



**The Festiniog Railway:  
Getting There and Back**  
Peter Jamieson

Text © Peter Jamieson  
February 2022

Printed by CPI London,  
38 Ballards Lane, London N3 2BJ

# **The Festiniog Railway: Getting There and Back**

Peter Jamieson

This memoir is dedicated to all those who were there with me and may remember sharing the same experience, and to the memory of Lyn Owen, who started out with me at the beginning





Back in August 1952 the road to Wales was long and arduous, occasionally three lanes, with telephone poles marching alongside and many roundabouts. The journey took much of the day but it was engrossing. Now we are mostly swept along by road engineers' inexorable horizontal and vertical alignments, which cut a swathe through the landscape and shave their way through town and village or ignore them completely. Except for the latter stages of the journey, where if you are approaching up the Tanat Valley little has changed, not much remains of that earlier experience. Then there was the sense of anticipation; now you just set your Satnav, tune in to Radio 4 and join the melee.

On that first journey we left home at Welwyn Garden City early with luggage on the roof protected by a canvas cover and set course up the A5 with the family squeezed onto the bench seats of the Austin A70 (a company car). My mother read to my sisters to while away the hours and we had lunch at a roadhouse near Atherstone. In the evening we arrived at a farm in the hills above Nant Gwynant with a spectacular view of Snowdon where Mrs Evans served an evening meal, which included apple crumble, whilst two china dogs

and busts of Sankey and Moody eyed us from the slate mantelpiece.

It was on this holiday one warm summer's afternoon that I first came across those fabled grass-covered rails and tumbled slate wagons at Harbour Station. Being a keen collector of railway memorabilia, I persuaded my father to 'salvage' the number plate of wagon 95 - a risky business, I now realize, as it took place below the office window of the then general manager Robert Evans. It could have been very embarrassing for my father. But you will be pleased to know that I returned the plate to the company a few years ago after its 'long loan' to me.


Until I came upon this vision at Portmadoc my mind was fixated on American railroads but that afternoon was a Damascene moment. From then on everything changed and to know all about it was the driving force. But where was one to find inspiration? For compared to today's coverage, where every siding is seemingly the subject of a definitive history and every last nut and bolt has been lovingly drawn, it was then a bibliographic desert.

But I came upon this book, recently published, called 'Narrow Gauge Rails to Portmadoc' by one James I C Boyd, which I found in Hamblings model shop in Cecil Court off the Charing Cross Road. It became a holy

text, which I carried everywhere. Apart from this there were but a few other rare texts such as 'The Light Railway Handbook' by R W Kidner, an important reference work for the believer, Charles Lee's 'Narrow Gauge Railways in North Wales' (long out of print ) and a series of monographs by Lewis Cozens. A tantalizing series of articles appeared in the 'Railway World' by Boyd titled 'Glimpses of the Narrow Gauge' and glimpses they were. There was not much else.

## FESTINIOG TOY RAILWAY

Take a Trip by the Toy Train thro' Faeryland  
FIRST EVER BUILT. OPENED IN 1836  
13½ MILES OF ENCHANTING SCENERY  
The Wonderland of Wales



**TIME TABLE, JULY 4th to SEPT. 24th (inclusive), 1938. Week Days only.**

	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.
Portmadoc dep.	10.20	12.30	3.15	4.50	Blaenau Ffestiniog dep.	11.48	2.04	2.55
Minffordd „	10.32	12.43	2.54	2.57	1			
Penrhynt „	10.37	12.51	—	4.31	6	Tanybwlch „	12.15	2.33
Tanybwlch „	10.57	1.13	5.04	5.37	26	Penrhynt „	—	2.53
Blaenau Ffestiniog arr.	11.22	1.36	4.18	5.18	51	Minffordd „	12.45	3.15
						Portmadoc arr.	12.54	3.10
							2.66	3.79

A stops if required. B after Sept. 10th will leave Blaenau Ffestiniog at 12.30 a.m. and run 20 minutes later throughout. C after Sept. 10th leaves Portmadoc at 12.53 p.m. and runs 20 minutes later throughout. X runs August 1st to August 25th inclusive only.

**SPECIAL EXCURSION FARES to and from all Stations.**

On production of L.M.S. Holiday Contract Tickets, holders can obtain at Blaenau Ffestiniog Station (Ffestiniog Railway) a Special Ticket at a cost of 3s. 6d. to cover the journey over the Toy Railway to Portmadoc, thence by Crosville Motor Services, Ltd., Portmadoc to Caernarvon, through the famous Pass of Aberglaslyn and Beldiglet, thus enabling passengers to make a Circular Tour, through the Conway, Lledr, Maentwrog, Glastyn, and Gwyrfal Valleys, rejoining the L.M.S. Ry. at Caernarvon for home station. Also Cheap Supplementary Tickets are issued to Afonwen and Pwllheli (G.W. Ry.).

Full particulars of Cheap Circular Tour and Excursion Tickets from North Wales Coast and Cambrian Coast Stations over this Railway to be had at L.M.S. and G.W. Ry. Stations.

Trains on the Festiniog Railway connect with L.M.S. and G.W. Ry. trains at Blaenau Ffestiniog, also with G.W. Ry. trains at Minffordd Junction and in some cases at Portmadoc.

