

In one of the opening scenes of the 1953 Ealing Studios' comedy classic, *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, the guard of the branch train calls out, "Hey, Charlie! Here's your death warrant," while handing a rolled-up poster to the station master.

After the train has departed, Charlie pastes up the poster and it is revealed to be the closure notice, which soon stirs the villagers to save their line, an adventure whose story is hilariously told in the strangely prophetic film.

The British Transport Commission, an unwieldy body created by the Transport Act of 1947 to direct all forms of inland transport, began to close little-used lines in the early years of nationalization in an effort to stem mounting losses.

Closure notices, like the one at left, first went up in Devon on the branch from Yelverton to Princetown, which was closed completely in 1956. After the Teign Valley closure in 1958, passenger services were withdrawn between Totnes and Ashburton, and in the following year between Newton Abbot and Moretonhampstead.

Beeching's *The Reshaping of British Railways*, published in 1963, led to a mass execution. Eventually, over 400 route miles and more than 200 stations would be lost from the network of Devon and Cornwall alone. The last Devon closure notice was posted in 1972, when the passenger service between Exeter and Okehampton was withdrawn, all that was left of a main line and its branches which had served Plymouth, Mid-Devon and North Cornwall.

The remnant of the West Country system is today thoroughly diminished in importance and effect, at a time when good sense would dictate a return to rail transport.

Why the railways began to succumb to competition after the end of post-war austerity is no mystery. Car ownership, for instance, promised freedom and convenience that not the best public transport could match. The prospect thrilled even the most intelligent; the extract at right from a government-commissioned report captures the fervour of the time.

Against which, the railways, dirty and old-fashioned, crippled by the loss of their former refined organization and by industrial disputes, slowly and agonizingly trying to modernize, became in the minds of decision-makers a lost cause. They must have concluded that in future only one transport system would be needed.

Thus began the great transition which attempted to provide for the unlimited

"We are nourishing at immense cost a monster of great potential destructiveness. And yet we love him dearly. Regarded in its collective aspect as 'the traffic problem' the motor car is clearly a menace which can spoil our civilisation. But translated into terms of the particular vehicle that stands in our garage (or more often nowadays, is parked outside our door, or someone else's door), we regard it as one of our most treasured possessions or dearest ambitions, an immense convenience, an expander of the dimensions of life, an instrument of emancipation, a symbol of the modern age."

*Traffic in Towns*, H.M.S.O., 1963

demands of road traffic, purposeful and frivolous alike, in the process not just subjugating the railways, but causing the decline of most public transport; even walking and cycling were severely harmed.

In the mad scramble, there was no consideration of the natural or built environment, of human health or of how the new transport would be sustained in the long run. No weight was given to the social and cultural value of public transport. Ignored were the potential benefits of a modernized, high-capacity, general purpose, guided system, with its statutory public service obligation, operating for the most part within its own estate.

Mass motor transport has proved not to be the high plateau of human achievement. Amid the chaotic hell of modern *Motopia*, with its 35-million vehicles, its vast amount of unnecessary movement, both for people and goods, its death and destruction and division, the wild dreams of the 1960s have been forgotten.

Above anything else, the supremacy of road transport has been built on cheap oil. Yet many countries are now announcing an end to its use as motor fuel. From all directions there is increasing pressure for change. Attitudinal research among young adults points to the declining value and social status attached to car ownership, which has anyway reached its peak in Britain.

The more that automatic guidance, pooling and sharing, road vehicles working in train formation and other futuristic ideas are proposed, the more it sounds like a return to the public transport that was so hastily and foolishly abandoned. And if electricity is to be the new propulsion, it will continue to be most efficiently used by the only vehicles that



On 19th April, 1958, not two months before complete closure, the 4.35 p.m. Exeter (St. David's) to Heathfield traverses the recently renewed track between Ide and Longdown. The train is running off the embankment above Halscombe Lane, the highest on the line and just one of the colossal earthworks that remain today. The cutting seen in the background was filled with rubbish by Devon County Council in the 1970s.

Courtesy Peter W. Gray

can collect non-stored power: trains and trams.

Instead of seeing how far the old systems could be shrunk, or aiming for their near destruction, in the 1950s and '60s, the world would have been better as it turns out if public transport had been lifted to new heights, with a highly-developed, fully-extended railway system as its spine. Even with absolute freedom, befitting a democracy, widespread, affordable, inclusive, integrated, multi-modal public transport would have greatly reduced the allure of the self-centred choice.

The 1915-built locomotive and its wooden bodied carriages seen at left could today have been a fast, lightweight electric train, possibly fed by energy from an infinite source and running to a rhythmic timetable. Even the smallest stations could have been transport and business hubs, with radiating bus routes and rail-associated services. Passengers could have been making seamless journeys by different

modes across land and water using a universal swipe card.

Several branch lines in Cornwall, which escaped the axe, quite recently carried not many more passengers than the Teign Valley trains in their last years. Supported by the taxpayer, these surviving basic lines provide a useful social service, as well as scenic delights for tourists and trippers, and are used by more and more people every year.

But this "third class" designation need not be the pattern. If the individual, instead of fawning upon his car, involved or concerned himself with the community and general mobility, and ensured that his actions supported trains and buses, it would make possible, even in a thinly-populated area, a level of public transport provision hitherto unimaginable.

**BRITISH TRANSPORT COMMISSION**

WESTERN BRITISH RAILWAYS REGION

## NOTICE

### Teign Valley Branch Line

The British Transport Commission hereby give notice that on and from **MONDAY, 9th JUNE, 1958**, the Passenger Train Service will be withdrawn between Exeter and Heathfield, and from the undermentioned Stations and Halts:-

<p><b>ALPHINGTON HALT</b> <b>IDE HALT</b> <b>LONGDOWN</b> <b>DUNSFORD HALT</b> <b>CHRISTOW</b></p>	<p><b>ASHTON</b> <b>TRUSHAM</b> <b>CHUDLEIGH</b> <b>CHUDLEIGH KNIGHTON HALT</b></p>
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Passenger Road Services are already in operation in the area and a new service will be introduced between Leigh Cross and Newton Abbot, connecting at Leigh Cross with existing services to and from Exeter (Paul Street). Details of these services are obtainable from the Devon General Omnibus and Touring Co., Ltd.

Parcels and Freight Facilities will be withdrawn from Longdown and the line will be entirely closed between Aliphington Halt (inclusive) and Christow (exclusive).

Parcels Traffic will continue to be dealt with at Christow.

Merchandise Traffic (including coal and coke) in full-truck loads will continue to be dealt with at Christow, Ashton, Trusham and Chudleigh.

The Road Motor Collection and Delivery Services in the area for goods in other than full-truck loads will be continued.

Information in respect of arrangements for dealing with traffic, and any other matters arising out of this withdrawal of services, will be supplied on application to:-

**MR. H.A.C. WORTH**, District Traffic Superintendent  
Exeter (St. David's) Station  
Telephone: Exeter 72281, Ext. 236

Paddington Station, May 1958 K.W.C. GRAND, General Manager

