

A Bolt From The Blue

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The very mention of Blaenau Ffestiniog will prompt most people to make a (usually unfavourable) comment about the weather. This is somewhat unfair because, whilst Blaenau may well have the highest annual rainfall of any town in England and Wales, the weather there can often be good - and when it's good, it's very, very good. The surrounding mountains create a wonderful sun trap and, despite being nearly seven hundred feet above sea level, it can often be warmer in Blaenau than further down the valley.

Such was the case one balmy midweek morning in August 1983. I was there in my regular role of stationmaster, along with Clare Britton, holding the fort in the booking office in *Isallt*, on the High Street at the top of the footbridge. Even by midday, it was obviously going to be a typical fine-weather day, as potential passengers headed for the beach and our trains ran only half full - something which was to turn out to be a blessing in disguise later in the day. With trains on both the FR, and the BR line from Llandudno coming and going with almost monotonous regularity, it looked like being a totally unremarkable, almost boring, day. Until...

As in Porthmadog, the weather in Blaenau can change from one extreme to the other in a matter of minutes. About 15.00, the skies blackened quickly and, in no time, the heavens opened. Then a blinding flash heralded the arrival of a thunderstorm - and Blaenau thunderstorms are truly awesome. To misquote a line from *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, they are best observed from a concrete bunker on an adjacent planet! The storms come in across Cardigan Bay and get funnelled into the Vale of Ffestiniog. Then those same mountains which form a sun trap become a trap of a different sort.

Unable to progress further inland, the storms roll around and around the head of the valley, sometimes for hours on end, with the thunder echoing off the hills and the lightning usually growing in intensity. British Telecom, the electricity people and our own Signals and Telegraphs people will readily attest to the fact that Blaenau lightning will shatter the strongest lightning protectors known to man. One storm knocked out the equipment at both Valve House and Stwlan level crossings at Tanygrisiau, and S&T were barely able to rescue enough undamaged parts out of both to return one of them to service.

With 16.00 approaching, I ventured out of *Isallt* to go down to meet the mid-afternoon BR train. We then had more responsibility for operating the BR side of the station than we do now, so this was a matter of duty. As the train ran in, the guard stuck his head out of his van, looked up at the sky, then looked at me. '*It's clear blue sky and bright sunshine at the other end of the long tunnel*', he remarked. '*It was like that here until an hour ago!*', I replied. After ensuring the arriving passengers wanting our train were pointed in the correct direction, I strolled over to meet our 14.50 from Porthmadog. There was no point in hurrying - our platform was then just a barren slab, with no buildings, and no shelter apart from that afforded by the footbridge and its approach ramp (the one since replaced by an iron staircase). Once out of *Isallt*, wherever you went, you got wet!

At 16.10, the two trains pulled out, almost side by side, and vanished into a curtain of rain and a gloom brightened only by the lightning flashes of the worsening storm. I went back up top and, once back inside the warmth of *Isallt*, removed my so-called waterproofs which, in those conditions, were more like a water redistribution system. Clare and I then set about the end-of-day cashing up. This was in pre-TITAN, non-computerised ticketing days, so we had to record the closing numbers off each type of ticket, check it against the previous days close, and work out how many of each type of ticket had been sold and hence how much money we should have taken. Next came the counting of the money we had actually taken, and the sometimes lengthy job of working out why it didn't match the amount we had arrived at in the previous exercise! Then the omnibus phone started ringing, persistently, urgently, almost menacingly...

The 'omnibus' is an open telephone circuit running the length of the FR. Every station and signal box has a handset connected to it, and at various points along the line there are plug-in points to which staff can connect portable field telephones carried in every guards van and on all engineers' trains. The only drawback of the system is that anyone can listen in to other people's conversations. Certain practical jokers amongst the staff occasionally have a bit of harmless fun making spoof phone calls to goad eavesdroppers!

