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TO THE SEA BY TRAIN

THE GOLDEN AGE OF RAILWAY TRAVEL

ANDREW MARTIN

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A NOTE ON HISTORY AND TERMINOLOGY

Pre- and Post-Grouping Companies

Until the Railway Grouping of 1923, there were about 120 railway companies in the United Kingdom, a relatively sensible number compared to 1846, when there'd been 272. The multiplicity of companies caused confusion both by their separateness and by their entanglement. A 'Correspondent' wrote to the *Railway Magazine* of October 1906 to say that he'd seen, near Basingstoke on the London & South Western Railway main line, a train drawn by an LSWR engine and consisting of, as he put it:

1. South Western Railway's carriage
2. North Eastern Railway's horse box
3. Great Northern Railway's carriage
4. Great Eastern Railway's horse box
5. Great Western Railway's horse box
6. Great Central Railway's carriage

He added, 'I should think it is quite an unusual thing for six different railways to be represented in a train of only six vehicles, and I thought it would interest *Railway Magazine* readers.'

A number of pre-Grouping companies are mentioned in this book, including some very obscure ones, which tend to be mentioned only once, because their reward for having reached the seaside was to be swallowed up by the bigger pre-Grouping companies, such as the North Eastern Railway, the Great Northern Railway and the Great Western Railway.

In 1923 this multiplicity of companies was distilled down to four – 'The Big Four', the *Railway Magazine* called them – and these were:

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

It will be seen that one name signifies both a pre- and a post-Grouping company: the Great Western, and indeed there is a GWR today. I read a post on a railway forum in which the writer said that when he mentioned the Great Western he meant 'the real one'. Whether by this he meant the pre- or post-Grouping company I wasn't sure, but I was confident he didn't mean the modern-day one. John Betjeman called the Grouping 'dismal' for its rationalism, but the Big Four have come to embody railway romance. Since they were in competition with each other, and with the motor car, they waged PR campaigns in which they glamourised themselves, and the period of the Grouping coincided with the golden age of the seaside railway poster. The names of the Big Four haunt the modern railway, so besides the GWR we have brands called 'Southern' and 'London Northwestern Railway', and an operator called 'London North Eastern Railway', the names of which complicate any internet search for their more illustrious predecessors.

Nationalisation

The railways were nationalised in 1947; British Railways came into being in 1948. From 1965 the organisation traded as British Rail, for much the same reason that Anthony Wedgwood Benn became Tony Benn – to sound more democratic and modern. In that same year, a 'corporate identity' was rolled out, in emulation of London Transport. A new sans serif typeface, Rail Alphabet, was introduced as BR's equivalent to the Johnston Sans of LT, and the double arrow logo became BR's equivalent of the roundel, displacing the 'cycling lion' (a lion straddling a locomotive wheel). The double arrow survives in many places, including on railway tickets and road signs showing the direction to the station in sleepy seaside towns.

BR was subdivided into regions, mirroring the territories of the Big Four.

Beeching

Dr Beeching used to be the second most infamous doctor after Crippen, but his notoriety seems to have faded, hence his inclusion here. He was chairman of BR from 1961 to 1965. His report of 1963, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, proposed not so much a reshaping as a reduction of the network by about a third. Most of his proposed cuts were implemented over the rest of the decade.

Privatisation

I have been mentioning modern-day private operators. I had better give the date when the railways were privatised: 1997. In 2024, however, the Labour Government partly renationalised the system.

Steam Locomotives

Steam locomotives are either tank engines or tender engines. A tank engine is a single unit, carrying its coal in a bunker and its water in tanks, and, being small engines, they are picturesquely associated with the smaller holiday resorts, like Hayling Island or Southwold. Bigger steam engines carry their coal and water in a trailer or tender. They are all members of 'classes', for example the King class of the GWR, associated with one of the most famous seaside trains, the *Cornish Riviera Express*.

Steam locomotives are also described by their wheel formations. Some wheel formations have names, and the only one we will be bothering about is 'Pacific' (denoting 4-6-2).

