**Tynedale by Bullet Train**

In the first days of December 2005, a doctor at a hospital in Cramlington called me to say that if I wanted to see my dad again, I should probably get on a train right away.

For a number of reasons, this wasn't such an easy thing to do. When I took the call I was in the final year of an English degree at Bristol University, and living in a cramped, mostly underground student house just off Park Street in the centre of town. As I listened to the consultant's voice crackling out of my Nokia 3510, I found myself gazing out of the window at a derelict patch of ground strewn with weeds and old Coke cans, which sloped down to a grey 70s office building impeding the light from entering my airless box room.

The drabness of these surroundings embodied my state of mind at the time. In just over two years, I had made few friends at Bristol, where nearly half the student body was privately educated, and most of the rest came from parts of the English South with a very different culture to the North East. I'd applied to Bristol because I wanted to experience a new and — I imagined — exotic side of British life. But the staid, preppy atmosphere of the university in an era of tuition fees and corporate management targets turned out to be a bitter disappointment.

More painfully, the distance of the city from Northumberland put me at least six hours away from my family, at a time when I really needed to be much closer to home. A few weeks before receiving the call from Cramlington, it had been my dad's voice crackling over the Nokia, telling me that my mum was likely to lose her struggle with

breast cancer very soon. Not really knowing what to do or where to be, I had returned to Bristol from the North East in the autumn after a summer of watching her grow weaker by the day — only to spend the first two weekends of term shuffling back up north in spite of the cost and distance.

But even in a country with a more sympathetic transport system, the degree of separation would probably have been too great. In the end, I was on a crowded Virgin CrossCountry train moving through Birmingham New Street station when I found out via phone that my mum had passed away.

Now, it seemed like the nightmare was happening all over again. Mum dying had hit Dad pretty hard. Realising that his health was now collapsing too, a great weight of responsibility tumbled onto my shoulders. And again, as I tried with scant experience and less maturity to work out the right thing to do, Britain's transport infrastructure was not exactly proving to be the friend I needed.

After hanging up on the doctor, I stuffed some clothes and toiletries in a backpack and ran to the train station, bought a same-day ticket which nearly demolished my student loan, and embarked on another long CrossCountry journey back to the North East. I spent most of the next six hours leafing numbly through a copy of *FHM* bought from the buffet carriage, trying to contact my sister in Sheffield as my phone credit ran out, and wondering how you were supposed to cope without any parents to guide you through the crucial moments of life.

When I got home, there were further practical difficulties as my sister and I attempted to reach our dad in the critical care unit at

Cramlington. As neither of us could drive, this meant a punishing two-and-a-half-hour journey across the North East on public transport, from our home near Hexham (where the local hospital was), through to the network hub at Newcastle, and then to the more specialised ward in Cramlington.

Political developments were largely to blame here. Partly based on advice given by Richard Branson's Virgin, the New Labour government elected in 1997 introduced forms of privatisation into the NHS, so that, for example, local hospitals were grouped together in 'Foundation Trusts' managed by public-private partnerships. After the reforms had taken effect in Northumberland, where previously you would have been treated at the nearest local hospital for almost anything, you now had to visit the most relevant hospital in the Trust, depending on the form of treatment you needed.

As we made daily trips to visit our dad via infrequent bus services and rickety train carriages, and as his condition worsened to the point of no return, it felt as though an entire political system had contrived to make life even harder for us as we dealt with a family tragedy that was spiralling out of control like a damaged record.

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How did life on the edge of one of the world's richest countries come to be like this?

Though it has always had its fair share of social and economic difficulties, the North East of England did not use to be a place where mobility was such a problem. In fact, far from being an

underdeveloped backwater, this part of the world is one of the places which taught us what it means to be modern, a place which embodies what it feels likes to be always hurtling restlessly into the future.

The North East's spirit of technological advancement has a long history. After centuries of being a borderland at far remove from the centres of the English establishment, the region kicked into energetic life with the advent of historical modernity. In the 19th century, of course, the North East's 'capital' Newcastle was one of the global centres of modern technology — an area where the steam train was developed, hydraulic machinery emerged, and the incandescent light bulb was patented. In 1879, Mosley Street, in the centre of town, became the first electrically lit street in the world (a fact which sits strangely beside its more recent status as a favourite drinking spot for members of the cast of *Geordie Shore*). A little later, in 1884, a Newcastle-based engineer invented the steam turbine, a device which has been used to generate the vast majority of the world's supply of electricity ever since.

