



Reporting on the railway

The ancient Greeks first had the idea of moving freight in carts along tracks carved in rock. In the sixteenth century Germany created a wooden railway. However, the first use of steam locomotives was in Britain, and the UK's railway system is the oldest in the world.

The first public railway was built in 1807, using horse drawn carriages on an existing tramline. A number of small, privately owned lines followed. During the 1840s a national rail network was almost completed. Building the railway totally transformed towns and the landscape. Writers and artists of the time captured the enormous changes brought by the arrival of the railway.

Read this description of the construction of the new railway in Britain from the nineteenth century:

Extract from Chapter 6 of *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens (first published in monthly parts 1846–1848)

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcases of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.

In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement.

But as yet, the neighbourhood was shy to own the Railroad. One or two bold speculators had projected streets; and one had built a little, but had stopped among the mud and ashes to consider farther of it. A bran-new Tavern, redolent of fresh mortar and size, and fronting nothing at all, had taken for its sign The Railway Arms; but that might be rash enterprise—and then it hoped to sell drink to the workmen. So, the Excavators' House of Call had sprung up from a beer-shop; and the old-established Ham and Beef Shop had become the Railway Eating House, with a roast leg of pork daily, through interested motives of a similar immediate and popular description. Lodging-house keepers



were favourable in like manner; and for the like reasons were not to be trusted. The general belief was very slow. There were frowzy fields, and cow-houses, and dunghills, and dustheaps, and ditches, and gardens, and summer-houses, and carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. Little tumuli of oyster shells in the oyster season, and of lobster shells in the lobster season, and of broken crockery and faded cabbage leaves in all seasons, encroached upon its high places. Posts, and rails, and old cautions to trespassers, and backs of mean houses, and patches of wretched vegetation, stared it out of countenance. Nothing was the better for it, or thought of being so. If the miserable waste ground lying near it could have laughed, it would have laughed it to scorn, like many of the miserable neighbours.

Questions:

1. What would you say is Dickens' overall impression of the railroad?
2. Provide a summary of the positive and negative implications of the new railroad from Dickens' perspective. Provide evidence from the text to support your view.
3. If Dickens were alive today what differences might he observe in the way major railway infrastructure projects are carried out in modern times?
4. What concerns about construction work on the railway might people living locally raise today? E.g. TV reception, view, safety etc. Pretend you are a representative from the railway – how would you manage local people's concerns?

Creative exercise

Either:

Write a story that is based on the perils of a young person taking a dangerous split-second decision near the electrified railway. For example, one summer afternoon a group of mates has gone out to find something to do. They end up close to the railway line. What happens next?

Or:

Considering what you have learned, write a poem that captures your impressions of how a major railway upgrade can impact on individuals and the community.



RAILWAY ELECTRICITY IS 100 TIMES MORE POWERFUL THAN ELECTRICITY IN THE HOME.

It is very dangerous so remember the **Rail Life 'Safety Top 3'**:

- **STAY CLEAR OF THE TRACKS.** Is it worth putting your life on the line?
 - electricity can jump up to three metres.
 - don't play with kites or balloons near overhead power lines.
- **USE THE LEVEL CROSSING.** Shortcuts across the railway can kill.
- **KNOW THE SIGNS.** Be alert to railway signs, they could save your life.

