

AN OPENING OR TWO

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My narrow-gauge life dates from 1958 - on the Talylyn Railway, where I qualified as a guard three years later. I was aware of *'the other railway up north'*, but had never found a reason to visit. That changed in 1965, when my old friend (and more recently FR financial director) Hugh Eaves, also a TR man in those days, was down at Tywyn volunteering at the same time as me. He was keen to visit the FR, and with us both having the same day off, we ventured up the coast. The journey would warrant a small article in its own right, and I might get round to it someday! Suffice to say that we eventually ended up at Tan y Bwlch, the FR terminus at that time.

We walked up the derelict, overgrown trackbed to Dduallt, and strolled up into the centre of what was to become the spiral. Work was in progress digging out the cutting at the back of the hillock, and the spoils from the excavation were being used to build up Cei'r Bont, the embankment linking the cutting to Rhoslyn Bridge. Barely twenty yards of embankment had been built, but optimistically, the first two concrete pillars to support the bridge were in place. There were also signs of activity beyond the bridge, at what was to become Barn Cutting. Hugh and I looked around, looked at each other and shook our heads. *'They'll never do it!'*, we both agreed, and toddled off back to Tan y Bwlch.

Twelve years later, having changed my allegiance from TR to FR, and eaten a few words, I found myself on the platform at Harbour Station about to guard the first public service train to the temporary lakeside terminus at Llyn Ystradau. Not only was it to be the first public trip round the spiral and through the tunnel, it was to be mine as well, as I had no idea what was at the other end of the tunnel! Opening new stretches of line was not a common occurrence back then, so not much thought had been given to route learning for staff prior to the opening.

The date was Friday 8 July 1977, and it was a strange day in what had already been an unusual year. The danger of rock falls inside the tunnel had prompted the need for 'Shotcrete' lining. This work had started in the January and continued through much of the spring. Eventually, on 29 May, Her Majesty's Railway Inspector came to inspect the line, in a special train which incorporated the 'gauging wagon'. This is a flat wagon on which is mounted a metal frame shaped to the full FR loading gauge. If it fits, then everything else will fit. Unfortunately, it didn't fit! In places, the shotcreting had narrowed the tunnel, making it foul of gauge. The inspector nevertheless authorised the opening of the line subject to remedial work, which took place during June and early July.

Come 8 July, word was that the service trains would start through running that day, but which would actually be the first one was anyone's guess. I was on the second set. The other had already left Porthmadog on its third return trip to Dduallt when I came back in after my second trip. I was due out again at 15.15 with the day's last train. With no platform awning at Harbour Station in those days, Control could communicate with guards by leaning out of the office window! Terry Turner looked down and gave a 'thumbs up'. *'You're going through!'*, he called.

The passengers had all been issued with large souvenir tickets (bigger than a present-day buffet car menu card), and off we set to make another milestone in FR history. But the journey had an ironical twist at the end. The lake, which we had spent many thousands of pounds and man-hours to bypass, wasn't there! Two days earlier, it had been drained for maintenance work on the dam. The temporary terminus quickly became known as 'Mudflats Ystradau'.

Clearly visible from the new station was Tanygrisiau, which was the next objective. But before we could get there, more shotcreting was needed in the tunnel during the winter of 1977/78. This project turned out to be plagued by delays due to mechanical and technical problems, and, to be quite blunt, cock-ups. Even before the start of 1978, FR publicity was showing services operating to Tanygrisiau from early in the season. However, the tunnel problems put the opening further and further back, and staff were subjected to much flak from passengers. Even though no trains were running, Tanygrisiau booking office opened in May to deal with irate passengers turning up there and finding no trains.

Following a successful inspection on 8 June, and the completion of certain outstanding works, as required by the inspector, the official opening was scheduled for 24 June. The 'deviationists', that motley, devoted, mostly volunteer army who had built the new line, had been promised the first train along the completed route. Their train was to run thirty minutes ahead of the official opening special, and Neil Mackintosh and I were booked to guard it, with Phil Dowse driving his beloved *Ricket* (better known in other circles as *Blanche!*). With all the corridor stock having been commandeered for the train bearing the official guests, we had the one remaining observation car, and seven or eight compartment coaches. An hour before departure, we realised we would be going through the new tunnel in the dark! The only battery/dynamo cars at that time were the buffet cars, which were in the other train. The passengers were warned, and claustrophobia sufferers accommodated on the later train.

At Tanygrisiau, we ran into what is now (as of 3 July 2010) the Up line (nearest the lake). After taking water from the tower which used to be at the top of the loop, below Footbridge One, *Blanche* ran round and sat below her train. Soon, Jo Clulow on *Merddin Emrys* arrived with the corridor train, running into the Down line. Everyone gathered on the platform for the formalities, which were soon completed. The most interesting part of the day was still to come, however.

