

On the European continent, the inter-war years saw considerable investment in electric and diesel traction on railways. In Britain the railways continued to maintain their faith in steam. The Southern Railway made rapid progress with electric traction in the 1930s, but by 1939 no more than five per cent of British railway mileage was electrified. Likewise, the Great Western introduced a fleet of diesel railcars for branch and cross-country operations, but found few imitators amongst its rivals. Why was there such a neglect of more efficient forms of traction in Britain? One possible explanation is that in the 1930s there was still too little known about the comparative costs and merits of different forms of traction. Moreover, it was also generally felt that the Southern Railway's traffic was more suited to

electric traction than that of the other companies, since the bulk of it consisted of passengers moving in dense flows over relatively short distances at peak times of the day. This type of traffic required rapid transit to avoid congestion and here the multiple electric unit, with its speed, acceleration and flexibility, scored heavily over the steam-hauled train. But perhaps the most important reasons for the lag in new technology were the capital locked up in steam traction which had yet to be proved obsolete, and the fact that generations of railwaymen — directors, traffic managers, engineers and workmen alike — have been reared in an era of steam traction and required much convincing to depart from established practice.

Steam Locomotive Renewals: 1921-38

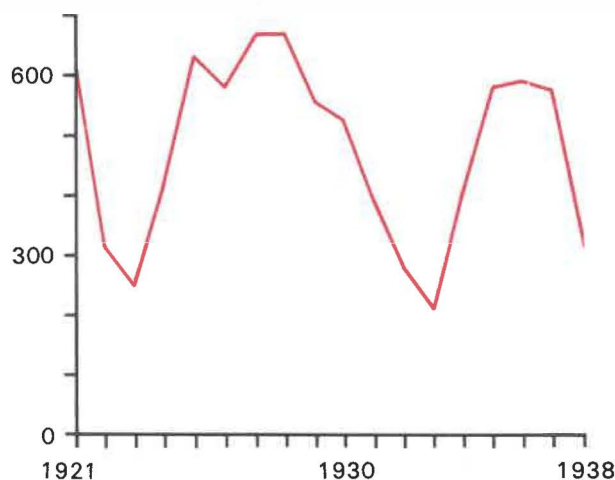




Plate 58: SR 'Lord Nelson' class on the Down 'Bournemouth Belle' approaching Surbiton. For a brief period this was the most powerful locomotive type in Britain.

