

English Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

There have been coal mines in Britain since Roman times, two thousand years ago. By the late 17th century, the steel and textile industries' insatiable demand for coal had led to ever deeper mines, which were ever more vulnerable to seeping ground water. Steam power, which would drive the Industrial Revolution, was in its infancy, and crude devices—"Miner's Friends"—were built to pump water out of flooded mines, a welcome replacement for the traditional horse-and-pulley systems that were frustratingly slow. Clever collieries soon decided they wanted steam power to transport what they dug out of the earth and started building railways to serve their mines. The first steam locomotives, one of which was called *Puffing Billy*, appeared in the early 1800s, making short runs in the coal mining regions of England and Wales. The Liverpool and Manchester Railway, which was started in 1830, was the first modern railroad. It wasn't long before thousands of miles of tracks were laid all over the country and the golden age of rail transportation was in full swing.

The railways solved many problems: even at a speed of about 30 miles per hour they were much faster than man- or horse-drawn carts or canal barges. But they also created a need for a standardised time system. Until then, most towns kept their own time, usually with a sundial in the town square. There was London time, based on what was set at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, which became known as Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). But there was also Bristol time, and Cardiff time, and others, which were all a few minutes ahead or behind London. The railways needed a single, standard time for their timetables and GMT officially became "Railway Time" in 1847. It then became Britain's legal standard time in 1880.

Britain brought the railways to Argentina and Uruguay in the late 1800s and with them came a wave of British engineers, administrators, accountants, and assorted employees. These *ingleses* set about building rail networks to transport passengers and freight and open up the remote

interior of the countries. They brought their language and culture with them, and some of their customs caught the attention of the local populations. Salient among these was the British idea of punctuality. Argentines and Uruguayans in those days were mainly Mediterranean transplants and their descendants who had a very different attitude to time. Whereas the British, perhaps influenced by their reverence for the railways, tended to see punctuality as an admirable trait that everyone should accept as the norm, residents of Buenos Aires and Montevideo saw no reason to allow time to rule their lives. Their priorities lay elsewhere. They had a casual approach to time that made it acceptable to arrive late for appointments or events, a habit that horrified the Brits. To the latter's consternation, people arrived late for meetings and assignments, official functions and receptions seldom began at the appointed hour, and even upper-level dignitaries seemed to have no understanding of time as a highly desirable organizing system. Argentines and Uruguayans accepted the unpredictability of life; the British tried to control it. This profound disconnect inevitably led to misunderstandings, bruised feelings, and, occasionally, harsh words.

The British had, at that point, been running their immense empire for a while and had come to believe that, when far from home, one must never forsake one's Britishness. It just wasn't done. So the expat railway personnel in the Río de la Plata region kept running their trains on time (to the wonderment of their passengers and freight customers) and kept insisting on punctuality in all their dealings, no matter how many times they felt slighted by late arrivals. Eventually, their hosts came to respect them for their quaint and relentless devotion to the god of time and started referring to the concept of punctuality as *hora inglesa*, or English Time. To this day, when Uruguayans or Argentines want someone to arrive on time, they say: "We'll meet on Friday at 10 o'clock. But *hora inglesa*, right?"