

STEAM TRAINS TODAY

Riding the Heritage Railways of Britain

ANDREW MARTIN

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Some Terminology

Railway Companies

In the Railway Grouping of 1923, more than a hundred railway companies were absorbed into four companies. These (the 'Big Four') were:

- The Great Western (GWR)
- The London, Midland & Scottish (LMS)
- The London & North Eastern Railway (LNER)
- The Southern Railway (SR)

Amongst the pre-Grouping companies mentioned in this book are:

- The Great Western (the name persisted after the grouping, and indeed is used today by the privatised operator of the West Country routes)
- The North Eastern Railway (NER)
- The London & North Western Railway (LNWR)
- The Midland Railway (MR)
- The Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway (L&Y)
- The Somerset & Dorset Railway (S&D)
- The Highland Railway

The railways were nationalised in 1947, and British Railways came into being in 1948. It traded as British Rail from 1965.

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In 1997, the railways were privatised.

Tank Engines and Tender Engines

A tank engine is a single unit: a steam locomotive carrying its coal in a bunker and its water in tanks close to its boiler. A tank engine is usually small. Bigger steam engines carry their coal and water in a trailer or tender.

Wheel formations

Under the Whyte system of notation, steam locomotives are described by their wheel formations. A 4-6-2, for instance, has four leading wheels, six driving wheels and two trailing wheels. There are always driving wheels, but there may not be leading wheels or trailing wheels, in which case a zero is used, as in 0-4-0. The driving wheels are coupled together: if there are, say, six of them, we might speak of a 'six-coupled engine'. Some of the wheel formations have names, usually with arcane origins: for example, 4-4-2 is an Atlantic, because it originated on the Atlantic Coast Railroad in America. There is also a system of describing the wheel formations of diesels, but we will not be concerning ourselves with that.

Preface

Covid and the Heritage Lines

When I was finishing this book in late 2019, I should have noticed that the title of the last chapter, 'Some Possible Futures', had a rather blasé ring about it. Readers will not find in that chapter any reference to a global pandemic, and in fact this book is entirely Covid-free, apart from this note.

Steam Trains Today was going to be published in March 2020, just when Covid hit. We decided to postpone publication for a year, because we wanted the heritage railways to be open when the book came out. Some sentences might read a bit oddly in light of the pandemic, especially those touching on the 'crowded commuter trains' of the national network. As for the heritage lines, a handful of the scenarios I describe have been overtaken by events. The Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust no longer has its museum at Washford, for instance, which is a shame. But for most of the year since the completion of this book, the lines have simply been engaged in a grim battle for survival. They were, like much of society, devastated by the pandemic, and many of the retirement-age volunteers who keep the lines going – 'Generation Steam', as they are known – will have sadly fallen victim to it.

In using that word 'devastated', I am quoting Steve Oates, Chief Executive of the Heritage Railway

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Association, but Steve quickly added that, as of February 2021, ‘The lines have all survived. I’m not aware of any that have closed.’

They were able to survive by furloughing paid staff; by generous public donations; by government money (from the Culture Recovery Fund and the Heritage Emergency Fund, among others) – and by their own resourcefulness. In 2020, Steve Oates himself had a holiday on the Talyllyn Railway in Wales, which, like many of the lines, opened in summer between lockdowns. In the interests of being Covid secure, the Talyllyn provided packed lunches to take on the trains (in the civilised tradition of the lunch-eon hampers available during steam days). ‘It was just different and *nice*,’ says Steve. Of that fleeting, flickering summer, he recalls, ‘The lines that opened did all right, and some of them had their best September ever. There was a real hunger for them.’

At the time of writing, there seems a reasonable prospect that the lines will be open for at least some of the summer of 2021, and the ‘hunger’ could be even stronger, given that we might not be allowed to go abroad, and given that they permit just the kind of sociability and escapism we have long been denied. ‘It could be a good summer,’ says Steve Oates. ‘It could be *brilliant*.’

I do hope so, and I would like to dedicate this book to all members, past and present, of Generation Steam.

Andrew Martin, *February 2021*

Introduction

Mother's Day at Loughborough

The Swapmeet

A rainy and dark Sunday morning in Leicestershire. I am standing on the edge of what appears to be a field of ash, and looking at a red-brick railway station, Quorn & Woodhouse by name. The station is not on the national network. You will not find it when booking on Trainline. It is a preserved station on a preserved line called the Great Central Railway, which is not to be confused with the *old* Great Central Railway (1897–1923), nine miles of whose 200-mile route the *preserved* Great Central has preserved. I will call these two the OGC and the PGC. The OGC was closed between 1966 and 1969, on the recommendation of Dr Beeching, the BR chairman and railway ‘axeman’ who is going to be the villain of our piece. The PGC began operations in 1974, having bought its stretch of line from BR for £75,000.

