

The Swedish West Coast Line

From National Romanticism to transport rationalisation: Historic environment, cultural heritage, and railway landscapes as ecosystem services

HENRIK RANBY

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INTRODUCTION

This article is about railway landscapes, using a Nordic example of the Swedish Väst kustbanan or West Coast Line (VKB). The VKB runs between the Öresund Sound and the Göta River, joining the southern county of Skåne with the city of Gothenburg and ultimately the capital of Denmark with the capital of Norway. When the line was built in the 1880s, it connected two expansive regions, each known for its rapid industrialisation and its ports, shipyards, industries, and foreign trade. The line followed the Swedish west coast, helping the sugar industry in north-west Skåne, contributing to the growth of the seaside resorts of Ängelholm, Torekov, and Båstad, and connecting cities in the county of Halland – Laholm, Halmstad, Falkenberg, Varberg, and Kungsbacka – and benefitting the seaside resorts there too.¹⁾ Places such as Lindome, Kålleröd, and Mölndal (one of the earliest industrial towns) were brought closer to Gothenburg, and some 40 small towns in Skåne and Halland were connected by rail.²⁾ I will consider the history of the VKB and its landscape from south to north, keeping to the sequence in which the line was constructed.

Almost 140 years after it was built, the VKB is still an important route for railway freight and long-distance and regional passenger traffic. The recent addition of the Öresund Bridge to the south has increased commuting and the labour market has expanded. The VKB is more than that, though: it is a railway landscape rich in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Rail passengers see the countryside of north-western Skåne and Halland, ranging from the flat Ängelholm plain and unmistakable county boundary of the Hallandsås Ridge, past southern Halland's wealthy farming district, the gentle hills and plains of Susedalen, and on to the rugged wildness of the west coast's fjords, lakes, and forests. In places, the coast itself is visible.

In my book *Åkdon, blick och landskap* (2020, 'Transport, gaze, and landscape') I remark on the paucity of research about the VKB. In the standard work about Swedish station buildings, Gunilla Linde Bjur only mentions Halland in passing, while thus far I have only studied the Skåne–Halland section of the line.³⁾ I have argued for wide-ranging interdisciplinary research about the VKB, for which this article is the first step, though it is in the nature of a preliminary study

to pinpoint the key topics rather than offer conclusive results.⁴⁾ The VKB, being an inter-Nordic connection, lends itself to discussion in a Nordic journal such as *Fabrik og Bolig*, especially as it runs through country that was Danish until the seventeenth century.

RAILWAY LANDSCAPE AS ECOSYSTEM SERVICE AND HISTORICAL RESOURCE

How does a railway interact with its historic environment and landscape? The unobstructed views of the countryside, the railway heritage: should they be seen as resources which the physical environment offers passengers, local communities, and the region? And are they resources or services that a sustainable society should capitalise on?

The term *järnvägslandskap* or 'railway landscape' has been used by Eva Gustavsson and Johan Bergkvist, although both take a narrower view than I would wish and are generally concerned with the immediate areas around railway stations.⁵⁾ Taking into account the specifics of historic environment management and its favoured models of historic landscape, human geography, and landscape analysis, I instead propose a broader definition: A railway landscape is a landscape whose character, identity, and accessibility are defined by the presence of a railway, and in which railway infrastructure is a prominent feature.⁶⁾

My definition is informed by the work of Clas Florgård, a professor of landscape architecture, although he does not explicitly use the term railway landscape.⁷⁾ As I see it, a railway landscape is both a common asset and a common responsibility, as the European Landscape Convention would have it, and is an umbrella term for a variety of values and benefits – cultural, ecological, aesthetic, social, and economic.⁸⁾

In nature conservancy, it is usual to use 'ecosystem services' to refer to the services we get 'for free' from nature.⁹⁾ For Naturvårdsverket or the Environmental Protection Agency (NVV), 'cultural ecosystem services' by definition add to quality of life and give people a wealth of experiences from outdoor recreation and natural and cultural heritage.¹⁰⁾ The NVV holds that cultural ecosystem services must be linked to specific ecosystems, and are not

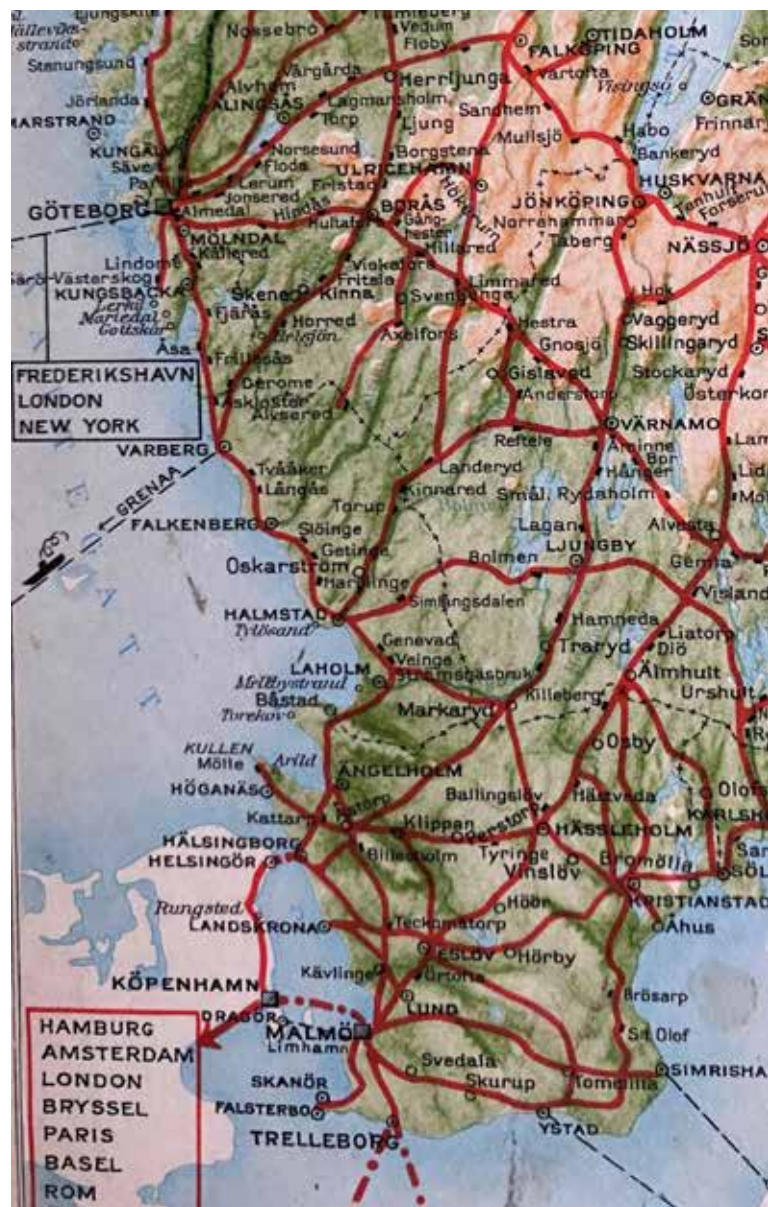
applicable to man-made cultural heritage such as urban areas, churches, castles, or railway stations and bridges, lengthmen's cottages, and railway engine sheds.¹¹⁾

The NNV and the Boverket, or the National Board of Housing, Building, and Planning, are tasked by the government to communicate ecosystem services to the other government agencies responsible for spatial planning.¹²⁾ Boverket's project ESTER, like Trafikverket or the Transport Administration, has extended the definition of cultural ecosystem services to include the historic environment, but there are even more interpretations than that.¹³⁾ Conservation research singles out 'cultural landscapes' and 'the historic environment' as sustainable, identity-shaping resources.¹⁴⁾ Knowledge of the historical past is fundamental to understanding and valuing cultural ecosystem services. One key issue is the linking of cultural ecosystem services with cultural heritage or the historic environment.¹⁵⁾ Several Swedish environmental goals highlight the importance of ecosystem services in community planning (something most local authorities are now working towards).¹⁶⁾ Ecosystem services can increase cross-sector collaboration and counteract the silo effect.¹⁷⁾

The Swedish Transport Administration had a hand in the NNV's campaign about ecosystem services. Cultural ecosystem services are mentioned in the Transport Administration's call for 'urgent research and innovation' in the period 2021–2026 under the heading 'Research problem – Landscape Historic Environment'.¹⁸⁾

Recognising the railway landscape as a resource also means acknowledging its historical importance. How has the VKB changed since it was built? How were its railway landscapes managed in the twentieth century, with what discourses and on what premises? What has happened to long-standing, historical railway landscapes as the VKB gradually changes? How was the railway landscape valued, what interest was there in protecting it, and could we today make better use of the railway's historic environment and landscape as resources, integrating them into sustainable infrastructure planning?

The railway network of Southern Sweden with the West Coast Line to the left. Map från 1960. Statens reproduktionsanstalt.



50 THEORETICAL BASIS

I have argued elsewhere that in the industrial age, all modes of transport (in which I include the railways) have been instrumental in the history of landscape and in shaping experiences of landscape. There is a strong bond between transport, gaze, and landscape; modes of transport, like perceptions of the landscape, have a central part to play in cultural history and the creation of historic environments; and wheel tracks can be seen almost everywhere in the – transport – landscape: a cultural history without carts, railways, bicycles, motorbikes, mopeds, cars, or buses is almost unthinkable and would give the wrong impression of the past.¹⁹⁾

This recognises the part the railways played in creating characteristic historic environments, providing access to the countryside, and influencing perceptions of the landscape: Sweden's characteristic cultural heritage ranged from station buildings to railway towns, from railway bridges to station gardens; there was access to the countryside for visitors, but also for passengers watching from passing trains; and the landscape as a both natural and cultural experience, meaning a resource or ecosystem service that offered quality of life and a wealth of experiences from outdoor recreation and nature and cultural heritage. The railways' impact on perceptions of the landscape spanned aesthetics, regional identity, nation-building, Scandinavianism, and world view. For many long-distance passengers, the impression of the landscape (here in Halland) would be overridingly what they could see from their seats, framed by the carriage window.