Units

Most modern trains are not hauled by a locomotive. They consist of units, which is to say that the power is distributed along the length of the train. There are diesel multiple units (DMUs) and electric multiple units (EMUs), and bi-modes capable of running on electrified and non-electrified lines. Units normally come in clusters or 'families', and are then subdivided by numbers indicating different iterations of the same basic vehicle. The numbers of the antiquated Sprinter family of DMUs, for example, run from 150 to 159. Readers can rest assured that I will be largely ignoring these numbers.

DMUs, being smaller and cheaper than loco-hauled trains, often ran on the fading seaside lines. Today units carry no such stigma. Even our main-line trains are units, albeit with streamlined front ends that do appear locomotive-like.

SPECIAL TRAINS AND SPECIAL DAYS

Blackpool, July 2023, mid-afternoon. Heavy rain falls, the light's already gone from the day, but on Albert Street, Blackpool's old ally, electricity, is doing its best to compensate. The facades of the tall Victorian guest houses are illuminated, as are some of the modest come-ons: 'Open All Year', 'Lift to All Floors', 'Full Central Heating'. Through a propped open front door you might see, glowing in the darkness of a hall, a small red neon sign denoting a cubbyhole by the stairs and reading 'RECEPTION'. Albert Street is at right angles to the front, and at its seaward end the word 'Casino' is illuminated by gold-coloured bulbs, blurred by the rain. This is not *the* Casino of Blackpool. *The* Casino is not actually a casino but an elegant Deco lounge, opened in 1939 at the Pleasure Beach funfair at the south end of town as a reception space for LMS excursionists. The Casino viewable from Albert Road is part of the sprawling Coral Island amusement arcade, the one room where you can gamble face to face with a human being – the croupier – as opposed to a machine. Coral Island can be counted a pleasure zone of sorts, but it cannot generate the excitement of what was there before.

It stands on the site once occupied by the head-building – ticket hall and concourse – of Blackpool Central station,

Anyone determined to strike a positive note about the demolition of Blackpool Central station could argue that the site is still given over to pleasure.

which closed on 1 November 1964, on the last, rainy night of the Illuminations. The next day Blackpool Central was still there, but there weren't any trains – only cars, already parked on the platforms, so it was as if the killer had moved into the house of the victim. For a while the head-building was used as a bingo hall. The hands of the station clock on its facade were removed and replaced with the number '90' – 'blind ninety', the top number in bingo. The piecemeal demolition of Central was completed in 1973, when the site became an even bigger car park – the biggest car and coach park in Europe, according to the Blackpool railway historian

Barry McLoughlin.[1] In a retrospective piece of 23 October 2023 the online magazine *Live Blackpool* contended that the closure 'tore the heart out of Blackpool and was possibly the worse decision ever made by Blackpool Council'.

What do they mean by 'heart'?

In the 1890s Blackpool was receiving 2 million visitors a year, the majority arriving at Central station, which had opened as Hounds Hill in 1863. *Live Blackpool* repeats the oft-made assertion that in 1911 Blackpool Central was the busiest station in the world. It had fourteen platforms (the same as Paddington at the time), half of them excursion platforms, and it was the intensity of summer use that was remarkable. Numbers for Central tend to be tangled up with those for Blackpool's other big station, Blackpool North, and it is generally hard to differentiate between the stations, each of which might receive trains from anywhere in Britain. On Saturday 13 August 1910, 200 ordinary and special trains ran into North and Central, bringing 92,000 visitors.[2] In photographs taken in the early twentieth century you can't see the Central platforms for people, just as you can't see the beach over the road for people. Blackpool made a habit of publicising these 'crush photos', the logic being that even more people might want to come to Blackpool when they saw how busy it was. (An Edwardian cartoon has a Central station porter calling down to a beach attendant, 'Yer'll 'ave to move 'em all up a bit, Stanley, 'ere's another train in.')

