

UK RAIL NETWORK PASSENGER GROWTH

Most of the justifications that have been offered in support of HS2 have focussed upon the hugely enhanced capacity that it is predicted to deliver for the UK rail network.

There is undoubtedly a major problem that must be addressed. Construction of the UK rail network began in early Victorian times and rail passenger journeys rose year on year to reach a peak of 1,543 million journeys by 1914. Since that time, the number of journeys declined to reach an all-time low of 625 million journeys in 1983. At that point rail's fortunes changed and almost every year since then has seen an increase in patronage with no less than 1,685 million journeys being made in 2015, a 170% increase over the 32 years since 1983.

Faced with this unprecedented change in the fortunes of rail transport in Britain the Government realised that it had a major problem on its hands; there simply was not enough capacity in the existing rail network to cope with projected growth in demand. With no realistic prospect either of upgrading the existing network or restoring lines that were closed in the Beeching cuts of the 1960's, the Government decided that its only option was to build new high speed lines to relieve the pressure on the existing network.

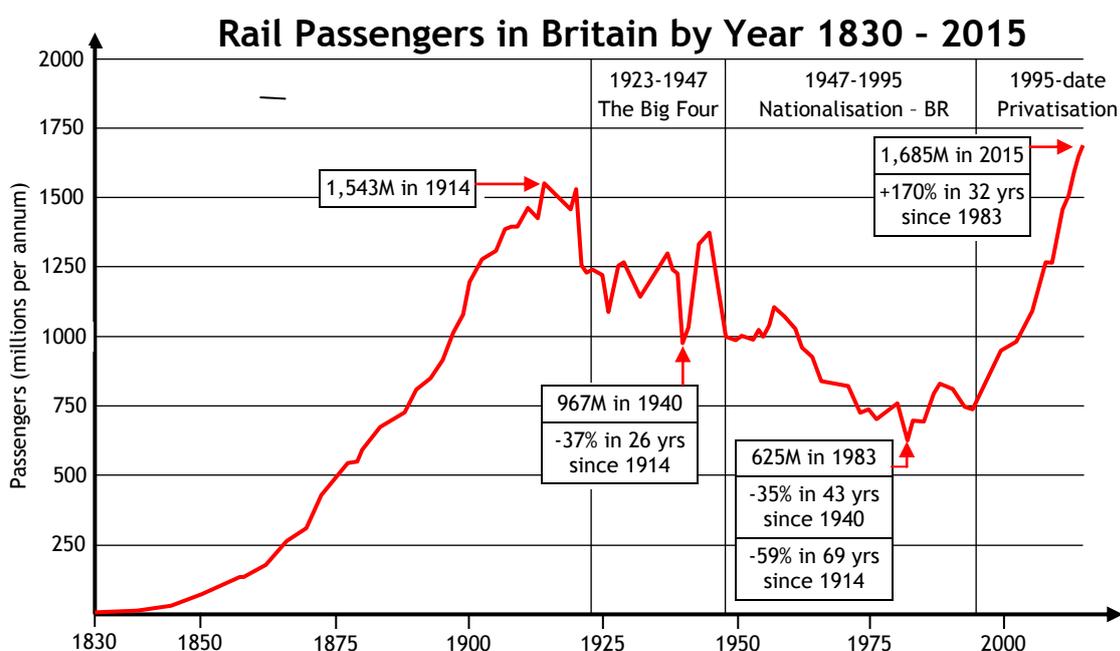


Figure 1 : Historical Growth in Passenger Volumes on UK Rail Network

Info in Figure 1 redrawn from diagram in

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rail_transport_in_Great_Britain#/media/File:GBR_rail_passengers_by_year_1830-2015.png

Whilst the decision to build new high speed lines is welcome, it has been taken largely on a 'business as usual' basis, reacting to the congestion issues of the UK's highly London-centric economy. Little or no account has been taken of factors such as the need to redress regional economic imbalances, or to tackle global warming.

There is a clear risk that if the mission of the UK high speed rail project is taken to be simply the provision of new capacity on critical London-centric routes such as the West Coast Main Line, the result will be to exacerbate existing economic disparities. There is an additional risk that the provision of this new capacity may fail to address the parallel need for improved direct links from the UK regions to Heathrow Airport. All this dictates that – just as with connectivity – a national strategy must be adopted in the enhancement of capacity.

This national strategy is essential to ensure that high speed rail delivers a 'local capacity dividend' of improved local services at all locations of major congestion. These nationwide capacity enhancements are necessary not only to justify the huge public investment in new high speed intercity railways, but also to enable the existing rail network to play its part in delivering the **“hugely enhanced capacity and connectivity”** that is HS2's fundamental aim. It is simply not practicable to build new high speed lines to improve all the journeys between all of the UK's many regional cities; the ideal of full interconnectivity can only be achieved with full integration between the new high speed lines and the existing main line network.

The aim of the UK high speed rail project for transformed capacity and connectivity will only be met if all these journeys can be improved. This demands that congestion problems in all parts of the existing network are resolved with transformational interventions on a similar scale to that of building a new high speed line.

The issue of climate change sets a new dimension and a new imperative to the capacity challenge. The legally-binding target of the 2008 Climate Change Act has committed all Governments to achieve an 80% reduction in the emission of CO₂ by 2050, and the major part of that reduction must come from modal shift from car journeys and road haulage to trains. This would cause a growth in the demand for rail travel far beyond current projections.