The guests' train was due to return to Porthmadog as the first of the two departures. With *Merddin Emrys* trapped up at the top end of the station, *Blanche* was going to have to take it. *Merddin* could have banked the train up to the summit, but nobody had thought of that (or wanted to think of it). The prospect of the 'Old Lady' taking ten corridor cars up to Power Station Summit would daunt many people on a normal day. But this was no normal day - as is traditional on important FR occasions, it had poured with rain from the word go! I had guarded for Phil often enough to know that he was up to a challenge like this. Those of us who appreciated the significance of what was about to happen gathered at the end of the platform and waited with bated breath. Phil put *Blanche* into first notch on the reversing lever, then gently eased open the regulator. Slowly the train began to move. With a measured, regular exhaust beat that hardly varied, *Blanche* hauled the

load towards the summit. We all stood in mesmerised silence for nearly ten minutes, during which there was not the slightest hint of a slip. It was one of the most masterful pieces of driving I have ever seen on the FR.

Beyond Footbridge One at Tanygrisiau lay the derelict route onto Blaenau This was in need of repairs to collapsed embankments and culverts, not to mention major works on bridges, one of which had been removed. In the 1950s, to allow improvements to the road from Tanygrisiau Post Office up to Dolrhedyn village, the FR had agreed to a Council request to remove Dolrhedyn bridge, on condition that they replaced it, at their own expense, when (not 'if!') the line reopened. The Council accepted the condition, no doubt thinking they were on a safe bet!

Although getting back to Blaenau was the FR's avowed intention, in 1978 most people thought that it would be many years away. However, in opening back to Tanygrisiau, and confounding far greater pundits than the two who had sat on the hill at Dduallt back in 1965, the FR had made a lot of people sit up and take notice. Serious money became available, and local councils began taking an interest. Initial plans were for a terminus, on what is now a playing field, on the opposite side of the road to the old LNWR station at Blaenau, which was then still the terminus of the Conwy Valley line from Llandudno.

Until the early 1960s, the only tracks between the LNWR and GWR stations at Blaenau had been those of the FR, which ran into what is now the BR side of the present Blaenau station (on the site of the old GWR station), before continuing under the old Queens road bridge to the foot of the quarry incline at Duffws. The GWR trains ran from what is now the FR side of the station, heading off via Trawsfynydd to Bala. In the late 1950s, Liverpool Corporation were planning a new reservoir, Llyn Celyn, which would flood Capel Celyn village and the road and railway from Bala to Ffestiniog.

Apart from building a new road around the lake from Bala to Arenig, Liverpool Corporation also budgeted £2m to divert the railway. But the British Transport Commission agreed that if Liverpool Corporation would pay to link the two standard-gauge lines through Blaenau, to allow nuclear waste flasks from Trawsfynydd Power Station to be taken out via Llandudno Junction instead of Bala and Ruabon, they would sanction the closure to passengers of the line between Bala and Blaenau, including complete closure of the Bala-Trawsfynydd section. As this would cost only a quarter of their original proposal, Liverpool Corporation agreed, although as a gesture of goodwill, and to pacify local complainants, they also paid for a completely new road (now the A4212) to be built between Arenig and Trawsfynydd, a route which had previously consisted only of rough farm tracks.

By the beginning of the 1980s, an early return of the FR to Blaenau Ffestiniog was becoming a serious prospect, and a grand plan appeared, supported by local councils, for both FR and BR trains to run to a new Central Station on the site of the old GWR station. The 'Liverpool' link line, opened in April 1964, ran through the west side of the old station formation, and mostly down the west side or centre of the cutting between the two stations. The plan involved building a new BR platform on the east side of the old formation, then slewing the standard gauge track to the east as well. South of the A496, the way was now clear for the FR to start work. Previously, the FR had passed under the A496 by the old bridge which is now used by the standard gauge link. A new bridge under the A496 had to be built - in fact, two new bridges, as the section from Blaenau to Glanypwll was engineered for double track, to accommodate a Blaenau to Dinas (for Llechwedd Caverns) branch which never materialised.

In what seemed like an amazingly short time, all of this was completed early in 1982. The works at Blaenau had been finished, the section up from Tanygrisiau was as good as new, and even a new Dolrhedyn bridge was in place. Needless to say, the Council had tried to deny all knowledge of their previous commitment, but we had kept the correspondence! All was therefore ready for a Grand Reopening.

The first BR train ran into the new station at Blaenau Ffestiniog on 22 March 1982, to be met by *Blanche* with a van, flying the flag for the FR. However, it was to be another two months before regular FR trains started running to Blaenau as well. By that time, Allan Garraway and Alan Heywood had appointed me Blaenau Station Master for the season, with Sean Britton standing in on days when I was either off or keeping my hand in as guard, signalman or controller. The opening, officially called the Resumption of Services, was planned for Tuesday 25 May, but there were two momentous days before that.