There were 36 licensed photographers on Blackpool foreshore in 1895 (alongside 62 sellers of fruit, 47 of sweets, 57 of toys and jewellery, 52 of ice-cream, 21 of oysters and prawns), but most people arriving at Central would not need a picture to remember the experience.[3] Their visit to Blackpool was a special occasion, and many of them had arrived on 'special', or excursion, trains that were not listed in the

normal timetables, but advertised on leaflets or posters. Some of the specials brought textile workers from northern towns in their 'Wakes Weeks', which arose out of religious festivals, and crystallised as weeks or fortnights – Saturday to Saturday – when the mills closed for maintenance, allowing an entire town (a few misfits and the men checking over the mill machinery aside) to decamp to the seaside. So the memorability of the event was increased by the fact that it was communal.

The train might have been hauled by a big, black L7 class loco of the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway, commonly known as 'High-Flyers' on account of their high-set boilers, which made them seem to gallop. Bottles of beer would have been opened soon after departure, which might account for the joyful screaming as the train went through tunnels, the sticking of heads out of the window, despite the risk of a fly slamming into your eye or your hat being whisked away, the on-board canoodling – more serious on the journey back, perhaps, after love matches had been formed (and on nocturnal returns, the lightbulbs might be removed from compartments for this purpose). The rattliness of the train – excursion rakes often comprising superannuated carriages held in reserve for most of the year – might have been erotically stimulating to some; it would certainly have increased the sense of speed and drama, the speed of a heartbeat; and emerging from Central station almost directly in front of the sea, would have done the same.

I am old enough and Northern enough (born in York) to have taken a train to Blackpool for a week's holiday. Our family had a succession of cars, but never very good ones, and the seaside was largely beyond their range. Besides, my father worked for British Rail, so we had free train travel, a perk slightly

overshadowed by the unfashionability of trains at the time, and I'd have traded it in for the Ford Capri in our driveway. We might as well get the stats out of the way. Between 1951 and 1972 the proportion of holidaymakers travelling by car rose from 27 to 70 per cent, or from 53 to 85 per cent if coaches and buses are included in road transport. Over the same period, the railways' share declined from 47 to 12 per cent.[4]

My father was involved in 'costings' in the British Rail Eastern Region's headquarters in York, and his task, in that twilit industry, was not to increase costs but to reduce them, which he resented having to do, and which I resented on his behalf. I became sentimentally attached to BR, which seemed then – and still seems in retrospect – a competent and socially useful organisation, not least because it took people to the seaside.

Reading timetables, I expected to see sand in the page gutter, and the destinations that looked most pleasing on the page were the seaside towns. They were the first ones you noticed, since they were the termini, a happy ending: Cleethorpes or Bridlington for Sheffield and environs; Scarborough for Leeds; Skegness and Great Yarmouth for Nottingham and Leicester, and so on.

On *Rail UK Forums*, a contributor styling himself '30mog' wrote:

> Many my age love trains because they were the saviour of families who didn't have cars in the 1970s … Bank holiday Monday 9 a.m. was rush hour at Sheffield. Specials to Cleethorpes, Skegness and Blackpool in quick succession. I would say that 90 per cent of the time my family travelled by train was an excursion – with bargain basement tickets.

The best-known BR excursions were 'Merrymakers', a brand created in 1971, perhaps as a counterweight to the less merry continuous coal trains serving power stations under the name 'Merry-go-Round'. In the next ten years, almost half a million people were carried on Merrymakers, usually to seaside destinations. But BR excursions had many names, the most straightforwardly joyous being the Western Region's Bucket and Spade Specials of 1964, with a free bucket and spade for every child.

Some seaside expresses, like the *Atlantic Coast Express* or the *Cornish Riviera Express*, ran regularly and were in the timetable; others were intermittent enough to be identified as 'specials'. Within living memory, for instance, were the Intercity Holidaymakers, long-distance trains that joined the dots between unlikely places: Nottingham and Paignton; Manchester and Eastbourne. Specials were conjured out of a much baggier railway than today, with great reserves of spare rolling stock. As Simon Bradley notes, 'In 1959 BR had 6,000 carriages that made no more than ten to eighteen return journeys a year.'[5]

In its *Encyclopaedia of Titled Trains*, the *Railway Magazine* brings its forensic microscope to the question of which seaside trains were specials and which were not. The case of the *Eastern Belle*, they state, is 'an odd one'. It was launched in 1929 as a service from London Liverpool Street to a different resort each day, the destinations including Felixstowe, Aldeburgh, Frinton, Yarmouth, Cromer, Hunstanton and Skegness. But on Sundays it *always* went to Clacton, and this working featured in the timetables owing to its steadiness. (Clacton, incidentally, was the *Eastern Belle's* most popular destination because it was the nearest to Liverpool Street, so you'd have a longer time in Clacton than the other places – and a *much* longer time than in Skegness.)

