

**Centre for Lifelong Learning**

**Assessment Cover Sheet for Anonymous Marking**

**Module title:** 15/16 RS T3 – British Railway Workers

**Module code:** CED00009M

**Module level:** M

**Tutor:** David Turner

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**Tutor's comments:**

*General Comments*

This is a very good essay that explores the push and pull factors of railway work in the 1825-1870 period, and you are to be commended for considerations of the broader context of the UK labour market, and including the work of scholars not on the reading list. The work argues the case well, is mature and shows good originality of thought. The structure is sound, and the reference formatting is good, despite inconsequential glitches. The work could at times benefit from the odd example to add colour, while on occasion some points could be elaborated on. There are also odd occasions where the relevant work of other scholars could have been brought in, even if in passing, even if out of the year range, just to show a bit broader reading.

*Actions to improve*

- The odd example may be nice, just to add colour.
- Make sure you elaborate on some points fully.
- If there's an opportunity to support your arguments by mentioning the work of another scholar, even if in passing, or even just in a reference, take it.

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**2<sup>nd</sup> Marker's comments:**

This is an excellent essay, which generally brings in issues from the wider economy and considers them alongside issues from the railway industry. What might have improved things was to push some of the issues you raise a little further – the Malthusian trap for example – but generally this is a minor point. Keep up the good work.

Signature: D A Turner (1 <sup>st</sup> marker)	Mark/Grade: 72	Date: 27/06/2016
Signature: K D Tennent (2 <sup>nd</sup> marker)	Mark/Grade: 72	Date: 24/07/16

**Individuals were attracted into railway work between 1825 and 1870 simply because of the higher pay. To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

This essay will include the somewhat mundane conclusion that those who chose to move into (and stay) in railway work in the mid nineteenth century did so because they saw it as better than the perceived alternative(s). However, while pay was certainly a particularly substantial element in that equation, it was not the only consideration. Indeed the argument here is that the employers could have offered more modest wages and probably still have attracted sufficient staff. Each of the elements in the 'job equation' that faced the job applicant during this period will be considered below, in order to analyse the part played by the element of 'higher pay' in the appeal of railway work to that applicant. There is a case for concluding that although the pay would certainly have been an attraction it would have been a 'bonus factor' rather than the 'dealmaker' in its own right.

Availability of labour was high from the 1820s onwards. The population of the UK, especially England, had increased much more than in the rest of Europe between 1750 and 1820<sup>1</sup>. Within this was a trend of immigration to Great Britain from Ireland that increased in the 1820s when 'famine in 1821-2 coincided with the introduction of steamships on the Irish Sea'<sup>2</sup>. Following a still greater influx after the 1848/9 famine the total Irish-born population in Britain was 3.5 percent, of which a disproportionate number were young working age men<sup>3</sup>. They mainly took on the worst-paid and most dangerous construction jobs and were widely blamed for keeping wages down<sup>4</sup> within this swelling labour pool.

As Feinstein has also shown, the 1820-50 period was one in which agricultural wages had undergone a decline, and with the rise in other real wages being relatively modest (until after the 1850s) there was a labour surplus<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> E.A. Wrigley, "British population during the 'long' eighteenth century, 1680-1840," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Volume 1: Industrialisation, 1700-1860*, eds. Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 57-95

<sup>2</sup> EH Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain 1850-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon 1973), 286

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 286-7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 295

<sup>5</sup> Charles H Feinstein, "Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain during and after the Industrial Revolution" (*The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 58, No. 3 Sep 1998), 651

Commented [DT1]: That's debateable at this point.

Commented [KT2]: I wouldn't say its necessarily a mundane conculsion!

Commented [DT3]: Good!

Commented [KT4]: What is the job equation?

Commented [DT5]: The paragraph could, I think, have been a little more concise if you wanted to save words.

Commented [DT6]: I think you need to say a little better why this is relevant backdrop to the case you are making.

Commented [KT7]: Always put footnote after punctuation, e.g. .1 not 1.

Commented [DT8]: Good!

This overall continuing growth of available labour was taking place alongside a shift in the provision of employment from agricultural/rural to industrial/urban during the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. Indeed but for the availability of new work arising from the wider industrial revolution the population of Britain might have been heading for a Malthusian trap<sup>7</sup>. It was in this overall context – though with wide regional variations in detail - that a worker seeking employment might weigh up considerations of pay, conditions and security in what in macro terms was probably a ‘buyer’s market’ for the railway employers.

