Back on track: old railway lines you can hike and cycle

Fifty years ago today, Dr Beeching set in motion the removal of hundreds of miles of Britain's railways. Now many of the 'green' routes are open to hikers and bikers.

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What's the attraction?

It's now 50 years since Dr Richard Beeching, then the Chairman of British Railways, published his report, The Reshaping of British Railways. It outlined plans to close half of Britain's railway stations and remove 30 per cent of available rail miles. Protests were widespread, but the Beeching axe fell, nevertheless.

Yet that wasn't the end of the story, or quite the end of the lines. Organisations such as Sustrans (0845 1130065; sustrans.org.uk), Railway Ramblers (www.railwayramblers.org.uk), local authorities and an army of volunteers worked tirelessly and tenaciously to turn some 4,500 miles of abandoned rail lines into a stunning network of green cycling routes and footpaths. So make tracks and take advantage of the green side of Beeching's legacy.

Back on track

Devoted rail enthusiasts have re-opened many deserted stations as Heritage Railways. They are mostly run by volunteers who
have buns back in the buffet, restored trains running on time and whirls at the ready. Many stations run special events to recreate the past. Churnet Valley Railway, Froghall (01538 750755; churnet-valley-railway.co.uk; £11) has a 1940s weekend and a classic cars event. On certain dates the Nene Valley Railway, Peterborough (01780 784444; nvr.org.uk; £15), has a travelling Post Office demonstrating how mail was sorted on the trains and mail bags exchanged. Heritage railways make a great day out for families as well. The much-loved Thomas the Tank Engine makes frequent appearances at many stations including the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre, Quainton (01296 655720; bucksrailcentre.org; £15). You can also realise your dream of being a train driver. In North Wales, the Llangollen Railway (01978 860979; llangollen-railway.co.uk) offers a two-hour Steam Locomotive Experience for £395. For stations that capture the feel of pre-Beeching times, visit Stogumber and Blue Anchor on the West Somerset Railway, Minehead (01643 704996; west-somerset-railway.co.uk; £17).

Birdsong

Time your visit to East Sussex between April and June and you might hear the song of the cuckoo as you walk the 11-mile Cuckoo Trail (01323 443126; www.wealden.gov.uk). The Cuckoo Line once ran from Heathfield to Hampden Park near Eastbourne (0871 6630031; visiteastbourne.com). Popular with families, whatever time you explore the route, you’re likely see and hear plenty of other birds, butterflies and wildlife. Views of the countryside are framed in the brick arches of redundant bridges. Make use of the picnic tables along the route or rest on benches carved from trees blown down in the 1987 gales.

Insider information

"The most impressive railway paths tend to be those in the areas of most dramatic scenery, so it is especially worth investigating places like the West Country, the Peak District, Wales and Scotland. In the Peak District, the pair of towering, trackless viaducts that once carried quadruple track into Millers Dale station gives a sense of scale to what Beeching and his successors did. The engineering is breathtaking, but the sense of loss is palpable, even now." Jeff Vinter, Chairman, Railway Ramblers

Engineering in the extreme

Prepare to be impressed by the Monsal Trail in the Peak District (visitpeakdistrict.com), a showcase of daring Victorian engineering. In 1863, the Midland Railway wished to create a link between London and Manchester, so it began digging tunnels, building bridges and constructing viaducts through what appeared to be a geologically impossible landscape in Derbyshire. Beeching closures began in 1967, leaving astonishing structures along the eight-mile trail from Bakewell to Blackwell Mill. You’ll see old cotton mills and lime-kilns, relics of the area’s
industrial past. There are six tunnels along the route open for walkers and cyclists. The masterpiece, however, is the magnificent Monsal Head Viaduct which soars 74 feet above Monsal Dale. Pick up maps at Bakewell (01629 813227; www.peakdistrict.gov.uk).

Not a bridge too far

Gwynedd in Wales was once known for its gold mines. While not as precious, the nine-mile Mawddach Trail from Dolgellau to Barmouth is still highly treasured. Once popular as a route for bringing holidaymakers from the Midlands to the west Welsh coast, it's now one of Britain's most popular trails for cyclists and walkers. For maps and information call in at the Dolgellau Information Centre (01341 422888; www.eryri-npa.gov.uk).

The route follows the gentle curve of the Mawddach Estuary and there are great views of the Rhinogs Mountains. The focus of the walk is the final stretch, crossing the iconic Barmouth Bridge. The views are wonderful, especially when the rolling hillsides are reflected in the estuary.

Off the rails

If you want to go off the rails you might as well do it somewhere special, such as the Lochwinnoch Loop Line from Paisley to Kilbarchan. The 14-mile trail passes through Castle Semple Country Park, ancestral home of the Clan Semple. The country park (01505 842882; clydemuirshiel.co.uk) is a great place to picnic. You could get more active and try some of the water sports on offer, or slow things down at the RSPB Reserve at Lochwinnoch (01505 842663; rspb.org.uk; £2). If you like history, you could roam the ruins of Collegiate Church, watch tartan being woven at the Weaver's Cottage at Kilbarchan (0844 493 2205; nts.org.uk; admission £6.50) or see the monument to William Wallace, Scotland's Braveheart, at his birthplace at Elderslie.

Forest walk

Share tranquillity with the ponies, wild horses and cattle that graze on heath land along the old railway line from Burley to Holmsley in the New Forest (maps and information are available from the New Forest Visitor Information Centre in Lyndhurst: 023 8028 2269; thenewforest.co.uk). Part of the Southampton to Dorchester line, it was known as Castleman's Corkscrew after the twisting route and a local solicitor who promoted it. Hire a bike in Burley at Forest Leisure Cycling (01425 403584; forestleisurecycling.co.uk) from £16 a day – you can also pick up maps here – or park at the Burbush Car Park. You’ll see remnants of rail along this two- to three-mile stretch, and the remains of the old platform at Holmsley Station. The station itself is now the Station House Tea Rooms and Restaurant (01425 402468; newforesttearooms.co.uk), displaying railway memorabilia including original signs, timetables and the station-master's hat.

What they said about it

'I'm sittin' in a railway station, got a ticket for my destination..."
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