

SOAP ON THE RAILS

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There can be very few people who would immediately associate the FR with TV soap operas, although a senior member of staff did comment, about ten years ago, that if anyone were to make a soap based on life at Harbour Station at that time, it would be ridiculed as far-fetched and implausible! Truth can often be stranger than fiction, and the world of TV fiction arrived on the FR in 1985, when Mersey Television (MTV), now known as Lime Pictures, descended on the Railway to record scenes for an episode of their popular Liverpool-based series *Brookside*.

What could possibly be the connection between a Liverpool housing estate and a narrow-gauge railway in Wales? Well you might ask! Even I am still not entirely sure, despite having been involved in the production of the episode, and subsequently watching it. The story line was about two Brookside Close residents, former British Rail driver Harry Cross (played by Bill Dean) and Ralph Hardwick (Ray Dunbobbin) deciding to get away from it all for a day or two. They end up in Porthmadog, buy third-class privilege tickets to Blaenau, go and sit in the observation car, and get thrown off by the guard at Dduallt. After being marooned for two hours, another train comes along, and (surprise! surprise!), the driver is an old BR colleague of Harry's, who rescues them. They get whisked away on the footplate and live happily ever after.

At that time, I was the Company's regular liaison man with film and TV crews. When, therefore, the enquiry from MTV first came in, Alan Heywood had no hesitation in plonking it quite firmly in my lap. There followed several lengthy telephone conversations with the director and producer, after which I had a good idea of what they wanted. They had obviously been down incognito on previous occasions to plan their visit.

The crew were coming down mid-week in June, arriving about lunchtime on the first of two days. That afternoon was to be spent filming around Harbour Station, including shots of Harry and Ralph getting on board the train; for this scene, a normal service train was to be used (the 14.50 from Porthmadog). The rest of the action was to be filmed on day two, using a special train departing Harbour Station at 08.30 and staying up the line all day. Realising what day two was going to involve, which would include a lot of stopping and setting back to re-take various scenes, I insisted that the MTV crew bring with them at least four walkie-talkie radio sets, for myself, the train driver, and their producer and director. Communication would otherwise have been extremely difficult.

Soon after midday on day one, MTV arrived with their state-of-the-art recording equipment. The producer gave me two radio sets, one of which was for Seamus Rogers, the driver of the special next day. After a planning meeting in the Guards' Room, we prepared for the first shoot, which was to turn out to be nowhere near as straightforward as it first sounded, thanks to a recalcitrant clock!

MTV wanted an opening shot filmed from Greaves' Wharf, looking across the harbour to the front of Harbour Station. For continuity purposes which did not become clear to me until I saw the finished episode, they wanted the big clock overlooking the car park to be showing 10.42. In those days, the clock was much bigger than the present one (the old one now hangs in the stores at Boston Lodge), and was further west, to the left of Pauline Holloway's office window.

The problem was that all clocks at both Harbour Station and Boston Lodge were (and still are) controlled from a master clock at Boston Lodge. This sends out a pulse every thirty seconds, and all the minute hands click forward half a minute in unison. S&T top brass Bob MacGregor and Martin Duncan therefore came over from the Lodge to disconnect the big clock from the master pulse circuit, and connect it to a hand-held pulse emitter. It was by now around 13.00, and as there is no reverse pulse function, we had a lot to do in a short time to get the clock to 10.42. Unfortunately, the clock could not cope with the frequency of pulses being emitted. Although the minute hand had no problem going down the right-hand side of the clock face, once it got to half past the hour, it struggled going up the left side! In desperation, I went into the catering stores and borrowed a ladder and a broom. Going as far up the ladder as my vertigo would allow, I aimed the broom handle at the minute hand and started prodding each time it received a pulse. At last, we were making some progress. My radio crackled into life - it was the producer over on Greaves' Wharf. *'Just to let you know we are filming this for our Christmas out-takes party!'* *'Thanks'* I replied, adding a doubt about his parentage, and carried on prodding. At last, by 13.30, it was 10.42 - if you see what I mean. I had hardly finished putting the ladder and broom out of sight before the producer was back on the radio to say they had got the shots they wanted. In the broadcast episode, that scene lasts barely a second...