Commented [DT9]: Write this out, don't use slashes.

Commented [DT10]: Which was?

Commented [DT11]: Excellent!

Certainly the employers gave a strong impression that they believed that they could afford to pick and choose and dictate terms. Both Kingsford and McKenna report that in 1837 the GWR imposed a literacy test on job applicants<sup>8</sup>, although it seems unlikely that this applied to every vacancy. But most companies in the early days applied patronage by individual directors to selecting employees, and several sources attest to the common expectation of multiple testimonials of the good character of the applicant who was ‘petitioning’ for employment<sup>9</sup>.

Commented [KT12]: Surely they couldn't have done this for every single employee?

Commented [DT13]: Good paragraph

And of course when entry to an occupation, or club (for example), has been difficult to achieve one psychological effect on the entrant is to place extra value on the sense of ‘belonging to that organisation’. The effect in this instance was compounded in turn by the paternalistic behaviour of the employers in seeking to use both care and control to instil an *esprit de corps* in their substantially uniformed quasi-military organisations. It would appear that, quite separately from (and sometimes despite) considerations of working conditions or pay, there was a sense of social status as well as corporate loyalty in railway workers from the 1840s onwards<sup>10</sup>. This sense of corporate loyalty was reinforced in material terms by the provision of livery or other work clothing to most grades of railway

Commented [KT14]: Good! Othering!

Commented [DT15]: Can you put some more flesh on this bone with an example or some documentary evidence?

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, Table 4-1, 131

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Joachim Voth, “Living Standards and the Urban Environment” in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Volume 1: Industrialisation, 1700–1860*, eds. Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 293-4

<sup>8</sup> PW Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen* (London: Frank Cass 1970), 9 and Frank McKenna, *The Railway Workers 1840-1970* (London: Faber & Faber 1980), 31

<sup>9</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 7-8, McKenna, *The Railway Workers*, 26, Ernest J Simmons, *Memoirs of a station master 1879*, (London: Adams & Dart 1974), 4

<sup>10</sup> McKenna, *The Railway Workers*, 43

staff either free or at nominal charge, as described by Kingsford<sup>11</sup> - few other civilian employers offered this.

**Commented [KT16]:** Yes and perhaps a sense that there was lifelong employment.

Furthermore McKenna makes the interesting argument that workers from agrarian backgrounds were attracted to the quasi-military railway companies (and indeed were attractive to them) because they were used to hierarchy and deferring to authority – but with the complementary appeal that, unlike in their rural experience, this new employment offered them the opportunity to rise within that hierarchy<sup>12</sup>. Kingsford confirms that the prospect of advancement was a genuine attraction of railway work for potential candidates, but the curtailing of promotion opportunities in practice (as railways reached their maturity) was in turn a source of frustration for many staff, as evidenced by the high turnover of staff by several companies in the 1850s and 1860s with a high percentage citing dissatisfaction with prospects<sup>13</sup>.

**Commented [DT17]:** Lead with your own opinion, and then back it up with the ideas of others.

Another factor reinforces the picture that railway work would have been seen by many as an aspirational opportunity. If, as seems likely from the lack of evidence to the contrary, the substantial Irish pool of labour was mainly excluded from mainstream railway work, this may have been due to direct discrimination or the indirect effect of that requirement for local testimonials for applicants. (The mobile groups of mainly unskilled Irish workers – who made up a significant group of the railway navvies and other labouring classes in northern England and southern Scotland<sup>14</sup> – made no apparent inroads into mainstream railway labour during this period despite their ‘offer’ of dangerous work for low pay.) One effect of this would be to raise the status of railway work in the eyes of its workforce, and to make alternative jobs at the lower end of the spectrum even less attractive, and certainly not aspirational. It is notable that although there was a somewhat high level of staff turnover described by Kingsford, the dominant reason for leaving was to advance the individual’s job prospects even further<sup>15</sup>. He also highlights that many staff were supernumeraries (in 1870 ‘probably in the region

**Commented [DT18]:** Again, an example might be good.

**Commented [DT19]:** Lack of evidence, is not evidence for something. Avoid doing this, stick to what you do know and can argue for, and highlight what you don’t know.