I have emphasised how important it is that research into historic environments absorbs the lessons of art history, perception, and visual experience. The railway carriage is a moving viewpoint where passengers view a landscape: vistas at high speeds and at the lower speeds near stations the same landscape's towns and cities.²⁰⁾ The phenomenon was already well known to nineteenth-century authors, and was highlighted in the late twentieth century by Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Rune Monö.²¹⁾ It is a perspective commonly found in landscape research: or, as it has been said, 'roads and railways are decisive for people's opportunities to experience the landscape'.²²⁾

My recent book stops in the early 1970s and does not continue on to the changes to the railways, and by extension the railway landscape, in the mid-1980s on. In this article I shall therefore address different questions about the assessment and management of railway landscape during the renewal of the VKB between 1985 and 2024, and how it is assessed and managed today.

NATIONAL ROMANTICISM AND THE RAILWAY LANDSCAPE

The oldest stretch of the VKB dates to 1885, the same year as the Tourist Association was founded, with its motto 'Känn ditt land', 'Know your country'. The National Romantic concept of landscape took shape at the end of the nineteenth century, encouraged by Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (1906-1907, *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*) and the interest in local history, seen, for example, in various county histories by the railway official and land historian Mårten Sjöbeck.²³⁾ In this, a knowledge of school geography – from reading *Nils Holgersson* to learning about the regions and cities, natural resources, commerce, natural and cultural heritage, and the names of rivers as mnemonic rhymes – was essential to Swedes' regional and national rootedness, and created collective points of reference and identity. The regions together built the nation.²⁴⁾ The railway network was instrumental in the National Romantic concept of landscape: it united the vast length of Sweden and offered views of countryside, townscapes, cultural heritage, and what can be called 'national icons', such as the Kullaberg peninsula, Laholm Bay, Varberg Fortress, and the Lion Redoubt at the southern entrance to Gothenburg.²⁵⁾

The National Romantic idea of the VKB was cemented by its inclusion as one of the five decorative panels in the main concourse of Gothenburg Central Station, painted by Filip Månsson (1864–1933). The railway lines are picked out in gold on faux archaic maps, which show ships coming into harbour and the iconic sights along the way.

The National Romantic landscape was also on show in the central concourse of Stockholm Central Station (completed in 1927)



in the heritage murals by the artists John Ericsson and Natan Johansson. The west coast was included, as there was a painting of Varberg Fortress from the south.²⁶⁾ I take the subtext of the murals to be that the railway that binds the nation together and gives people access to different regions, landscapes, and historical monuments.

The National Romantic railway landscape was associated with aesthetics and pride, but also with a certain topographical eagerness to explore and understand. It was evident from around 1900 in the sheer number of photographs and postcards of railway stations and bridges or views from trains, and in the 1930s the new topographical genre of aerial photo postcards.

The National Romantic railway landscape – the railway as a link to magnificent views, landscape, nature, and historical monuments – should not be thought specifically Swedish, as it was anchored in industrialism's visual culture across the board in art, literature, and popular culture. The nineteenth century often privileged the visual over the other senses.²⁷⁾

The railway map mural in Malmö Central Station (by the Skeppbron entrance), though smaller than the one in Gothenburg, is done in the same style and covers the entire European railway network in 1924, from Narvik in the north to Tunis in the south, from Lisbon in the west to Ankara in the east. It too includes ships and occasional map animals (such as a camel in the Sahara).²⁸⁾ The internationalism of the motif was probably considered appropriate for a terminus with the ferries to Copenhagen just outside.

FILIP MÅNSSON: The West Coast Line as a wall painting in the main concourse of Gothenburg Central station (1930). Railways in gold and landmarks emphasized. H. Ranby 2023.

HALLAND'S LANDSCAPE -- A BRIEF CHARACTERISATION

According to the Council of Europe Landscape Convention, 'landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'.²⁹⁾

Halland is an elongated county, bounded to the south by the Hallandsås Ridge, to the west by the Kattegat, and to the east by the forests of the southern Swedish highlands. The northern border with the county of Västergötland and the city of Gothenburg has never been as definitive. The county has a relatively mild coastal climate and is usually counted among the Old Danish or Eastern Danish provinces, sometimes called Skåneland. Halland is crossed east to west by four main rivers: Lagan (which runs through the town of Laholm), Nissan (Halmstad), Ätran (Falkenberg), and Viskan.

The land rises to meet the coast, shielding the inland areas. The picture is one of thick forest to the east, green river valleys, wide sandy beaches to the south and rugged shores as you move north, and a similar divide between southern Sweden's fertile plains and the rocky hills of the north-west, as is very obvious around Varberg.

The town of Tvååker is said to mark the border, including the shift in dialect from rolled Rs to guttural Rs. It was also roughly the same boundary in architectural idiom between the peasant houses of Skåne Halland (East Danish) and the more typically Swedish building styles of western Sweden.³⁰⁾ Folk art largely comprised textiles, ceramics, and painted furniture and hangings. Medieval Halland also stood out for its urban culture, where its towns were fortified and often had castles. There was also the Cistercian monastery of Ås, founded at the end of the twelfth century by monks from Sorø in Zealand.³¹⁾ Laholm and its castle, Lagaholm,

were strategically placed on the Lagan to control transport and travellers, both north-south by land and east-west by water; Old Halmstad was known for its half-timbered buildings; Kungsbacka was once Denmark's northernmost town; while Varberg has since been moved and has a post-medieval grid street plan.

In the nineteenth century, from having been poor, barren country with drifting sand and moorland, Halland became farmland that produced grain for export, a development seen first on the large country estates following the land redistribution in the lowlands between 1825 and 1850.³²⁾ Pine trees were planted to stabilise



JOHN ERICSSON/NATAN JOHANSSON: The Varberg Fortress. Wall painting in the main concourse of Stockholm Central station (around 1927). H. Ranby 2023.



the sand around Laholm Bay. Fishing and shipping were Halland's traditional industries and its coastal towns supplied the inland areas. Varberg was already a noted spa and bathing resort in the early nineteenth century. Halland is known as the county Selma Lagerlöf glossed over in *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, but even she captured its key features in a few sentences.³³⁾ On the other hand, Karl Nordström's and Nils Kreuger's paintings of Varberg Fortress are among the more atmospheric National Romantic accounts of the region.³⁴⁾ In terms of art, the National Romantics of the Varberg colony were followed later by the landscape artist Arvid Carlsson (a member of the Halland Circle) and the surrealist Halmstad Group.³⁵⁾ As for museums, Halland is generally associated with Bocksten Man, a remarkably well-preserved medieval 'bog body', and with the lead-filled brass button supposedly said to have been the bullet that killed King Charles XII at the siege of Fredriksten Fortress in 1718. Sjöbeck summarised the character, landscape, and buildings of Halland in 78 pages, illustrated with his own photos. However, his interest was the historic landscape, and he hardly mentioned the railway.³⁶⁾

Halland has long been a through route, far easier to journey through than the forests of southern Småland and around Göinge. True, the Hallandsås Ridge used to be a notorious haunt for highwaymen, but as early as c.1070 there was a route north for Adam of Bremen to describe, going over the Hallandsås Ridge, along the Halland coast, and then striking north-east into Sweden along the Viskan Valley. There were other routes that followed the river valleys, such as the Nissastigen, a historic road that ran alongside the River Nissan. An ancient or medieval road running north-south through Halland has been identified, which became known as Kungsvägen (lit. the king's road), a name associated with the Danish-Norwegian union in 1380 and communications between Copenhagen and Kristiania (now Oslo). Improved after Halland became Swedish in 1645, the road is largely still in use, with milestones at regular intervals.³⁷⁾ What would be the A2 trunk road and most recently the E6 motorway thus has a thousand-year history. As Sjöbeck said in his description Halland's communications that in most people's minds the county was associated with public thoroughfares, and 'many Halland sayings are only truly intelligible when viewed in terms of transport'.³⁸⁾

Typical landscape of southern Halland. H. Ranby 2023.

THE ARCHITECTURE AND CHARACTER OF THE VKB

In Sweden, the railway network was planned so the main lines were built by the government (what would later become Swedish State Railways or SJ) and the rest were built privately by joint stock companies. Among the first government construction projects were the Västra Stambanan or Western Main Line (VSB) between Stockholm and Gothenburg and the Södra Stambanan or Southern Main Line (SSB) between Malmö and Falköping, where it connected with the VSB. Both lines were built from south to north, from Gothenburg and Malmö to Stockholm. The first sections came into operation in 1856. The VKB was completed in 1862, the SSB in 1864. The branch lines were built by cities, local authorities, landowners, and large businesses, helped by government concessions and loans. Despite being built privately, the majority went on to be nationalised in the twentieth century. From the start, Sweden held to what known as an *antikustprincip* or anti-coast principle. It was considered best for the country to bring the railways to less developed inland regions. The coast had existing communications such as coastal shipping and steamboat traffic. It also meant the main lines were less vulnerable to potential attacks by foreign forces.³⁹⁾

The VKB started off as a collection of branch lines that were subsequently linked. Malmö, Landskrona, and Helsingborg, Skåne's main cities, vied to establish connections up the coast and to boost their rural hinterlands' food production and foreign trade, especially once Denmark had to abolish the tolls in the Öresund Strait in 1857. Until 1896 the VKB name was kept for the Helsingborg-Gothenburg stretch, but in the twentieth century it came to include several lines that terminated at Malmö and Helsingborg.⁴⁰⁾ I concentrate on the three railways that together formed the main line between the international train ferry in Helsingborg (1892–2000) and Gothenburg.