After a quick lunch, we all gathered at the end of the platform before the service train arrived at 14.30. Harry and Ralph ran through their lines, the cameraman set up shop off the end of the platform, and the sound engineer held out his microphone boom ready for a quick rehearsal. The train arrived, stopping short of the platform end, and I went down to the water tower out of the way. After three or four takes, the director was still not quite happy. With departure time approaching, he decided to do one more take.

Actors and crew gathered for a briefing by the bin compound wall, oblivious to what was going on behind them. I cringed and chuckled, knowing exactly what was going to happen next. The camera rolled, Harry

and Ralph went through their lines again, and turned to get on the train. Harry pulled at the observation car door handle – then tugged – then wrenched. Yes, you’ve guessed – the guard (Sean Britton) had been down the platform locking doors! End of part one! In the finished product, you never actually see them board the train.

The MTV crew remained filming around the station for an hour or so, before setting off down the High Street to book in for two nights at the *Royal Sportsman Hotel*. They had invited me to join them that evening, for the hard slog of going through their plans for the next day. I asked if it would be all right for Seamus to come along, too - it was equally important that he knew what was to happen. Armed with pints of Bass, the director, producer, Seamus and myself sat down to sort out day two. The MTV lads handed me their running order for the day, and I read through it.

Oh dear! They *could* have had everything they wanted, in the sequence they wanted it, if it were not for one important detail. Their special train was restricted in where it could go, and how long it spend there, by the movements of the normal scheduled service train, running three return trips between Porthmadog and Blaenau. This would mean their train would have to get out of the way. As the main filming was to be at Dduallt, and Dduallt to Blaenau was then one section operated on a ‘one engine in steam’ staff, the filming train was going to have to spend a lot of time locked in the loop at Dduallt.

After about two hours, I had eventually drawn up a plan which gave them everything they wanted, and fitted in with FR operational requirements. Seamus and I crawled out of the *Sportsman* after midnight, and kept our fingers crossed. The coming day was to be probably the most unusual either of us had ever spent on the FR, before or since. Being thrown in at the deep end was Seamus’s fireman, genial Swiss lad Louis Berger, on his first working visit to the FR. Their engine was to be *Linda*, newly converted to coal firing on the gas producer system.

Rod Buchanan and Robert ‘Whizz kid’ Shrives manned the buffet car, while my own role, apart from film crew liaison, was guard and Dduallt signalman. However, Seamus and I were not the only driver and guard on the train. *Equity*, the actors union, were quite happy for ‘real’ people to be seen doing their own jobs in factual programmes such as news and documentaries; but in fictional programmes, all roles had to be filled by actors. Having an actor as guard was not too much of a problem, but getting it to appear as though an actor was driving *Linda* was not going to be as straightforward! In the end, we had to reach a compromise.

By 08.30 next day, all was ready. One novelty was giving the ‘right away’ by radio, after which we set off for Tan y Bwlch. In the observation car, the cameraman did some filming out of the windows, but for the most part actors and crew were rehearsing the scene where the guard (actor Peter Doran) first encounters Harry and Ralph with their third-class tickets. We were due to start filming this scene at the bottom of Tafarn Trip. As with other scenes that day, and having only one cameraman, this one was to be done using a technique where the scene is acted twice (at least!) and shot from opposite camera angles; the two takes are then edited together to give the impression that there are two cameramen. This technique is often used in interviews. During the interview, the camera will be continually on the interviewee. After he has gone, the camera is turned on the interviewer, who repeats all the questions. Edited together, again it looks like there are two cameras. For the sort of scenes we were doing, it was not going to be that simple. We were on a moving train, with scenery going past. On each take, each significant bit of scenery had to pass outside at the same point in the dialogue as on the previous take.