**Commented [DT20]:** Ah, this may suggest the above, so okay.

<sup>11</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 111-3

<sup>12</sup> McKenna, *The Railway Workers*, 26-7

<sup>13</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 146-7

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, 292

<sup>15</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 36-7, 44-5

of five percent<sup>16</sup>), a factor that contributed to the high turnover figures of some companies<sup>17</sup>. The fact that despite this turnover there were applicants on waiting lists for jobs throughout this period indicates that railway work was seen as desirable in principle<sup>18</sup>, at least in part for aspirational reasons.

**Commented [DT21]:** While out of period, you could have just mentioned Howlett's work, which talks about secondary and primary labour markets. It would may have re-enforced that such things were developing.

It is worth noting, in parenthesis at this point, that despite all the requirements for personal testimonials the other main cause of staff wastage during this period was indiscipline – probably a testament, as ever, to the value of testimonials? Nevertheless this enforcement of workplace discipline, a topic discussed again further below, does not appear to have put off this queue of applicants.

**Commented [DT22]:** Do you have a reference or figures?

Meanwhile, in addition to the status, clothing and promotion prospects there were further positive considerations for the jobseeker. Even before (or without) gaining a grade promotion there would be at least two incremental pay increases for many grades of staff during this period<sup>19</sup>. Alongside this prospect, and the provision for clothing cited above, for many railway staff there was the probability of housing being provided or subsidised<sup>20</sup>, and household fuel<sup>21</sup>.

**Commented [DT23]:** In what capacity, and to what extent was this applicable to all staff?

These 'fringe benefits' (potential 'dealmakers') were some of the elements in the equation facing a prospective railway job applicant. The core pay on offer will now be considered before looking at some of the 'negative' considerations (potential 'deal-breakers') facing the jobseeker.

There is plenty of information from each company's own records about how much core pay the various grades of railway staff were each receiving from the 1830s onwards<sup>22</sup>. Naturally there were many variations: between those various grades, and on location (e.g. London or 'country'), and chronologically – broadly higher in the 1850s and lower in the 1860s. Nevertheless adult staff (not 'lad clerks') very rarely received less than 15s (fifteen shillings) per week, with even

**Commented [DT24]:** You have become very reliant on Kingsford for this section, but it might be worth just referencing, even if just in the footnotes, the others that have talked about railways' paternalistic benefits.

<sup>16</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 150

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 41

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 129-130

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 121-7

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 111

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 88-102

the lower traffic grades receiving between 20s and 25s<sup>23</sup>. These rates need to be compared with what the potential job applicant could expect to gain elsewhere.

Since many of the prospective rail workers came from the world of agriculture – see further below – a wage comparison here would be useful, but documentation of such pay is at best thin. Kingsford cites the GWR's General Manager's 1879 Report twice<sup>24</sup>:

'In agricultural districts where wages were very low, fifteen shillings per week as a commencing wage for a porter enabled the company to obtain, without difficulty, as many men as they required, especially as the chances of promotion afforded to the men a prospect of advancement far beyond what they were likely to attain in agricultural pursuits.'

By inference the report is referring to an earlier time, including the pre-1870 period, and is plausible if only because at least the GWR managers knew that they had had no difficulty recruiting for these porter jobs (at the foot of the GWR's hierarchy). But there were regional variations, especially during the 1825-70 period, and not all applicants had agriculture as their sole alternative option.

Hunt's detailed analyses show that, outside London, unskilled labour was particularly poorly paid in the south of England in the mid nineteenth century<sup>25</sup>, and his Table setting out agricultural labourers average wages by region for 1867-70 still shows 12s.5d. for the south-west region, against a figure for north-east England of 18s.9d, and a Great Britain average of 14s.3½d at the time<sup>26</sup>. It appears that the availability of either mining or other new industries – or simply the 'strength of custom'<sup>27</sup> - was the main reason for such variations, and illustrates why the GWR 15s wage for porters would be particularly attractive in most of that company's hinterland.