As early as the mid-1870s, Halland was unusual in having no railway. The first lines to be built ran north-east from the coast, connecting to the publicly owned national rail network and bringing inland Småland and Västergötland closer to Halland's ports.



Skåne-Halland Railway.
The Sinarpsdal valley
at the Bjäre peninsula.
Postcard. O. Blad.

54 The Halmstad-Nässjö Järnvägar or Halmstad-Nässjö Railway (HNJ) opened its line between Halmstad and Värnamo on 1 September 1877 and the final stretch from Värnamo to Nässjö on 21 December 1882. The Varberg-Borås Järnväg or Varberg-Borås Railway (WBJ) opened in 1880. Large brick station buildings were built as the Halmstad and Varberg terminuses, both in a restrained style inspired by medieval architecture. Varberg Station was designed by the Stockholm architect S. F. Mellin in 187.⁴¹⁾

The plans for a west coast line were championed by the grain merchant, member of parliament, German honorary consul in Helsingborg, and train enthusiast Petter Olsson (1830–1911) from his base in north-west Skåne. By starting the Skåne-Hallands Järnväg or Skåne-Halland Railway (SHJ) to build the line between Helsingborg and Halmstad and the Åstorp–Höganäs branch line, Olsson benefited his home city and its port as well as his commercial interests in the brick and sugar industry.⁴²⁾ The background to the SHJ was long and complex, and it came with a series of technical challenges such as crossing the Hallandsås Ridge and building the long steel viaduct through Helsingborg. As with all railways, it was a question of balancing the requirements of sufficiently low gradients and curve radii with holding down construction costs, added to which were endless negotiations with local stakeholders and shareholders, which affected the route taken. The plan was to have stations at regular intervals, and their loading ramps and goods sheds meant agricultural produce could be shipped out and construction supplies and the like could be brought in. The line was completed in 1885. Railway architecture was synonymous with brick buildings in a relatively restrained style, with larger station buildings such as Kattarp and Laholm built with symmetrical frontispieces and the smaller ones with an L-shaped plan (Ödåkra, Mjöhult, Båstad, Eldsberga). Most railways took a similar approach to their architecture, with individualised designs for larger city stations and standardised buildings in a handful of sizes for the small stations.⁴³⁾ The austerity of the SHJ's architecture has been credited to Olsson and his brickworks, perhaps as an expression of his Protestant ethic and teetotalism. The SHJ was known for its brick buildings – even its goods sheds and warehouses. In Sweden, red-painted timber goods sheds were the norm.

From Helsingborg, the SHJ ran over a long steel viaduct with views of the Öresund and the castle of Kronborg on the far shore, and wound through the Pålssjö beech forest and on across Skåne's north-western plain. At Ängelholm it rejoined the coast at the mouth of the River Rönne before cutting inland as Kullaberg Point came into view, bypassing the Bjäre Peninsula and running north from the town of Skålderviken to cross the Hallandsås Ridge. The open plains were by thick forest up on the ridge. From its highest point at Grevie (104 m above sea level), it ran down through a cutting and the beautiful Sinarpsdal Valley to the town of Båstad, where after another cutting there were a sweeping views of Laholm Bay and on across the southern Halland plain with its county estates. It crossed the southernmost of Halland's rivers, the River Lagan, in Laholm near the ruins of Lagaholm Castle, and continued across the plain past small towns such as Eldsberga and Trönninge to Halmstad, and from 1916 the industrial landmark that was its ironworks.

The next section of line between Halmstad and Varberg was completed in 1886 by Mellersta Hallands Järnväg or the Central Halland Railway (MHJ), thanks largely to hitherto railwayless Falkenberg, where, like every Swedish town, local interests wanted a railway connection. They had the vocal backing of Olsson in Helsingborg, who was keen for the line to continue north.⁴⁴⁾ Varberg was less interested, but there the county council gave large subventions to help fund construction. The railway would be of great importance for Halland's dairy industry.⁴⁵⁾ MHJ stood out for its decorative railway architecture in Renaissance Revival and medieval styles, for which it brought in the Gothenburg architect Adrian Crispin Peterson (1835–1912).⁴⁶⁾

Trains crossed River Nissan by a steel bridge and came into Halmstad Norra, an elegantly neo-Renaissance, pavilion-like station, all patterned brickwork and decorative carving.⁴⁷⁾ Falkenberg's two-storey station was even more palatial, with brickwork and plaster facades, again in a Renaissance Revival style. Originally, it even had high Renaissance gables.⁴⁸⁾ In Falkenberg, Peterson had the chance to design more of the townscape than the station. He may have had a hand in another brick building for the MHJ, with carved decoration similar to Halmstad Norra, and he certainly

Skåne-Halland Railway.
Laholm railway station.
Postcard sent in 1905.



designed Falkenberg's new church, completed in granite and concrete in 1892, which stood in a park near the station. The civic centre was evidently a point of pride for the town in the late nineteenth century.

Gothic Revival architecture left its mark on the medium-sized country stations (Harplinge, Slöinge, and Tvååker) – two-storey, villa-like buildings complete with corner turrets and rich ornamentation – while even the seven smallest stations (Gullbrandstorp, Brännarp, Getinge, Heberg, Skreanäs, Långås, and Himle) had vaguely medieval facades. The basic design could be scaled down or up according to local conditions while remaining essentially the same.

Continuing up out of Halmstad, passengers were treated to one of the most appealing vistas, the rolling hills along the River Susesån. Once across the River Ätran they pulled into Falkenberg with views of the old city centre with its panelled houses and Sankt Laurentii Parish Church, followed by the nineteenth-century civic centre and the station. Sjöbeck chose the River Ätran as the marking the boundary between Skåne-like southern Halland and the more distinctively Swedish northern Halland.⁴⁹⁾

After a long, flat, straight stretch north of Falkenberg, the railway again rejoined the coast at the sands at Apelviken, south of Varberg. Grimeton Radio Station has been a prominent landmark in the flat, rural landscape since the 1920s. After Hästhagaberget the rugged coastline was increasingly evident, and, passing through deep railway cuttings, the imposing bastions of Varberg Fortress came into view as the train neared Varberg. This station, built by the WBJ, was completed in 1880.

The northernmost section of the VKB between Varberg and Gothenburg was completed in 1888 by Göteborg-Hallands Järnväg or the Gothenburg-Halland Railway (GHB), though behind the project was Sweden's largest private railway company, Bergslagens Järnvägar or Bergslagens Railways, which wanted the Oslo-Copenhagen line finished. That international connection had been on the cards ever since the Dalsland railway came into operation in 1879.⁵⁰⁾ Yet progress with the final section was sluggish. Olsson continued his efforts and secured the help of the Gothenburg merchant Oscar Dickson, which has been regarded as decisive.⁵¹⁾

The GHJ also built in brick. It favoured richly patterned designs in red and yellow brick. The Gothenburg architect Hans Hedlund (1855–1931) is said to have designed the stations in Kungälv and Mölndal (later Fässberg and then Mölndals Nedre, now demolished). They were built as two-storey buildings with frontispieces oriented to the sides.⁵²⁾

Larger L-shaped station buildings were built in the medium-sized towns of Fjärås and Lindome, of which Fjärås remains. The L-shape was a standard model of station used by the SHJ too. The GHJ's examples had heavily decorative masonry with quoins. As their appearance is reminiscent of Kungälv and Mölndal, it can be assumed Hedlund had a hand in them. Smaller station buildings were built in brick with frontispieces and narrow platform canopies to the side: Åskloster, Backa, Åsa, and Anneberg.⁵³⁾

Leaving Varberg on the GHJ line, past the old railway roundhouse (demolished in 2018), there was a marked change in the landscape, as southern Sweden gave way to western Sweden. Having crossed the mouth of the River Viskan by two truss bridges and along the coastal plain, at Strävalla the line turned inland towards the hills, passing the Fjärås Bräcka ridge, where it left the plains behind and the forest was denser. After Fjärås and Kungälv, it soon came to the River Mölndalsån, a valley with an industrial landscape that led via Krokslätt and Almedal to south Gothenburg, with Mölndals Kvarnby and its river rapids to the east.⁵⁴⁾ As early as 1887, the GHJ had built an industrial spur there for the paper manufacturer, AB Papyrus.⁵⁵⁾ Continuing north, there were Krokslätt's factories – the first built in 1877 and a notable expansion after 1890 – and at Almedal the Lyckholm brewery (1880) with its magnificent director's mansion. Until 1968, the railway ran to the east of the Gårda district, with its industry and the county governor's residence, and past Olskroken before turning westwards to cross the viaduct into its Gothenburg terminus, Bergslagsbanan Station (from 1930 Gothenburg Central Station). Skansen Lejonet or the Lion Redoubt at the southern entrance to Gothenburg was the main historic landmark and the 80-metre-tall gasometer built in 1933 (and demolished in 2017) was its industrial counterpart.



**Central Halland Railway.
The line at the Varberg Fortress.
Swedish Railway Museum.**

56 As passengers experienced it, the VKB differed from the SSB because it largely ran through open country, with a variety of vistas of farmland, hills, sea, and forest. Unlike many Swedish railway lines, there were no large forests. For much of the route, the railway ran alongside the old Riksväg 2 road, a link to past travel experiences shared by many over the years.

