THAT JOURNEY NORTH
and other Cambrian trivia
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In my article *An Opening or Two*, in *Magazine* No.210, I mentioned that my 1965 journey with Hugh Eaves, from Towyn to the FR, would warrant an article of its own - so here it is, along with some other reminisces of Cambrian area travel in the 1960s.

Hugh and I set out on the 8.45am train from Towyn, sadly a DMU by then. It arrived in Barmouth just after 9.15 - and duly sat there for an hour! It *had* to come through Towyn at 8.45, to bring the kids from Aberdovey and points south to what was then Towyn Grammar School - and having reached Barmouth, there was no reason why it could not continue north. Until 1969, there were still many more crossing loops on the Cambrian than there are today, and the train had ample time to get down to Dyffryn Ardudwy to cross the next Up train. But no, it sat in Barmouth for an hour - because it was the only way they could fit in the meal break for the driver and guard!

After a few minutes, I suggested to Hugh that we went round to the parking ground next to the station - this served as Barmouth bus station, and I thought there was a chance we might be able to continue to Portmadoc earlier. A quick look at the timetable revealed buses to Portmadoc at 9.20 and 10.20. '*Damn!*', I said to Hugh. '*We've just missed one, and the next one doesn't go until the same time as the train*'. Then I looked across the parking ground and noticed a completely empty double decker with the correct route number and destination on its blinds. Knowing that bus services in this part of the world are full of eccentricities, I popped my head around the door of the inspector's office (a luxury which disappeared from Welsh bus terminals years ago) and asked '*Is that bus over there the 9.20 to Portmadoc?*' '*Yes*' replied the inspector. '*Definitely the* 9.20*, not the 10.20?*' I queried. '*Yes, it's the 9.20*' confirmed the inspector, his face showing a hint of a grin. '*What time is it likely to leave?*' '*Well… the driver for it comes in on a bus from Dolgelley, and that doesn't get here until 9.33...*' '*Fair enough*', I thought - it sounded about par for the course!

Hugh and I went and sat on the top deck. By now, there were a couple of other passengers on board - and soon, people started appearing from all directions and climbing aboard. The late running was obviously a well known ritual! By the time the driver turned up and we eventually left, close to 9.40, the bus had quite a healthy load.

Although the destination blind read 'Portmadoc', the bus only ran as far as the *Oakeley Arms* at Tanybwlch, where passengers had to change into a Blaenau-Portmadoc service. This route was also operated by double deckers, and in summer ran every half hour. Not that bus travel was particularly fast in those days. Unlike express services, which only stopped at designated locations, local services which stopped at any bus stop (and most farm gates in areas like North Wales) were known as 'Stage Carriage Services' and had their schedules restricted by law to an end-to-end average maximum speed of 12mph.

Mind you, such was the state of the roads back then, you would have been hard pushed to get from Blaenau to Portmadoc with a bus in less than an hour, which is what the service was timed at. Next time you travel between Maentwrog and Penrhyndeudraeth, take a close look at the lay-bys - there are plenty of them. Every single one of them is part of the original main road, before an attempt was made, about forty years ago, to widen it and straighten it out (a bit!).

As we headed down through Penrhyn, we realised we were going to be a bit tight for catching our intended FR train from Portmadoc, so we decided to alight at Boston Lodge and await the train there. After a few minutes, we heard the sound of a steam engine and, looking out from alongside the old engine shed, we could see *Prince* with a short train heading across the Cob. We returned to the platform, next to which was a small building used as a hostel – officially called the *Halt Room*, but for some reason more commonly known as *The Brothel*! (and still referred to as such, even in the Weekly Notice!). On the end of the hostel was a notice explaining to intending passengers that they should indicate their wish to board by holding out an arm in the same manner as used to hail a bus at a request bus stop. It concluded with '*If you merely wave to the driver, he may very well wave back, but will not necessarily stop*'!

Prince lurched into sight around the corner of the old engine shed. Former East Coast main line driver Bill Hoole was leaning out of the cab, staring fixedly into the distance, regulator wide open as he no doubt visualised Stoke Bank ahead of him. Hugh and I stretched out our arms in the prescribed manner, but, still on full regulator, *Prince* sailed past - as did three non-corridor carriages, brought up in the rear by then-new observation car No.100. Out of the guard's van popped the head of a gentleman I subsequently got to know as David Stirling. '*Did you want this train?*' he called, receding into the distance. '*Yes please*', we both shouted after him, whereupon he dropped the setter – still with *Prince* chuffing furiously away up front! '*Interesting way to run a railway*' I commented to Hugh. And so we started on the final leg of our journey to Tan y Bwlch, from where the story continued in my previous article.