Partly because of this high-powered industrial heritage, visually embodied in the dramatic geometry of the vaulting rail and road bridges which dominate the city's Quayside, Newcastle is a place where surging connectivity is an essential part of the accents of speech, the rhythm of the streets and the motions of the mind. Indeed, we might say that ever since the 19th century, Newcastle has been — in every sense — a city of electrifying movement.

But over the past few decades, Newcastle's historic status as a dynamic, forward-facing regional capital has been severely tested. After centuries of being at the leading edge of transport design

(especially rail technology), the North East has been increasingly isolated and marginalised by the tardy development of the UK's transport system over the past 40 years. When the Tyne and Wear Metro opened in the summer of 1980, few would have predicted that this remarkable civic utility would amount to the last major expansion of the North East's transport infrastructure in the post-war period — a final fling for the modernist and industrial culture that dominated the region for a century and a half after the Big Bang of George and Robert Stephenson's *Rocket* in 1829.

Since the transport system expanded for the last time with the opening of the Metro, the North East has had to be content with patchy, overpriced private services, rail carriages converted from bus parts, and no substantial extension of transport capacity or scope, despite decades of population growth and increasing environmental urgency. Given this backdrop of decay and dis-integration of local and national travel networks, there is a basic, material sense in which the North East is now further away from the centres of British political and economic power than at any point since the 19th century.

But what of the human cost of an outdated, poorly maintained public transport system? Like many others, my life has been shaped in certain crucial ways by the historic, systemic failure of public travel in this country. Where I grew up in the Tyne Valley, the ghosts of a vanished technological past haunt the landscape. Venture even a short distance westward from the centre of Newcastle and you will quickly encounter a hinterland of abandoned mines, obsolete train tracks, and bridleways converted to walking routes — residues of an

industrial heritage that now has very little, if anything, to do with the region's economic and social life.

To be sure, as in much of the North East, the disappearance of transport in the Tyne Valley predates the civic decline of recent years, occurring long before the processes of privatisation, under-investment and austerity that have overshadowed the millennial period.

For example in my village, Fourstones, the railway station was liquidated in the late 1960s, in the wake of the Beeching Reports commissioned by Harold Macmillan at the start of that decade. These fateful publications, written by the chairman of British Railways, Dr Richard Beeching, recommended a massive downgrading of the British rail system at a time when the motorcar was beginning to rule the world. In the North East, this led to the closure of dozens of stations (many of which were in large, populous towns like Blyth and Ashington), and the running-down of entire routes, such as the Durham–Bishop Auckland line. In West Northumberland, the cancellation of the Border Counties Railway in the 1950s had already left behind a series of ghost stations in isolated rural locations like Falstone and Deadwater. After what became known as the 'Beeching cuts', large parts of the North East were effectively removed from the transport network and cut off from the central civic institutions of the region and nation.

The impact of removing a railway station from a village or town can be devastating. There is a popular myth that rural locales are cosy, sociable places where the ancient traditions of English pastoral

life have been preserved in the face of a dehumanising modernity more commonly associated with urban areas.

In fact, only a tiny percentage of people in the countryside (most notably farmers) fit the stereotype of the self-sufficient rural community. For some time now, the vast majority of people in the rural and semi-rural North East have relied on transport to enable them to get to work, access basic amenities and meet up with friends and family (especially after the winding down of industries like mining, which sustained local ecosystems).

Without an efficient public transport system, the sad reality is that rural life becomes an interminable series of car drives — for those who can afford it. For those who do not have access to a car for whatever reason — whether temporarily or permanently — it can be a lonely, laborious existence. If society does not step in to mobilise and empower its citizens through travel, life in places like the rural North East comes to be governed by the isolation of the cut-off domestic household, and the mundane, daily struggle of trying — and often failing — to get where you need to be.

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The story of the decline of transport in the North East — and in Britain as a whole — is part of a much wider narrative of social and individual withdrawal after the death of Victorian and modernist ideals of collective progress. It is a story about fundamental changes to the whole pattern of life in this country over the past few decades, rather than one about a closed railway station here or there.

But this is not the place for an overarching survey of the past half-century or so of British society. It will be better if I try finally to emphasise how the political and personal have overlapped in my family's case (which was, I should stress, unlucky, but not all that unusual).

