

GUIDE BOOKS

Newton and Machynlleth Railway

“The neighbourhood (of Machynlleth) is full of objects of antiquity. At a distance of 11 miles to the west we come to the town of Towyn (sic). A thoroughly Welsh town, and a most rural watering place. St. Cadfan’s church will delight an antiquarian. Hence follow the mountain road, by the majestic Cader Idris, whose cyclopean precipices are upheaved in our very path, to Dolgelley (sic) ...

A small portion of the Aberystwyth and Welsh Coast Railway beyond Machynlleth is now open. It extends through Glyn-Dovey and Ynys-Las to Borth on the coast of Cardigan about 8 miles short of Aberystwyth.”

George Bradshaw’s guide of 1863.

Three men and a Bradshaw by John George Freeman, edited by Ronnie Scott

Many years before Michael Portillo picked up his Bradshaw, J G Freeman describes a journey on the Ffestiniog Railway in August 1875 (pages 174-179).

“A train being timed to start at 1 o’clock, we now repaired to the railway station (Porthmadog Harbour), but the clerk was so dilatory that he did not commence issuing tickets till considerably after the hour. ... after a delay of half an hour we started amidst dire forebodings as to when we should return.

This line is certainly a curiosity in its way, the rails being only two feet apart, the carriages little more than five high and about six inches from the ground, with lengthwise seats in many to give a better view of the scenery, and the engine a small podgy thing quite unlike any we have ever seen. ... Our rate of movement was very slow, though the engine made a tremendous smoke and noise out of all proportion to its deeds, also, when about to recommence its labours after a stoppage, treated us all to a dreadful jerk. ...”

Another popular series of guide books was published by Ward Lock. Their Red Guide to Lynton and Lynmouth provided this introduction to the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway;-

“In order to avoid the expense of tunnels, long embankments and bridges, the line was made to wind and twist so that its course resembles a mountain torrent. At more than one point the turns are so sharp that even a short train may be on both sections of an ‘S’ curve simultaneously. Heading north from Snapper Halt, the line crossed and re-crossed the River Yeo, before turning onto the Chelfham Viaduct, the line’s major engineering feature, with eight arches, 70 feet high, spanning the Stoke Rivers Valley.”

Frank Box, a photographer whose images have left later generations with charming memories of the Lynton & Barnstaple, wrote;-

“It was a line of little things. It seemed to marvel how, on a gauge of only 1 ft 11½ inches, a coach seating four a side could be safely poised. As one jogged along there was ample time to observe the simple everyday scenes of the countryside; the litter of pigs and the primroses near Snapper; magpies slowly winging their flight from copse to copse; the morning newspaper flung out by the guard as one climbed near the farm at Chumhill; the wild daffodils and some beautiful velvety-coated carthorse foals below Wistlandpound – lovely name!; a white-walled homestead perched so prominently above a sensational horseshoe curve; rabbits in their hundreds on a sunny hillside near Parracombe. Then the train would stop suddenly while the driver alighted and tenderly lifted into safety a small lamb which had strayed into the “two foot”.”

The Southern Railway’s official guide – Devon and Cornish Days – written by E.P. Leigh-Bennett in the early 1930s, stated;-

“In no other train have you ever been taken through such excitingly lovely country. It goes rather slowly with you, for which you are profoundly thankful, because if it rushed along, like its main line colleagues, you wouldn’t be able to feast your eyes on the scenery as you are now doing. Delightful little stations, too. The bumptious little engine gives a falsetto shriek of pride on approaching and leaving all of them. Perfect!”

Quintessential narrow gauge, but perhaps too perfect to last! Despite such prose, the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway was closed on 29th September 1935.

