

Railway history is littered with the most surprising links — NRM Associate Curator Bob Gwynne and Mentor of this Museum explores one curious railway connection.

Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised by the strange links that crop up in railway history, because despite all the heavy engineering, railways are really about people. The people that built them, run them and use them. Every time you see a locomotive or a carriage, it's worth remembering that here is something that was made. It didn't just happen—people were involved.

This can lead you to the odd juxtapositions and incidents of history. My own favourite is an exhausted and penniless Richard Trevithick meeting the young Robert Stephenson in Colombia in 1827. Robert paid the £50 for Trevithick to sail back to the UK, to die six years later, his dreams never fully realised. Stephenson meanwhile returned, built Rocket, and the rest (as they say) is history. However, you sometimes come across something that is a 'what if': an intangible that isn't really history – because you can't prove it – but which sounds like common sense and which gives you a different perspective on a real object.

Step forward Victorian novelist Mrs Gaskell. If you look a little closer at her history there is a surprising link. Elizabeth Gaskell's cousin was Samuel Holland (1803 – 1892), who promoted the building of the Ffestiniog Railway to enable the products of his quarries to more easily get to market. His house Plas Penrhyn (not far from the Ffestiniog's Boston Lodge works) was a favourite of hers, and in fact she stayed in it several times. As a teenager she had also stayed with a friend of the family in Newcastle, William Turner, who was a friend of George Stephenson's and a supporter of his work in building the Liverpool and Manchester railway.

Given Elizabeth's later writing it is clear that she took an interest in the dawning 'railway age'. When Elizabeth married in 1832, she honeymooned at Plas Penrhyn and in fact thought of the area as one of her favourites. No doubt it was a refreshing contrast to the grimness at the time of her home, Manchester. After Gaskell's second daughter Meta was born on 5 Feb 1837 (her first child was stillborn), she recuperated at Plas Penrhyn. She went on to have three more daughters, and in 1844 a son, William.

In 1845, while on holiday at Plas Penrhyn, William caught scarlet fever. The sources have it that he fell ill in 'Ffestiniog' and was rushed to the doctor at Porthmadog. Did they mean Ffestiniog the place, or were they just using the name to denote a region of Wales? If it was the place, then there could very well be a link to the Ffestiniog Railway. Scarlett fever starts slowly and then comes to a noticeable rash.

It is easy to imagine Elizabeth taking her precious son for some 'air' in the hills to try to lift the kind of alarming lethargy that an ill child slips into, before the dreaded symptoms became obvious. Could it be that once it was clear the child was ill, she then took the quickest route from Ffestiniog (the place) into Porthamadog, which then (as now) would have been the railway?

If that was the case could this desperate run for the Doctor have been in **Spoooner's Boat**? We know that this curious vehicle is a replica of something destroyed in 1886. (It had a head-on collision with a train while being piloted by Charles Easton Spooner, the line's engineer). It is also clear from the records that the vehicle existed before locomotive power came to the Ffestiniog in 1863, (such as Palmerston, first delivered to the FR in 1864).



Left - FR Loco. No.4 "Palmerston" passes Haffod Y Llyn halt and loop and passes some of the many bright Foxgloves along the railway; photo by Owen Chapman

Right – "Spoooner's boat" crossing The Cob at Porthmadog.

But did 'The Boat' exist in 1845? Charles Easton Spooner's father, James Spooner, had helped built the Ffestiniog in 1832 and had been its manager from 1844. Did he have built an inspection vehicle, his own private

conveyance for use on the line? It would certainly have been more convenient and comfortable for riding down the line than hitching a lift on a train descending by gravity. As for using sail power to cross 'the Cob' from Boston Lodge (the only flat part of the line) – another line in Wales, the Oystermouth Railway, had tried using sail power as early as 1807, so it's not impossible.

Baby William's death led to Elizabeth Gaskell turning to writing (these days, we would call it therapy) and it turned out that she was good at it. Her first novel 'Mary Barton' was published in 1848. Dickens would commission stories from her, and Charlotte Brontë was a friend (Gaskell wrote Charlotte's biography after she died). Cranford, her most well known work, was first published in instalments in a magazine run by Dickens, himself no stranger to railways.

Elizabeth Gaskell died in 1865 whilst getting ready to move into a new house in Alton in Hampshire. Meanwhile, Spooner's boat lived on in the collective memory of the Ffestiniog Railway until the late Mike Seymour, FR Heritage Group chairman, left in his will a sum of money for the re-creation of this railway legend. The result, first unveiled to an astonished public in 2005, was Spooner's Boat – a unique rail vehicle.

But did Mrs Gaskell travel in the original with an ill child in a desperate dash for help? We shall never know. But it does prove, if proof is needed, that all railway artefacts are filled with stories. Spooner's Boat, despite being a relatively recently built replica, is a tantalising example of this.