At Tan y Bwlch, while *Linda* took water, everyone got in position ready for the first shoot. As well as the principal actors, we also had about thirty ‘extras’ on board to act as passengers. There weren’t anything like enough of them to make a six-car train look full, so we had to keep moving them around into whichever carriages were to be in camera range. A motley bunch they were, too! One of them queened his way through the guard’s van; ‘*Ruddy prima donna*’, I muttered, obviously louder than intended. ‘*Got it in one!*’ responded a sound engineer standing in the Pullman saloon, grinning broadly.

We set off and stopped at the top end of Creuau Bank, just below Tafarn Trip. Given the OK by the director, I gave Seamus the call to set off for the first take. For this, the cameramen was seated in Harry’s seat at the end of the observation car, filming the guard coming in asking for tickets, and the ensuing dialogue between Harry, Ralph and the guard. ‘*Cut!*’ calls the director at the end of the scene. We were now at the top end of Penybryn Garnedd, above the tunnel. Onto the radio again – ‘*Stop please, Seamus, and set back to Tafarn Trip*’. I lost count of how many times I made that call before the end of the day! The producer was fairly happy with that first take, but wanted to do it again just to be on the safe side. Up and down we went again, with everyone in the same positions.

Now it was time for the difficult bit, the ‘reverses’ where the whole scene is filmed again from the opposite camera angle. For this series of takes, the cameraman was looking at Harry and Ralph from behind the guard. The biggest problem was Garnedd Tunnel; during the reverses, the observation saloon had to go into and out of the tunnel at exactly the same point in the dialogue as on the initial runs. After three or four attempts, it was getting very close to 10.00, my cut-off point for setting off to Dduallt to lock the train into the loop out of the way of the 09.45 from Porthmadog. I had warned the producer that this would happen, and told him we could carry on with this particular sequence after the last service train had gone back

down, which would be about 17.00. He was quite agreeable to that. In fact, not once during the whole day did the crew express the slightest gripe whenever I told them that time was up and the train had to be shunted out of the way again.

When the 09.45 went through Dduallt, we were all sitting round drinking tea or coffee. Once we were able to get the train out again (which wasn't going to be for about fifty minutes), the next scene was to be that of the guard evicting Harry and Ralph. The crew started setting up all their equipment towards the bottom end of the platform, roughly where the observation car and guard's van would stop. As soon as the service train had gone down, we got our train out of the loop (via top end points) and reversed it back into the main line platform, to check the exact stopping place, in relation to the camera, for the observation car door from which Harry and Ralph would emerge.

As soon as we were able to get a Tan y Bwlch token, our train set back out to below Rhoslyn Bridge, ready to be filmed running into the station. Standing well out of microphone range, I watched it slowing as it progressed along the platform, and talked Seamus through the last few seconds to get the observation car stopped in exactly the right place. After a couple of reruns for retakes, the crew were happy that they had got what they wanted, but none of this sequence was actually used; in the finished episode, the first sight of Dduallt is with the train already in the station, with Harry, Ralph and the guard already out arguing on the platform.

The next few hours seemed to be non-stop activity - there was always something to be filmed. After we had locked in the loop again for the 12.20 from Porthmadog to go up, everyone was kept busy filming a scene where Harry and Ralph stroll up the hill in the centre of the spiral, contemplating the meaning of life. There was a big hold-up early afternoon when batteries powering the camera and sound equipment started to go flat; everything stopped while new battery packs were obtained from the guard's van and connected up. After the second service train had gone back down, it was time to start filming the high spot of the day - Harry and Ralph's rescue. Step forward 'driver' Joe Pritchard (actor Richard Davies).

