

Track Planning Services

Railroads or Railways? - One of Life's' Hard Questions

OR

What's in a Word - A trite little piece!

There is conjecture amongst modellers and others about the choice and use of words to describe their interest in the hobby of model railroading; or is it model railwaying? When we use the word "railways" or "railroads" there is sometimes objection from other modellers. Australians have grown accustomed to using one or the other, depending on their allegiances, upbringing or qualms from fellow modellers. Very few modellers regularly use both; interchanging each word depending on whim or circumstance.

There is much passion from some about which word is correct, or even undesirable. To the extent of dogma, modellers often have explicit and overpowering opinion about usage of "railways" and

"railroads". This opinion is often expressed in haughty terms, denigrating the user of the wrong word in the most vocal fashion, so that everyone nearby can hear the berating inflicted on the unfortunate user of - the other word.

In this essay we will examine the use of both words from an historical, usability and preferential view. The use of the words "railway" and "railroad" have a great deal of history about them, most emanating from the 19th Century.

The following transport systems commenced within a few decades of each other in a range of rail transport dominated countries. Consider the early use of the words in the following countries:

Naming of Some 19th Century Systems	
NSWGR	NSW Government Railways
VR	Victorian Railways [Victorian Government Railway Department]
LNER	London and North Eastern Railway
PRR	Pennsylvania Railroad
NYNH &HRR	New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad
SAR	South African Railways
SNCF	Société National de Chemins de Fer [<i>literal translation</i> = "railways"]
DBB	Deutsche Bundesbahn [<i>figurative translation</i> = German Federal Railways]

In the table above, the name of the company and abbreviations are as used by the company itself. In each example, the words "railway" and "railroad" are hidden in the abbreviation or acronym which became the usual identifier for the rail company. Interestingly, there is an abbreviation RR for railroad, but no similar abbreviation (RW) for railway, although "R" stood for "railway" in some acronyms. In each instance, "railway"

and "railroad" are single words and not hyphenated.

Naming of the French rail system (SNCF) uses a figurative term for 'rail line' while the German system uses words for a "people's shed" (DBB) as descriptors.

Some of the above systems have now passed into history. In today's world of rail transport, we have the following:

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21st Century Systems

Example of System	System Operator
CountryLink	NSW TrainLink Services
V/Line	V/line Corporation
The Ghan	Great Southern Rail
Pacific National	Pacific National Pty Ltd
Aurizon	Aurizon Ltd
Amtrak	National Railroad Passenger Corporation
Eurostar	Getlink
Avanti	Formerly Virgin Trains
PLM	Chemins de fer de Paris à Lyon et à la Méditerranée

Not many mentions of rails or roads here.
Modern definitions of the terms “railway” and

“railroad” from dictionaries of major English-speaking countries are:

COUNTRY	Dictionary		
Australia	Macquarie	“Railway”	a track made of steel rails along which trains run
		“Railroad”	[no apparent meaning]
Great Britain	Oxford	“Railway”	A track made of steel rails along which trains run
		“Railroad”	A track or set of tracks made of steel rails along which passenger and freight trains run; a railway
USA	Merriam-Webster	“Railway”	RAILROAD; especially: a railroad operating with light equipment or within a small area
		“Railroad”	a permanent road having a line of rails fixed to ties and laid on a roadbed and providing a track for cars or equipment drawn by locomotives or propelled by self-contained motors; also: such a road and its assets constituting a single property
	Wikipedia		The difference between the American term railroad and the international term railway (used by the International Union of Railways and English-speaking countries outside the United States) is the most significant difference in rail terminology.

Australians have no formal view on the matter of differences between the words. No simplicity of definition between the words in other countries either.

However, in the context of rail systems, definitions

from rail authors may give a better insight into acceptable use of these words. Consider the following from the middle of the 20th Century:

Quotes from History

"... the first roadway built of rails ... was a short track of wooden rails ..."

"...Strictly speaking, a 'railway' means a line of rails or track providing a runway for wheels, whereas 'railroad', the more comprehensive term, means the rails or 'line' together with all the lands, buildings, rolling stock (including locomotives), and other assets constituting a single property."

"... the terms 'railway' and 'railroad' are often used interchangeably ..."

The Steam Locomotive in America

Alfred W. Bruce ©1952 W. W. Norton & Company Inc

"A railroad, called railway in Great Britain, is a form of land transportation in which a permanent roadway with parallel rails provides a track for cars "

Lexicon Universal Encyclopaedia ©1987 Lexicon Publishers Inc

**Railway seems to be the two pieces of rail supporting trains,
whereas railroad is the rails plus the infrastructure**

From an historical perspective, Australians were first influenced in rail transportation by relationships with English masters. The first passenger paying line was opened in England in 1823. In the mid 1800's, they had the most extensive and reliable rail network in the world.