Portmadoc, August, 1938.

**SEE OVER**

R. EVANS, Manager.

A friend and fellow disciple, Lyn Owen, and I became avid narrow gauge railway modelers: 7mm on '00' gauge. But with few drawings available we had to scale up those that appeared in our books or copies of the 'Railway Modeller' or 'Constructor' mostly by R. E. Tustin. Supplemented by photographs from the same sources, this had to do, except that we poured our pocket money into buying photos from the Locomotive and General Railway Photograph Co. But undaunted and armed with primitive electric soldering irons we soldered up old tins and bits of brass to create 'Welsh Pony', 'Mountaineer', 'Snowdon Ranger' and others. We styled ourselves rather portentously: 'Owen and Jamieson Locomotive Builders'. The engines worked after a fashion, though it was always the valve gear that was the problem and for this reason I never finished 'Russell'. The locos were supplemented by other 'rolling stock'. Lyn's father worked for Bowaters who unwittingly supplied the cardboard and the school workshop the lathe to turn chimneys and domes. Incidentally, in April 1954 and again in 1955 the Bowater connection allowed us to visit Sittingbourne and the fully operational railway where we travelled on the footplate of 'Monarch' the pride of the line, then a recent acquisition.



*Above left: 'Snowdon Ranger', built 1955*

*Above right: 'Welsh Pony', built 1953*

*Below: April 1955, 'Leader' and 'Monarch' in Bowaters papermill yard in Sittingbourne*







In the summer of 1953 we had another family holiday at the farm in Nant Gwynent. After a year of intense study and eager anticipation I was not to be denied a visit to Boston Lodge and other sites. The rest of the family was persuaded to stifle their boredom in a layby whilst I affected an entry into the carriage shed, where I found coach 23 thick with dust. This didn't deter me from sitting reverently on one of its bench seats in contemplation of the dereliction around me. There followed an excursion up the line from Penrhyn crossing in order to measure up the disc signal for modeling purposes but from there on the way was barred by gorse and brambles. That was enough for the family and nearly led to a mutiny but I had had my share of the holiday, which also included an excursion to the Tal-y-Lyn Railway.



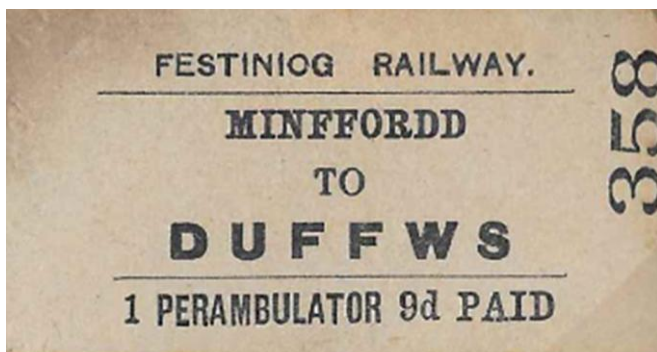
*August 1953,  
measuring up the  
disc signal above  
Penrhyndeudraeth  
for a model that  
was never made*

There followed excursions to other narrow gauge railways. I did once or twice persuade my sister and then my father to accompany me on expeditions (by train) in 1953 and 1954 from Salisbury, where we were camping, to Corfe Castle to visit Norden and Furzebrook and the China Clay tramways. My sister was totally uninterested as 'Russell' crossed the main road bound for Norden and some shunting and I had to bribe her with tea in Corfe Castle. My father was more patient as we watched 'Tertius' idling in the sun at Furzebrook but even he wanted to continue our walk, so time was up.



*August 1954, 'Tertius' in the sun at Furzebrook*

It was at the Model Railway Exhibition in Westminster Central Hall, an event we never missed, during the Easter holidays in 1954 that my friend Lyn and I came across a small stand in the basement. This was devoted to the Festiniog Railway and the nascent preservation society. We wanted to sign up there and then but had to make do with application forms and a tantalizing wait for the formalities to be concluded. Eventually we were welcomed in and our membership cards arrived. Mine was numbered 67.





Nothing could stop us making a further pilgrimage but as there was no chance of the family joining us with the car, we had to resort to our bikes. Besides with very limited financial means we also needed to visit some fairly obscure places en route. So it was that in August 1954 we set off on our bikes accompanied by Lyn's grandfather, a veteran CTC member, to peddle our way from Welwyn Garden City to Portmadoc, stopping over at many a youth hostel on the way. It was a poor summer and before the days of 'lycra' we peddled many a mile soaked to the skin with sticky oilskin capes and sou'westers yielding very poor protection. After a couple of days we made it to Devil's Bridge and journeyed on by way of the Plynlimon and Hafan Tramway (just a mound in a field), Corris, Towyn, and Fairbourne to reach Llan Festiniog youth hostel, then in the charge of the formidable Mrs Williams and her husband.