Now, calling someone on the omnibus involves cranking a handle on the side of the instrument to produce a series of coded rings identifying the intended recipient of the call. Up in *Isallt*, the phone was sounding one long ring - the code for Control. The rings became longer and more frequent, obviously not getting a response. Then the rings changed to the code for Porthmadog Booking Office, then Rhiw Goch Signal Box - and then our code in Blaenau. I looked hesitantly at Clare, and picked up the phone fearing the worst. It was a distraught, somewhat shaken, Dduallt signalman.

Dduallt signal box had been the victim of a direct hit. The lightning had knocked out the local automatic telephone exchange, making it impossible for him to use the dial telephone system, and the omnibus circuit was obviously not working west of Dduallt. The signalling system had also been affected - the bottom-end track circuit indicator in the box was showing 'occupied' even though there wasn't a train in sight, and the signalman couldn't get a response from the token instrument for the Tan y Bwlch section.

As we spoke, the train that had left Blaenau fifteen minutes earlier was starting its run around the spiral. We broke off the conversation so the signalman could deal with this train, which was due to cross the 15.45 from Porthmadog. I relayed to Control news of what had happened by the only means possible (the BT national telephone network), getting a resigned '*It could have been worse*' response. My next call to Control was not so well received - it *had* got worse!

Back at Dduallt, the signalman had admitted the Down train to the loop and reset the top points for the Up train to go through. Thankfully, this train had already obtained a Tan y Bwlch to Dduallt single line token before the lightning had struck. The Dduallt to Blaenau section was then worked 'one engine in steam', so there were no failed token instruments to impede the train's progress. Then - disaster, stage one!

With the bottom-end track circuit showing 'occupied', the signalman should not have attempted to pull off the Up Home signal - but he did. Then again, with the bottom-end track circuit showing 'occupied', the interlocking should not have allowed him to pull off the Up Home signal - but it did! With a clear road and no passengers to pick up or set down, the Up train sailed through, the crew blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding around them.

After popping out to exchange tokens with the passing train, the signalman returned to his lever frame, a beautiful ex-LNWR frame that the FR had acquired from Springs Branch box near Wigan, which was unfortunately about to become the object of much cursing and swearing. Disaster, stage two, had arrived! In preparation for getting the Down train on its way again, the signalman went to put the up home signal back to danger. The lever went back as far as the mid position, enough to put the signal arm back to danger. But it would not go past the back-lock which would release the associated interlocking. Such was the interlocking at Dduallt that pulling off the home signal at either end locked the points at *both* ends! In a nutshell, the signalman was snookered! He had *Earl of Merioneth*, driver Evan Davies, and a ten-car train, stuck in the loop and unable to get out at either end.

The only telephone communication available between Dduallt and Control was via the omnibus circuit to Blaenau and thence by the BT phone to Control. Clare and I stayed on in *Isallt*, manning 'northern control' and relaying messages. The 15.45 from Porthmadog had now arrived in Blaenau and it was agreed that it would go back down via the main line at Dduallt, stopping to pick up passengers off the train trapped in the loop. Thankfully, both trains were lightly loaded and getting both sets of passengers into the smaller eight-car train was not going to be a problem. Next came news that was well received at Dduallt - the S & T staff were on their way up by road to release the marooned train.

However, getting to Dduallt by road is not easy; from Porthmadog, you take the first left immediately after the Oakeley Arms and follow a narrow lane for about a mile to Plas Dolymoch. From there a steep, rough, gated track leads up to the back of the Dduallt spiral. Nevertheless, shortly after 19.00, the locking on the bottom points had been released. Off back to Porthmadog headed the train with its crew. It was also carrying a signalman somewhat relieved to get out of the place!

After informing Control of the train's impending departure, Clare and I finally shut up shop in Blaenau and also headed for home. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be such a quick escape for the S&T lads, who had to work on late into the night to patch things up well enough for the service to run again next morning. It hadn't been one of our better days - different, though!