I don't know, and I cannot now ask them, but I think that when my parents moved to the North East in the 1970s, they were attracted by the romance of being slightly off-radar. They had both grown up mostly in London, which is about as far away from rural Northumberland (in both physical and cultural terms) as it's possible to get. In deciding to move here, I'm pretty sure they were at least partly motivated by the familiar city dwellers' urge to get back to nature and community — of which there is, famously, no shortage in the North East.

But more than this, I think they were destined, as members of the post-war generation, to find a place on the edge of society when they went in search of somewhere to settle down. As baby boomers, they grew up in a Britain where almost everything was provided by the state — free healthcare, free education (from nursery through to university), plentiful secure employment, relatively cheap housing, solid civic amenities. As public sector workers who had passed through Polytechnic educations to permanent employment with relative ease, to an extent they must have looked on this country as a place that was set up mostly in their favour, even if their socialist worldview led them to feel anger about a range of political injustices.

As such, they and their friends were mostly able to go in search of modest versions of the good life without much concern about

practical hindrances. When my dad got a job as a lecturer at Newcastle Poly, my mum came to join him after a couple of years of long-distance commuting, safe in the knowledge that she would find it relatively easy to get a job as a primary school teacher in the North East. From their flat in Newcastle, they then migrated to a recently vacated mining terrace in a remote corner of South Tynedale — and again, they were able to strike out like this because they could count on steady jobs and a decent standard of living.

But they hadn't counted on what would happen after Margaret Thatcher's 'no such thing as society' ethos started to be practically implemented from the 1980s on. At the deepest level, they could not have predicted how almost all of the social reforms of the next few decades would be based on the idea that life should revolve around the individual and the self-enclosed family unit, at the expense of wider social safety nets. My parents were unlucky enough to get ill in a society where systems of state support had been rolled back, because of an assumption that individuals will mostly be okay without them. In fact, as my family's experience showed, the removal of state support is bound to leave most people facing serious adversity and even social abandonment at some point in their lives.

In the case of my sister and I, it would be no exaggeration to say that a 2.5-hour journey via public transport to the designated local hospital at the time of a parent's final illness is equivalent to — if not in fact much worse than — many pre-twentieth-century experiences of desperation in accessing local travel and healthcare amenities. And to reiterate, I do not think that our example was all

that atypical, having heard many similar horror stories of life in twenty-first-century Britain over the last fifteen years.

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More positively, it is not so very difficult to imagine a brighter future for the North East and its public infrastructure — beginning with the keystone of the transport system. As demonstrated by recent developments like the go-ahead for the HS2 railway line connecting London and Birmingham — and, much closer to home, the announcement of plans to reopen the old route between Newcastle, Ashington and Blyth — it is relatively easy to implement public works projects with the potential to dramatically improve the connectedness of the UK. All that is required is the political wherewithal to enable such schemes, and of course, the courage to channel public money back towards the public sector — two things that have been in drastically short supply over the last four decades of privatisation and low investment.

As part of the plans for post-war Newcastle that eventually gave rise to the Tyne and Wear Metro, there were evocative sketches of monorail lines arching across Northumberland Street and high in the sky above St James's Park. There is no reason why similarly ambitious schemes should not be revived in the 21st century.

If the Metro could be built amid the economic crises of the seventies and eighties, it seems reasonable to suggest that we should be able to afford a modest extension of the same facility at a time when the economic hardships endured by regions like the North East have become an issue of some political and environmental urgency. Why not ensure a rail link in every North East town or district with a

population of 2,000 or over? How about a designated role of 'transport mayor' for the entire region? Why not take the whole transport network back into public hands in order to ensure affordable ticket fares and the smooth running of a regional system that works in tandem with inter-city lines?

Getting back to a position where our society is oriented around the public as a whole rather than the wealthy individual able to access private resources will not be straightforward, because it will require a radical sea change in political thinking and acting. But achieving this goal has one thing at least in its favour. Sooner or later, the damaging effects of a political system that does not look after its citizens in times of need will be felt by everyone — even those who think they are immune from suffering.

I know all this from painful experience. So I hope you will forgive me when I say that my dreams these days are filled with visions of sparkling new railway lines criss-crossing the North East, journeys to Northumberland on electrified bullet trains — a transport network that gets us to our friends and family with such ease and at such speed we barely even notice it exists.

*Alex Niven*