But would it matter very much if you ended up in Frinton when you'd been expecting Yarmouth? It was all the seaside. In the 1970s people would say, 'We're off to the seaside next week,' and leave it at that, just as they might say, 'We're off out to tea.' I am reminded of a series of LNER posters created in 1931 by Tom Purvis: in rich, Mediterranean colours they depicted activities – picnicking, swimming, boating and so on – in generic seaside places under the title 'East Coast Joys', the one constant being the intense blueness of the sea – and the sea was the point, not the places or the people, who lacked facial features. The nearest thing to a ticket to the sea *per se* might have been the BR Holiday Runabout tickets: unlimited travel for a week in 'Holiday Areas', whether 'Cornish Riviera', 'Glorious Devon' or 'Smiling Somerset'. But to travel by BR to the seaside in the 1970s was to be conscious of having missed out on something more momentous. The trains tended to be small, oil-smelling DMUs; the posters in the stations seemed to be directing people elsewhere. In 1978 BR came out with 'Sleep Your Way to Europe', and in 1980, 'Do the Continental'.

The golden age of the British seaside had only recently passed. It was in the 1950s, when the effects of the Holidays with Pay Act 1938 were finally being felt, having been delayed by the war. As a milestone, the Act is comparable to the Bank Holiday Act of 1871 and the founding, in 1842, of the Early Closing Association, which lobbied for Saturday to be a half-day holiday, although it wasn't until the 1930s that the full weekend off became the norm.

Even in the 1950s there was a golden-ness still about railway posters. In 1956 a man encumbered by golf bag, binoculars and fishing rod is nonetheless so elated that he leapfrogs a radiant deckchair above the words, 'Herne Bay on the Kent Coast'. The image is by Bromfield (a one-name

artist), and it reminds me that Herne Bay is now known as 'Hernia Bay', on account of its ageing population. Also in the mid-1950s, a beachball on a bucket has a smiling face in an image by Tom Eckersley. Below is the word 'Bridlington'. (Bridlington inspired some excellent railway posters, perhaps because the artists felt strongly motivated to help it escape the shadow of Scarborough.) In 1960 an image of a cartoon-ish man in a swimming costume who obviously can't believe his luck holds hand with a mermaid above 'Porthcawl Has Everything' – the creation of Reginald Montague Lander. Lorna Frost writes that the 'informality' of railway posters in the 1950s and 1960s reflected the growing informality of the seaside itself, that 'the image of the upper-class spa town had finally gone.'[6]

The art of the seaside railway poster added perhaps even more to the gaiety of the nation than the trains themselves, whether harmonising with a summer's day or glimpsed out of season, a little tattered on a station wall. In *The Fortnight in September*, R. C. Sherriff's novel of 1931 about the Stevens family's annual holiday in Bognor, young Ernie Stevens excitedly indicates a poster advertising Bognor on a wall at Dulwich station, where their journey begins. It reads 'BOGNOR REGIS – FOR HEALTH AND SUNSHINE', and shows 'a smiling girl upon a beautiful yellow foreshore'. 'It ought to look like that this afternoon,' muses Ernie's older brother, Dick.

The railway poster came into focus after the Grouping, a product of competition for holiday traffic between the Big Four, and between them and the growing numbers of cars, charabancs and coaches, hence the GWR slogan of the 1934, later taken up by the other three, 'It's Quicker by Rail'. See for instance the LNER poster of about 1935, by Tom Purvis: 'Cleethorpes: It's Quicker by Rail', showing a cloche-hatted

mother and cherubic child pressed up against the window of a shadowy train compartment. In contrast to the shadow, the view from the window is the yellow glare of the awaiting beach. But more often the people in the posters were already on the beach. The LNER 'Quicker by Rail' series was notably erotic: blondes are shown being chatted up by caddish-looking men on sea walls at Bridlington, Whitley Bay and Scarborough, although the Scarborough man, to do him credit, carries a walking stick, implying wartime heroics.

