

## Some notes on the Bala model – inspiration and philosophy

Keith Jagers January 1989

The old-style country railway is no more.

It was killed off by mass car ownership and unrestrained road-based goods haulage, which have never had to meet the full cost of their environmental impact. We have yet to realise the extent of this, and pay the price.

Until the early 1960's few people owned a motor-car, and those that did used it mainly for local journeys only. Motorways, fast reliable and economic cars, cheap air travel and package holidays were non-existent. The local railway station was a focal point of the country community. Workmen, shoppers, schoolchildren, businessmen and sales representatives, farmers, holidaymakers, members of the armed forces, people visiting friends and relatives – all used the train as a matter of habit.

The country stationmaster knew his customers and their business well and thereby all the business of the district. He was a respected member of the community, alongside the policeman, the vicar and the squire. Meetings and partings, courtships and emigrations, business deals, departures to war, disputes, arrests – all were conducted on his doorstep.

The mails went by train – efficiently overnight, and sorted on the move. Likewise, the milk and the newspapers – in opposite directions. Farm produce, livestock, machinery, coal, steel, stone, bricks, timber – all the materials and products of trade and commerce came and went by the goods train, sorted and transferred to road transport only for local delivery and collection. Even the shiny new car came by train! Given the integrated planning made possible by modern computer systems, such operations could work as well again today – if only the infrastructure had not been destroyed as soon as it was deemed to be marginally uneconomic.

The loss of this way of life is mourned by many that knew it well. The popularity of today's "preserved" steam railways is at least in part due to this. However they can perhaps only superficially attempt to portray the characteristics and atmosphere of the old days, bearing in mind that what has disappeared is not merely the steam engine, or indeed the railway itself, but a different way and pace of life. Some succeed better than others, which sometimes resemble a subtle blend of scrapyard and funfare, frequented by more tourist patrons on one day than used to be seen in a whole month. And all their cars need to be parked somewhere close by! Perhaps their main aim should be not to re-create in every detail, but to concentrate on what they do best, entertaining a broad cross-section of the general public.

An alternative medium is the railway model, subject to its limitations of space and relative lack of animation. Here is the freedom to represent a particularly scenic, characteristic or otherwise personal favourite location long after the real-life site has been covered in car parks, new buildings or has reverted to nature. Possibly 1 in 20 adults had some form of model railway, or "train set" in their childhood, that is a total about 2 – 3 million such in Great Britain! This 1 in 20 may seem a rather strange figure nowadays, but is an average of perhaps around 1 in 2 of the post-war male child population now entering their forties, and maybe only 1 in 50 of much more recent youngsters. Though if the proliferation of model magazines now aimed at this market is anything to go by, perhaps the latter situation is less sparse than it appears?

Of these, the number which progressed into a more serious adult hobby is maybe around 1 in 30, or 50 – 100,000. Most of these models are free-lance, imaginative designs, but some 4 – 5000 seek to represent real stations or locations in reasonably authentic form. This may be compared with the total of some 7000 stations, large and small, picturesque or ugly, which once existed on Britain's railways – now reduced to some 2000 only, and many of these being quite featureless modern designs or vastly altered and simplified.

This is not just one hobby, but many – one for each day of the week. For apart from the woodwork, the mechanics, the electrical and electronic control systems, and the artistic aspects of scenery, detail and finishing, there is the historical and geographical research involved in ensuring that the model is as authentic as possible. The study of old maps, timetables and photographs, and talking to those who worked on or used the old railways, reveals that every building, piece of equipment, employee, and every wagon and carriage in

every train working had a specific function and purpose. The whole fitted together like a complex jigsaw puzzle. So if one gets fed up with cutting endless joints for the timber framework, or soldering masses of coloured wires to the correct terminals, there are plenty more interesting diversions available within the general theme.

Bala is a small market town in North Wales, situated by Bala Lake, the largest area of natural inland water in Wales and the source of the River Dee. The first railway in the area, opened by 1868, ran from near Wrexham, via Llangollen, through the Dee valley and alongside the lake, then on past Dolgellau to reach the west Wales coast near Barmouth. It bypassed Bala town by some  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile, both for geographical convenience and because the community, or rather its most influential landowners, did not want the railway. However, looking at the commercial benefits which had come to those towns which were served, they soon realised their mistake. By 1882, a branch line had been constructed from the main route at Bala Junction, through a new Bala station and yard convenient for the town, and on over the mountains to the slate-mining community of Blaenau Ffestiniog. Even then, the newcomer was subject to pre-conditions, what we would nowadays know as planning restrictions, and the railway buildings at Bala had to be specially-designed in stone to look as pleasant as possible when viewed from the main road bridge!

