

BT

Some things never change over time, or so it seems. In my “Tolson Newspaper” of September 6th, 1963, another headline catches the eye, blending the past with the present in a way which all too many readers will identify with:



There then follows many paragraphs of furious invective against the GPO, the then operators of the monopoly British Telecom system, for the appalling service offered to the British public. Here's a sample:

“A creaking expensive, inefficient, time-wasting, infuriating system, unworthy of backward banana republic. However you look at it the British phone service is awful, pathetic.....”

And in 2017:

“BT has pledged to improve its customer service after fierce criticism of the company over allegations of rip-off charges and poor quality broadband services....”

Plus ca change.....Not holding your breath, I hope!

What is perhaps of a more contemporary interest about this item is the calling for Beeching as the man to sort out the company's many problems. In 1963 no-one would be in any doubt as to who he was and why he should be called on to intervene. For in March 1963 Dr. Beeching, (as he was always referred to), had published his first report on the restructuring of the British railway network, recommending the closure of thousands of miles of track and the sacking of thousands of railway workers. Along with the Profumo scandal the Beeching proposals would become the biggest hot potato in British politics in 1963. Soon, Beeching would be voted “the most hated civil servant of the 1960s,” as the public reacted angrily to the destruction of what was seen as one of Britain's paramount achievements in the Industrial Revolution.

Today, what is perhaps of more significance, both culturally and linguistically, is that, more than half a century later, Beeching survives in the English language as a stand-alone noun, still making regular appearances in such newspaper headlines as *“Time to do a Beeching”*

or “*What we need now is the Beeching effect,*” implying that some kind of drastic action is needed to solve some serious problem.

Whether post Dr. Beeching generations are aware as to just why his name continues to be used in this way is a moot point. Are they forced to consult Wikipedia for enlightenment? And in another fifty years will the name of the poor doctor still be invoked as a solution to the insoluble? But at the very least it teaches us that notoriety is as good a way as any of establishing your place in history, as Guy Fawkes, Dick Turpin, Ann Boleyn and Jack the Ripper all testify.

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