

Kyrle Probus Club.

The often-turbulent history of Britain's 20,000-mile railway network was related in fine detail to members of Kyrle Probus Club on Thursday (June 4).

John Falcon entitled his talk 'No Way to Run a Railway.'

'Today, there are 26 train operating companies,' he said. 'Fares are very expensive unless you book well in advance. Trains tend to be very crowded because they are rented at considerable expense.'

John explained that train companies do not own the tracks, which leads to 'terrific complexity and extra cost,' although he believes the travelling public are not aware of this fact. 'The trains are run by private business but all infrastructure is owned by a national company – Network Rail.

'Known before as Railtrack, Network Rail is currently in debt – 28 billion pounds sterling. How did it all come to this?'

John recalled that passenger steam trains were first hauled by Rocket and its fellow engines on the Liverpool-Manchester line in 1830. 'Until then, there was no such thing as a rail industry. The UK system of about 20,000 miles was mostly in place within 40 years.'

From the early days of Brunel, the railways evolved through route competition backed by massive finance raised for new lines.

By the end of the (19th) Century, the last great line, the Great Central, was completed with its attractive terminus at Marylebone. 'The railways had reached their high point' as railway traffic increased enormously during and after the First World War. By the onset of World War 2, the railways, which suffered but survived extensive bomb damage, were virtually nationalised.

Mainline steam ended in Britain by August 1968, and British-made diesels enjoyed a very successful run.

'Until the 1980s, British Rail had more 100mph trains than anywhere, except Japan,' John said.

The basis of the current privatisation scheme was the 'separation of wheel from rail,' he said. 'It has raised immense problems and expense. Seven other countries in Europe tried it and found exactly the same thing.'

However, the 'good news' means passengers can now typically travel from Burton to Glasgow Central in 4 hours 10 minutes, compared to the previous 6 and a half hours, with trains from Euston to Manchester Piccadilly every 20 minutes. A planned new fast line will bring Birmingham to London in 45 minutes.