

The Birth and Evolution of European Railways: Historical Issues and Lessons for Today

Paris, November 21st, 2025

SNCF, 34, rue du Commandant René-Mouchotte, 75014 Paris, France



10th International Railway History Association conference

In partnership with Rails & histoire and with the support of SNCF

Two hundred years ago,

the world's first railway line opened between the British cities of Stockton and Darlington. The railway has been viewed with a mixture of fear, admiration and hope. It was seen as a means of creating wealth while mobilising considerable investment. Initially, its effects on economic growth, industry and innovation prevailed in people's minds and historiography over the revolution it brought about in the mobility of goods and people, food and lifestyles, education, and the circulation of ideas and the perception of space. All of these changed in scale. As this year of celebrations comes to a close, the IRHA aims to stimulate ongoing debate and once again place the railway at the heart of contemporary discussions, as it was two centuries ago.

8.45 Registration

Welcome by **Andrea Giuntini**, IRHA's Chairman

9.00 Introduction by Dr **Florence Brachet Champsaur** (SNCF), directrice Patrimoine, culture et politiques mémorielles, SNCF

9.30 Session 1 - **How the railway was born in the UK and continental Europe: a comparison.**

In 1825, Great Britain was the most advanced country in the world and had favourable conditions for developing the railway. It set the standard for all subsequent experiments.

Chairperson: **Marie-Noëlle Polino** (SNCF and IRHA)

Speakers:

David Turner (Aston University, Birmingham, UK), *Early railway development in the United Kingdom: exploring the legacies of slavery*

Giulio Pappa (Scuola IMT Alti Studi Lucca, Italy), *The Development of Railways in the Kingdom of Sardinia: A Transnational Ambition in a Fragmented Italy?*

10.30 Break

10.45 Session 2 - **The dissemination of railways in Europe: how continental European countries embraced railway innovation.**

The English model spread throughout Europe and evolved in various forms. A kind of railway ideology emerged everywhere, influencing the sector's key decisions.

Chairperson: **Michèle Merger** (CNRS, France and IRHA)

Speakers:

Csaba Sandor Horvath (Széchenyi Istvan University, Győr, Hungary), *The first plans and buildings for the railway in the Habsburg Empire, particularly in the Kingdom of Hungary*

Leandro Stacchini (University of Siena, Italy), *A complementary network: the origins of secondary railways in Italy and Spain between political debates, technical solutions and early developments (1860-1915)*

11.45 Session 3 - **Building railways, trains and stations: a European affair and its networks.**

The construction of the first railways was an extremely challenging undertaking. Significant commitment was required for the development of steam locomotives, fixed and rolling stock, and signalling and control systems. The railway standardised not only the production of equipment, but also of buildings. Stations became symbols of dominance over the territory.

Chairperson: **Ana Cardoso de Matos** (Universidade de Évora-Cidehus, Portugal)

Speakers:

Ralf Roth (Goethe Frankfurt University, Germany), *How to create a national railway network? Some European experiences from the past*

Bertrand Lemoine (France), *XIXth century railway stations: a comparison between England, France and Germany*

12.45 Buffet Lunch

14.00 Session 4 - **The economic impact of the railways. An ongoing debate.**

The impact of the railways on the overall economy was shocking everywhere. They also competed with existing communication methods. All activities, businesses and markets, as well as the transport of goods, changed profoundly as a result, leading to the emergence of the railway worker category.

Chairperson: **Jordi Martí Henneberg** (University of Leida, Spain)

Speakers:

Federico Meneghini Sassoli (University of Pavia, Italy), *Early Railways and Internal Markets: Between Risks and Opportunities*

Georges Ribeill (Rails & histoire, France), *1823-1833, une décennie cruciale en France. De premiers rails au service de houillères et forges sans débouchés*

15.00 Session 5 - **The train in everyday life.**

The railway not only transformed the landscape and cities, but also disrupted everyday life. This gave rise to railway travel, art and tourism, as well as railway food.

Chairperson: **Stefano Maggi** (University of Siena, Italy)

Speakers:

Paul Van Heesveelde (Belgium), *To what extent railway fiction can be used as a source for history*

Jean-Pierre Williot (Sorbonne University Paris, France), *The station buffet in Europe: a key player in the railway sector*

16.00 Break

16.15 Session 6 - **The European railway after two centuries.**

The railway sparked hopes of unifying territories, and it is still considered a means of achieving European unity today. But what about the rest of the world?

Chairperson: **Paul Veron** (IRHA)

Speakers:

Laurent Tissot (Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland), *Building a Europe of Railways*

Arnaud Passalacqua (Université Paris Est-Créteil Lab'Urba, France), *Exporting european high-speed rail to the United States? A second - but unfulfilled - wave of rail dissemination*

17.30 Chairperson: **Michèle Merger**

Award presentation of François Caron prize offered by RAILS & histoire