

A GRAND DAY OUT

Brian Bushell

Back in the late seventies I was working in the City of London as Programming and Training Manager for one of the big US banks, and had a wonderful bunch of colleagues who all had a common problem; they'd never been to Wales, and never heard of the Ffestiniog Railway - so much for *'The Little Railway the Whole World Talks About'*!

Something had to be done! Whatever *was* done, however, would obviously include a trip on the FR - there was no point in visiting Wales otherwise! My first thought was a weekend coach trip, and I tried the idea on a few colleagues, and on the secretary of the bank's social club. The initial response was enthusiastic. The club secretary suggested seeing if any other banks were interested - *'I'll ring their club secretaries'* he said. In no time, my coach had become a train, with twenty banks having expressed an interest and their club secretaries offering to promote the trip.

The next stop was Euston, to meet some old contacts from my days at British Railways Board headquarters, to arrange a train. BR were not really into corporate entertainment (although that soon changed), and didn't have a dedicated set of high-quality carriages for such a train, which had to include full restaurant car service. Initial plans for a High Speed Train (an HST 125) were quickly ruled out. The North Wales coast line had not been cleared for HST power cars at that time. Even worse, the Blaenau branch hadn't been cleared for Mk.III carriages, and the HST power cars have tighter clearances than the carriages they pull, due to a long overhang at the cab end. The cost of clearance tests, plus those of running an empty HST from either Old Oak Common or Finsbury Park to Euston, before and after our special, soon consigned that plan to the dustbin.

The BR lads were stuck for an alternative. The *Inter-City* trains working the WCML (West Coast Main Line) were so intensively rostered to either scheduled services or planned maintenance that anything else was out of the question. If a carriage developed a fault, then the trains affected ran with one carriage less until it was repaired, it was that tight. The WCML possessed some other carriages used for football and enthusiasts' specials, but these weren't exactly the stuff of prestige corporate events.

Undeterred, we set about agreeing a schedule for the special we didn't have! I wanted the weekend of 28/29 April 1979, the crunch point being the Saturday morning, and getting to Llanrwst in time to cross the midday train from Blaenau to Llandudno. This would involve leaving Euston about 09.00, stopping only at Crewe for a locomotive change, and again at Llandudno Junction to reverse for the Blaenau branch. Arrival in Blaenau was to be about 13.45, leaving at 22.30 for an overnight stay in Llandudno. Return from Llandudno on the Sunday was booked for about 17.00, arriving back in Euston by 21.30. BR confirmed the timings fairly quickly, with a departure from Euston at 08.50 - for a train that still didn't exist!

The next task was to visit *Travellers Fare* to arrange the on-train catering. When I first told them what train had been agreed, and what catering I wanted (a full bar and restaurant service for up to two hundred people), the response was on the lines of *'Pull the other one!'* However, once they realised the booking was genuine, that it was for some of the biggest names in the City, and that they stood to make a lot of money out of it... Need I say more? *'We'll have to charge you for your crew's overnight accommodation in Llandudno'*, they added. *'Don't worry about that'*, I replied. *'I'll book them in at one of our two hotels.'* And what a good move that turned out to be!

In the end, *Travellers Fare* really rose to the occasion. I was allocated their most highly regarded Chief Steward, who was then allowed to handpick his own crew from the cooks and stewards off every Euston-based restaurant car crew. Once a menu had been agreed, *Travellers Fare* set about producing some really memorable souvenir menu cards.

Up in North Wales, the FR was taking a back seat during my regular visits. Early on, I had agreed the schedule for our special train with Alan Heywood. This would be 17.00 from Tanygrisiau (the FR terminus in 1979), returning from Porthmadog at 19.00 to Tan y Bwlch for a barbecue, with a choice of two trains from Tan y Bwlch back to Tanygrisiau, both of them with bus connections back to Blaenau. However, much of my time in North Wales involved organising other aspects of the trip.

The Saturday afternoon was to be spent touring the slate caverns, Tanygrisiau power station and Stwlan dam. Apart from spending time at Llechwedd, and the power station reception centre sorting out the logistics of dealing with five bus loads of passengers at thirty minute intervals, I had to visit the *Crosville* bus company's office in Caernarfon to arrange the buses and the evening connections from Tanygrisiau station. Also needed were three coaches for optional Sunday outings to the usual tourist favourites, such as Caernarfon Castle and Swallow Falls.

Finally, there were the hotels in Llandudno. The accommodation was straightforward - we would take over two hotels for one night. But there were the ancillaries, such as late-night entertainment on the Saturday, and luggage stowage arrangements for the Sunday. You wouldn't believe the number of obstacles that one weekend's outing could throw up.

In my London office, things were buzzing. My evenings were spent producing itineraries and booking forms, preparing designs for tickets for the slate caverns, road coaches and both trains, and producing a

guide book for each passenger. The booking forms went out in the autumn of 1978, and acceptances quickly passed the hundred mark, then a hundred and fifty, then two hundred. Everyone paid up front, including for the optional meals on the BR train and the Sunday coach trips, so I was pretty safe in confirming latest numbers with the different parties involved.