The SHJ originally had the old two-axle side-door compartment carriages, but in 1887–8 the three VKB companies jointly invested in new bogie carriages: modern and elegant, they had end platforms, electric and overhead lighting, and heating. The VKB had a more sophisticated air. In first and second class, the compartments had upholstered seats, armrests, and headrests, and could be made up as beds. It was an opulent railway experience that marked out the VKB as something exceptional.⁵⁶ It was ahead of SJ, which did not introduce bogie carriages until 1891.⁵⁷ In 1892, Danske Statsbaner or Danish State Railways (DSB) opened its Helsingborg–Helsingør train ferry, which connected to SHJ in Helsingborg's north harbour. Other changes in the private railway era meant that an extension was added the station building in Varberg in 1893 and a new station was built in Almedal in 1894 as the terminus for the Gothenburg–Borås railway.⁵⁸

NATIONALISATION AND THE VKB, 1896-1985

Nationalisation, consolidation

The VKB was of national, strategic interest from the first, and that increased when the train ferry service to Denmark opened, all of which was used to justify its nationalisation in 1896, when it became part of state-owned SJ. SJ immediately launched a series of construction projects along the VKB. The track was changed for stronger rails. Ångfärjestationen, later Helsingborg F, was built in Helsingborg in 1898. A large timber station building, it was intended to be temporary station and had a negligible southern Swedish character; instead it was built in the Old Norse style reminiscent of stations in northern Sweden. It bore more than passing resemblance to both the Ångfärjestation or Steam Ferry Station (1895) in Malmö and Frihavnsstationen or Free Port Station (1895) in Copenhagen.

Several other station buildings were rebuilt or extended, including Båstad and Ängelholm. As early as 1906, it was noted that SJ had added 13 station buildings to the VKB, made alterations to 8 and rebuilt 1.⁵⁹ The new stations included Gullbrandstorp (1897), Lisbro and Skreanäs (1898), Söndrum (1907) and Källered (1909).⁶⁰ By 1920 there were engine sheds with turntables in Helsingborg, Ängelholm, Halmstad, Varberg, Kungsbacka, and Gothenburg.⁶¹

In the 1900s there was a plan for the VKB to continue into Norway via the Bohusbanan, which had opened in 1903, but it came to nothing because of the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905. The proposed bridge at the Swedish–Norwegian border over the Idefjord was never completed, the Bohusbanan ended at Strömstad, and trains continued to go through Dalsland and Kornsjö to reach Norway.⁶² The 1920s saw the rerouting of the line south of Varberg, completed in 1920, the modernisation of Falkenberg Station in 1925, and in 1928 the construction of a long plate girder bridge over the River Nissan by AB Götaverken.⁶³

The station building at Brännarp Station was rebuilt in 1921.⁶⁴ Söndrum had a new station in the National Romantic style, which opened in 1922. There was a National Romantic timber station in Hede too, while Anneberg was rebuilt along the same lines in 1925. Several one-storey L-shaped stations were built: Båstad, for example, and Eldsberga and Trönninge. Major change came to the railways in Gothenburg in 1930. In future, the terminus for the VKB trains was SJ's Central Station, not Bergslagsbanan Station as earlier.⁶⁵

The democratic ambitions of the Swedish Model were evident in the fact that from 1928 to 1988 all SJ's passenger rolling stock (apart from the royal train) was painted a uniform brown. Being state-owned, the VKB's locomotives and carriages were the same as the rest of SJ, although the best carriages and fastest locomotives were reserved for the most important lines, of which the VKB was one.

Electrified, modernised

Near the VKB line a large hydroelectric plant was built at Lagan near Laholm in 1932, clearly visible to VKB passengers. It was needed to meet the SSB's demand for electricity for the Nässjö–Malmö

Central Halland Railway.
Halmstad Norra (North) station,
designed by the architect Adrian
Crispin Pettersson. H. Ranby 2023.



section. A temple-like granite building, it was designed by the architect Salomon Sörensen and his son Arnold Salomon-Sörensen to fit in with the sensitive historic environment of Lagaholm Castle ruins.⁶⁶⁾

The project to electrify the VKB ran from 1933 to 1937 and in 1939 the line's first double track was laid between Gothenburg and Almedal.⁶⁷⁾ Like Frillesås, the new Halmstad Norra was built as a restrained, modern, brick building with a pitched roof to fit in with the surrounding functionalist housing estate in north Halmstad. Almedal Station was far more modernist. The old Halmstad Norra survived, but in Almedal the 1880s station building was demolished.⁶⁸⁾

Station modernisations in the inter-war period saw flushing toilets replace the old dry toilets, the addition of central heating, and the installation of the characteristic curved platform canopies (Helsingborg F, Halmstad, Falkenberg, and Varberg). Falkenberg Station's high Renaissance gables were replaced by a hipped roof at some point between 1925 and 1936, judging by the postcards.

Several nineteenth-century stations were rebuilt and rendered in the mid twentieth century. Vallberga was one, Åsa another. Where the work done in Folke Zettervall's time as SJ's chief architect (1895–1931) retained much of the original character, functionalism and a new chief architect, Birger Jonson, left more of a mark. Ornamentation was removed and brick buildings were rendered in the best functionalist manner. The results at Peterson's villa-like stations on the old MHJ section of the line was especially brutal. The tall corner turrets at Harplinge, Slöinge, and Tvååker were replaced by low-pitched roofs. It is almost as if modernism wanted to castrate nineteenth-century architecture.⁶⁹⁾

Compromised

Between June 1940 and August 1943, most of the German troop transfers through Sweden used the VKB. German soldiers travelled in carriages leased from SJ to move between occupied Denmark and Norway, for example between Helsingborg and Kornsjö. It was not only soldiers on leave, however; large quantities of goods and materiel were transported on German freight wagons. The transports were supervised in the towns and cities by the Swedish

police. It was politically controversial and violated Sweden's neutrality so it had to be discreetly handled to avoid demonstrations and sabotage. Trains crossed at night at places such as Vejbyslätt, where the Swedish military was stationed to keep track of operations. Derailments were not unknown, suspected to be sabotage. The German troop transfers have often been singled out as part of Sweden's appeasement of Nazi Germany. Sweden only ended the agreement when it considered Germany to be sufficiently weakened to no longer pose a threat.⁷⁰⁾ There were press reports of German rolling stock on the VKB even after August 1943. One in *Arbetar-Tidningen* on 7 September 1943 noted that a passenger carriage, a travelling post office carriage, and 14 goods wagons, all German, had been ferried across from Helsingør to Helsingborg, from where they were heading north pulled by a Swedish electric locomotive. The article was censored but the original survives in Gothenburg University Library.⁷¹⁾

Rationalised

The government bought Bergslagens Järnvägar in 1947 and with it Dalslands Järnväg. In the post-war period, competition from road traffic went up and the railways were rationalised. In 1956 third class was abolished in Sweden, as in many other European countries. From the mid-1950s it was the car, not the train, which was seen as a right and the great social leveller in Swedish welfare state.⁷²⁾ The switch from rail to road, especially sugar beet, reduced freight traffic at Skåne's rural stations. The system of resident lengthmen was discontinued in 1956, after which the lengthmen's cottages became redundant. The government's new transport policy in 1963 meant all forms of traffic had to bear their own costs, which put SJ in a difficult financial situation as car ownership soared. Most of the smaller stations were closed, and later a number of old stations were demolished. Trains no longer stopped in Vallberga from 1962, Veinge from 1963, or Vejbyslätt from 1968, for example.⁷³⁾ Around 1970–72, stations such as Almedal, Mölndal, Källered, Lindome, Anneberg, and Åsa closed.

In several cases, a station closure were followed by the demolition of the station building and other buildings. That was the case at Almedal, Mölndal, Skreanäs, and Slöinge. It seems more were



**Central Halland Railway.
Falkenberg railway station,
designed by A. C. Pettersson.
In this picture with its
original decorative gables.
Swedish Railway Museum.**

58 demolished in Skåne than in Halland, perhaps because of individual SJ managers' attitudes in the various administrative districts.⁷⁴⁾

A major change in Gothenburg was the construction of the Gårda Tunnel in 1968, then Sweden's longest railway tunnel. It was necessitated by the expansion of the E6 motorway, which was built on the route of the old railway. The new E6 was constructed to run alongside the railway for long stretches in Halland north of Halmstad, for example, and from the Björkäng motorway service station. The VKB and the E6 even cross at several points in Halland. The motorway expansion led to some route changes, for example at Getinge.⁷⁵⁾

By the mid-1980s, the VKB was still essentially single track and followed its original route. It had locomotive-hauled trains with SJ-brown carriages that stopped only in towns and cities, not at rural stations. The Helsingborg–Gothenburg journey took over three hours with stops in Ängelholm, Båstad, Laholm, Halmstad, Falkenberg, Varberg, and Kungsbacka.

