills<sup>145</sup>). With commuters crowding the road outside my back door, it seemed logical that they would be more comfortable on a train, particularly as the line was already there.

That small and fairly obvious thought brought me to the discovery, as a new Member of Parliament, that British Rail has every right to open or reopen a line, but, if the experiment fails, it is a lengthy and extremely expensive process to close the line. Principally for that reason many perfectly good lines carry only a little freight, when they could be used much more usefully.<sup>146</sup>

Speller's bill was supported by the Government. The junior Transport Minister, Kenneth Clarke<sup>147</sup>, said:

'...there should be no role for the Secretary of State in experimental rail passenger services of this kind ... the railway board should begin and end an experiment and not involve the Secretary of State or the Government. That could lead, under some Governments, to political and other difficulties in the process. We tried to draft the Bill so that it would allow a simple procedure whereby proper notice is given to the public that a service is being opened on an experimental basis outside the 1962 Act safeguards and that proper notice is given to the public if the experiment fails and the service has to be withdrawn.'<sup>148</sup>

Consideration of the bill took just one day in the Commons, and it passed to the Lords, where it got a second reading, without opposition, on 18 June, after a debate of less than half an hour.





There were no amendments tabled for consideration in committee, so the Lords was able to pass the bill without further debate, and it received Royal Assent on 2 July.

More than 30 years on, what has the 'Speller Amendment' (or 'Speller Act') achieved? The answer is more than anyone thought possible.

On 16 January 1987 Speller himself had been told in response to a written question that '32 stations and two passenger services had been opened or reopened on an experimental basis under the 1981 Act, and that a further 11 stations and five passenger services were expected to be opened or reopened in the next 12 months.'<sup>149</sup>

Just over a year later, the Commons Hansard for 5 December 1989 records this question and answer:

#### 'Freight Railway Lines

Mr Malcolm Bruce<sup>150</sup>

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many freight railway lines have been opened to passenger traffic under the Transport Act 1962 (Amendment) Act 1981; and if he will list these with mileages of track, dates of opening and whether they remain open to passenger traffic.

Mr Portillo<sup>151</sup>

Fifteen stretches of freight line have been opened or reopened by British Rail to passenger traffic under the Transport Act 1962 (Amendment) Act 1981. The details are as follows:

#### TRAILBLAZER

The 1980s saw a number of important lines reopened. Perhaps the most significant was the Edinburgh-Bathgate line in 1986. Four days after opening on 28 March, one of the newly branded Bathgate trains awaits departure at Waverley. *Murdoch Currie*

| Line   | Year | Approximate mileage |
|--|------|---------------------|
| Penistone-Barnsley                                       | 1983 | 7.5                 |
| Newbridge Junction-Bathgate                              | 1986 | 10.2                |
| Kettering-Corby  | 1987 | 5.5                 |
| Dore Curve (Derbyshire)                                  | 1987 | 0.25                |
| Morecambe-Heysham Harbour                                | 1987 | 4.0                 |
| Oxford-Bicester  | 1987 | 10.0                |
| Coventry-Nuneaton  | 1987 | 10.0                |
| Coatbridge Central-Motherwell                            | 1987 | 5.0                 |
| Cardiff City   | 1987 | 4.15                |
| Abercynon-Aberdare                                       | 1988 | 5.75                |
| Lichfield City-Lichfield Trent Valley                    | 1988 | 1.25                |
| Bishop Auckland-Stanhope                                 | 1988 | 9.6                 |
| Walsall-Hednesford                                       | 1989 | 9.75                |
| Thornton West Junction-Thornton<br>South Junction (Fife) | 1989 | 0.25                |
| Altrincham-Stockport                                     | 1989 | 8.0                 |

Note: All these lines remain open to passenger traffic.<sup>152</sup>



There appear to have been few attempts to produce a more recent comprehensive list of Speller Act reopenings, but one creditable effort has been made by Phil Deaves, owner of the <http://www.railwaycodes.org.uk/> website. This table is reproduced in Appendix B with his permission, and with the grateful thanks of the authors.

This long list demonstrates just how many stations and lines were opened and reopened following Tony Speller's private member's bill becoming law in 1981. Not all came about because of it, though a great many did. The most remarkable feature of the list is the tiny number of services that were subsequently withdrawn – the only one not operating today in one form or another is that from Bishop Auckland to Stanhope (and even there the Weardale Railway has restored part of it as a heritage line).

The sad irony for Speller is that the one service he wanted to see restored in his lifetime (and mentioned in his initial speech on his

bill) – that from Barnstaple to Bideford – has not been, and indeed in 2010 Devon County Council indicated that it did not believe a case existed for reinstating the line. As a tribute to Speller, however, and because of its importance to tourism, we have included the line as far as Bideford in our list for reopening in Appendix A. Torrington station was the original terminus for most passenger services, but it is a long way from the town it served.

The 'experimental' status of those in the list is now of largely historical interest, since virtually all the services have been included in franchise specifications since the privatisation of the railways from 1995. Speller deserves immense credit for spotting a legislative opportunity to help satisfy the public's growing demand for rail travel, even though the national mood in the preceding years had been for contraction and decline.