Christmas came and went - with BR still short of a train! I went to Porthmadog for a few days break, only to find yet another obstacle. Alan Heywood reported that a rail tour from Brighton was booked on the FR the same day as my trip. Providing them with an FR train was no problem, as the same set could serve them and us, with an hour's break at Tanygrisiau. But they were proposing to come down the Blaenau branch in the same path as I had booked! Thankfully, they'd made the FR booking before their own BR train times had been confirmed. When told they couldn't have the path, they settled for road coaches from Llandudno Junction. (In referring to the Blaenau branch, I'm sticking strictly to the conventional railway usage of 'up' and 'down', even though going 'down' the branch obviously involves a lot of going up!)

Back in London, I was now working on the final details of the trip, including allocation of hotel rooms, seats on the FR train, and the buses to travel on for the Saturday afternoon trips at Blaenau. I couldn't allocate seats on the BR train, as I still didn't have one! But at last, a call came from Euston - they had solved the problem. The summer timetable began the weekend after our special, and the new WCML timetable needed an extra, air-conditioned *Inter-City* train. It would be made up a week early for us. I've never heaved such a big sigh of relief!

Departure date was drawing near far too rapidly. I'd got to know every inch of the 'square mile' delivering booking confirmations, tickets, seat allocations and guide books to different banks. I also became very grateful for the Travelling Post Office (TPO) service. Getting urgent mail for North Wales into the post for the normal last collection was usually out of the question, but a dash to Euston at 20.00 solved the problem. Stick an extra penny stamp, along with the normal first-class post, onto each envelope, pop down to the platform before the Night Mail drew out at 20.30, and drop the mail in the letterbox in the mail van. Delivered to Porthmadog or Llandudno first post next day! Apparently, envelopes arriving at Harbour Station with TPO postmarks were much sought after.

The big day arrived and I made an early start, arriving at Euston just after 08.00. I needn't have rushed. After waiting on Platform 15 for fifteen minutes I was joined by four stewards, each pulling a platform trolley piled high with buffet car stock, including two trolleys stacked with beer. *Travellers Fare* - and the FR and hotels - had been warned that 'banker' and 'beer' were synonymous! I'd particularly asked for plenty of *Ruddles' County*, which was the only decent bitter *Travellers Fare* had in those days, and they had most definitely not ignored my request!

The holding pen between the ticket barrier and platform was starting to fill with assorted bankers. Unfortunately, apart from me, the stewards, and loads of beer, the platform was deserted. 08.50 came and went with no sign of our train. Along with several other morning departures from Euston, it was still in the carriage sidings at Willesden, trapped by a points failure. Already on board, since before 07.00, were the rest of the restaurant car crew, busy preparing over a hundred breakfasts.

The fault was soon fixed, and Platform 15 sprang into life at 09.15 as our train pulled in and members of the waiting throng found their allotted carriages and seats - and in many cases headed for the restaurant car. Ten minutes later, the *Bankers Special* - a Class 87 electric locomotive, ten Mk.II carriages and two hundred and twenty staff from fifteen banks - sallied forth. Apart from signal checks near Willesden, we romped down the line to Crewe. There, the Class 87 was replaced by Brush Class 47 diesel 47545 for what was to be a stop-start run along the North Wales coast. Having lost our path, we were stuck behind an all-stations service train.

Lunch service for seventy five passengers began at Colwyn Bay. Five minutes later, at Llandudno Junction, we were greeted by well-known station inspector 'Ivor the Junction', who thrust into my hand a huge pack of souvenir Llanfair PG platform tickets to sell for one of the railway charities. I asked Ivor to let the *Crosville* bus depot at Blaenau know we were running late.

Locomotive-hauled trains down the Blaenau branch were then usually double-headed by two Class 25s, but these were not equipped to power the on-board services of a train such as ours. So 47545 ran round, to be joined by 25209 as pilot. Whether the latter was needed for the extra power I do not know, but its main purpose became apparent later.

We waited for the midday train from Blaenau, which we should have crossed at Llanrwst. Then, for the first time ever, a Class 47, and an air-conditioned *Inter-City* train with full catering set off down the Blaenau branch - forty minutes late! It was a very spirited run, making up over ten minutes lost time. Word of our unusual train had spread; back gardens and fields around Llanrwst and Betws were thronged with waving onlookers. Beyond Dolwyddelan, we caught sight of four white *Crosville* coaches conveying the passengers off the Brighton rail tour. They were probably looking at us, rubbing their eyes in disbelief.

Our terminus at Blaenau was the old North Western station, with a short platform and no run-round loop. We stopped short, 25209 uncoupled and went into the sidings, and 47545 pulled the train into the platform.

Before we had finished alighting 25209 had hooked onto the rear, ready to shunt the train, in two sections, into the sidings.

The restaurant car crew had been given tickets to join us on our afternoon jaunts around Blaenau, but decided to stay with the train and rest. They also had a surprise up their sleeves, preparation of which would occupy part of their evening. They were kept company by the security men hired to look after passengers' luggage (another detail easily overlooked).