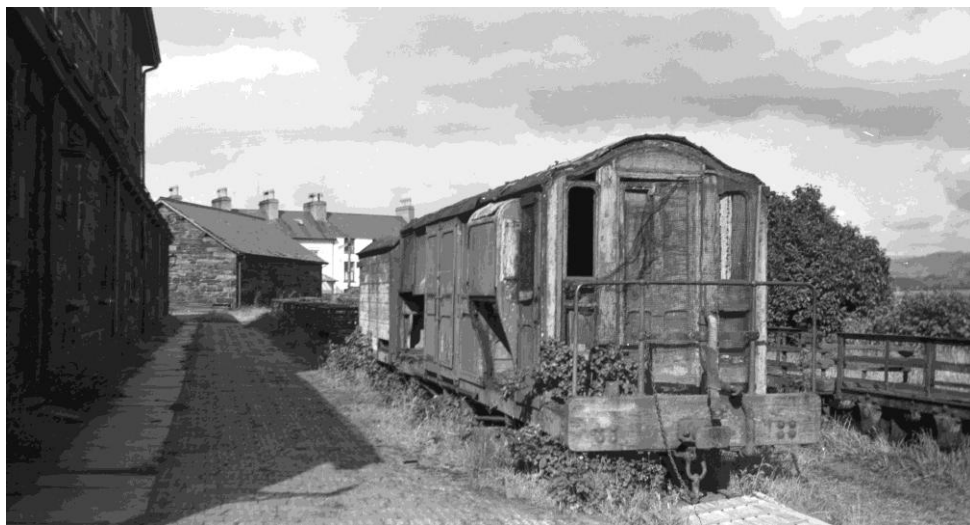


*August 1954,  
Welwyn Garden City,  
setting off for Wales,  
receiving last-minute  
directions*

Lyn's grandfather was remarkably patient and indulgent of our needs and would leave us for the day and take a ride around North Wales whilst we continued our tour of inspection. This included walking the line above Tan-y -Bwlch and a modest bit of criminal behaviour at Penrhyn station, where the ticket office hatch was not properly secured and by squirming we could just reach the ticket rack. Somehow we found our way into Boston Lodge and recorded the scene as many others had done, but in the engine shed were disturbed by Alan Garraway, making the rounds of his future empire. He took our presence in good part especially when we enquired about joining the Society.



*August 1954, Harbour Station, a scene of nature gaining the upper hand*



*August 1954, Harbour Station, the forlorn remains  
of the 'curly roof' luggage van*

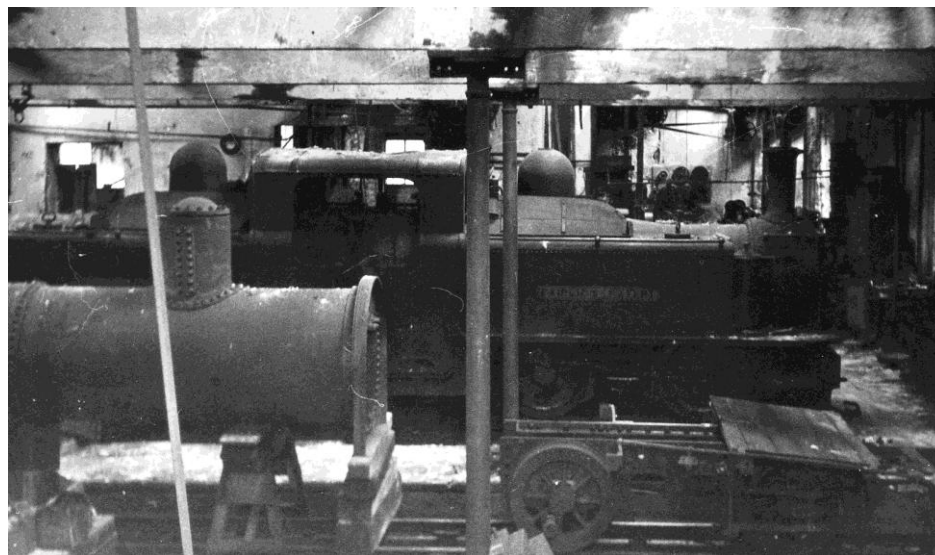
*August 1954, Boston Lodge. Bottom yard - a peaceful scene of dereliction*

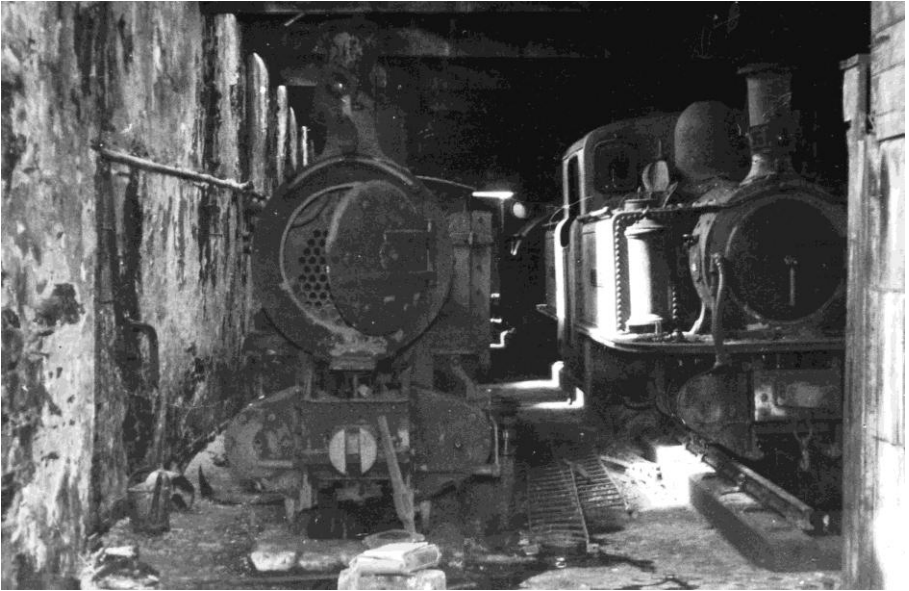




*August 1954, Boston Lodge. Bottom yard - the partial remains of 'Moel Tryfan' and sundry coaches bask in the sun*