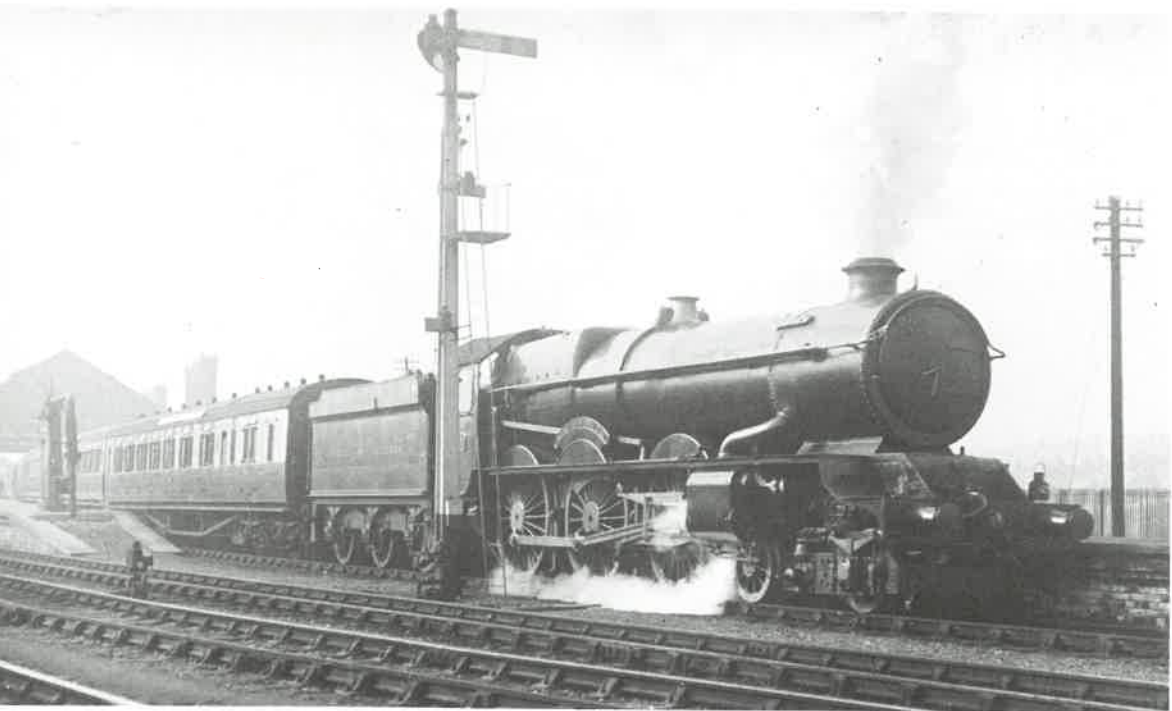
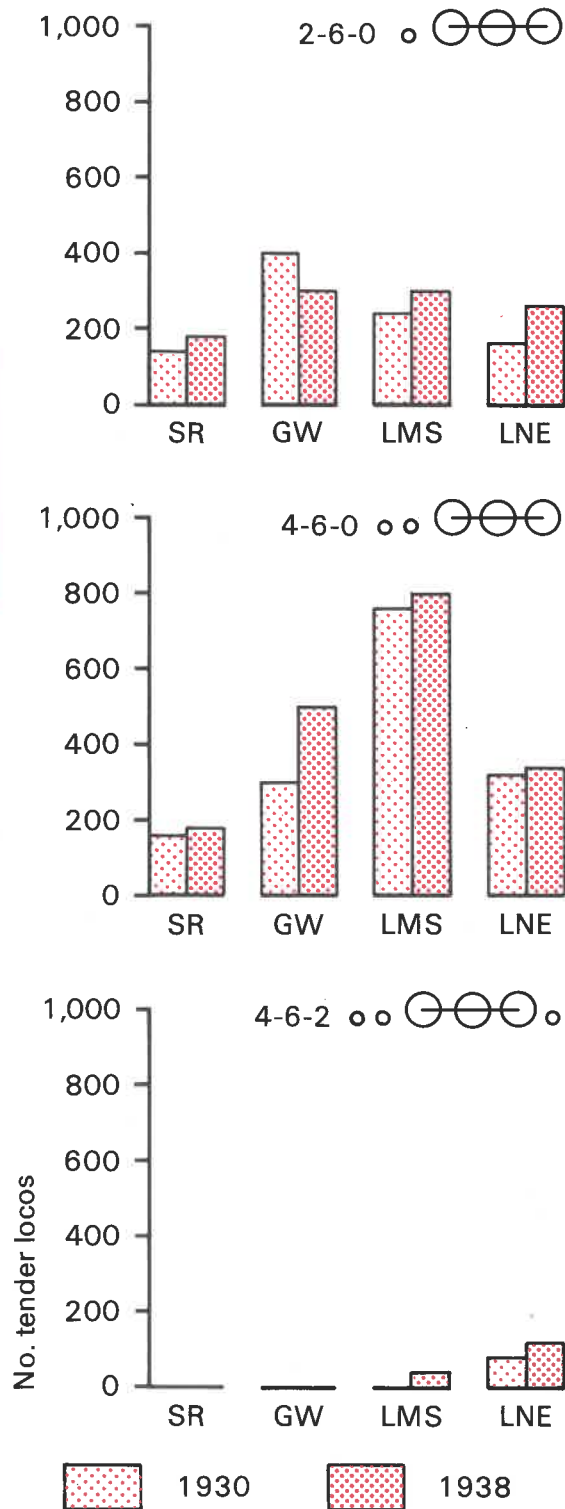
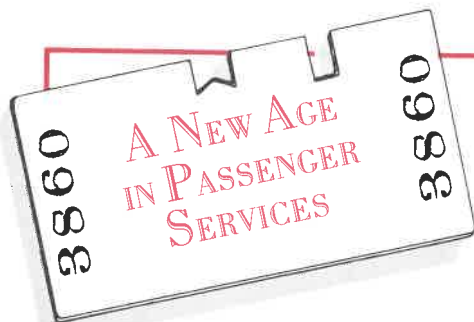