DOUBLE TRACKS, NEW ROUTES, AND COMMUTERS, 1985-2024

In the mid-1980s, a major renewal of the VKB began, albeit in stages. Double tracks and changes in route meant capacity improved and travel times were significantly shorter. It was a complicated process that has taken 40 years. There has been something of a railway renaissance, which was sparked by the government's new rail policy in 1979, which promoted regional projects for commuter trains and the like.⁷⁶⁾

In 1985, the route north of Halmstad was redrawn. That year the Halmstad–Bränninge line was straightened and the old line via Halmstads Norra and Söndrum was removed and removed. In Helsingborg a railway tunnel was built under the city and the new station for through traffic, Knutpunkten (lit. The Junction), was completed in 1991. The steel viaduct in northern Helsingborg was replaced with a concrete viaduct. The project made the old Helsingborg F Station redundant, and the opening of the Öresund Bridge connecting Malmö and Copenhagen in 2000 meant the Helsingborg–Helsingør train ferries were no longer needed either.⁷⁷⁾

Further north, the Kungsbacka–Gothenburg section was double-tracked in 1992. In 1993, an underground railway station was added at Liseberg, serving the amusement park. The line past Tvååker was closed on 4 April 1993 when a new double-track section opened between Hamra and Torebo.⁷⁸⁾

In 1993, a project to run a tunnel under the Hallandsåsen Ridge was also launched, prompted by the steepness of the climb, the curves, and the problem of leaves on the track. After endless geo-technical problems and environmental scandals, it was finally completed in 2015, the double track greatly increasing capacity on the VKB.⁷⁹⁾ A new station was added on the outskirts of Båstad. On the initiative of the city council, a new red brick station building was built that echoed the old: Båstad had wanted to preserve something of its identity.⁸⁰⁾ The fact the station building was not oriented to be visible from the train does detract rather from what was a well-intentioned project.

In Halland, Eldsberga–Halmstad was double-tracked in the early 1990s, followed by Båstad–Eldsberga, following a new route, in 1996. Laholm was now bypassed, and a station was built on the outskirts in 1996.⁸¹⁾

In the 2000s, something similar was done in Falkenberg, where a new double-tracked route skirted the city and a new station was built on the outskirts (2008). In both the Öresund and Gothenburg regions, commuter train traffic evolved with the advent of the Pågatågen regional rail system in Skåne (1983) and Västtrafik in Gothenburg (1988). The SJ brown era gave way to trains in bright, sometimes garish, colours. When the Öresund Bridge opened in 2001, the Öresundståg train network became a factor across the whole of southern Sweden, linking Skåne, Gothenburg, and Karlskrona to the east.

In north-west Skåne, passenger rail growth has meant that old stations have been resurrected in new guises (Ödåkra, Kattarp, Förslöv) and new stations have been built (Maria, on the outskirts of Helsingborg). In the Gothenburg region, Kålleröd reopened in 1991, Lindome in 1992, Anneberg in 1992, and Åsa in 2013, while a new station was built in Hede.

In Gothenburg, construction of Västlänken or the West Link began in 2018: an underground railway tunnel north of Almedal

Central Halland Railway.
Tvååker railway station by
A. C. Pettersson. Postcard.



linking the VKB and VSB with through trains and new stations at Korsvägen and Haga.⁸²⁾ On 10 December 2023, the double-track Ängelholm–Helsingborg Maria stretch was inaugurated. A double-track railway tunnel is under construction under the old station area in Varberg, which is expected to be completed in 2024.⁸³⁾

Future projects include a possible new route into Helsingborg, the stretch through Päljö forest being single track, as is the tunnel into Helsingborg Central Station (formerly Knutpunkten).⁸⁴⁾

In the past 40 years, the VKB has been rebuilt so much it deserves to be thought of as a new railway. If road transport and cars were seen as the modern alternative in the post-war period, after the mid-1980s it is the railways which have experienced expansion and investment. Public confidence in the railways has risen significantly, as have society's transport needs.

The modern rail system makes a sharp distinction between freight and passenger traffic. Station buildings with ticket offices have been replaced first by ticket machines and then by ticket apps.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT, CULTURAL HERITAGE

Any railway will change in the course of 140 years. Is it still the same railway people use now? The VKB appears to be a palimpsest, the old railway partially scraped away and overwritten by decades of new infrastructure. Some railway environments remain relatively untouched (Falkenberg is one), while in some old railway towns it is difficult even to trace the route.

What links people's perception of reality and their memories of the landscape to landmarks, rail routes, familiar stops, and typical station buildings? Do carriage windows still frame Halland's landscape and shape passenger perceptions of the county? What will remain in the long term and how can a historic environment perspective be reconciled with contemporary requirements for efficient transport?

The VKB embodies a variety of cultural heritage. At its most tangible it is what the railway has created: physical historic environments in the form of the surviving station buildings and other railway buildings such as lengthmen's cottages and other staff hou-

sing, engine sheds, goods sheds, bridges, etc. The historic environment also includes its brownfield land, sometimes converted into cycle paths. Some historic railway heritage is divorced from the modern railways because of rerouting, so it is no longer in sight of rail passengers as at Stureholm, Ingelstråde, Halmstad Norra, Falkenberg, Tvååker, and Getinge. Others, like Heberg and Åskloster, are still close to the current double track. Among the privatised stations there are both good examples of building conservation (Fjärås, Getinge) and buildings in a terrible state of disrepair. In 2021, the Transport Administration did inventory Halland's railway land and property, but it was limited to the busy main lines and did not cover the areas from which the railway had retreated.⁸⁵⁾

Alongside the tangible historic environment, the VKB also represents a more abstract heritage of history and stories, discourses and worldviews, literature, photos, and recollections. Together, this creates a rich and varied cultural heritage, partly documented in writing and images, partly in fleeting, generation-specific memories that gradually fade if they are not recorded.

In considering art and visual culture in Sweden before 1809, Lena Johannesson (1997) finds the cultural landscape and its content and symbols, whether historical or contemporary, to be central to people's acquisition of knowledge and their grasp on time and place, and it is the human gaze, taking in the landscape – and the transfer of experience that involves – which is largely what make people cultural beings.⁸⁶⁾

The earliest, official image of the VKB was presented in guidebooks, in postcards that proudly presented railway stations at their best, and in various accounts of railway history.^{87) 88)} The National Romantic paintings in the city stations have already been mentioned. Then there were literary descriptions by the likes of Elin Wägner, and Sjöbeck's county histories.⁸⁹⁾

Street and road names were also part of the cultural heritage of rail. The road layout was often changed when a new railway station was built. Hence in most towns and especially railway towns there will be a Järnvägsgatan (Station Street) or a Banvägen (Railway Road) or similar. The place names remain even in places that no longer have a railway.

The dark legacy of the German troop transfers has regularly

Gothenburg-Halland Railway.
Åskloster railway station,
designed by the architect
Hans Hedlund. Postcard.



60 been brought up by Nordic historians, and for example has been highlighted in Ängelholm's local history yearbook in 2008 and an exhibition at the Railway Museum in Ängelholm in 2014.⁹⁰⁾ It is also the setting of Hans Alfredsson's alternative history novel (1996) about rail sabotage in Pålssjö Forest, which results in Sweden being drawn into the Second World War. In Helsingborg, the debate flared up when the question of when conserving or demolishing Helsingborg F was discussed between 1991 and 2016.⁹¹⁾

Generally speaking, the post-war railway discourses were characterised by the generation-specific loss associated with station closures and railway towns losing their *raison d'être*. Today, those are events so far back in time that only pensioners have personal memories of the rural stations being in operation.⁹²⁾

It has been behind not only the bitter cynicism about rail policy, but also a burgeoning railway nostalgia, which was as good as institutionalised in the large number of railway enthusiasts, postcard collectors, model builders, local historians, etc. Historical material has been published as books (for example, the yearbook *Spår*) and in magazines such as *Tåg*, and more recently a range of websites with railway data. YouTube gives people the chance to see the VKB from the train driver's seat, and not only the current line, but also old single track over the Hallandsåsen Ridge.

Every passenger who uses the VKB will have their own associations, memories, and ideas linked to generations, individuals, and situations. For me it is childhood ski trips to Norway in the 1970s or commuting to college in the 1980s, though however personal they may be others in my generation will have experienced the like.

"The station is the gateway to adventure. As a child, I stood here late on Friday evenings in the February murk with my family. The skis had been checked in and, rocked by the regular rhythm of the rails, the sleeper would take us to Oslo, and then onwards to Norway's mountains. ... Right here is where adulthood starts. The brown carriages begin to roll, past the towering concrete silos in Norra Hamnen, past Roskildegatan with the café where I drank hot chocolate with whipped cream, past the Functionalist white cube of the Concert Hall, the Karantänen gallery, incessantly barking dogs, the marshalling yard, up onto the old steel viaduct over the Fri bad beech, and into the beech trees of Pålssjö forest. This train will take me to Gothenburg, where I'm going to train as a con-

*servation officer. I am leaving my home town with enthusiasm: 'Bye then, petty bourgeoisie, judging people by the brands they wear down Kullagatan!' And the train speeds on across the plain, snaking through the hills and curves of Sinarpsdal Valley and down to Halland's open country."*⁹³⁾

Cultural heritage will always age, cultural amnesia is a fact of life, and the 1980s are already long gone. Today's student will feel differently about the VKB, perhaps having never having queued for the ticket office, been over the Hallandsåsen ridge, seen the power station at Lagaholm, or watched that particular station sign – TVÅÅKER – come into view. Whose cultural heritage counts? How recent can cultural heritage be? Is a travel centre from the 1980s cultural heritage? People's view of the landscape will always have multiple dimensions – and be difficult to grasp. It is partly required and learned, whether at school or from county histories, travel programmes, postcards, etc., when it is part of people's socialisation as citizens. It is also partly people's own perceptions, their individuality, what they see, their memories, and how collective impressions come together to form a sense of, say, Halland.