*August 1954, Boston Lodge erecting shop. 'Prince' and 'Taliesin' wait patiently for their overhaul to recommence*





*August 1954, Boston Lodge engine shed - 'Moel Tryan', 'Merddin Emrys' and companions slumber amidst the debris*

*August 1954, Boston Lodge Top Yard. 'Palmerston' is slowly consumed by shrubbery whilst the author poses for posterity*







*August 1954, Dduallt - awaiting the coming of 'The Deviation'*

*August 1954, Tanygrisiau - soon to be demolished for the access road to the pump storage scheme*





*August 1954, Blaenau Ffestiniog, the Great Western Station footbridge.  
The author in elegant cycling attire poses with Kodak camera at the ready*

*August 1954, the former Duffws station, Blaenau Ffestiniog,  
demoted to a public convenience*





There was also a visit to Port Penrhyn, which included a ride up the line in the cab of 'Linda' and a tour of the shops and quarry where we found 'Lilla' simmering in the sunshine during the lunch break. In a siding there stood a 'De Winton' looking rather woebegone. This was significant because I am in part descended from the family and my de Winton grandfather was able to enlighten me subsequently about Jeffreys de Winton, the illustrious originator of much in the area that has the name emblazoned upon it. He was our ancestor and my grandfather's brother Walter, my great uncle, had been apprenticed at the works in the 1880s. I have dined out in railway circles on this connection ever since.

Incidentally my grandfather remembered travelling on the Great Western in broad gauge days, probably on his way to and from boarding school, and remarked on the expansive comfort of the compartments.

A visit to Dinorwic was not so successful as the quarry was closed for the annual summer holiday, though we found platelayers busy repairing the bar type track at Port Dinorwic ready for the next surge of activity.



*August 1954, Penrhyn Quarry - 'Lilla' during the lunch break, waiting to take on coal*

*August 1954, Port Dinorwic - track relaying during the summer shutdown of the quarry*



We even walked the northern parts of the Welsh Highland Railway, again in the rain, and tried to wring out our socks as we took shelter in the remains of Bettws Garmon station. Further along we explored the site of Dinas, which seemed remarkably unchanged except for the lack of rails.



*August 1954 . Dinas, Welsh Highland Railway.  
The former refreshment room has just been dismantled.  
Forty years later it would once again  
become a station*



1955 was to be the vintage year. Plans were made and I wrote to Alan Garraway to forewarn him of my impending arrival. He replied saying I was to be tasked with 'deturfing', which in one form or another I have been doing on and off ever since, though nowadays it is shovelling ballast. In hindsight it is remarkable that Alan found the time to write personally to a gauche but enthusiastic schoolboy.

By this time I was familiar with the road to Wales and the youth hostels. The weather that summer seemed to be forever set fair and the journey over the Welsh hills to Festiniog was full of anticipation as my Sturmey Archer gears ticked along beneath me. At last after a year of anticipation and the last gruelling few miles, I arrived at Llan Festiniog youth hostel again.

The following morning there was bright sunshine but with coolness in the shadow of the Vale of Festiniog below. Having pealed my quota of potatoes I mounted my bike and careered down the hill. The roads were almost empty in those days and I was shortly turning into the grass-grown yard behind Harbour Station. I propped my bike against the wall of the goods shed and walked through the booking hall onto the platform. All was peace and tranquility, nothing stirred. But presently way out across the Cob a plume



*August 1955, 'Prince' arrives at Portmadoc Harbour Station for the first train of the day. The author's bicycle is propped against the goods shed wall*

*August 1955, 'Prince' awaits the departure of the first train*



of sulphurous smoke appeared moving very slowly. After an age 'Prince', scrupulously obeying the laws of perspective, began to emerge from the pall of smoke and eventually very gingerly took the heavily elevated grass-grown curve into the station: it was a great moment. There followed a few glorious days working in Boston Lodge helping Fred Boughey shore up the inspection pit in the yard, which had subsided one lunchtime under the weight of 'Prince' and there was an excursion with 'Mary Ann' to collect sleepers from BR at Minffordd. We refreshed ourselves with bottles of 'Dandelion and Burdock', a firewater brought over from Portmadoc in the train, and sat on the beach by Glan y Mor yard to eat our sandwiches at lunch time. There were those hardy souls who bathed as well, for it was possible to do so then.

