

Mick Cash: Rail and me

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the first railway service from Darlington to Stockton in 1825, the story of our railways is being retold to the 21st century generation.

It's a story that spans three centuries, nine monarchs, and an estimated 621,400 miles of railway track across the world.

Perhaps the story of our railway that's best known is one of innovation in fields like technology, travel infrastructure and industrialisation. We recognise it in the landmarks that define our landscapes such as the Forth Railway Bridge and the Ribble Viaduct, and we remember milestone feats of engineering such as the Rocket, Locomotion, and the Flying Scotsman.

And of course, we remember our railways' famous individual pioneers, such as the Stephensons who spearheaded the adoption of rail transport in Britain; Isambard Kingdom Brunel whose engineering genius gave us the Great Western Railway; Sir Nigel Gresley whose Flying Scotsman was the first steam locomotive officially recorded over 100mph in passenger service; and the unfortunate William Huskisson MP – the first passenger killed on the Railway.

But over the last 200 years, it's the hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who have built, maintained and operated the railway. With them came a social infrastructure which manifested itself in many ways, pensions being an important one.

The social history of rail

The rail industry's 200th anniversary has stimulated a lot of commemorative and celebratory activity. For me, it's also an opportunity to look back at the pension journey – when they started, and how we ended up with the pensions we have today.

Railway employers were some of the earliest to introduce workplace pensions for their people. The first – the London & North Western Pension Scheme – was set-up in 1853, less than 20 years after the opening of the world's first Railway between Stockton and Darlington in North East England. By 1887, 22 years before the state pension would be introduced in 1909, there were at least 10 other schemes in operation.

This reflected the Railways' pioneering approach not only to industrialisation, but also to workers' welfare and to wider societal infrastructure. This was an industry supporting its workers through the creation of employer and union provident funds. These funds ensured workers were paid when sick, when recovering from accidents or ill health – something we take for granted today, but was not the norm back then. They also provided protection for rail workers' families, including orphaned children of railway workers, through superannuation and death benefits.

Beyond pensions, the rail industry created charities, orphanages and convalescent homes, created to mitigate the dangerous outcomes that so many railway workers and their families faced.

The beginnings of occupational health can also be traced back to the rail industry with the establishment of the Great Western Railway's Medical Fund Society in 1847 to improve the health and wellbeing of rail workers and provide access to what we might consider basic needs today, but that were unaffordable at that time long before the NHS. In my day it was the British Rail (BR) Doctors, and today it's the health and wellbeing policies delivered by numerous private providers.

Not to mention the many savings banks, social housing programmes, social clubs, recreational facilities, training and education designed, developed and delivered by the rail industry.

Together they formed a rich and varied social infrastructure that's still recognisable today, and in many cases provided a blueprint to other industries and government-led initiatives.

My story

My journey with the Rail Industry started in 1978, and in the almost 50 years since, I've felt the benefit of our industry's commitment to social infrastructure in a myriad of ways.

I joined the S&T department at the entry level, as a Junior Railman with only 4 CSEs (Certificates in Secondary Education – two level 2s and two level 4s). From my first day, I was auto-enrolled into the pension scheme and the union which, looking back, are two of the best decisions ever made for me.

I benefited from training and education that lasted beyond my time on the track – lifelong learning that helped me proudly represent my fellow workers, which I continue to draw on today as I help safeguard rail workers pensions in my role as Trustee Director for the Railways Pension Trustee Company Limited.

My employer supported me when I had had back problems, and gave me the time, space and understanding I needed when my mental health problems started.

My first home was built because of the railways – a terrace house in my home town of Watford, purchased in 1982, where my eldest child would take her first tentative steps.

Over the years, I've saved money for a rainy day in the British Rail Savings Bank, learnt first aid and taken part in competitions. I've met union members at British Railways Staff Association clubs for branch meetings and put the world to rights.

That has been my journey. Without the social infrastructure created by the railway, and the support, kindness and community of my fellow workers, life would have been a lot more challenging.

So today, as we look back on the railways' 200 years of technological and industrial innovation, let's also celebrate the lasting impact of our industry's contribution to the social infrastructure that underpins our communities today and will continue to be vital long into the future.