Cultural heritage of a more recent vintage, in this case after 1985, has as far as the VKB is concerned not seen much interest in the historic environment management terms. There is as yet no temporal distance to the advent of double track and all it entails. Heritage management rarely considers anything thought 'contemporary' to be a historic environment, and therefore it is not assessed or valued. Cultural heritage issues become generational issues, and things are singled out and valued only once they are cultural *history* or threatened with destruction.⁹⁴⁾

MANAGING HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT RESOURCES

I hold that cultural landscape, the historic environment, and cultural heritage are resources that add value to people's experiences and well-being. The investment was written off long ago, leaving sustainable resources that create identity and community and can help the hospitality and tourist industries. To discuss such perspectives on the VKB, we need both the history and a sense of the cultural heritage, to which we should add the history of cultural heritage and how it has been valued and treated.



A landscape of the
The Swedish State Railways:
The ruins of Lagaholm Castle,
the Laholm hydroelectric plant
and railway bridges over the
Lagan river. Postcard/O. Bladh.

THE DEVALUATION OF MODERNISM

For much of the twentieth century, Sweden underrated its nineteenth-century architecture. It began with National Romanticism and only escalated with Functionalism. That devaluation at first meant a 'restyling' renewal and later demolition. It also included railway towns as a whole, which according to Ellen Key were 'disgus-

tingly ugly'.⁹⁵⁾ Modernist, rationalist ideology had no place for past ideas of style or neatness, let alone a well-tended station flower-bed.⁹⁶⁾ According to the architecture manifesto acceptera (1931), modern Sweden had no need for the 'outgrown forms of an old culture'.⁹⁷⁾



Falkenberg railway station, nowadays closed. The curved platform canopies (1920s) and the catenary system (1930s) are typical for the Swedish State Railways. H. Ranby 2023.

The welfare state was largely about material standards and economic growth. It was a modernist, rationalist society not much given to thinking about the past, and even less so if it were not immediately profitable. The cultural heritage conservationists of the day were not interested in station buildings from the nineteenth century.

Notions of the National Romantic railway landscape seem to have gradually faded away. For a generation endlessly told to travel by train, private cars promised to open up the landscape in the 1950s.⁹⁸⁾ International mass tourism brought new landscape experiences abroad. Yet it would be wrong to say it spelled the end of the idea that railways meant landscape experiences. Railway tourism in the shape of the Inland Line in northern Sweden was one such venture, as was the poster campaign 'See Sweden – Take the train'. The Interrail Pass, started in 1972, has brought decades of affordable rail travel and a community of landscape experiences to young people.

Since the early twentieth century, SJ has been careful to curate the history of the railways.⁹⁹⁾ It was ably abetted by huge numbers of train enthusiasts (generally men), who documented, compiled, and published data in bulk, although more often than not

they were bogged down in the detail rather than attempting to see the bigger picture. Only around 1970 did a real understanding of nineteenth-century cultural heritage dawn. It was a time when Sweden's railways were a morass of axed lines, closed stations, and demolitions in the wake of the 1963 transport policy and an economic downturn.

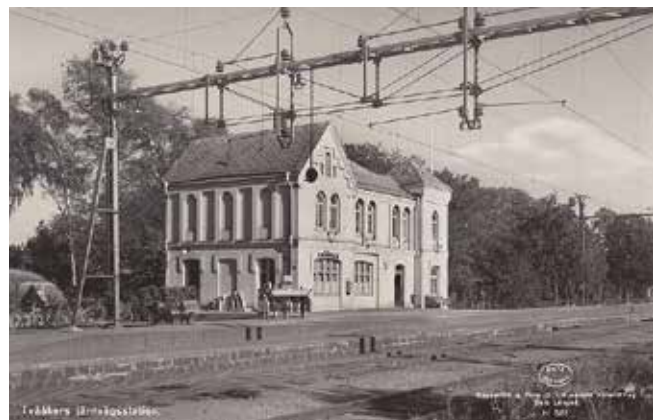
TRANSPORT RATIONALISM AND A MUCH-REDUCED LANDSCAPE EXPERIENCE

In my 2020 analysis of transport and landscape I left off in the 1970s. I did not address the railway landscape in the thoroughgoing changes to rail travel after the mid-1980s. In understanding today's VKB and how best to manage railway landscapes as ecosystem services, that past will be important. What follows is an outline of the last 40 years, to be fleshed out by future research.

For decades, views on the modern railways have been dominated by a discourse I have termed 'transport rationalism'. To compete with other forms of transport, the goal has been to transport passengers and freight quickly from A to B and in a safe way to minimise accidents and suicides. This and the growing prioritisa-



Ödåkra railway station with its idyllic garden. Electrical train coming in from Helsingborg. Postcard from the 1930s.



Tvååker railway station. The tower has been shortened and catenary is installed. Postcard around 1950/O. Lilljeqvist.



tion of health and environmental concerns have reinforced the success of the modern railways. Transport rationalism is an implicit, 'self-evident' discourse among decision-makers. In *SJ 125 år* (1981), SJ's then director general Bengt Furbäck said shorter journey times (because of faster trains) and greater traffic safety were two fundamental requirements for the railway revival he believed was underway following the government's 1979 transport policy.¹⁰⁰ A couple of essays in the sequel, *Järnvägen 150 år, 1856–2006* (2005), hint at the essential factors in the VKB's development since 1985. The new authority Banverket or the National Rail Administration (1988–2010), the greater health and safety demands under the Planning and Building Act (1987), the government's insistence on high speeds and improved safety, for example by removing level crossings, and the environmental guidelines on noise pollution were some of the parameters for railway construction.¹⁰¹ Johan Bergkvist has argued that the National Rail Administration was uninterested in architecture and gave little thought to rail history, but rather it was free marketeers and environmental (meaning health) issues which dominated.¹⁰²

The tunnel under the Hallandsåsen Ridge, begun in 1993, was a clear example of transport rationalism. The purpose of the project was faster transport from A to B and increased capacity. The existing railway over the ridge was mostly considered a technical problem (leaves on the line) and its aesthetic qualities were basically uninteresting.¹⁰³

However, transport rationalism is more complicated than that. The head of strategic urban and regional planning at the National Rail Administration, Olov Niska, said rerouting the line at Falkenberg was caught between the extremes of government interest and the local authority's monopoly on planning. The city council wan-

ted to free up land in a central location, the county council wanted to avoid significant changes to the urban environment, while SJ and the regional transport operator Hallandstrafiken wanted to run double track through the city. However, local politics meant it would be impossible to carry out a railway expansion within the city because of deep-seated objections to compulsory purchase orders. With no clear regional support, the railway was 'pushed out of the centre'.¹⁰⁴ Niska's essay highlighted that transport rationalism was not only driven by government objectives, but also by local political circumstances, and that local democracy might not always provide the ideal conditions for effective, long-term railway planning.

The consequences of transport rationalism for the railway landscape seem to have escaped people. Photos of trains passing through beautiful Swedish landscapes were still routinely published, but railway journeys in the dominant discourse were experiences centred on nature, landscape, or culture; Karin Boye's adage 'it is the journey which is worth our while' no longer applied.¹⁰⁵ SJ's old slogan 'See Sweden – Take the train' was increasingly doubtful. Somewhere along the way, the experiential aspect of rail travel had been completely disregarded. And despite the National Rail Administration publishing a special aesthetic guide for projects, *Banestetik* (1993). At one point it addressed the perspectives I too consider important:

*"There is no reason to try to hide or camouflage the railway ... The railway is an important part – in many cases a positive addition – to our landscape, provided it interacts with nature in a beautiful way. It is through personal involvement in the design of the whole, parts, and details that a beautiful railway can be created. Managing and advancing the historical legacy of our railways, created by previous generations, is an important undertaking."*¹⁰⁶

64 The superficiality of the travel experience relates to speed, of course. The faster one travels, the more cursory the picture.

The rerouting of the VKB between 1985 and 2024 has resulted in a considerable reduction in passengers' landscape experiences, their picture of Halland, and the cities' opportunities to present themselves. The Bjäre Peninsula and Sinarpsdal Valley have been lost to passengers; the views of Skälderviken and Laholm Bay greatly reduced; the seaside resort of Båstad is out of sight; Laholm does not appear to be a town, and its medieval castle ruins and monumental power station cannot be seen from a train. Further north, Falkenberg, which previously presented two faces with old timber buildings and the new nineteenth-century city centre, has disappeared. The original role of the railway station as industrialism's window on the world – the way a city or town presented itself to outsiders – seems irrelevant in a transport-rationalist communications regime. In Halland, several places lost much of their

railway town identity when the VKB was rerouted. Tvååker, once a key Swedish cultural border marker, no longer exists in the railway landscape.

The Varberg Tunnel, completed in 2024, has separated the railway from the coast around Apelviken, and hidden not only the views of Varberg Fortress, but also the entire visual presentation of the city centre.¹⁰⁷ In the Transport Administration's information film about the Varberg Tunnel (2019), the historic railway is presented as standing in the way of urban development or as a barrier with life-threatening level crossings and a single-track transport bottleneck. Trains in urban environments bring nothing but problems. The new station, 10 metres below street level with a modernist box on top, is presented as an attractive, vernacular building and a significant environmental improvement. The film has censored all the cultural history and landscape experiences of the old line. The historic station building or the Station Park, later the English



The West Coast Line with double track. A "Öresund train" passes Skrea church south of Falkenberg. H. Ranby 2023.



Park, do not rate a mention, nor the iconic views of Varberg Fortress or across the Kattegat at Älviken. Not a word about the demolition of the WBJ's old railway roundhouse to make way for the project.¹⁰⁸⁾

The historic environment perspective is wholly absent from the film, and so too the idea that passengers' experiences of nature and culture should be considered a resource. The transport-rationalist perspective predominates. Historical qualities such as Varberg having been a railway town since 1880 or any number of popular cultural phenomena that all indicate people find trains fascinating are neglected. The city's interest in expanding seawards with its Västerport development is presented as decisive and desirable. This is transport rationalism combined with a local willingness to expand.

