

# in brief...

# Train times

Are we better than the Victorians at running our railways?  
**Tim Leunig** investigates.

**B**ritain's railways now carry more people further than at any point in our peacetime history. Only the extensive troop movements of the Second World War kept the network busier than it is today.

At first sight, this is surprising. In the 19th century, the railways had no significant competitors for medium or long distance travel. Today, in contrast, they face huge competition from cars, coaches and, increasingly, aeroplanes. So it is worth asking if the performance of Britain's railways has improved in the last 150 years.

My research project on this issue – *The Effect of Ownership and Regulation on British Railway Performance, 1850-2006* – comes to two conclusions. First, although the current regulatory system could be improved, we are better than the Victorians at regulating private railways. They used a similar form of price regulation but the absence of periodic franchising meant that poor performance then could last far longer than would be tolerated today. But against that, quality improvements are much more erratic today.

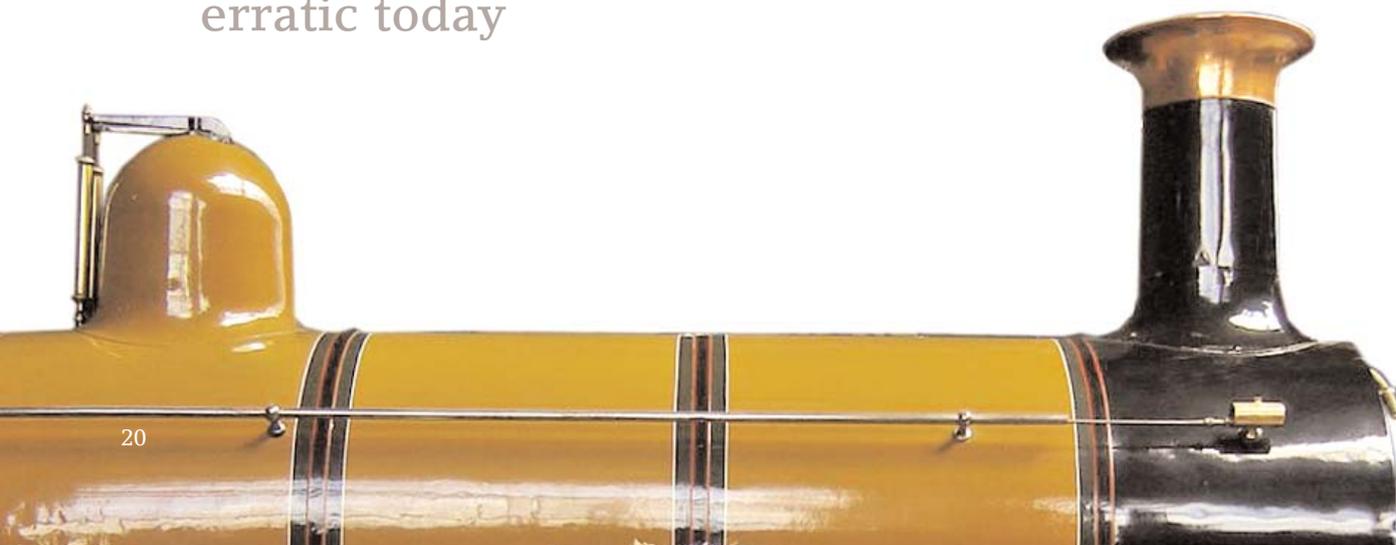
We are better than the Victorians at regulating private railways – but quality improvements are much more erratic today

Given high levels of safety, passengers want their trains to be fast and on time. Technological improvements and competitive pressures spurred railways to offer higher speeds prior to the First World War, and speed remained an important aspect of quality for much of the twentieth century, spurring the replacement of steam with diesel and electric power.

But after 1970 a different picture emerges. Long-distance routes continued to get faster, sometimes dramatically so. But shorter distance routes, particularly commuter routes into London, stopped getting faster. In fact, on many routes, particularly south of the Thames, it is now no faster to commute into London than in the immediate post-war period, and it is substantially slower than in the 1970s.

This is odd, because London commuters are an ever-larger proportion of railways passengers. Today, all of the most important routes, as judged by passenger numbers, are commuter routes into London. Indeed, the busiest route – East Croydon to London – is around four times busier than the principal intercity route – London to Manchester.

We might expect, therefore, that government and rail companies, nationalised and privatised, would want to see commuter rail services improve over time. Yet it is London



## It is now no faster to commute into London than in the immediate post-war period, and it is substantially slower than in the 1970s

to Manchester – not Victoria to East Croydon, Gatwick and Brighton – that has received high levels of investment.

It is hard to reconcile this investment pattern with any sensible definition of the public interest. It is no harder to upgrade commuter lines than to upgrade the West Coast mainline. It would benefit more people. It would increase agglomeration economies in the South East. It might even pay for itself, since London-bound commuters are generally affluent, and may well be willing to pay more for faster trains. And yet it does not happen.

There seems a danger that railway policy in Britain today, unlike that of the 19th century, is being determined by politicians and not by customers. Huge levels of public subsidy to the Channel Tunnel rail link generated good headlines for ministers. Making busy commuter routes from Liverpool Street, Victoria and Waterloo a little faster will not generate the same headlines.

But upgrading commuter lines would be of immense value to people who use these trains day in and day out.

Equally, it would benefit those people who would like to live outside London but are currently put off by the time it takes to commute into the city.

A more rational allocation of railway investment – along the lines of Sir Rod Eddington's 2006 report on transport and the economy – would increase investment on busy if unglamorous lines. The Victorians would have approved: while they made mistakes, they were very much focused on who wanted to travel where. That is a focus government could usefully rediscover.

## More rational allocation of railway investment today would increase investment on busy if unglamorous lines

**Tim Leunig** is reader in economic history at LSE and an associate in CEP's globalisation programme. This research is funded by the ESRC as part of its Public Services Programme (<http://www.publicservices.ac.uk/research/237/>).

