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“. . . Guess who York's biggest employers will be when the trainworks shuts? Chocolates. Yes, Rowntree's and Terry's. Delicious of course, but no call there for people who work with aluminium and computer-controlled gauges and fabrics and turn out products that cost three million pounds each. And there's a puzzle here – a conundrum which has been exercising the mind of those 750 men and women at the train-making factory: do we really need new trains?

Because there are people in suits at the headquarters of British Rail in Euston Road London NW1, and they'll say no, there's no need for any new trains until 1998 at the earliest. But there are other men and women in suits, who commute into London every day from Kent. They cram into carriages that are up to 40 years old, they rattle and bounce along, you try telling them we don't need new trains. And here's another puzzle, again pondered over by those 750 workers in York: will privatisation of the railways be good, or bad?

Well, John Watts the Transport Minister says it'll be wonderful, and he's a canny man, Mr Watts. He was such a nuisance to the government when he was a back bencher on the Commons Finance Committee that they made him a Minister. And Mr Watts sees a massive increase in the railways after privatisation: the 25 different train companies, he says, will be seeking out new markets, providing what the customers want, putting on new services, and the three rolling stock leasing companies will be competing to provide the fastest, most reliable high-class carriages. Of course, the government argument runs, there may be a slight delay before all this comes about – a hiatus, they called it – and it's that hiatus that has consigned 750 families to the dole in York.

Because with all this splitting up of the railway monolith, there's nobody actually making decisions about ordering new trains. Everybody's too concerned with drawing up contracts for using the tracks, selling the tickets, leasing the equipment, much too busy with management buy-outs and venture capitalists to decide on details like 'Will we need any new rolling stock?' And so the ABB train factory saw the orders drying up.

The Managing Director there is a big blunt Swedish chain-smoker called Stig Svard, and he formed an alliance with a small neat Yorkshireman called Tony Walton, who's the rail union official at ABB, and together they enlisted the help of city councillors, local MPs and consultants, and they had a very simple case. Here we have, they said, the last factory in Britain that makes complete trains,

and everybody says we need to switch people from the roads to the railways to cut down on congestion and pollution, and we know there'll be demand for our product within, say, three years. So, could we please have some help from the government in the form of accelerated orders to keep us in business now?

Mr Watts, and the Treasury mandarins accepted all those arguments – except the last one. Not my problem about the orders, said Mr Watts, Minister for Roads and Railways (notice the irony in the order of priority in his title – Roads, and Railways). The markets must decide, he said. It's not the government's role to keep individual companies in business.

And so our last train-making factory in Britain will go out of business after a hundred and fifty years. And when the good times do come along and demand increases for trains and carriages, well, don't worry, we shall be able to buy them of course. The French, and the Italians, and the Germans, and the Swiss, and the Swedes, will be only too happy to oblige. It won't help our balance of payments of course. But the market will have prevailed. It'll be too late then of course for the York craftsmen and craftswomen – because if they're really lucky, some of them may well have found a new job – at the chocolate factory.”

Mike Briscoe

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Transcribed by Lisa @YorkStories, www.yorkstories.co.uk. Originally transcribed from my recording of BBC Radio 5 Live's Sunday programme, 14 May 1995, on audio cassette. Transcript included on www.yorkstories.co.uk, in August 2014, to accompany a digitised copy of the audio file. Part of a project to put online various documents and recordings I have relating to the closure of York carriageworks.

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