



FULL STEAM AHEAD

THIS MONTH OUR RICHARD SHARES A FEW STORIES ABOUT RAIL TRAVEL WITH US

I STILL REMEMBER THE SHOCK ANNOUNCEMENT.

My parents looked grim and worried. I was four or five and the world was still new and bewildering (now it is only bewildering). They explained that my father's senior partner had fallen out of a train and died. It was the early 1950s. Central locking had not been invented, and many trains did not even have corridors: the door of each compartment opened straight onto the platform or, as the senior partner found out too late, the railway line. Rumour had it that he had taken a little tippie and needed to take a pee.

That was my first train memory. This was brought back to me recently when I came across a 1958 issue of the East Anglian Magazine. This carried a full-page advertisement for the Great Eastern Railway, and a train timetable. There were then direct trains to London from Sheringham and Hunstanton. That was more than 50 years ago, so you would expect those old steam trains to take forever to get from Norwich to London. Right? Read on and find out.

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In those days people had the same anxieties about rail travel as some do now about flying (but I don't of course with my son at the controls. Time to make you look up another P&F piece of mine: November 2012). My father had a rule never to travel in the front three coaches or the last coach of a train. He stuck to that through his life. Once perhaps there was more reason to worry about rail safety. Another issue of the East Anglian Magazine shows a photograph of the wreck of the London to Cromer train at Witham in Essex. All 14 coaches overturned and 10 people died.

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OK, that's the disasters out of the way. It is not now widely known that the creator of the Thomas the Tank Engine, the Reverend W Audrey was the vicar of Emneth, on the edge of Norfolk. It is even less well known that he christened my brother. It is not known at all (or wasn't until this page appeared in P&F), that I once played tennis with his daughter Hilary while she was a pupil at the Wisbech High School and I was at the Grammar school. The authorities were so keen to separate the boys from the girls that they placed the schools on opposite sides of the river Nene. I played appallingly badly and have never knowingly played tennis since. Years later I caught up with Hilary. I am relieved to report that she did not remember the tennis match. More significantly she did not remember me.

One of the characters in Audrey's books was a tram – Toby the tram engine. The exact replica of that tram trundled every day past our house when I was a child, belching steam and smoke (the tram, not me – I was just belching). There were no fences or barriers. Health and Safety were long into the future. It was therefore easy for us children to put half penny pieces on the track. As it ran over them, the tram squashed them to the size of a penny (of the old kind).



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The wreckage of the Cromer express at Witham.

I learned from a one-time sexton that the roof was extensively repaired in that year by men who came from Norwich or thereabouts. The sexton was a Mr. Bell who lodged with the sexton while the work was in progress. If my letter should come to the notice of the firm for a little girl I can remember the local

THE WITHAM TRAIN DISASTER I CAME across the enclosed picture recently. It shows the wreck of the Cromer express at Witham, near Chelmsford, in 1905. My parents lived at Chelmsford then and although I was only

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In my teenage years a gentleman by the name of Dr Beeching decided (wrongly it transpired) that it would be a good idea to close hundreds of railway stations and lines in the country. Dozens of charming Norfolk stations closed at his behest. It is difficult to imagine now that places like Thursford, Wendling, Snettisham, Paston and Knapton, Fakenham (east and west), and of course Emneth all had stations and all were swept away by the Beeching reforms.

The legal ramifications of station closure lingered long after the lines were pulled up. I once was involved in the purchase of an ex railway house. The deeds still had the provision:

PROVIDED always and it is hereby agreed by and between the parties hereto that the said Sir William Browne Ffolkes and his heirs and assigns or other the owner and occupier for the time being of Hillington Hall shall be at liberty to stop all passenger trains (not being special express or excursion trains) passing either up or down the line of Railway between Lynn and Fakenham at Hillington Station for the convenience of himself and themselves his and their family and friends residing at Hillington Hall but not servants unless travelling with such Licensee or Licensees.

No trains pass anywhere near where I live, but imagine having the right to stop any passing train so that you can hitch a lift into town. And how would the conductor account for that delay.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I apologise for the delay, some toff has just exercised his ancient right to stop the train.'

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Back into 2013, a great friend of mine recently went by train to London. She had booked in advance and had taken advantage of her senior railcard. When the conductor came to check her ticket she found that she had left her railcard at home. The conductor was adamant that she should pay the full fare. She was equally adamant that she should not, but when he threatened to have her removed at the next station she capitulated, but not before calling him Mr Jobsworth. She then hit on an idea to use modern technology to rescue her: she arranged for her neighbour (who had a key to her home) to photograph her railcard and text it to her. Triumphant she found the conductor and showed him the image of her card. She asked for a refund. His response was that normally he would agree, but as she called him a jobsworth, he certainly was not going to do it on this occasion.

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And finally, you are no doubt mustard keen to know how much faster the Norwich to London trains have become since 1958. The answer is: scarcely at all. The travel time from Norwich to London Liverpool Street then was two hours. Although a few services now take 11 minutes less to arrive in London, many are only five minutes faster than they were 55 years ago. That's progress for you.

1. Cover of the East Anglian Magazine
2. Wreck of the London to Cromer train at Witham in Essex