The first regular rail line in Australia opened in 1854. The English influence impacted on our early locomotives, imported rail lines, and operational utilities (train staffs, signals, trackside structures etc). Depending on the chief mechanical engineer in our colonies, more or less influence was obtained from England. We adopted all manner of their technological advances.

As years advanced further into the 19th Century, chief engineers looked elsewhere for new and superior engineering and processes. Infrastructure and practices from North America were imported and became part of common usage. Baldwin locomotives began replacing Beyer-Peacock locomotives!

From the late 19th Century into the 20th Century our transport relationships, methods and language changed, reflecting wider and newer technologies. The first use of the relatively simple but reliable Walschaerts valve gear (from Belgium) came from American locomotives imported into Australia.

The introduction of diesel electric locomotives,

essentially from North America, brought another set of technologies and terminologies to rail transport in Australia. We started using "44 tonners" for shunting when the US Army brought them to Australia in WW2. We also imported English diesel electric and diesel hydraulic locomotives. Compared to North American locos, these generally proved unreliable and were discontinued (eg early English Electric locos, 41 Class in NSW).

By way of comparison, the preponderance of aircraft technology from the USA dictates most world jargon in air transport, just as early English rail transport influenced world rail jargon.

Modellers recreating late 19th to mid 20th Century Australian layouts are accurately using the word "railways". The locomotives, rolling stock, stations and buildings all have some element of the word in advertising and narrative painted and lettered on company infrastructure. For the era, modellers depend on the usage of "railways" because it was the progenitor and early standard of our rail transport systems.

In an alternative modelling scene of North American prototype, are modellers content to call their layouts the Pennsylvania Railway (sic) because they are Australian; or because the English term was in first use for our early rail systems?

Confusion abounds, even with the naming of the same rail company in the US. The US Library of Congress refers to “the Denver & Rio Grande Railway”, Wikipedia calls the D&RGR a railroad, and American Rails and Britannica uses railroad, although Britannica acknowledges the D&RGR is alternatively called a railway.

Wikipedia says ...

“The New South Wales Government Railways (NSWGR) was the agency of the Government of New South Wales that administered rail transport in New South Wales, Australia, between 1855 and 1932. The agency was succeeded by the Department of Railways on 1 January 1915; and then following the enactment of the Public Transport Commission Act, 1972 (NSW), the Public Transport Commission was formed; later to become the State Rail Authority on 1 July 1980.”

Further changes to the NSW corporatisation of rail transport and naming followed from 1980.

The insistence of using the term “railways” has long been overcome by modernisation in rail systems. In 2020, NSW ceased using the term railways in their system. We have Transport for NSW, Rail Infrastructure, Sydney Light Rail, CountryLink. Victoria started privatising their rail network from the 1990’s, using various operators for different parts of their network, but they are no longer called railways.

If the transport body ceases to use the term “railways”, then who is the authority that insists the term is correct?

Compare the use of the terms railway and railroad in Australian society to the way we use and pronounce foreign terms. For example is it more appropriate to pronounce “Tour de France” as if we are French, or

should we say it as it is written in English? Who is to say one is more correct, no matter how we say it, unless we are in France!

Perhaps modellers use and insist on embedding the word “railways”; based on their love for their hobby in a particular century, era or origin of locomotives and rollingstock. Since late in the 19th Century, the Americanisation of technology commenced, but there was no immediate change in terminology. Just because government used a particular term 150 years ago, does not make it the word of choice for today.

In real life, and on our layouts, we are used to routing locomotive direction using “turnouts”. This term has been in common usage in Australia for many years, but some would insist we use the alternative term “points”. In Great Britain, the major manufacturer of model rail track uses “turnout”, because it is in common international use on real and model rail lines. Elsewhere the term “switch” is in common usage.

Today, enginemen, engineers or drivers use the word “road” to describe the track or path their locomotive will take, much the same as a truck driver describes the route he will take. They do not say “... I will take a rail (or rails) to a destination ...”.

Whether users of the word “railways” in a broader context are continuing to show undue allegiance to the English is a matter of their choice. However, as our country changes and our choices change with our dependencies, it is appropriate we recognise usage of words that may not have been common in years past. In our more eclectic condition, both “railway” and “railroad” are equally appropriate and acceptable.