Another example is the Skåne town of Ödåkra, a short way north of Helsingborg. It was built as a typical railway town with an L-shaped station building, a goods shed, rows of neat houses on either side of the railway lines, and a large industrial employer – here a distillery. The station building was demolished in 1983, hollowing out Ödåkra's identity as a railway town. When the new double track opened in 2023, noise barriers had been put up along a 2-kilometre stretch of the VKB, which has proved controversial. There has been talk of a 'Berlin Wall'. Evidently, an older era's enthusiasm for a well-ordered society is being pitted against modern transport rationalism.¹⁰⁹⁾

The level crossing in the middle of town has been removed, replaced by a grade-separated crossing further north. The new commuter station has been fitted with a modernist grey noise barrier. The focus for railway passengers and road users on Björkavägen alike is no longer the old railway town's neat nineteenth-century villas with their verandas and turrets (as in Vintappavägen). The community has been cut in half and no longer presents itself as was once intended, as a social unit. In terms of its historic environment, it is difficult to find anything positive about the new Ödåkra.

The planned renewal of Helsingborg's northern approach may remove the Påljö beech forest, the Öresund Strait, and Kronborg Castle from view. How West Link will affect the approach to Gothenburg remains to be seen. Will passengers cross Gothenburg without even having seen Gothenburg?

The implementation of a fast, functional, and rational transport system between 1985 and 2024 has come at the price of an extensive reduction in passengers' landscape experiences. Nature, topography, sea, and iconic cultural landmarks have disappeared from sight; urban environments and station towns no longer control how they are presented, because that is left to rationally functional but often nondescript stations. People soon christened the new station outside Laholm the 'Little House on the Prairie' from the Laura Ingalls Wilder books and TV series, underlining its bleakness and lack of context.

The VKB's passengers today have no sense of Båstad, Laholm, or Falkenberg as historical cities, and it seems likely Varberg and Helsingborg will soon join the list. There seems to be no interest in people being able to see Kullaberg or Varberg Fortress. Remarkably, there has been no reaction to speak of from local council communications officers, event and destination developers, tourism stakeholders, or brand consultants. Diminished experiences have been a non-issue.

When passengers' common frames of reference, learnt in school geography lessons and literature, vanish from view, so too does a National Romantic notion that landscape and cultural memory bind a society together. Everything is smoothed out and Halland loses part of its character when the VKB goes underground.

Denmark can be mentioned as an example of a different approach to historic railway landscapes. For Kystbanen or the Coast Line between Copenhagen and Helsingør, inaugurated in 1897 and one of Denmark's busiest lines, modernisation and electrification (1982-86) has been combined with the conservation of the old station buildings and other key elements in the historic environment.¹¹⁰⁾

Transport rationalism also stands in stark contrast to the popular cultural references to rail journeys through varied landscapes – and of course the associated visual experiences. Interrailing is familiar to millions; the rail journeys through stunning countryside and over iconic viaducts in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are a common reference for younger generations.¹¹¹⁾

TRAINS ARE THE PROBLEM

Greater recognition of safety, environmental, and health challenges means that trains operating in densely populated areas are more frequently viewed as problematic. In the nineteenth century trains were something to be proud of and fascinated by, but today they are best hidden behind noise barriers and embankments or in cuttings and tunnels. In descriptions of landscape, railways are often presented as a wound, a barrier, or a detriment to the landscape, and not as adding something positive. Conceptually, this is alien to the idea of trains and rail travel, scenery, or views in popular culture as something positive or fascinating.

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT AND RAILWAY STATIONS

What has the response been when it comes to historic environment management? Old-style heritage conservation was object-oriented. The focus was station buildings, not station gardens or railway landscapes.

The government's cultural conservation agencies first turned their attention to railway buildings in the late 1960s. Riksantikvarieämbetet or the National Heritage Board (RAÄ) and SJ collaborated in 1968 on inventorying the country's stations, on the initiative of Arkitekturmuseet or the Architecture Museum. The date was sent to RAÄ for processing. The project concentrated on station buildings. While the data-processing was underway, interest in Sweden's industrial heritage continued to grow, resulting in the new cultural policy adopted by Parliament in 1974 (Proposition 1974:28).

When RAÄ finished working through the data, lists of station buildings were sent out to the usual statutory consultees, who in this case were the regional antiquarians and county archivists. In 1983, RAÄ produced a new list of the station buildings still in SJ's possession, which ranked station buildings according to a range of criteria. It noted that 130 station buildings were of special historical or architectural interest and should be officially listed as historic monuments. SJ accepted about 50 of them and on 21 August 1986 the government announced that 55 railway buildings (not all of them station buildings, for example the Östra Årstabron Bridge) would be listed as statliga byggnadsminnen (state-owned historic buildings).¹¹¹⁾ Previously, that had been limited to railway buildings at Fryksta in Värmland and Buttle on the island of Gotland, along with Lund (4 March 1972) and Vansbro (15 May 1975).¹¹²⁾

At the same time in the 1970s as arrangements were made to safeguard some of the country's railway stations, SJ was busy demolishing others. Academic critics of the demolitions raised their concerns in a special issue of *Nordic Journal of Settlement History and Built Heritage* about railways and the built environment in 1986. Erik Nordin feared there was a fire sale to pre-empt any new policy to protect Sweden's railway history in all its forms.¹¹³⁾

Take the Skåne sections of the VKB as an example. According to Linde (1975), the stations at Ormastorp and Västraby were demolished in 1975.¹¹⁴⁾ The station buildings in Ödåkra, Kattarp, Hasslarp, Vegeholm, Rögle, and Mjöhult were demolished between c.1975 and 1985.¹¹⁵⁾ In Höganäs, the local council demolished the station building at Höganäs Övre in c.1977 followed by Höganäs Nedre in c.1980. Several stations on the Hallandsås Ridge (then in Kristianstad County) and in southern Halland were demolished around the same time. A century after SHJ began operations, most of its buildings were razed to the ground.

Yet a closer look at the station buildings in Halland reveals a different picture. Although some were indeed demolished, there is no indication of a rush to demolish the county's railway architecture. The architectural heritage of the MHJ, GHJ, and SJ has survived. No station buildings in Halland have been listed as historic monuments, though.¹¹⁶⁾ Sometimes it has been possible to repurpose them. Falkenberg's railway roundhouse, for example, has taken on a new lease of life as commercial premises.

The most controversial of all the VKB station buildings was Helsingborg F (formerly Ångfärjestationen), built by SJ after nationalisa-



The West Coast Line becoming a “subway”. The new station in Varberg. Visulent.

68 tion and closed in 1991. It became the Tivoli rock club, was threatened with demolition, investigated as a potential historic monument, and finally moved to the other end of Sundstorget Square, largely thanks to local opinion. It was never listed, though a couple of 1920s platform canopies remain to mark where it once stood.¹¹⁷⁾

The Transport Administration's recent inventory of Halland's railway land and properties was published in 2021. It is limited to the land adjoining the line and does not include any properties that have ended up off the current route.

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT AND RAILWAY LANDSCAPES

Historic environment managers have struggled to spell out the value associated with railway landscapes. Admittedly, historic *monument* management slowly but surely became historic *environment* mana-

gement by the late 1980s, emphasising its holistic approach. Yet the older sort of building-oriented thinking continued, and a change in terminology did not automatically make it an effective tool when dealing with questions of landscape. The government probably assumed the local authorities would act using their powers under the Planning and Building Act (1987) and the Natural Resources Act (1987, included in the Environmental Code). To this day, the majority of local authorities instead focus their planning resources on population and housing growth than on conservation. In hindsight, a backlog of cases, negative precedent set by the courts under the Planning and Building Act, budget restructuring, the questionable management of areas of national interest, a neoliberal interest in ownership and property rights, and a fixation on regional and local growth almost guaranteed expectations would not be met. All too often the result was *theoretical* historic environment management with limited real-world impact.¹¹⁸⁾



The new station at Ödåkra with soundboards. Trafikverket.



Getinge railway station.
No railway here any longer
but a building preserved by
a new owner. H. Ranby 2023.

One of the perennial problems for historic environment management is the number of stakeholders and consequent lack of coordination and continuity involved in any decision about the railways. Until the 1980s, decisions were made by SJ. Between 1988 and 2010, the National Rail Administration was responsible for the railway network, while after 2001 Jernhusen provided the commercial property management services for the stations. The books *Banestetik* (1993) and *Spår i landskapet* (1999) published by the National Rail Administration were its first attempt to make a distinction between railway landscape and technical infrastructure.¹¹⁹⁾

After 2010, the Rail Administration and the Road Administration merged to become Trafikverket or the Swedish Transport Administration. In 2013, Bergkvist called for proper consideration to be given to the cultural, historical, and aesthetic factors in railway construction and network management.¹²⁰⁾ Asked in 2023 whether there has ever been a concerted, holistic approach to the VKB's history, both the county antiquarian Emma Östholm and the head of Kulturmiljö Halland Malin Clarke answered in the negative.¹²¹⁾ I received much the same answer in 2017 from Mats Riddersporre at Skåne county council about the stretch over the Hallandsåsen Ridge, that the rerouting of a main line with real consequences for people's landscape experiences was not considered a historic environment concern at all, but was an internal issue for the Transport Administration. This despite it being described in older guidebooks as one of the most beautiful railway journeys in Sweden. The regions' historic environment management and legal authority does not seem to extend to railway landscapes.¹²²⁾

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AS A RESOURCE?