The LNER produced the dreamiest seaside images: the strangely anonymous, sun-dazed figures of Tom Purvis, while Dame Laura Knight offered thin, balletic women playing ball games on some Yorkshire beach, under a slightly overcast sky, for once. Not all the posters emanated from a railway company. In *Happy Holidays* Michael Palin suggests that a poster featuring the legend, 'Guernsey: The Sunshine Island', must have been generated by the Guernsey tourist authority, given its even-handed approach to trains: 'Services via Weymouth or Southampton by Great Western or Southern Railways'. The poster, incidentally, shows another chat-up scene: the couple on a headland, looking down on a tranquil bay, the man, according to Palin, 'chiefly remarkable for the enormity of his trousers'.[7] (These being Oxford bags.)

In their posters and publicity, railway operators made weather boasts about their regions, and there was something endearing about this mild hucksterism. In 1907 the GWR launched what Michael Palin called 'one of history's longest and most dubious slogans': 'There is a great similarity between Cornwall and Italy in shape, climate and natural beauties,' hence the *Cornish Riviera Express*.[8] The Great North of Scotland Railway promoted Moray Firth as 'the Scottish Riviera', while the Furness Railway called Grange-over-Sands 'the Naples of the North!', the exclamation mark

presumably acknowledging that they knew they were being a bit silly. Still more tenuous, the Cheshire Lines Committee's brochures said of Southport that if 'a shower should happen to fall, the porous nature of the soil ensures that it should not have a permanent effect upon the health and spirits.'

An article by Alistair F. Nisbet in *Backtrack* magazine of May 2024 describes a 'riot' that occurred on Easter Monday 1952, when a beautiful, sunny morning in Southport turned into an afternoon of torrential rain. Excursionists who'd arrived from Lancashire cotton towns on twenty-five 'specials' gave up on their day out and crammed into Southport's Chapel Street station demanding immediate return to their home towns; the staff were overwhelmed and locked the station doors, causing greater unrest among those locked out, who, clad in skimpy summer clothes, not only could not get home but also lacked the shelter of the station roof. Southport generally seemed a hard sell. The Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway tried 'Come to Southport for mild winters!', a slogan Palin calls 'suicidally inoffensive'.[9]

The most robust weather claims were made by the Southern Railway. In 1930, it launched Sunny South Sam, a smiling railway guard who looked not so much suntanned as sunburned, and who appeared in various publicity guises, sometimes presenting Met Office sunshine indices. In an advert from his debut year, Sam holds up a sort of scroll showing the top 19 sunniest resorts. At number 1 is Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight; Brighton is at number 10. All 19 are in Southern territory except the Isles of Scilly, at 6, and Lowestoft at 13, and these are not underlined, which all the others are. Presumably number 20 was also outside the Southern's area, hence the awkwardness of a 'top 19'.

Southern sunniness was also promoted in a poster of 1936, in which a small, cherubic boy holding a commensurately

small suitcase is addressed by the crewman of an engine from what seems a very high footplate, over the slogan, written in childish handwriting: 'I'm taking an early holiday cos I know summer comes soonest in the south.' The child was Ronald Witt, and he had been photographed speaking to the fireman (a Mr Woolf) of a King Arthur Class locomotive, the *Red Knight* (which was green, like most Southern passenger locos), by Charles A. Brown at Waterloo. When John Elliot, head of Public Relations at the Southern, saw the photo he realised, 'We must go all out with it as a poster.'[10] Ronald Witt was not actually bound for the seaside, but for Southampton, from where his family would be emigrating to California.

The LNER took on the Southern's weather boasting with the not very convincing 'The Drier Side of Britain', sometimes used on posters featuring sunny East Coast scenes, with a threatening shadow, like thick black smoke, encroaching from the left. In a way, the railways got what they deserved. If you go about comparing Cornwall to the Riviera, you ought not to be surprised when people investigate the actual Riviera, which Freddie Laker would allow them to do when in 1966 his charter airline Laker Airways opened for business.