I'd also 'hired' three FR staff as 'bus conductors', and Jo Clulow, Richard 'Santa' Nowell and Ron 'Lawrie' Lawrence were all waiting to ensure passengers joined the correct bus. The three buses each initially set off to different destinations. I'd also appointed a colleague as Slate Mines liaison. He was to travel on the first bus to the mines, take the tour (the Miners' Tramway was then the only option), and remain at the mines to shepherd passengers arriving on later buses. Sitting outside the power station reception centre, I had the best spot to monitor the buses and trains. I got a bit worried when Santa's bus went up to Stwlan Dam, and still hadn't come down when the next bus was due to go up. *'Don't worry'*, said Ken, one of the regular Blaenau depot drivers - *'I'll get past him somehow'*! Santa apparently had got everyone off his bus, and was giving them the history of virtually every bump on the horizon!

The FR 'Brighton' special returned, the passengers rejoining their coaches back to the Junction - Tanygrisiau was beginning to resemble Victoria coach station! The train stayed in Tanygrisiau for cleaning and servicing ready for our use. The FR knew we were running half an hour late, but eventually our buses finally deposited everyone at the station, and it was off to Porthmadog in ten corridor carriages - the entire FR fleet of such vehicles at the time, bar one observation car. Both buffet cars, Nos.14 and 103, were in use, manned by ten stewards, one per carriage. They were kept very busy, being given a repeat order each time they arrived to serve the previous one! Gill Shephard was one of several staff press-ganged into working the train. She later told me that the buffet cars took over £700 that evening - and that's at 1979 prices!

During an hour's break in Porthmadog, most passengers headed for the pubs I'd recommended in their guide books. Nevertheless, all were soon on board again for the trip to Tan y Bwlch, where the stay was cut by thirty minutes to get us back on time. The Royal Oakeley Silver Band were booked to play outside the café, and I'd requested that they play *Men of Harlech* as the train pulled into the station. Sean Britton, living in Station House, subsequently told me they started playing when they heard us come round Tyler's Curve, and were on about the tenth rendition when the train pulled in!

After catching the first train back to Tanygrisiau, I headed for Blaenau and the North Western Hotel - now long-demolished - taking the opportunity to phone the hotels in Llandudno and reassure them that everything was going according to plan. They'd been a tad apprehensive about a booking for so many people when they weren't going to see them until nearly midnight!

I got back to our BR special as the second fleet of buses was arriving from Tanygrisiau. Once everyone was on board, the chief steward asked me to announce that fish or gammon and chips were available in the restaurant at £2.50. Nice touch, I thought. If an *Inter-City* train full of diners heading through Betws at 13.30 had seemed unusual, the sight of the same train going back at 23.00, with the restaurant car still doing brisk business, must have been totally bizarre. It hasn't been repeated. Nor, I suspect, is it likely to be - unless I take leave of my senses again! With midnight approaching, we all left the train at Llandudno station and headed for the hotels. It had certainly been a grand day out; even the weather had been kind.

Sunday didn't start entirely according to plan, mainly due to Saturday not finishing until about 04.00 on Sunday. Entirely my fault, of course. I'd booked a disco from midnight until whenever, and I was surprised at how many passengers still felt wide enough awake not just to stay up for it, but to join in as well. Even the restaurant car crew joined in, and loved every minute of it. Like most of their fellow crews from that era, they were a real salt of the earth bunch and contributed enormously to the success of the weekend.

I missed the coaches going out on the Sunday morning, but thankfully my three appointed tour guides did make it. Quite a few passengers missed the coaches, too, but at least they had all paid in advance. After a morning wander round town, I adjourned for lunch with some colleagues to the Snowdon Inn in Tudno Street. I suspect I had one too many there, because later my colleagues persuaded me to go up Great Orme in the cable lift, which would normally have resulted in vertigo-induced terror. The trip back was awful - I was in the last car down before the lift was switched off due to high winds. The empty cars still going up were swinging wildly and almost crashing into our car. The only redeeming feature was a grandstand view of our train being reversed from the Junction into Llandudno station.

Back on the train, the first priority was pointing people in the right direction for dinner. Over a hundred and fifty had booked, involving two sittings, the first to commence almost immediately. Second sitting started at Crewe, where we said farewell to 47545 - and to the last can of *Ruddles' County*! By Watford Junction, the bar was dry! Back at Euston on time, after an endless round of 'goodbye' and 'thank you', I set off with the restaurant car crew for the old Buffer Stop bar on the west colonnade, to unwind and reflect on the weekend's high spots.

Monday was a day of rest. Back at work on Tuesday, I soon realised that the *'Bankers' Special'* was the talk of the City. The phone hardly stopped ringing, and letters of appreciation kept arriving. It was the talk

of Euston, too, and it was not long before BR had dedicated, quality train sets for just such occasions. They learned to price them more realistically, too! Considering what my special had involved, which included keeping the Blaenau and Llandudno branches open until nearly midnight on the Saturday, and opening the Llandudno branch specially on the Sunday, the cost, even at 1979 prices, was a bargain. Without the catering, what did the train cost? *Well, to you, Sir, - a snip at £1,200...!*