*August 1955, coaling 'Prince' in the lunch hour at Boston Lodge*







*August 1955, Boston Lodge Halt. Passengers wait to return to Portmadoc*

*August 1955, Boston Lodge. The 'hearse' on the old inspection pit*





*August 1955, Minfford yard, preparing to unload sleepers*

But this idyll could not last and I had shortly to head back over the hills again and the long haul via Bala and the Tanat Valley to the realities of home life and an approaching year of 'O'-level exams. On the way I did manage to take in Maesbrook Station on the Shropshire & Montgomeryshire Railway, where the friendly 'stationmaster' allowed me to rummage through old S. & M. waybills and labels. There was also a pause at the Snailbeach & District Railway but by then this was little more than a siding.



I continued to make an annual pilgrimage on my bicycle for successive years, staying at youth hostels of varying degrees of discomfort and braving the rain. The route out tended to be via Mid Wales and far-flung hostels such as Crickhowell, Llangurig and Borth, returning by Shrewsbury and Chaddesley Corbett with much hill work, in particular between Llan Ffestiniog and Shrewsbury. My parents never thought to be concerned for my safety, though I was then 15 but on my own was often using 'trunk' roads, which were two-lane or at best three in those days. Apart from the occasional puncture there were no 'incidents', though I was once nearly squashed by a long RAF aircraft transporter slowly overtaking me on the A5. But I had the presence of mind to dismount and pull my bike onto the verge.

In 1956 a family connection enabled me to spend two days in the company of the BR District Engineer at Neath on my way to Festiniog. We met at Paddington and travelled first class, I a callow youth dressed in my unbecoming cycling 'outfit', he in a three-piece suit. But it was a very exciting two days and included an 'inspection' travelling in his saloon, pulled by a pannier tank, of the line to Brecon as part of a proposed freight route to the Midlands; of course it

came to nothing and the line closed in 1962. After this luxurious experience I had to mount my bike and head for the Welsh hills, pausing at Devils Bridge, Towyn and Welshpool. Fortunately there was a W&L train that day. I 'chased' it on my bike but had to take cover from the rain at Castle Caereinion where I noticed that a passenger during the First War, possibly bored with waiting, had carved 'Kaiser Bill is a fool' in the frame of the shelter.



*July 1956, the District Engineer's inspection special pauses at Torpantau after the climb from Talybont on Usk*



*August 1956, the Welshpool and Llanfair train approaching Llanfair*



*August 1956, Devils Bridge, the  
Vale of Rheidol. The afternoon  
train waits to depart*



*Left: August 1956,  
'Tal-y-Llyn' in the barn  
at Towyn Pendre*

*Below: August 1956,  
Dolgoch. The afternoon  
train awaits departure  
for Towyn*





*August 1956, Portmadoc Harbour . 'Prince' awaits departure for Minfford*

*August 1956, 'Prince' misbehaves and is replaced by 'Mary Ann'*





In 1957 I helped patch up the slating on the Harbour Station goods shed roof and performed other menial but necessary tasks. You were not always made welcome and there existed a strange 'them' and 'us' divide at times. To be 'us' meant that you had to wear a loco mans outfit and grease top cap even though you weren't about to drive 'Prince' or 'Taliesin'.



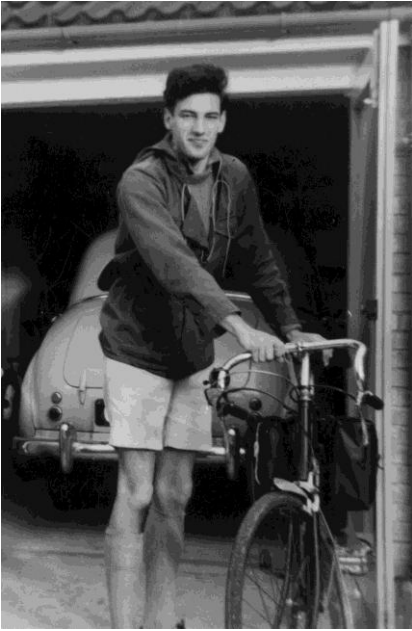
*August 1957. Penrhyn, waiting for the train*





*August 1957,  
Boston Lodge.  
'Mr. Therm',  
ex-Harrogate  
gasworks*

The last time I cycled there was in 1958 after my 'A'-levels, when I have to admit I put my bike on the train from Paddington via Ruabon and Dolgellau (part pulled by Dukedogs), arriving late in the afternoon at Minffordd where a group of us were staying. The passenger service had been extended to Tan y Bwlch that year and I was favoured with a ride down on the footplate of 'Taliesin' by David Rouse, who was driving and had been to the same school as me - an unusual example of the 'old boy network' working to my advantage. One of the tasks we undertook that year was 'deturfing' at Portmadoc to allow the 'Flying Flea' to be stabled without the four-wheelers, which had been pressed into service, grounding in the surrounding vegetation. One of our group was also in attendance at the not-so-ceremonial burning of the 'Flying Bench': a sacrilege that has cost a great deal of money to put right.