Throughout its life, the isolated station beside the River Dee at Bala Junction served merely as an interchange point between the branch- and main-line trains. It had no road access, but only a footpath reaching it across the fields. It did not appear in timetables, and had no staff of its own - they travelled from Bala when needed. There was no gas or electricity, the platforms, waiting room and signal box being lit by oil lamps. On summer Saturdays however, as well as the normal local passenger and goods services, there was a procession of holiday trains to and from London, Birmingham or Manchester serving the west Wales coast resorts. Many might be detained for some time at this rural outpost waiting for a train from the opposite direction to vacate the single line of rails ahead, so the pleasant scenery hereabouts will be quite familiar to several generations of tired holidaymakers!

The railways at Bala were closed down by 1965, victim of the well-known "Beeching" cuts, and most evidence of their existence is now obliterated. I first saw Bala Junction station, closed but not yet unduly derelict, in the summer of 1966, nestling in the sunshine at the foot of the hill beside the sparkling river. It looked just like a model, and so was the instant inspiration for what followed, in the form of a worthy representative of all that was being lost right across the country at that time. To my knowledge, at least three other people have been similarly moved to construct their own interpretation of what they saw there then. My model was started in 1979 and represents Bala and Bala Junction stations as they were circa 1939, when the Great Western Railway scene hereabouts was at its busiest and most varied.

## **Postscript – 2001**

The preserved steam railways are flourishing better than ever. This is despite frequent outpourings of the prophets of doom over the years, and quite amazingly since many of today's visitors were not even born when the era they seek to recreate was ending.

The model railway movement also flourishes, with the available range of products wider than ever; Exhibitions more numerous and popular than ever. Amazing too, considering the national joke and object of derision which our once-proud railway system has become.

As my notes above show, railway modelling is not just one hobby, but can be many. Being of a generation which was still encouraged to have "hobbies" from a young age, and of a temperament involving extremely low boredom threshold, this was most important. Do today's youngsters still have "hobbies"? The very word sounds genteel and old-fashioned now. Those of my father's generation would probably say not. They were even more imbued with the hobby culture than we were – as they will often say, out of necessity – they had no choice but to create and develop their own minimal-cost interests and activities. They consider that today's children have everything done and provided for them, stifling originality and creativity. The truth is probably rather different, it's surely a case of using available resources in the best

possible way, then as now, and as always some do and some don't. Human nature surely does not change that much in the space of just a generation or two?

My Bala model was to all intents and purposes finished during 1999. And with this, unwittingly and unpredicted, one of its principle functions in life finished also.

It was a surprise and an honour to be asked to prepare the model for leading magazine coverage, and then to feature in a professionally-made video for public sale, early in that year. To qualify of course, it had to be "finished", or at least substantially so. My esteemed publishing friend Chris Leigh duly visited and then presented me with a "Project Plan" - a list of some fifty items to be completed by a certain date - this was just like being at work! The target was met, the filming completed and the finished results were excellent - the fabled 15 minutes of fame achieved and gone in a flash.

The un-appreciated function was that the model had provided a very effective escape from "real life" over the previous 20 years or so - albeit only for an average of perhaps 4 hours a week, not a lot considering the time supposedly nowadays normally spent watching television. Though the whole project had been more than complex enough to alleviate boredom, it was also small enough to be completely under one's personal control. A little empire all of its own, and a situation now increasingly rare in the great wide world of human activity outside. One which it was so easy to relax into completely after a difficult or frustrating day at work. But the vital importance of this role was only appreciated after it ceased - on completion! The model was carefully protected with purpose-built covers, then not touched for upwards of two years.

Hardly once during the construction period did I pause to ask myself the fundamental question - why was I bothering to do this? Perhaps in the hope of eventually being able to pass it all on to children or grandchildren - assuming I could instil any sort of interest in them - but, alas, not to be. Not giving a thought at all to the fact that it would never be exhibitable - indeed would take some weeks to remove it from the loft and probably inflicting a lot of damage in the process.

But as several friends have pointed out to me, it's still there waiting - perhaps for a renewed interest in retirement?