John Hassall's 'Jolly Fisherman' poster ('Skegness is SO Bracing') was commissioned to advertise an excursion from King's Cross to Skegness on Good Friday 1908. The excursionists would have had an afternoon in Skegness. A slightly later GNR poster, also by Hassall, advertised Sunday and Thursday excursions giving '5½ Hours At Skegness'. Note the half-hour. Every minute was important, but perhaps every minute was also slower, given the intensity of the experience. When Charlie Chaplin recalled a visit to Southend in 1903, when he was six, he described it as a 'holiday' even

though it lasted *only* a day. Back then, the seaside was more differentiated from the rest of the country: not only did it have the sea, and a much cleaner sky than one's home town, but it was also stranger, a place where clocks were 'floral', golf was 'crazy'; castles were made of sand; piers offered a walk to nowhere, and chairs (deckchairs) were designed for lying down on.

The British seaside is not so exotic today. In 1972 John Betjeman made two short TV travelogues, both called *Thank God It's Sunday*. In one of them he travelled to Southend from Fenchurch Street station. The film was repeated on TV in 1995, with an introduction by Alan Bennett, who said, 'In 1972, England wasn't curling at the edges in quite the same way it is today, the seaside still cocky and cheeky rather than seedy and run-down.' That curling at the edges has been investigated with increasing anxiety ever since, and a very thorough and readable account of it is given in *The Seaside, England's Love Affair*, by Madeleine Bunting. Here is the key sentence from her prologue:

> For over two decades, seaside resorts have been found to have the worst levels of deprivation in the country, while a raft of shocking indicators – from poor health, shortened lives, drug addiction, high debt, low educational achievement to low income – demonstrate the blighted communities which cluster along English coastlines.[11]

Today the seaside railway terminus is more likely to be seen as 'the end of the line' in a baleful metaphorical sense rather than some joyful culmination. A certain percentage of people travel to Blackpool, Scarborough or Penzance with no firm intention of returning, but just because they can't go any further. Or because they know the rents are cheap;

or because they had a nice holiday in happier times. This book reflects the decline to some extent, and readers are duly warned that most of the journeys I undertook were aboard runtish units terminating at stations with rusty tracks, a car park lying adjacent (signifying former sidings) and a megastore or some other inappropriate thing where station buildings once stood. On my walks to the front I sometimes encountered street drinkers, charity shops, semi-derelict buildings, but I don't offer only the past as a corrective to such melancholic scenes, and the magic hasn't entirely disappeared. Sometimes the sun swinging out from behind a cloud is enough to bring it back.

1

THE TRAINS GO TO THE SEA

Transcending Coal

'Holiday Memory', Dylan Thomas's long poem of 1954, recollects seaside holidays in Mumbles, to which the young Thomas was taken on 'the trams that hissed like ganders'. It begins:

> August Bank Holiday. A tune on an ice-cream cornet.
> A slap of sea and a tickle of sand. A fanfare of sunshades
> opening. A wince and whinny of bathers dancing
> into deceptive water. A tuck of dresses. A rolling of
> trousers. A compromise of paddlers …

Thomas is too preoccupied with childhood delights to bother about railway arcana, but the Swansea & Mumbles Railway, which closed in 1960, had a claim to be the first railway in Britain to carry fare-paying passengers on seaside excursions, although, strictly speaking, it was a horse-drawn tram when it started doing so in 1807, running exhilaratingly along the coast of South Wales from Swansea to Mumbles via Oystermouth. The Swansea & Mumbles became a true railway in 1877, when steam locomotives were introduced, but then it became a tram again, albeit an electric one with enormous double-decker tramcars, in 1929.

The Swansea & Mumbles, which began operations the year before laying on those excursions, was built to carry coal, iron ore and limestone, and coal played a role in the three intertwined causes of the British seaside holiday: a change of attitude towards the sea; the connection of railways to the coast; the growth of leisure time and paid holidays. Coal was important to the first and third causes because it caused the pollution to which the coast was an antidote, and to the second in that the commonest early motive for running rails to the sea was to export coal.