We are already entering a historical thicket, as one tends to do on Britain’s 120-or-so preserved railways, but a notice fixed to a fence between the ash field and the station provides some guidance. ‘Opened in 1899 as part of the Great Central Railway’s main line from Manchester and Sheffield to London Marylebone, the station is restored in the brown and “stone” colour scheme of the London & North Eastern Railway who owned the line in

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the 1940s.' So I probably ought to discount the 1970s diesel locomotive being rained on in a siding of the station, because that's strayed from a different time zone.

The preserved railways of Britain operate a time machine, and it does work, but it has a slight malfunction whereby it tends to default to the years of the Second World War. You're likely to be stepping out onto a station platform with – as here at Quorn & Woodhouse – posters reading 'Dig for Victory'. That standard wartime poster reading 'Is your journey really necessary?' is also here, even though it's a fatal question for the preserved railways, on which very few journeys are really necessary.

The PGC does re-create other periods at other stations, but let's stick with the 1940s for now. Many of the people involved in the preserved railways would have been born during the war, and a significant percentage will remember it; others might be connected to the 1940s by having been one of the quarter-million members of Ian Allan's Locospotters' Club, established in 1949 after Allan had been publishing his *ABC Spotters'* books for seven years. Many trainspotters gave up on spotting and became preservationists once British Rail had banished steam. I once asked Bob Gwynne, a curator at the National Railway Museum at York, and the author of a short book on preserved railways, whether the most favoured time-destination would creep forwards as the old guard died out.

He doubted it. 'The 1940s are a sort of fantasy or fairyland.'

'You mean like Narnia?' I suggested. 'Out of time?'

'Exactly.'

I do not think the preserved railways can be pinned

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down politically, but somebody once suggested to me that they were 'a bit jingoistic'. The popularity of the wartime theme might reflect this, especially given it's an idealised war. In the real war, stations were blacked out, as were the trains, and the engines were run-down. All the festive aspects of railways – of which the preserved lines are so fond – were quelled. Trains ceased to have names, and in 1942 dining cars were withdrawn, so the PGC wouldn't have been allowed its Fish Supper Saturdays (always a sell-out). Perhaps one day a preserved line will have an authentic wartime event, with a soundtrack of bombers droning overhead, and everybody groping about in the half-light, as in A. A. Milne's verse:

*We were alone, I hailed the fellow blindly,
'Excuse me, sir, I live at Wavertree.
Is it the next but one?' She answered kindly,
'It was the last but three.'*

In Leicestershire, the rain and wind are increasing. Today is 11 March – Mothering Sunday, as all preserved railway operators are well aware. Mothering Sunday marks the start of their main season, which runs until October, although most have Christmas events, and some (like the PGC) operate all year round. There's an irony in the season kicking off with a women's day, since the majority of people who operate and appreciate the preserved railways are not women. At the Talyllyn Railway in Wales, I watched a man browsing in the bookshop while his wife looked on.

'And what are your own interests, madam?' the assistant, a young woman, asked the wife.

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'Oh, I don't know,' she replied. 'I've been stuck with this railway lark for so long I've forgotten.' (She was joking, I think, and we will be meeting many women in this book.)

In a couple of hours' time, a Mothering Sunday Luncheon Special will be departing from Loughborough Central, one stop down the line. Meanwhile, another special event is taking place on the ash field behind me, which was once a goods siding: the annual PGC Swapmeet.

How much swapping is going on, I'm not sure. The event looks like a car boot sale of railway memorabilia, with trestle tables erected on the black cinder field, which is interspersed with oily puddles rippling in the wind – and by the way, it is PGC policy to evict anyone selling anything other than railway memorabilia, so there's no danger of the real world intruding. I examine a clothes brush stamped with the letters LBSCR: the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway, which ran fancy trains for fancy people, hence this clothes brush. The same stallholder goes in for bygone luxury, because he also offers some neatly pressed white antimacassars from the Blue Pullman. That was only a diesel train, and from the egalitarian 1960s, but it catered to wealthy businessmen, and was liveried not merely in blue but Nanking Blue.

Viewed from a modern perspective, the tone of the sale is peremptory, even politically incorrect. An armband says (underlinings are mine) 'Pilotman'. A small plastic sign reads, 'THIS LAVATORY MUST NOT BE FLUSHED WHILE THE TRAIN IS IN THE STATION'. A book on railway modelling has the subtitle, 'For the average enthusiast.' Some of the book titles are incredibly dour, chiming in with the greyness of the day: *From Tilbury to Tyneside*:

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Great Eastern Railway Shipping; LMS Working Timetables: Supplement Number 4, Sectional Appendix.

A train – a green diesel multiple unit (DMU) – has pulled into the station. I have a rover ticket, so I can go up and down the line all day. The interior of the train is warm, an elegant pale green, with well-upholstered bench-like seats of grey-green. Everything throbs promisingly as the engines turn over, and there is a hot oil smell. The PGC has supplied more notices. First, a reproduction of an advert for this kind of train dating from the 1950s: ‘Travel the Modern Way’. Well, diesel traction still is the modern way for a preserved railway, given that it postdates steam, and that there are as yet no preserved *electric* railways. Then there’s a notice written by the PGC itself:

Welcome on Board. You are travelling on a Diesel Railcar built in the 1950s. This style of train replaced steam power on many local and cross-country routes. At the time they were much welcomed because they were quicker, clean, well heated, had bright interiors and afforded excellent views along the line. Trains like this are known as diesel multiple units, as several can be joined together as needed.