Given the VKB's history, the question remains how its landscape, cultural heritage, and historic environments could be recognised as a resource and integrated into Sweden's rail renewal plans. Is there an alternative to transport rationalism? How can the existing understanding of the railway landscape as a source of experiences and well-being be realised in urban and regional planning and transport planning?

These days, historic environments and cultural landscapes are accounted resources, as is well established internationally and nationally.

Of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015), Target 9.1 is 'Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all'. It should be possible to interpret 'quality, reliable, sustainable' infrastructure that supports 'human well-being' as something that maximises the value of the railway landscape's historic environment. Target 11.4, meanwhile, is 'Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage'.¹²³⁾

The premise of the Council of Europe Landscape Convention (ELC), ratified by Sweden in 2011, is that the landscape is a 'common resource' and a shared responsibility. The value of landscapes are multiple: cultural, ecological, aesthetic, social, and economic. The ELC exists to improve the protection, management, and planning of European landscapes.¹²⁴⁾

Since 2014, one of Sweden's official National Cultural Environment Goals has been 'A landscape management perspective in which cultural heritage is utilised in the development of society'. It underlines the idea that the cultural landscape is a resource – surely something that is equally valid for railway landscapes.¹²⁵⁾

Sweden's Historic Environment Act (1988) opens with the words 'The protection and conservation of our cultural heritage is a matter of national concern. Responsibility for cultural heritage is shared by all. Both individuals and public authorities shall demonstrate consideration and care with respect to cultural heritages. The person who is planning or executing work shall ensure that damage to cultural heritage is avoided or limited'.¹²⁶⁾

Protection for railway landscapes is also found in the Railway Construction Act (SFS 1995:1649, revised as SFS 2022:373), which states that 'When planning, building, and maintaining railways, consideration must be given to both individual interests and public interests such as environmental protection, nature conservation and the historic environment. An aesthetic design shall be sought' (2018:1417). Further 'When a railway is built it shall be located and designed as to achieve the purpose of the railway with the



least intrusion and inconvenience without unreasonable expense. Consideration shall be given to the urban and landscape profile and to natural and cultural heritage qualities.'

The international and national ambitions for the historic environment support the view that railway landscape is a resource, and are included in the Transport Administration's various policy documents, in historic environment strategies and goals, and in in-depth descriptions of key research and innovation.¹²⁷⁾ According to the Transport Administration's Objectives for 2030 (2018:235), everyone should work to maintain and strengthen biological diversity and the cultural values of landscape. The adaptation of infrastructure to landscape is covered by the Transport Administration's *Ecological and Cultural Heritage standards* (TDOK 2015:0323).

In the Transport Administration's proposal for research and innovation projects, it states that the landscape is the foundation of a sustainable society and a sustainable transport system. The transport system is not adapted to the surrounding landscape but affects the natural and historic environment so much that it is a key reason Sweden is failing to meet its environmental quality targets and national historic environment targets. Infrastructure can contribute, though, by making the natural and historic environment accessible to the public, and it is crucial for regional development. The adaptation of infrastructure to the landscape thus turns on a range of cultural, biological, social, and economic factors in sustainable development.¹²⁸⁾

This is not entirely positive. The railways are seen as an *intervention* in the landscape rather than a resource. I can only agree when it acknowledges the railways made the historic environment more accessible.

The Transport Administration has announced it wishes to develop the processes and tools with which to integrate historic environment work into the early stages of strategic, physical, and maintenance planning, the development of methods of digitally documenting the historic environment in question (for example in historic railway environments), research into the synergies between the historic environment and other sustainability goals, and the recognition of cause and effect in landscape and the historic environment. Further research is needed to gauge the historic environment's and landscape's importance for society, crisis management, and public health in urban and rural areas; the historic environment's and cultural landscape's importance for sustainable development; and the historic environment's importance as a resource in a circular economy.¹²⁹⁾ The Transport Administration's landscape guidelines call for a robust knowledge base and transparent landscape analyses.¹³⁰⁾

In the end, there are so many formulations about cultural landscapes and historic railway environments in the Transport Administration's documentation that the way is open to almost any railway construction project, however marginal its advances on a strictly transport rationalist approach, whether using existing new methods of analysis and developing alternative methods with which to identify ecosystem services along railway routes.

The realisation of such ambitions and their subsequent impact seems to hinge on the people taking the decisions – their professional training, competence, and status in the organisation and how many are involved. The international and national policy documents have all-encompassing interpretive frameworks. Is it an engineer, a biologist, or a cultural historian who is consulting them? Which

Kungbacka railway station,
a preserved building at a
station still in use. H. Ranby.

occupations dominate? Who has the deciding say? Can there ever be a consensus about what ecosystem services are, and will it mean that the railway landscape with its cultural memory is seen as a resource worth conserving?

Some formulations plainly assume the railway is an intervention in the landscape (and does damage which must be minimised or compensated for), rather than creating landscape, or at least contributing specific qualities to the landscape, such as the historical and aesthetic qualities I have singled out.

The Transport Administration does not own the issue, of course. Local authorities, as in Falkenberg and Varberg, can have a great deal of influence on railway planning. The valuable historic environments sidelined by rail renewal plans and duly sold off are a question for the regional and local authority planning authorities and historic environment management. It demands not only knowledge, but also empathy and insight into the character of railway towns and the railway landscape as a resource, but the outcomes could range from embankments repurposed as cycle paths to cultural protection for station buildings under the Historic Environment Act and the Planning and Building Act, all thanks to an appreciation of the value of former railway structures such as access roads, railway gardens etc.

Decommissioned railways can be used as pedestrian and cycle paths, as seen along the VKB and elsewhere. Such historic landscapes can be a resource long after the final train, as borne out by a TV series broadcast recently in Sweden. In *Walking Britain's Lost Railways* (2018) Rob Bell follows the network of paths made from disused railways. They are walks replete with flashbacks to the golden age of rail, magnificent views, and the quiet pleasures of the present.¹³¹⁾

RESULTS

After 140 years of operation, the VKB has a complex railway landscape with multifaceted cultural values from its station environments, landscapes, and views. The literature is thin, but it is clear the VKB played an important role in the history of both the Nordic region and the Swedish west coast. Since 1900 it has been altered and modernised, but in recent years the changes have become more pervasive with double tracks, new sections, and tunnels. I have found

that the rail renewal after 1980 did not capitalise on the impressive cultural and historical values of the railway landscape. Historic environment management has had next to no impact on rail renewal. A transport-rationalist view of rail has dominated, studiously neglecting the VKB's historical railway landscape and passenger experiences. In the Transport Administration's policy documents and statements, however, there are signs of a change. Landscape, cultural heritage, and aesthetics are singled out, which promises a better balance between landscape, cultural heritage, and efficient infrastructure. In 2023, however, there were ongoing railway projects such as at Varberg and Ödåkra, where the tensions between transport rationalism and cultural heritage had turned into outright conflict.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This preliminary study has outlined the issues of the ecosystem services associated with railway landscapes and shown that it is possible to capitalise on them. There are multiple pathways for further inquiries. More research is needed about rail renewal, planning processes, and the interplay of government, the regions, and local authorities after 1980. However good or poor the outcome, the complexity of the processes also warrants analysis as negotiations of transport policy.

Methods to identify different railway landscapes and their character, views, and content can speak to the better use of the railway landscape as a resource, and can in turn be applied in future rail planning, for example by the Transport Administration.

ABSTRACT

The article considers the railway landscapes of the Swedish West Coast Line (VKB) between Skåne and Gothenburg, which forms part of the Copenhagen-Oslo rail connection. The author sets out the history of the VKB from three joint stock companies in the 1880s to nationalisation in the 1890s, and subsequent changes over 140 years, told through the medium of Halland's landscape and its varied nature, towns, and landmarks as seen by railway passengers.

72 In the early twentieth century, what is best called a National Romantic view of railway landscape was in the ascendant. Since the 1980s, the VKB has been converted to double track. Much of the line has been moved, new tunnels have been added, etc. The requirements of speed, safety, and noise reduction have gradually removed many of the railway landscape experiences. The author calls for fresh methods of analysis and project planning to better use the ecosystem services which railway landscapes have to offer future infrastructure planning. The formal foundations are already in place in international and national conventions, laws, and policy documents.

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- 6) For landscape analyses, see Westerlind & Eklöf 1994.
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- 19) Ranby 2020, 535.
- 20) Ranby 2020, 18–22.
- 21) Ranby 2022, 227–228, 235–248; Schivelbusch 1984; Monö 1988.
- 22) Berglund et al. 2011, 4. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 23) Lagerlöf 1906–1907; Sjöbeck & Järnvägsstyrelsen 1931, 1936.
- 24) Ranby 2002, 21–33.
- 25) See, for example, Ranby 2020, 240–246.
- 26) sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholms_centralstation
- 27) Crary 1990.
- 28) The painting is in poor condition with no obvious signature. www.bebyggelseregistret.raa.se/bbr2/show/bilaga/showDokument.raa?dokumentId=21000001825063&thumbnail=false
- 29) In Swedish, *landskap* also means province, as in the old administrative divisions; Ranby 2020, 42.
- 30) Winberg 2000, 27.
- 31) Sjöbeck & Järnvägsstyrelsen 1936, 110.
- 32) Winberg 2000, 175.
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- 41) sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varbergs_station
- 42) Åberg 1953, 169–188.
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- 44) Åberg 1953, 186.

Notes

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- 2) Olofsson 1921, 156, 160–161; Trettondal 1959.

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