

Railways fail to win back the passengers

I was not surprised the rail company is cutting back the number of services to Manchester. When I last returned to London from Manchester by train from conference this year on the all too early 21.15 last train there were plenty of empty seats despite the cancellation of the previous service and transfer of those passengers to the later one. there were even fewer people on the way to the city.

The latest figures I could find for overall use of the railways are the year to March 2022. Even the up to date numbers are delayed. They showed the railways with passenger journeys down 43% on 2019-20. Rail journeys were just 1% of total journeys undertaken. Government subsidy shot up that year to 2022 to £20.3 bn, 75% up on 2020, as taxpayers were made to pay the losses created by so many empty seats. The railways at great expense moved a lot of heavy fairly empty rail cars around the country, and created a lot of carbon dioxide in the process for their diesel engines and for their electric ones using power mainly generated from fossil fuel.

I found figures for quarter 3 2022 which showed fare revenues down to 71% of 2019-20 levels. Journey numbers had recovered a bit from the previous year, but only by discounting more fares.

The railways have not found a good business model for the post lockdown era. They need to show more flexibility over tickets for commuters who now travel in on fewer days and maybe at different hours to the old peaks. They need to identify the main places for the growing leisure business. They need to encourage handling large numbers of people all wishing to move to the same popular venue at the same time instead of deterring some of this by station closures and crowd management schemes that deter users. They need to adjust timetables to reflect travel needs and run fewer unpopular trains.