Travel on the Cambrian was often a source of humorous incidents. Later in the sixties, I had started volunteering for the FR on my days off from the TR. Getting up at the crack of dawn one morning, to head

north for a guarding turn, I caught the first Down train of the day from Towyn. Most DMUs still had a first class saloon at one end, behind the drivers cab, so I was able to sit in comfort with a grandstand view forward. I had a rather useful personal first class London Midland Region pass, known as a 'silver leather pass', which went with my job as Technical Manager of Crewe Computer Centre. When I moved up to BRB headquarters in 1971, silver became gold, covering the whole of BR and Sealink ferries, which was bliss!

South of Harlech, we approached what was then Llanbedr & Pensarn station. Prior to 1885, it had been simply Llanbedr, and after 1978 was renamed just Pensarn, with the Llanbedr bit being transferred to what had been Talwrn Bach halt, further south and nearer Llanbedr village! As Llanbedr & Pensarn, it had a signal box at the north end, and, like Penrhyndeudraeth, it had a passing loop but only one platform, with both lines signalled for bi-directional running. There was a level crossing at the south end, and because of its distance from the box, the gates were worked by a separate crossing keeper, although they were interlocked with the signals.

The home signal was at danger, and the crossing gates firmly closed against us. Our driver stopped and blew his horn several times, with no result - the station looked deserted. The signalman was no doubt comfortably ensconced in his box, thinking whatever the Welsh is for '*Nothing to do with me, guv!*'. The driver was just about to get out and walk forward to investigate, when a gentleman appeared from the station house and ran down the platform to the gates - wearing pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers! But despite incidents like this, the magic of the steam days was gone…

In the early sixties, Hugh's father was headmaster of Barmouth School, and lived in a beautiful house up the aptly-named Panorama Road, which rises steeply on your left as you leave Barmouth on the Dolgelley road. The view of the Mawddach estuary was stunning, and sitting on the veranda in front of the house on a sunny summer Saturday afternoon was heaven. With the full length of the bridge on view, as well as Barmouth Junction station, the coast line visible to the point where it went out of sight over the top of Friog cliffs, and the Ruabon line as far as Penmaenpool, it was nothing unusual to have four trains in sight at once. More often than not, after an Up train had gone over Friog, it would not be more than fifteen minutes before a Down train would appear, the two having crossed at Llwyngwril. The chances were that by the time the Down got to Barmouth Junction, another Up train would be waiting to cross it.

During 1960, when the Cambrian was in the final years of being part of BR's Western Region, Barmouth Junction was renamed Morfa Mawddach, and news of the renaming was duly passed on to Paddington. It was obviously conveyed by someone who could not speak Welsh, and received by someone who never asked how it was spelt. A few weeks later, posters appeared in Towyn advertising '*Cheap Day Returns to Morva Mordack*'... If you don't mind, I'll stick with Barmouth Junction! On the subject of names you will note that, throughout this article, I have used place name spellings from that era.

Barmouth Junction had four platforms, two on each line - not to mention, on the central island between the Down Ruabon and Up coast lines, an excellent refreshment room which served as the 'local' for the inhabitants of nearby Arthog. At the north end, there was a headshunt which ran parallel to the main line, towards the bridge. One poor driver, shunting in thick fog and having misread the shunting signals, did not realise which track he was on. He went off the end of the headshunt and deposited his engine quite firmly in the sand. It took two weeks to get it out! Also, not many people knew that Barmouth Junction had a south curve between the Ruabon and coast lines, making a triangular junction. You could be forgiven for not realising this, as most of the time the curve was used as a carriage siding!

In 1964, with closure of the Ruabon-Barmouth line due the following April, the Talyllyn Railway Preservation Society ran their AGM special from Paddington to Towyn via that route (it usually ran via Welshpool and Machynlleth), and it thus became the last passenger train to run via the south curve - as well as the first for quite some time. However, Ruabon-Barmouth was the regular route for FR Society AGM specials, and I well remember going to see one at Ruabon on 26 April 1958 - long before I had ever been to the FR - when it arrived behind *City of Truro*, and continued on to Portmadoc with two regular Cambrian performers, 'Dukedog' Nos.9017 and 9021. There was something special about those old GWR outside-framed 4-4-0s, and it's great to see that two of the three engines at Ruabon that day have been preserved.