Nevertheless, even where agricultural wages were higher the rates on offer for railway jobs above 'passenger porter' would still have been eye-catching – averaging over 18s, and often more than 20s - throughout the 1840-70 period<sup>28</sup>. Since builders' labourers and craftsmen were averaging 3-4d to 5-7d per hour

Commented [DT25]: Good mention.

Commented [KT26]: But ironically less men were probably required in those areas!

Commented [DT27]: Good.

Commented [DT28]: Reproduce the numbers or the table, but you don't say 'in his table', as you are not showing it.

Commented [DT29]: Just an observation, but could you have brought in Feinstein's figures of wage increases from 1760 onwards? You potentially could have argued that these would have been lower earlier on in the period, making railway work *more* attractive.

Commented [DT30]: Excellent, you are going beyond the reading list, and this is compelling information.

<sup>23</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 89-94

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3, 88

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, 7-20

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, Table 1-4, 64

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 56

<sup>28</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 90-3

respectively in (for example) 1860<sup>29</sup> the unskilled labourers would have had to work some 60+ hours per week to match such initial railway wages. This at least made the starting wage a clearly more than competitive prospect; but to the historian it stimulates the followup question of whether such wages actually needed to be quite so competitive.

**Commented [DT31]:** '60-plus'

Kingsford emphasises that in the early days at least, most new staff with the possible exception of engine drivers were mainly recruited locally<sup>30</sup>. Hunt emphasises that with the exception of the groups of young Irish immigrant workers mobility of labour was not that high until after the 1850s, and for most of the nineteenth century regional variations in wages in most areas of work continued. It can therefore be argued that railway companies could have been more hard-headed in deciding the wages on offer during this pre-1870 period, especially in regions like the south-west where local wages were more modest. One can surmise that during the pioneer days of the railways, when substantial profits were anticipated, perhaps the control of wage costs was not seen as a critical concern when the chief consideration was to recruit staff 'of good character', as mentioned above. It could also be argued that higher pay was needed to compensate for the 'fringe disbenefits' - it is at least conceptually possible that the prospect of working long hours in a sometimes dangerous setting, always subject to a quasi-military discipline and potential dismissal, might have outweighed the relatively attractive wage and linked fringe benefits already outlined - but in practice they did not. The considerations of discipline with associated job insecurity, risk to life and limb, and railway hours of work will now each be discussed as 'potential deal-breakers' for the jobseeker.

**Commented [DT32]:** There was also come migration to railway towns that you could of mentioned.

**Commented [DT33]:** I worry that this section is straying into a bit too much speculation without evidence.

**Commented [DT34]:** Perhaps provide an example?

**Commented [KT35]:** But was discipline tight in other industrial jobs in this period? Certainly other industrial jobs e.g. textiles were dangerous.

Discipline at work and job security were linked during the 1825-70 period in a way that is strange to the modern eye - the existence and usage of the Master and Servant Act 1823, amended in 1867 and abolished in 1875. Under this Act, the latest in a succession of laws dating from 1351, breach of an employment contract was a criminal offence, with a magistrate being able to impose a period of custody (until 1867) or other punishment should a worker refuse to work, or

**Commented [DT36]:** You don't need to worry about saying this.

<sup>29</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, 68-9

<sup>30</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 2-5

refuse a court order to return to work (after 1867)<sup>31</sup>. Interestingly, Naidu and Yuchtman go on to provide evidence that in the coal, iron and textile industries, which were subject to peaks and troughs of labour demand due to price fluctuations, many workers actually preferred to sign long (typically one year) employment contracts during this period because employers normally honoured them and hence they offered the worker some security<sup>32</sup>. But in the railway world during this period, the worker was potentially subject to the criminal law even though his job security was assured more by the nature of the business than by the length of the contract, for it did apply in practice – for example, Kingsford cites four enginemen on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway being given a month’s hard labour at Kirkdale for refusing to work in 1836<sup>33</sup>. It was the skilled men such as engine drivers who had the most to lose by being tied by the criminal law to employment contracts, and who had the most to gain from liberty to seek higher wages elsewhere. But if for other workers job security was the foremost consideration, the railway company’s potential usage of the Master and Servant legislation would not have been a great disincentive to sign up.