*1958, setting out for Wales  
from Welwyn Garden City*

*1958, 'de-turfing' in  
advance of the 'Flying Flea'  
at Harbour Station*





*July 1958, the 'Flying Flea' passes Boston Lodge*

*July 1958, a sacrilege: burning the 'Flying Bench' at Boston Lodge*





*July 1958, Tan y bwlch. 'Taliesin' takes on water for the return journey under the watchful eye of Fred Boughy. David Rouse attends to his engine*



In the autumn of 1959 I went up to Cambridge University and in casting around for societies to join I immediately became a paid up member of The Cambridge University Railway Club, an august institution of long standing, which once a year 'borrowed' an antiquated locomotive (in my day a J15) and two coaches for its members to drive back and forth between Linton and Haverhill. It was at a club meeting in my first term that I was accosted by a beaming but prematurely balding fellow-member about joining the 'university platelayers' working party bound for Festiniog in the Christmas vacation. Like my experience in 1952 this first encounter with

Gerald Fox proved to be another turning point. His infectious enthusiasm persuaded me that I had better put my name down.



*Railway Club  
driving day,  
Linton Station,  
June 1962.  
The author  
poses at the  
regulator*

So a new era of association with the Festiniog Railway began. The days of cycling there were over and those of the extended train journey began.

I set forth on a gloomy late December morning in 1959 with my rucksack for North Wales: a commuter diesel to Kings Cross then to Marylebone in its murk and solitude where I joined 'The Master Cutler'. I alighted at Rugby and legged it to the LNW station and the train to Crewe. Another change and the North Wales line to Llandudno Junction. It was dark as we

ground our way up the valley to Blaenau and 'dieselized', unlike the rest of the journey where steam reigned supreme in all its grime and the carriages were clammy, smelt slightly of mould and the windows ran with condensation.

Gerald had managed to arrange for us to use the Llan Festiniog youth hostel. Though officially 'closed' it was a long way from head office and Mr Williams and his wife were welcoming as usual. We shared the dormitories with the first cohorts of workers who were just commencing the construction of Trawsfynydd nuclear power station and as yet had no permanent abode.



*December 1959, Marylebone Station, departing for Wales*

We took the Crossville bus (double-decker) down the hill in the morning to Boston Lodge. Here we were told to join Will Jones and Ron Lester on the track at Rhiw Plas, where a temporary road crossing had been installed while the bridge was rebuilt to take the load of the nuclear reactors, which were to be delivered by sea to Portmadoc before wending their way up the hill to Trawsfynydd. After a couple of days our energies were redirected to offloading wagonloads of spoil over the embankment just short of the road bridge at Tan y Bwlch where there were signs of movement. It was satisfying hurling quantities of slate waste into the void for a few days and since then the embankment seems to have survived in a stable condition.



*December 1959, Rhiw Plas bridge works, preparing for the delivery of the Trawsfynydd power station nuclear reactors*



I am afraid we took time off to travel and walk parts of the Croesor tramway where we met Clough Williams-Ellis at the top of the village incline surveying his domain. But more importantly we explored and then bade farewell to the dying Bala Branch, travelling on the last train from Blaenau to Bala and back. As mayor of Blaenau Mr Williams our host made an impassioned speech on the platform before we departed. This was reciprocated at Bala where to the accompaniment of the local silver band, followed by detonators and cheers, we set off back again in the care of Moses Hughes, the guard of the last train. He was a staunch nationalist who considered the closure an act of English betrayal. Actually the very last train was the working back to Trawsfynydd where as the engine was detached in the gloom two well-oiled locals commiserated in song on the platform. It was a truly Welsh send-off. On the same night across the Irish Sea the last trains ran on the County Donegal Railway; it was for us 'black Saturday'. The end of the 1950s.

For my return home from Wales I chose to travel south. The 'Cambrian Coast Express' to Dovey Junction and thence to Aberystwyth, where I took the slow train to Carmarthen, stopping purposelessly at



lonely but romantic Strata Florida. There followed an efficient and speedy run in 'The Pembroke Coast Express' up the Great Western main line to Paddington.



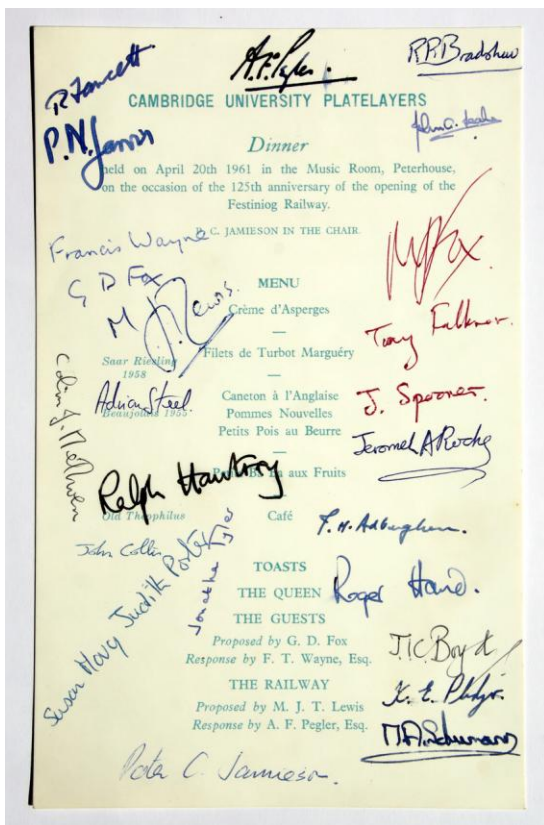
*March 1960, the Cambrian Coast train at Shrewsbury*



In between journeys it was necessary to do some work, for the Cambridge terms were short and a lot had to be crammed in. However, there was time for the 'university platelayers' to meet on a Tuesday evening in someone's room to imbibe cider from a small barrel, which was nurtured by the keeper and occupant of the room where we met. There was much

talk of railway matters and the camaraderie sustained us until the next time we took the 'Cambrian Coast Express' from Paddington.