The Cambrian was extremely busy on summer Saturdays, with practically every train crossing at every passing loop. Many of the trains were specials heading to Butlins Holiday Camp at Penychain near Pwllheli, and the star of these was the one from Swansea. This came via the old Carmarthen-Aberystwyth line, reversing at both Aberystwyth and Dovey Junction. It regularly loaded to ten very full coaches, and was often double-headed.

The Ruabon line did not miss out on the summer Saturday fun either, with extra trains from Birkenhead, and other places in North West England. The *Cambrian Coast Express* ran in two portions on those days, the first portion starting at Pwllheli and running via the Ruabon line, whilst the second portion started at Barmouth and ran via Machynlleth. I mustn't leave out mention of the regular Barmouth-Dolgelley shuttles, either. These were usually worked push-pull with an autocoach, and one of the beautiful little GWR 1400-class 0-4-2 tanks.

The Ruabon-Barmouth line was my regular route from Birkenhead to Towyn for several years. There was a daily evening through service from Birkenhead Woodside to Barmouth, which called at Port Sunlight at 15.15pm - perfect timing for my Friday 5.00pm finish at Lever Brothers! The closure of the line caused great sadness - particularly as we weren't able give it a proper send-off, because Mother Nature had closed it without warning three months early. A violent storm washed out an embankment in the Wnion valley, after which the line never reopened.

A replacement bus service was provided between Wrexham and Barmouth, route D94 operated by Crosville Motor Services. Crosville was one of the state-owned bus companies formerly owned by the Tilling Group, and they covered a huge area ranging from Holyhead over to Liverpool and Warrington, down through Northwich and Crewe to Shrewsbury, and across to Aberystwyth and on down the coast to Aberayron and Cardigan. Their route numbering had grown rather haphazardly to over 800 and in 1959 they had a rationalisation which resulted in all routes being given a new number prefixed by an area code letter. D was the Wrexham area code. Northern Merionethshire and Caernarvonshire became R (Portmadoc-Blaenau was R1), and everything south of Dolgelley was prefixed S.

Despite it being a rail-replacement service, the D94 was by no means an 'express', and Crosville staff operated it much like they did other services in mid-Wales. I remember once travelling home on a morning service, which stopped at a gate in the middle of nowhere - there wasn't a building in sight. The driver tucked the morning newspapers under his arm, got out, went through the gate and followed a rough path which eventually disappeared over the brow of a hill. It was a good five minutes before he reappeared!

Another thing I used to love about the D94 was the crew change. The buses were scheduled to meet in either Bala or Corwen, where drivers would swap to the bus going the other way. But timekeeping was abysmal in summer due to traffic congestion, and the usual practice was to keep going until they met each other - whereupon they would stop (usually side by side), get out and have a good five-minute natter as the traffic queues built up behind them!

The D94 bus route survives unchanged to this day, even carrying virtually the same route number - the D has been replaced by X. It must be one of few rail replacement services to have survived intact for so long. Back in the sixties, BR could put fares up almost without reference to anyone, but had to go through a lengthy enquiry process to get a line closed. You could always tell if they were thinking of closing a line, because it's trains would be re-timed to miss connections, so that people would stop using it.

With buses, it was the complete opposite. A proposed fare increase had to go through an approval process, but a service could be withdrawn at the drop of a hat. The usual procedure therefore was to propose a rail closure with the assurance that a replacement bus service would be provided - and two years later, quietly withdraw the bus!

The bus had one drawback - between Dolgelley and Barmouth, it had to run on the opposite side of the river to the trains it replaced, and thus did not serve Penmaenpool, Arthog or Barmouth Junction. Also the last bus got into Barmouth too late for me to catch a train on to Towyn. Someone from Towyn (usually Bob and Ann Gunn) would come over and pick me up at Bontnewydd, which had been the last station before Dolgelley, and was at the foot of the 'B' road which runs up through Brithdir to join the main road between Dolgelley and Cross Foxes. The journey on to Towyn generally incorporated a call at the Railway Inn in Abergynolwyn where a traditional Welsh sing-song was virtually guaranteed - as it was in most pubs in this part of the world.

With the Ruabon line closed, Barmouth Junction became a shadow of its former self, and the people of Arthog lost their 'local' soon afterwards. The closure of so many Cambrian passing loops, a few years later, made it all seem like the end of an era. Those were the days! I *could* write so much more - but I will save it for my memoirs.