The previous Wednesday, we ran a commemorative slate train from Blaenau down to Porthmadog. It consisted of *Prince* (with Jo Clulow), two slate wagons, and No.2 van, with me as guard. At Blaenau, a wooden platform on two axles, was put on the track and connected up behind the van. This was for TV camera crews - there were two, both from the BBC! S4C was still a couple of years away, so BBC Wales produced two main evening news bulletins, one in each language. The Welsh one, called *Heddiw* ('Today') was usually fronted by a splendid lady called Beti George, who sank into oblivion once S4C came into being. Agreements between the BBC and the unions required that separate crews for each language covered every event!

We did two 'dummy runs' to Glan y Pwll and back, the first for the English news crew (most of whom could speak Welsh!), with regular presenter Elfyn Thomas interviewing me on the balcony of No.2. On the second run, a Welsh news crew (all of whom could speak English!) took over, with a Welsh presenter interviewing a slate miner. Back at Blaenau after the second run, we removed the wooden platform from the track, and set off to Porthmadog. After work, I headed for the *Australia Inn* for the usual staff drinks gathering. I arrived as my own interview came on the TV in the bar. Clearly visible above my left shoulder was a sign reading '*Riding on this balcony is strictly prohibited!*' Oh, well, you can't get it right all the time!

On the Sunday, 23 May, all operating staff were booked on an evening special, with Allan Garraway driving *Linda*. This was (at last!) a route learning train, due to shuttle back and forth between Blaenau and Tanygrisiau with a different locomotive crew and guard each trip. On the initial run up, after leaving Tanygrisiau, we were greeted by a surprise which everyone on that train will always remember. Unbeknown to us, all the locals living in the terraces of houses which line the route from Tanygrisiau to Glan y Pwll had armed themselves with flags (surprisingly, Union Jacks as well as Welsh flags)

ready for the Tuesday. Word of our unscheduled special had obviously spread, because they were all standing outside their front doors to welcome us with enthusiastic flag and arm waving.

Soon after we arrived in Blaenau, the station filled with locals of all ages. We gave as many of them as we could free rides to Tanygrisiau and back! Heading out on our final trip back to Porthmadog, FR Chief Executive Dick Wollan announced the availability of two free drinks from the buffet car for everyone. Needless to say, a bit of horse-trading went on between drinkers and non-drinkers! It was a perfect end to an evening which left 25 May seeming like a bit of an anticlimax.

That weekend, Sean and I had been busy moving office equipment and furniture from Tanygrisiau booking office to the new Blaenau booking office in *Isallt* (now a café and guest house) on the main road at the top of the footbridge. On the Monday, it was time to move the essentials - ticket machines and cash drawers. We had both been a bit apprehensive about moving to Blaenau as it had a bad reputation even in those days - a reputation that is totally unjustified, because most of the locals are magic, unfortunately let down by a few idiots. We were therefore pleasantly surprised during those few days at the number of people who kept popping in to wish us well. I looked at Sean: '*I think I'm going to like it here.*' Without hesitation, he replied '*I think I am, too.*' And like it we both did (apart from the weather!).

The big day arrived. Roger Schofield drew the short straw of guarding the 09.45 from Porthmadog - the last train to terminate at Tanygrisiau. This was followed by the special for invited guests, with Evan Davies driving *Earl of Merioneth*, and Sean and Alan Tibbetts guarding. I was down on the platform at Blaenau to welcome them, trying to keep some sort of order and make sure those with designated places for the opening ceremony actually got there - not easy with hundreds of people milling around. Next, the midday arrival from Llandudno came in and disgorged more guests and onlookers onto the BR platform, where the speeches were due to take place. The BR train then reversed and disappeared empty. 'That's nice and thoughtful of BR' commented a few people. Little did they know!

Before returning to Llandudno, this train was booked to spend over an hour in Blaenau. However, on two or three days a month it had to go down to the old North Western station and lock into the sidings, and today was one of those days. After ten minutes, the driver and guard re-appeared, walking up the track with the Blaenau-Llanrwst token, which they restored to the token instrument in the station office. A few minutes later, another train appeared - from the Trawsfynydd line. It was a nuclear waste train, which stopped with the flask right alongside the assembled gathering on the platform, while the driver popped into the office to get the Llanrwst token! Comments about thoughtfulness were replaced by moans of '*How COULD they!*'