Even that great north Devon author Henry Williamson [author of *Salar the salmon* and *Tarka the otter*], brought his children along for a last farewell. “Goodbye little railway” he wrote in his book *The Children of Shallowford*, “the children loved you.” The *North Devon Journal* also marked the closure, publishing a poem [which can be sung to the tune of Jerusalem the golden!];

*Oh little train to Lynton
no more we see you glide
among the hills and valleys
and by the steep hillside.
The fairest sights of Devon
were from your windows seen
the moorland’s purple heather,
blue sea and woodland green.*

*And onward little river
in motion winding slow
through fairylands enchanted
thy course was wont to go.
Where still the hills and valleys
in sunshine and in rain
will seem to wait for ever
the coming of the train.*

Extracted from *The trains now departing* by Michael Williams,
Arrow books 2015, with his consent.

“Are ye right there, Michael?”

On Monday 10th August 1896, the fire in the locomotive No. 8 Lisdoonvarna had to be dropped at Miltown Malbay station due to an injector failure. It was working the 12:40 train from Ennis to Kilrush and Kilkee on the West Clare Railway in Ireland. A passenger on the train was Percy French, an entertainer, who was thereby unable to turn up in time for an advertised performance in Kilkee. In addition to successfully suing the Company for £10 damages, he wrote this song;-

You may talk of Columbus's sailing
across the Atlantical sea
but he never tried to go railing
from Ennis as far as Kilkee.

You run for the train in the mornin'
The excursion train starting at eight,
you're there when the clock gives the warnin'
and there for an hour you'll wait

And as you're waiting in the train
you'll here the guard sing this refrain

“Are ye right there, Michael? Are ye right?
Do you think that we'll be there before the night?
Ye've been so long in startin'
that ye couldn't say for sartin'
still ye might now, Michael, so ye might!”

They find out where the engine's been hiding
and it drags you to sweet Corofin;
says the guard “Back her down on the siding
there's the goods from Kilrush comin' in.”
Perhaps it comes in in two hours
perhaps it breaks down on the way;
“If it does,” says the guard, “be the powers,
we're here for the rest of the day!”

And while you sit and curse your luck
the train backs down into a truck!

“Are ye right there, Michael? Are ye right?
have ye got the parcel there for Mrs White?
Ye haven't! Oh, begorra!
say it's comin' down to-morra -
and it might now, Michael, so it might!”

At Lahinch the sea shines like a jewel,
with joy you are ready to shout,
when the stoker cries out, “There's no fuel,
and the fire's taytotally out.
but hand up that bit of log there -
I'll soon have ye out of the fix;
there's a fine clamp of turf in the bog there;”
and the rest go gathering sticks.

And while you're breaking bits of trees,
you hear some wise remarks like these;-

“Are ye right there, Michael? Are ye right?
Do ye think that ye can get that fire to light?
Oh, an hour you'll require,
for turf it might be drier –“
“Well, it might now, Michael, so it might!”

Kilkee! Oh, you never get near it!
You're in luck if the train brings you back,
for the permanent way is so queer, it
spends most of its time off the track.

Uphill the ould engin' is climbin',
while the passengers push with a will:
you're in luck when you reach Ennistymon,
for all the way back home is down-hill.

And as you're wobbling through the dark,
you hear the guard make this remark;-

“Are ye right there, Michael? Are ye right?
Do you think that ye'll be home before it's light?”
“ 'Tis all dependin' whether
the ould engin' howlds together –“
“And it might now Michael, so it might!”

Published by Pigott & Co., Grafton Street, Dublin

The above tale provides an excuse to include these photographs of the West Clare Railway, taken by John Slater, probably in 1960 [the line closed on 31st January 1961].



Diesel Railcars at Ennis, interchange with the Irish Standard Gauge. Four Railcars were introduced in 1953, replacing steam hauled passenger trains.



Above Trains at Moyasta Junction, the railcar is heading for Kilkee and No.503 is in the Kilkee platform.

Left - Double bogie [Bo-Bo] Diesel Locomotive No.503 at Kilrush. 3 of these locos built by Walker Brothers of Wigan were introduced in 1955. They were powered by 2 Gardner 6LW engines.



3 views taken at Kilkee, featuring No.501 on a loco hauled service.