Discipline could be harsh during this period, as set out in some detail by Kingsford, with (for example) the GWR dismissing three percent of its total staff in 1869/70<sup>34</sup>, and fining 1,039 men an average of 4s.5d for irregularities in their work<sup>35</sup>. But as with a comparable option of signing up for one of the armed forces (no better paid than agricultural labour anyway<sup>36</sup>) the trade-off for the employee here was good behaviour in exchange for regularity of work and income.

Moving on to risk of life and limb, some of the work on the railways certainly led to personal danger during this period when corporate responsibility for employee safety was an ethic yet to be established. Kingsford emphasises that figures for deaths and injuries for railway staff before 1870 cannot be at all regarded as precise, but it is at least clear that a number of engine drivers,

<sup>31</sup> Suresh Naidu and Noam Yuchtman, “Coercive Contract Enforcement: Law and the Labor Market in 19th Century Industrial Britain” (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, 2011) 5, 52

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 4, 8

<sup>33</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 14

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 24

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Murray Tulloch, “On the Pay and Income of the British Soldier, as Compared With the Rate of Agricultural Wages,” *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 26, no. 2 (1863), 185

Commented [KT37]: Good!

Commented [DT38]: Well, yes and no. After the 1836 Liverpool and Manchester event, the railways rarely, if ever, used the Master and Servant legislation. So while they technically could use it, it could be argued that transgressing the rule book was more likely.

Commented [DT39]: Probably a better way to put this would be to say ‘apply for railway employment.’

Commented [DT40]: Good. But tie it in a bit closer to the overall argument.



firemen, guards and even porters were occasionally killed during this period<sup>37</sup>.

**Commented [DT41]:** Again, a single example would be nice if you can find one.

But it seems unlikely that this would have put off many job applicants – especially the former servicemen - when set against the risks that were just as apparent to them posed by agriculture, building and especially mining.

**Commented [DT42]:** You need a reference and evidence here to make this claim.

Finally, long hours of work might have been a greater disincentive, if applicants would have fully appreciated these at the time of applying. Precise figures are again elusive during this period, although there was widespread public concern from the 1830s onwards, with Kingsford citing daily working hours of 12 to 18 hours in various instances<sup>38</sup>. This has to be considered alongside the question of weekend (especially Sunday) working, which was extensive. Extra hours could always be demanded as needed, in addition, so the potential length of the working week was certainly something, in principle, for the job applicant to consider.

**Commented [KT43]:** 12 or even 14 hour days were not uncommon in industry in this period.

However, the alternative prospect for most applicants, was hardly more attractive on this point. Although agricultural or building labour might be restricted per day simply by daylight (in the winter), both jobs were both seasonal and insecure. For most low-paid employees it would have been more important to have the certainty of receiving a regular income on the railway, even with the attendant likelihood of working excessive hours, than live with the risk of periodic dearth of income when working in agriculture or construction. In other words, job security again emerges as a 'dealmaking' consideration.

**Commented [DT44]:** We do have some recollections about this, especially towards the end of the period, that you could have brought in.

In the context of a labour surplus an 'average' individual seeking employment in most parts of the country would have perceived the prospect of a railway job as a relatively attractive one. The disincentives of long hours, an element of personal danger and quasi-military discipline would not have seemed strong. The offer of a competitive and rising wage was therefore perhaps a 'bonus attraction' rather than a 'core attraction' when considered alongside the key considerations of regular and secure work with some sense of status and the apparent potential for personal advancement, together with the (sometimes) fringe benefits of housing, clothing, domestic fuel and occasional travel which would all have comfortably

**Commented [DT45]:** I think you could have elaborated on this. Indeed, we have estimates of comparative hours with other employers, and so, even if these figures are problematic, they should be mentioned.

<sup>37</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 47-8

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 116

outweighed those possible disincentives. In a later period many companies such as the GWR realised that they could hire new employees at a younger age at a lower wage – this adds to the suspicion that in the 1825-70 period the wage offer was an unnecessarily attractive one at a time that was really a buyer's market for employers.

In summary, the higher pay on offer was probably indeed a special attraction for the prospective railway employee during the pre-1870 period, but in the context of the total package on offer in the circumstances of the time it was possibly an unnecessary attraction for the employers to have offered.

2815

**Commented [DT46]:** I'm not sure you really needed this when we are in the conclusion. It is, after all somewhat new information. Keep the conclusion concise and to your main points.

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