This sequence was another to be filmed from two angles, the first with the camera on the platform filming the train's arrival, and the conversation between Harry, Ralph and Joe. For the 'reverses', the camera was on the footplate, looking down on the two stranded passengers. Inevitably, both sequences required three or four retakes. The most difficult of these were with the camera on the platform. For these, Louis stood on the platform with the rest of us, out of camera shot. But it was accepted that there was no choice other than for Seamus to make some sort of appearance. The train arrived, with Joe appearing to be driving from the fireman's side of the footplate. In this sequence, Seamus is clearly visible on the opposite side of the cab, trying to appear not to be driving! He had shut the regulator and put the reverser into mid-gear before coming into camera shot, and is seen standing with his back to the camera, one hand discreetly holding the steam brake. He is looking down out of the far side of the cab, watching for the trackside marker we had placed to indicate to him exactly where to stop. Once stopped, he did turn more towards the camera.

After several attempts, producer and director were happy with this scene. With Harry and Ralph on the footplate, the train then set off 'for Blaenau' (in reality, going no further than Tunnel South). Louis and the cameraman were now seated in the tender, with Seamus driving. Once round the spiral, with *Linda* able to chug along unattended for a few minutes, Seamus stepped back and Joe moved into the driving position. The cameraman then filmed the footplate banter between Joe, Harry and Ralph - and inevitably everyone had a play on the whistle!

It was now time to get back to Dduallt to let the last service train go up and down. Once it was clear of Tan y Bwlch, we followed it down to continue from where we had left off seven hours earlier - and ran straight into another continuity problem. It had been a lovely sunny day and in the morning, the sun had been in the south-east, and we had been filming in the shade of the hillside. But now, the sun was in the south-west, beaming brightly straight into the observation car. Obviously anticipating this sort of problem, the MTV crew had plenty of *Rosco* scrim stored in the guard's van. This is a special material which reflects direct sunlight but allows natural ambient light through. While *Linda* ran round at Tan y Bwlch and took on more water, the crew spent valuable time completely covering the observation saloon windows in scrim, to get the same level of internal lighting as we had had in the morning. Then it was back up to Tafarn Trip to resume our shuttling back and forth, with varying degrees of success.

19.30 came and went and, not having spoken to Control for over two hours, I decided I had better ring them. For the first and last time in my life, I used Tafarn Trip telephone plug-in point, rapidly coming to the conclusion that it was never intended to be used. It was (and still is) in the most awkwardly inaccessible position imaginable, and was obviously installed without vertigo sufferers in mind! Moreover, having finally managed to plug in, my conversation with Control went on the lines of: 'What time do you call this? Where the **** are you? ***** well get back down here immediately! Arthur and I want to go home' Terry Turner did not seem amused! ('Arthur' being Arthur Brooks, duty supervisor at Boston Lodge that day). I reported back to the producer - 'I'm afraid that's a wrap, lads; we must get back to Porthmadog'.

The MTV crew invited the train crew to join them for 'thank you' drinks in the *Sportsman*. They had been an excellently professional crew to work with - as one said to me, if it had been another well-known TV

company (he did name them), they would have been there all week with twice as many crew. Having worked a couple of times with that particular TV company, I knew exactly what he meant. Joining them for a drink again after it was all over was much more relaxing than the previous evening, and they seemed well pleased with the day's results. Seamus and I crawled out of the *Sportsman* again, two hours later than the night before, this time accompanied by Rod, Whizz, and of course Louis, who by now was acquiring quite a taste for draught Bass!

The finished episode was aired on Channel 4 on bonfire night, and three nights later on S4C. Watching it makes all of the time we spent between Tafarn Trip and Penybryn Garnedd seem a bit of a waste, as the broadcast sequence covering Garnedd Tunnel is unedited and filmed from one camera angle. Nevertheless, if you would like to see the episode for yourself, go to (*website address to be notified in due course*). The action alternates between the FR and a more traditional soap story set back in Brookside Close. I guarantee you'll kill yourself laughing, particularly now that you know what went on behind the scenes!