One event in the Cambridge cycle that we arranged was a dinner to mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the opening of the Festiniog Railway, which took place in April 1961 and was attended by such luminaries as Alan Pegler, Francis Wayne and Peter Jarvis. There were speeches and toasts and much else besides and we returned to our colleges in a very pleasant state.



During the Easter vacation many with the fear of exams looming felt it necessary to work, but in 1960 some of us were in our first year and prepared to take the risk. So a party met at Paddington and for some unknown reason travelled by way of the Worcester and Birmingham Snow Hill to Wolverhampton before assuming a sensible route to Shrewsbury and eventually Portmadoc. The youth hostel was unaccountably 'closed' so we were staying with Mrs. Dennis in Madoc Street, drinking at either The Australia' or the BR station buffet, which was open till all hours. It was here that we spent time talking to Mr. Williams (one of many) an ex-FR driver who had something to do with turning 'Prince' on his side at Blaenau on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 1920! He proudly presented me with an enlarged but rather blurred photograph of the scene and now in the railway's archive, I hope.

We were not completely idle and tried to redeem our tarnished reputation with Alan Garraway. We shovelled secondhand ballast through the screen at Minffordd from BR wagons but more importantly under the supervision of Ron Lester we lifted the last sections of Croesor track in the road where the Shell petrol station now stands in Portmadoc High Street. Perhaps that really was the end of the Welsh Highland. We did have time off and walked the line to

Blaenau inspecting the massive civil engineering works for the dam and powerhouse at Tan y Grisiau. A couple of us also took extended leave to travel to Shrewsbury for the final rights on the Shropshire & Montgomeryshire, which closed on 20<sup>th</sup> March surplus to the requirements of the Ministry of Defence.

*March 1960, the last day on the Shropshire & Montgomeryshire Railway.  
The last train awaits departure from Llanymynech*





*March 1960, the Cambridge University Platelayers lift the last of the Croesor tramway rails in Portmadoc High Street*

*March 1960, Tanygrisiau pump storage scheme - the dam and powerhouse take shape*





*March 1960, the Cambridge University Platelayers 'skive off' and walk the line, playing with the points at Tan-y-Bwlch*

*March 1960, the 'Cambrian Coast Express' portion from Pwllheli arrives at Portmadoc*





This time the journey home was perhaps the most convoluted that I ever took, but then that was the aim, for the years before Beeching were just as full of fond farewells to supposedly redundant railways and it was important to have travelled over them. This time it took two days.

In the company of the Harlech schoolchildren I left Portmadoc on a bright misty spring morning on the 'Cambrian Coast Express' bound for Moat Lane Junction. It was a glorious run with the engine working hard up to Talerddig summit. I passed the time in the 'refreshment' room at Moat Lane with railwaymen from the engine shed while waiting for the Mid Wales Line train to Llanidloes. Here I paused to view the station before continuing down the Wye Valley to Three Cocks Junction where I put up for the night with my aunt nearby. The following morning I continued the pilgrimage, which took me to Hereford, Gloucester and Cheltenham where in warm spring sunshine I boarded the daily through train to Southampton via the M&SWJ; three coaches and a Maunsel U class. There followed a stiff climb to Andoversford, then over the Cotswolds past lonely Foss Cross to Swindon Town and the chalk country of Salisbury Plain. Thence to Marlborough and Andover.

Here I took a stopping train to Waterloo, which paused to pick up watercress at Hurstbourne; demotion for 'Lord Grenville' who was in charge of the train.



*March 1960, the 'Cambrian Coast Express' approaching the Friog Rocks*





*March 1960, Moat Lane Junction with the up 'Cambrian Coast Express': changing to the Mid Wales Line and Three Cocks Junction.*

*March 1960, Marlborough Station with the Cheltenham to Southampton train on the way to Andover*



The pattern of platelayers' travel arrangements persisted for the remainder of 1960 and much of 1961. Our party would meet at Paddington to take the 'Cambrian Coast Express' through to Portmadoc where we would pick up our barrel of cider from Victoria Wine and take the bus up the valley to the youth hostel at Llan Festiniog. No mention was made about the consumption of cider and it remained an official secret.

There was one departure from this routine when in September 1960 one of our number, who possessed an ancient Rolls, picked us up in Shrewsbury and we drove in style over the Welsh hills. On this occasion Paul Bradshaw joined us for the first time. But mostly it was 'just' the train. The return journey on occasion by way of Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, which took an inordinately long time, but mostly we passed through Birmingham Snow Hill of blessed memory.

Our winter and summer working parties were generally fairly productive. We spent a happy week in January 1961 deturfing a long section of track at Cutting Gwlyb and in the summer built a brick column under the rotten end of one of the massive timber beams in the erecting shop. An idle day was spent visiting Dinorwic, travelling in the miniature guards van on the transporter wagon down to the port.