It’s a Class 101, one of a fleet made by Metro-Cammell of Birmingham. I like these because I remember them, whereas I have no childhood memory of steam, even though I was born in 1962, six years before its abolition. Therefore, I am not part of what the preserved railways call ‘Generation Steam’, on which they are dangerously reliant. The Class 101s I rode between Leeds and York

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were liveried in BR Rail Blue, a colour scheme introduced in 1965 by Misha Black. Blue was a very Sixties colour, fittingly unnatural in that futuristic decade of plastic and man-made fibre. On its carriages, BR combined the blue with off-white, hence the nickname 'blue and dirt'. BR Blue came too late for steam engines, but new diesels were painted this colour, and the old green ones were repainted in it. This present DMU that I'm sitting in must have then been re-painted *again*, back to green. An attractive characteristic of these early DMUs was that there was no interior bulkhead, but only a glass window between the driver's cab and the front passenger seats. As a boy I would always sit at the front, so as to share the driver's view of the track ahead ... except that some grumpy – probably hung-over – drivers, stumping on board at York with their flask of tea and riveted leather BR bag, would immediately turn around and lower the blinds over the windows between them and me, spitefully removing the forward view.

This being an idealised railway, the driver has *not* lowered the blind. He is a human tourist attraction and wants you to watch him driving. Moreover, the front seats here are First Class – dark blue with white antimacassars – and there's no extra charge for First on this preserved line. (There is on some.) The effect is of sitting in a luxury cinema showing a film of the line as it stretches away to Loughborough. You might say it's a Cinemascope film because there is also the side view. In one lineside field, a couple of people in long macintoshes are doing some serious dog training. This is hunting country, after all. The railway embankments are rather overgrown, but that's deliberate: it helps the wildlife and nesting birds.

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The Class 101s on the PGC are owned by a sub-group of the railway called Renaissance Railcars. The diesels or steam engines on a preserved line might be owned directly by the line, but very often they're owned by separate syndicates of enthusiasts, like racehorses. (I mean to take a laissez-faire approach to the administrative organisation of the preserved railways, which quickly becomes complicated in most cases.) Class 101s finally disappeared from the real world in 2003, i.e. quite recently, so there are many on the preserved railways, for example at the Spa Valley, the Mid-Norfolk, the North Norfolk, the North York Moors Railway, the Foxfield and Ecclesbourne Valley Railways.

My feet, prone to be cold on modern, air-conditioned trains, are nice and warm, thanks to hot air emerging from a mysterious (to me) silvery duct next to my left boot. At Loughborough Central Station I alight from the train alongside the guard, who's about seventeen, and his vintage BR uniform, possibly bought last year at the swapmeet I've just attended, is too big for him. I decide to probe the mystery of the silver duct, reasoning that this will be a win-win. I'll increase my railway knowledge – and I do always feel I ought to be learning things on the preserved lines, perhaps to atone for the sheer pleasure I get from simply sitting on old trains – and the kid will presumably be pleased to enlighten me. 'How is the heat generated?' I ask. 'It's not steam heat, is it?'

'Oh, it's electric heating, I think,' he says, and he heads off to the buffet, but he's checked by the driver of the DMU, who has stepped onto the platform. The drivers on preserved lines tend to be in their sixties or seventies – seventy-five is the cut off – but this driver is a long-haired, scruffy-yet-capable-looking bloke perhaps in his forties.

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'A *word*,' he says beckoning the kid. 'These trains are *not* electrically heated.' He then gives the kid a short lecture about how 'red diesel' is atomised in a cylinder, the resulting hot air being pushed by a fan into the heating ducts. The lecture concluded, the boy hurries off, slightly embarrassed.

I feel a bit guilty: the boy's a volunteer, so it's not as if he'd failed to do his job, but the preserved lines are two things: tourist attractions and living museums, and some of the volunteers are more curatorial than others. At least, I assume the driver's a volunteer, but some of the preserved railways do employ drivers, and so perhaps professional pride had prompted this one to correct the kid.

A professional driver of steam engines or old diesels is doing what many people would love to do for nothing – so the pay's terrible: 'About fifteen grand a year', I was told. Catering and management staff might also be paid. The PGC has 500 active volunteers, and about fifty paid staff, unusually high numbers in both cases, but then it is open all year round, and runs regular dining trains. A preserved line might be considered successful if it has the ratio of paid staff to volunteers that it *wants* to have: a high number of paid staff might indicate commercial and operational ambition, or it could reflect poor volunteer recruitment.

Loughborough Central features in Simon Jenkins' *Britain's 100 Best Railway Stations*, described as 'the archetypal railway museum'. The station has an early 1950s theme, hence pictures of the newly crowned queen. There's a big perambulator with a doll inside and a notice reading, 'Would station staff please return this pram to the waiting