It is hard to believe the purpose of the Swansea & Mumbles was ever anything other than to skirt Swansea Bay on a golden summer's day. Thomas's poem is about happiness. The children on the beach are 'moving jewels, who might never be happy again', and the happiness of the beach gives way to, and is possibly even exceeded by that of, the funfair, as it comes into its own after dark when the naphtha jets are lit. The railway played a big role in facilitating the pleasure: yes, the vigorous children and younger adults of Swansea could have walked the six miles around the bay to Mumbles beach and pier, but not the very young or old. They could have taken the bus, of course, and they would have to after 1960, when the railway closed. But would the buses have been as much fun as the tall, double-decked, red-and-cream trams that hissed like ganders? After closure, one of the tramcars was acquired by the Middleton Railway, one of the earliest heritage lines. But it was little used, and much vandalised. It did not belong on that inner-city line; it's easy to imagine it anthropomorphised and pining for the sea.

⋆

The Kilmarnock & Troon Railway, commissioned by the Duke of Portland to carry coal from his collieries at Kilmarnock to his docks at Troon, opened in 1811 and is considered the first public railway in Scotland. It was converted for locomotive operation in 1837, and it had carried passengers from the start, at first in two open carriages with straw on the floor, then in custom-built carriages named *Caledonia* and *The Boat*. The K&T (swallowed up by the Glasgow & South Western Railway in 1899) made Troon a fashionable destination. The passenger cars were 'very busy in the summer evenings and on holidays carrying to the "saut watter" and back the Kilmarnock weavers, who were in fact the first seaside trippers'.[1]

Troon has two stations: outlying Barassie, then Troon. As I approached the former one sunny afternoon, on the Desiro electric unit from Glasgow, it seemed as if the whole world had taken up golf and quickly become good at it. On the golf courses to both sides of the line I observed a series of elegant swings, followed by confident marches along the fairways. There are about thirty courses around Troon, roughly half of them links – that is, by the sea, if we can so call the Firth of Clyde. Sitting across the aisle from me was a young man, with a small golf bag, a practice set, perhaps. He didn't look at any of the passing games, suggesting a confidence in his own ability, an impression reinforced by the fact that he was reading *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*.

The current Troon station dates from 1892, or rather 2021, when it was rebuilt following a disastrous fire on a very hot July day, so it was as if the conflagration – of mysterious origin – were caused by the sun itself. This is why the station looks pristine, with a spacious and airy waiting room, and paintings of local scenes proudly displayed. On the road outside, a busy signpost indicates 'Town Centre', 'South

Beach', 'Royal Troon Golf Club', 'Municipal Golf Courses'. The station was quiet on my arrival, but tens of thousands of extra passengers use it when the Open Championship is held at Royal Troon. Cyril Reid, a schoolboy in the 1930s, recalls 'the letting folk' descending on Troon in droves, mostly arriving by train, courtesy of the LMS:

> I remember well, as a young boy, going up with my brother to the station with our 'bogies' to earn some money transporting luggage for the holiday makers. The going rate was one penny per load. My brother will never forget the time he piled cases on his 'bogie', collected his penny, and then was told the destination was Collenan – a good two miles away.[2]

I headed towards the front beneath a high, clean sky, nicely offset by the pink sandstone of the Troon houses, some of the larger ones built for Glasgow coal merchants. Many were also once guest houses. There is a pleasing spaciousness about Troon: wide streets, handsome detached houses beneath a big sky, besmirched fairly regularly, it must be admitted, by planes approaching Glasgow Prestwick Airport. It seems logical that in 1938 the LMS carried nearly 400,000 people to the Ayrshire coast on cheap-ticket 'evening breather' trains, mainly from Glasgow.[3]

The South Beach commands a view of an enigmatic triangular lump out to sea. A man sitting on a bench overlooking the sandy beach, with eyes serenely closed and face uplifted towards the sun, told me, without opening his eyes or altering the angle of his face, 'That's the Ailsa Craig, where the stone for curling comes from.' Adjacent to the South Beach until the 1980s was an Art Deco open-air swimming pool. In the 1930s this hosted a beauty pageant, 'Archie McCulloch's