*December 1960,  
the Cambridge  
University  
Platelayers  
'deturfing' at  
Cutting Glwb*

The following winter we ventured into Moelwyn tunnel to remove the track. As it had snowed heavily, thawed and then frozen again in the night we spent most of the morning working the 'wrecking train' up the line under the beady eye of Ron Lester, hacking out the ice over the rails in the cutting above Coed-y-bleiddiau. Once in the tunnel it was warm and cosy but it was difficult not to touch the sides so we emerged blackened by generations of soot. One evening pausing for fish and chips in Portmadoc on our return the ladies of the café took pity on us but as a precaution laid newspaper on our chairs.



*Above, December 1961,  
the approach to Garnedd  
Tunnel*



*Left, December 1961,  
the Cambridge University  
Platelayers clearing snow  
at Coed y Bleiddiau for the  
Moelwyn Tunnel track-  
lifting train*



We made the occasional expedition into the hills mostly in the company of Michael Lewis, who joined our working parties but was even then investigating in a more scholarly way the far-flung extremities of the system. We had an expedition to the Graig Ddu slate quarry to retrieve a 'car gwyllt' for his collection and he would occasionally take himself to Bangor to check facts for his 'heretical' work 'How Festiniog Got its Railway'.



*September 1961,  
a visit to  
Dinorwic Quarry.  
Gerald Fox poses*



*September 1961, Dinorwic Quarry - up in the clouds*

In January 1961 there was a 'forced march' when Michael Lewis, Mike Schumann and I walked the Gorseddau Tramway fortified by a mutton pie purchased in Portmadoc and water from a stream. As we entered Beddgelert Forest on the return leg, dusk was falling and it was dark when we arrived at Beddgelert. The next bus was not for two hours so we decided to walk but fortunately a passing van picked us up at Prenteg and we promptly fell asleep. It was a memorable day.

But the old order started to change when in the cold New Year of January 1962 Mike Schumann acquired a Landrover and we took to the road. It was freezing as we sped along the A5 with only a thin layer of metal beneath our feet and one yearned for the fuggy warmth of BR's

compartment coaches with the condensation running down the windows into the channel, which was always blocked.

After I left Cambridge in 1962 the days of long vacations and idle railway journeys ceased and those of us working in London were like the 'Lags', reduced to making weekend sorties. By that time, the M1 took you to a roundabout near Rugby but then it was the A5 and a further string of roundabouts in the Black Country with an arrival at the youth hostel in the small hours. At about this time Gerald Fox had also acquired a long wheelbase Landrover, which was kitted out with discarded mattresses for long distance comfort. But Gerald already had his sights on the upper reaches of the line, well away from the tentacles of the 'Management' with whom he had had some unfortunate confrontations. So it suited his purpose to start a new project. In the spring of 1963 we spent many a weekend, sometimes standing for hours in the rain on the hillsides around Dduallt and below the Moelwyns holding a staff while Gerald took readings and shouted at us to hold the thing upright!



Following the survey and Gerald's design work there was a pause in what was to become 'The Deviation' and we were permitted to work on the 'real' railway. We spent some weekends in the summer of 1964 rebuilding a part of the walls on top of Cei Mawr, which had been previously pushed into the valley below to someone's satisfaction. The trains were running and every now and again Alan Garraway would pause so that 'Linda' could replenish our water barrel. Unbeknownst to Alan we had a 'rail' barrow mounted on a pair of wheels, contrived by Gerald, to make rock handling easier. It had to be dismantled and hidden in the bushes immediately we heard 'Linda' approaching. I carved a date stone '1964', which we set in the wall to record our efforts. When I last passed by I caught a brief glimpse of it from one of railway's smart new carriages.

From this small beginning The Deviation started in January 1965 with barely a whisper. A new way of life had begun. But that's another story.





### *Postscript*

In early March 2020 I set out to join Paul Bradshaw and the 'Rest of the World Gang' for a weekend of track work in the new carriage shed at Boston Lodge. I took the train from Euston, changing at Birmingham International. It was a fine trip across Mid Wales and up the Welsh coast with views across to Snowdonia and the LLeyn peninsular.

The following morning we met at Minffordd for a 'briefing' and then proceeded to Boston Lodge to start work. The weather was uncongenial with a south-westerly coming in over the Traeth and within half an hour of commencing, whilst picking up a cast aluminium fence post I cricked my back: it was the end of my working weekend and I now think that someone may also have been suggesting that it was the end of my volunteering on the Ffestiniog and the Welsh Highland.

The event occurred within a few yards of my first experience of volunteering when sixty-five years before, in the summer of 1955 as a callow teenager, I had helped Fred Boughey shore up the old engine inspection pit. I had come full circle and it was over.



### *Author's Note*

This account is an expanded version of an article, which first appeared in the *Ffestiniog Railway Magazine* in 1996.

I have retained the title of the railway and some place names as they were in the period covered by this account.

The photographs are mostly by the author but I am grateful to Mike Schumann and Alan Owen for allowing me to use some of theirs where gaps existed.

I wish to thank Stephen Conlin for his help and well-honed patience in designing this memoir.

Peter Jamieson

*February 2022*





