

Luxury Railway Travel

Paul Atterbury reviews Martyn Pring's new book, *Luxury Railway Travel: A Social and Business History*

One of the more over-used words in travel and transport history is luxury, a long-established favourite with marketing departments freely applied to vehicles, clothing, luggage and many other consumer products, along with a particular type of lifestyle. All this has made it quite hard to define exactly what the word means, though frequent associations include comfort, elegance, opulence, exclusivity and expense.

There have been many books written about luxury trains, both individually and collectively so at first sight, Martyn Pring's new book, *Luxury Railway Travel*, is headed into an already crowded shelf. However, the key here is in the subtitle, *A Social and Business History*, and this takes it into a broader market, and away from the specialist railway shelves. Pring calls himself a marketing professional, and his extensive experience of the travel, leisure and catering industries outweighs his self-confessed train buffishness.

The approach is essentially historical, a study of the gradual emergence of the luxury train in the late Victorian period, thanks both to technical improvements in trains and their operation, and to the social revolution represented by increased social mobility and the breaking down of tradition class barriers, defined particularly by the expansion of middle class influence and activity.

The luxury train came of age in the Edwardian era, helped by the spread of the Pullman concept, and in the 1920s and 1930s this turned into a golden age. This was the era of the named train, many of which became household names in railway history, a litany that includes the Flying Scotsman, the Golden Arrow, the Cornish Riviera Express, the Atlantic Coast Express (though whether that was ever a luxury train is debatable), the Brighton Belle, the Coronation Scot, the Jubilee and many, many more.

What is less familiar is the contemporary emergence of the named locomotive, and how closely these names, and the classes they represented, were linked to marketing, obvious examples being the Southern Railway's King Arthurs and West Countries, and the GWR's Castles, Halls and Manor, all designed to promote the regions they served. In fact, the backbone of this book is the rise of modern ideas of

advertising, marketing and publicity, in which the railways, both before and after the First World War, were pioneers. Familiar are the posters and visual publicity associated with this era, but the marketing package was much wider, and included merchandising material such as guide books, postcards, jigsaws and much else, along with the central idea that the railways were modern, fast, efficient and luxurious, a vital USP in an age when road and air transport were becoming more competitive.

Pring works hard to distinguish the differences between first class, Pullman, and other types of superior rail travel, but the boundaries seem to have been both flexible and porous over a long period. The streamlined LNER and LMS Scottish expresses, for example, seem to have had a higher standard than the conventional Pullman train, but this again may have been more about perception and marketing than actuality.

Important elements in the story are catering and sleeping, and the railway definition of luxury is firmly linked to the former, to which latter is an adjunct. This book explores thoroughly the history of on-train catering, with many railway companies seeing this as the area in which they could overcome their rivals, both on the rails and in other areas of transport. The regular serving of five course meals, prepared and served immaculately, was part of the railway experience. This point naturally underlines the links between trains, ships and hotels, all of which shared a similar concept of luxury, and whose development, notably in the Edwardian era, was closely intertwined.

Pring also makes the point that, while the interwar years were a golden age, the achievements of that era were inherited and further developed by nationalised British Railways, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. He is not alone in thinking that British Railways, and later, British Rail, was an adventurous, creative, efficient and much maligned organisation defeated by politicians rather than market forces. BR maintained the luxury image in the famous Blue Pullmans, which in turn became the springboard for the HST 125, one of Britain's greatest and most enduring trains. Ironically, this classic vehicle, and the rise of the InterCity concept with its emphasis on the business traveller, did mark the end of the traditional idea of a luxury train.

In some ways the most interesting part of the book is the final section, which looks at the renaissance of the traditional luxury train idea, the pioneer of which was James Sterling's Venice Simplon Orient Express, which first ran in 1982. Since then the luxury train has become a global phenomenon but it is something new, a combination of opulence, elegance and nostalgia that is all about the journey.

Historically, the luxury train was just a better way of travelling from A to B, but now the focus is on the experience of luxury for its own sake. Clever marketing has made these journeys seem very desirable, particularly for that special occasion. These journeys are very expensive, but a successful and more accessible spin-off, again pioneered by Sterling's British Pullman set, has been the luxury day trip with at seat catering. Another part of this development, a bit overlooked by Pring, has been the steam special day trip, where the combination of a classic steam locomotive running at speed on main lines matched with a rake of Pullman-style carriages with an at seat catering service, has proven to have a popular appeal far beyond the railway enthusiast. These are also very accessible, thanks to the different forms of catering on offer.

The last part of the book is a series of appendices, looking at more detail at the classic British luxury routes and trains, London to Scotland, London to the West Country, and Pullman services to the coast. By presenting these separately, there is inevitably some repetition and overlap with the main text. It might have been better to have included these in the main text.

This book is about social, economic and business history and as such offers a new way of exploring the story of luxury train travel, while leaving plenty for the dedicated railway historian and enthusiast.

Paul Atterbury is a British antiques expert, known for his many appearances since 1979 on the BBC TV programme *Antiques Roadshow* and for his travel writing.

Martyn Pring is a career marketing professional having worked across both private and public sectors, as a researcher at the Department of Tourism, Bournemouth University, and more recently, as an independent researcher with interests in culinary tourism, destination marketing and luxury branded sectors as well as travel writing. A self-confessed railway buff from a young age, and as a result of family connections, retained interests in maritime and aviation travel sectors. Martyn lives and works in Dorset.

Luxury Railway Travel: A Social and Business History is available at Pen and Sword: <https://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Luxury-Railway-Travel-Hardback/p/16752>