Plate 59: 4-6-0 no. 6001 King Edward VII. The 'King' class represented the ultimate development of the Great Western's steam practice.

1938	Total steam locos	Tender	Tank
SOUTHERN	1816	1082	734
GWR	3630	1320	2310
LMS	7613	5176	2437
LNER	6518	4279	2239

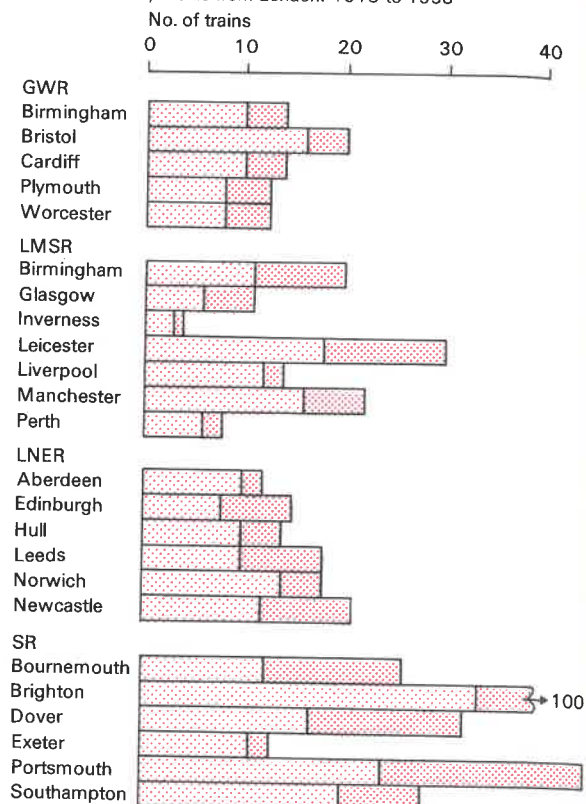
Committed to steam, the railway companies devoted much finance and energy to improving the performance of the steam locomotive. The LNER under Nigel Gresley became the initial pace-setter, but the other companies soon followed and by the late 1930s some fine locomotives were in service. Considerable effort went into the perfection of express locomotives, capable of handling heavy loads over long distances. The common wheel arrangements were 4-6-0 and 4-6-2, although Gresley provided the LNER with 6-6-2 and 2-8-2 designs as well, the latter for some of the difficult Scottish routes. The operational success of many of these improvements reinforced the view of railway managers that the steam locomotive had a future, a view no doubt confirmed by the remarkable performance of the LNER Pacific *Malverton* which, on test runs in 1938, attained a top speed of 126 mph, a British and world record for steam that has never been beaten.





Between the wars, railways remained the undisputed leaders in long-distance passenger transport and the four companies made strenuous efforts to consolidate and publicise that position. With renewed and improved motive power, they were able both to expand the frequency of service and to advance average speeds of travel. As time passed, something of a competitive spirit developed between the companies. Direct service competition was obviously limited, but the pursuit of excellence in train operation was open to all. Much attention came to be focused on non-stop working, where the GWR had for many years held the distance record with its Paddington-Plymouth run. In 1927, however, the record passed to the LMSR, and in 1928 to the LNER with its King's Cross-Edinburgh service of nearly 393 miles.