The day went very successfully (although, in case you are wondering - yes! - it poured all day!), but it achieved little of its main objective - publicity. A mid-week day had been chosen to maximise chances of publicity. Weekends are not good as news bulletins are fewer and shorter, newspapers are full of trivia, and journalists and TV crews are fully occupied covering sport. If you are planning a jolly and want a chance of publicity, pick mid-week, and pray for a 'bad news' day. In media terms, a bad news day isn't a day of disasters, political upheavals and other horrors, it's a day when b****r all happens and editors are struggling to fill front pages and pad out news bulletins. Unfortunately, 25 May had been a good news day for the media. There was a bit of bother in the South Atlantic, and some South Americans had inconsiderately sunk one of our ships, the *Atlantic Conveyor*. Jollies on little railways in Blaenau Ffestiniog ('*Is that near Port Stanley?*') didn't stand much of a chance.

There is one memorable occasion from 1982 that I must mention. There were no witnesses, and I have told very few people about it, but it will live in my mind forever. It was a quiet October day towards the end of the season. The morning train had been and gone, and I had been sitting at the desk in *Isallt* for well over an hour without seeing a soul. In response to a tap on the counter, I looked up to see the lovely, lively face of a very elderly lady. '*I would just like to thank you for bringing our railway back to us*' she said.

Before I could think of a reply, she went on to tell me that as a child, she used to live in Croesor and go to senior school in Blaenau. '*Every morning, I would walk from Croesor to Tan y Bwlech to catch the train to school, then catch the train back and walk home in the evening.*' (The next time you are moaning about your daily commute, think about that one!). She then explained that the only time it was different was if it had been snowing, in which case she would go to Blaenau on Monday morning, stay with her auntie all week, then go back home after school on Friday. Then she was gone, almost as suddenly as she had appeared. Close to tears, I returned to the desk and sat staring into the emptiness of a mind miles away.

The high spot of 1983 was the official opening to Blaenau on 30 April. This was quite deliberately arranged on a Saturday, because it wasn't intended as a publicity stunt, but as an opportunity for as many staff and volunteers as possible to come along and celebrate. In any case, the invited guest would have been working mid-week - and nuclear waste trains didn't run on Saturdays! George Thomas, Speaker of the House of Commons, was to do the honours, with FR Chairman John Routly replying on behalf of the Company.

I was Blaenau Station Master once again, and was expecting a hectic day. S&T volunteer Ron Walker had very kindly provided some walkie-talkie units which would ease communication around the station. As before, the FR special arrived (with Sean guarding again) just ahead of the BR train, and I gave Sean a radio. This time, both trains reversed back down to the old North Western station - and this time, it *was* a thoughtful gesture to get them out of the way and avoid disturbing proceedings. Sean would bring our train back up when he got the all clear from me. The BR crew found out we had radio contact and abandoned their train to join ours and await the call (and sup tea in the buffet car).

Having such a high-profile guest meant there was a very noticeable police presence, and one of my jobs was keeping them posted as to what was going on. They seemed a bit bemused that we had personal radios and they didn't! When George Thomas started speaking, I was unfortunately pre-occupied with irritating administrative matters and missed most of his speech. By the time I came out of *Isallt* to go down to our platform, John Routly was already well into his reply - too far in

for one person's liking! Dick Wollan was pacing up and down the footbridge, and as I approached him, he slapped the palm of his hand on his forehead and moaned '*Five minutes, he promised me! Five minutes!*'. His beautiful South Walian lilt made it sound all the more despairing! Ten minutes later John was still going strong, but by now I had gone and hidden in the Bunny Hutch (the wooden sales kiosk that had seen previous service at Tan y Bwlch, and Dduallt - named after famous deviationist leader Bunny Lewis, who had used it as a store).

The Royal Oakeley Silver Band suddenly burst into life, which was a clue that John had finished, confirmed by a quick look round the end of the Bunny Hutch. It would obviously be some time before the guests dispersed to the point where I was able to call the trains back up again, so I phoned Porthmadog to update them as to latest state of events and give them an estimated departure time for our train. By now, the band had changed tune. I called Sean on the radio - '*You'll never guess what the band are playing*'. I held the radio out of the Bunny Hutch door for him to enjoy the strains of the *Liberty Bell March* (better known as the *Monty Python* theme). A mickey-take? Surely not! I watched the BR platform until George Thomas and a couple of other dignitaries had been whisked away, and called the trains back up again. Everyone disappeared into their burrows, the trains went on their way, and peace returned. It had all been *Jolly Good Fun* - and, for once, it hadn't rained!

And that was that for me. As an ex-TR man, I had had more than my fair share of FR openings. Prior to 1980 (when I moved to the area), I was lucky that my holiday volunteering visits had coincided with a couple of historic FR events. But now, it was time for others to have their turn. For the next few years, I kept out of the way, working behind the scenes with TV and film crews.