Increase in Daily Trains from London: 1918 to 1938

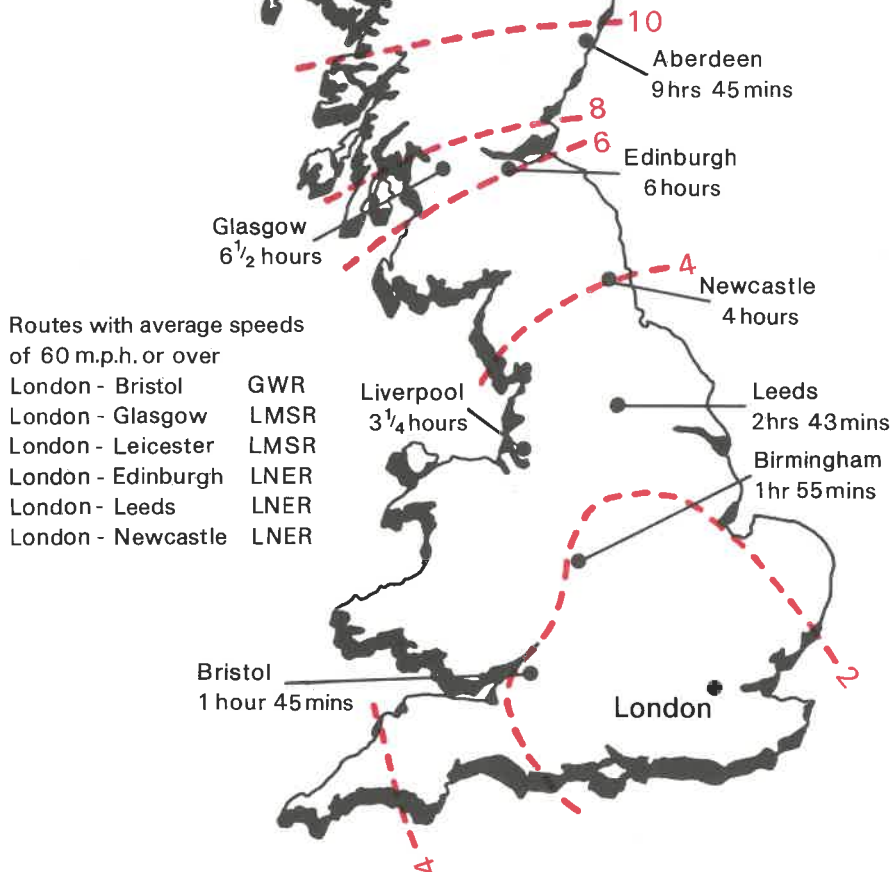


(after Nock)



Plate 62: LNER Up express near Grantham, hauled by a Gresley A1 Pacific.

Fastest Times October 1938



Prestige Trains

Improvements in timetabling were fundamental to maintaining the railways' competitive position in long-distance passenger movement, but the more perceptive of company officers soon realised that this would not necessarily restore the railways to their former prominent place in public imagination. Hence there began a campaign to create a dynamic and futuristic image, a search for what today would be called 'psychic income'. It was Gresley who led the field once more. In 1935 he introduced on the LNER's east coast main line a prestige train appropriately named the 'Silver Jubilee'. Both locomotive and carriages were extensively streamlined, following the

fashion of the age, and full use was made of modern materials like stainless steel and chrome in surface finishes. Not surprisingly, the train was operated to the fastest schedule then in use. So successful was the enterprise that Gresley followed it with further high-speed streamliners in 1937, including the famous 'Coronation' train with its beaver-tail observation coach and six-hour timing to Edinburgh. As the LNER's competitor for Anglo-Scottish traffic, the LMSR followed Gresley's example by introducing in 1937 its own streamliner, the 'Coronation Scot', to operate between Euston and Glasgow in six and a half hours.