PLATFORM 2

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Porthmadog Harbour station is the terminus of both the Ffestiniog Railway and the Welsh Highland Railway

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ON SCREEN … THE STOURBRIDGE MAIN LINE AND BRANCHES
3. THE SEVERN VALLEY ON TV - 1972-1993 by John Warren

This is the third article in a series that looks at the occasions when the Stourbridge line or its branch lines have featured either in feature films or in television series.

The Severn Valley Railway had only been open for two years and only operated between Bridgnorth and Hampton Loade when it was first discovered by the television industry as a location for a television sequence.

The programme was *Doctor In Charge*, the third incarnation of the "Doctor" series of comedies based on the books of Richard Gordon, and was broadcast between 1972 and 1973. It had been preceded by *Doctor In The House* and *Doctor At Large*, and later series included *Doctor At Sea* and *Doctor On The Go*. The episodes were written by Graeme Garden and Bill Oddie post *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again* and before *The Goodies* and starred Robin Nedwell, Richard O'Sullivan, George Layton, Geoffrey Davies and Ernest Clark.

Episode 15 of the first series (*Honeymoon Special*) was filmed in June 1972 and featured a scene in which two of the doctors' cars became stuck on a level crossing. While trying to resolve the situation, Richard O'Sullivan ends up with his plastered foot trapped under the rails as a train (GWR railcar 22) approaches. The train passes between the camera and Richard O'Sullivan and he comes back into view with his leg still attached to the plaster and, even more remarkably, to the rest of his body. From the stills of the programme, it can be seen that a temporary second track (made of wood) was laid and dummy automatic crossing barriers installed.

Doctor In Charge

By 1980, the line had been extended from Hampton Loade to Bewdley and the BBC arrived to film a children's TV series named *God's Wonderful Railway*. It consisted of eight episodes, divided into three separate stories set in different time periods. The first was set during the construction of the line. The second, set during the Edwardian period, was about a signalman at Highley while the third, set in 1939, featured the stationmaster at Arley. Among the stars of the series were June Brown, prior to her chain smoking exploits in *EastEnders*, Gorden Kaye (René in *'Allo 'Allo*) and Bill Dean (Harry Cross in *Brookside*).

God's Wonderful Railway

Six years later, the BBC returned to the Severn Valley line to film sequences for one of the most celebrated series of the year - one that won six BAFTAs and a lot of other awards. The series was *The Singing Detective*, written by Dennis Potter, which starred Michael Gambon as mystery writer Philip E Marlow who, bedridden with a chronic skin and joint disease, suffers flashbacks to his childhood. Sequences showed Marlow's father (played by Jim Carter) on the platform of a rural station as a young Marlow either departed or arrived on a train hauled by SVR locomotive 47383. According to many sources, the station used was Arley, although stills from the programme clearly show that it was, in fact, Northwood Halt. The series had a star studded cast which included Patrick Malahide, Bill Paterson, Janet Suzman, Joanne Whalley, Alison Steadman and Imelda Staunton.

The Singing Detective

By this time, it seemed that the Severn Valley Railway was a very popular location for BBC productions. In 1987, they returned again to film an episode of one of their most successful series - the adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* series of books. The book in question was *4.50 from Paddington*, written in 1957. Without ruining the plot, Elspeth McGillicuddy catches a fast train from Paddington to St Mary Mead to visit Jane Marple, played by Joan Hickson who many people, myself included, consider as the definitive Miss Marple. During the journey, the train passes a slower service and Elspeth witnesses a woman being strangled on the slower train. This scene required a location with two parallel lines and track was relayed on the Stourport branch to enable the filming of the two trains running side by side to occur. In a later scene, Jane and Elspeth retrace the journey to ascertain where the murder took place and they alight from the train at Bewdley.

4.50 From Paddington

Having used the Severn Valley Railway once, Joan Hickson, as *Miss Marple*, revisited Bewdley station in 1991 during the filming of *They Do It With Mirrors*. In the plot, she travels by train to a manor house owned by an old friend. Once again, her destination turns out to be Bewdley station.

They Do It With Mirrors

Moving forward to 1993, the BBC returned to film an episode of *The Inspector Alleyn Mysteries*. This consisted of nine distinct stories over two series and were based on nine books written by Dame Ngaio Marsh. The fifth story featured Chief Inspector Alleyn, played by Patrick Malahide, and his assistant Inspector Fox, played by William Symons (best known as Constable Alf Ventress in *Heartbeat*), on a train journey before getting off at Kidderminster station. Although the books were set in the 1930s, the TV adaptation were set in the years just after World War II, which is just as well as the SVR's Manor Class engine, 7819 Hinton Manor, was in full British railways livery with the "Lion on Wheel" emblem on its tender.

The Inspector Alleyn Mysteries

In the next issue, we continue our review of television series filmed on the Severn Valley Railway, looking at the years from 1995 to 2013.

OUT OF SEASON
by Rob Hebron

Normally, I would not take a holiday in the month of March. However, the weather early in 2018 had been particularly mild and the cost of accommodation out of season is very reasonable. Accordingly, I decided to spend a few days in Porthmadog so that my wife and I could visit nearby Portmeirion.

Our journey started at Stourbridge Town and then we travelled from Stourbridge Junction to Smethwick Galton Bridge for a connecting train bound for Pwllheli. Our four coach train did not appear to have many reservations so there was plenty of space and opportunity to obtain a table and a window seat. Once we had passed Shrewsbury and Welshpool, we realised the value of a seat with a view.

The spectacular view as the train heads past Fairbourne towards Barmouth Bridge, which crosses the Mawddach estuary to the south of Barmouth

At Machynlleth, the train split into two portions – ours to Pwllheli and the other to Aberystwyth. The next station, Dovey Junction seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. It might as well have been because it is one of the very few UK stations without road access. Here the line diverged and thereafter the scenery was spectacular. As well as calling at well-known coastal resorts such as Barmouth, the train stopped (by request) at numerous halts in picturesque towns, villages and hamlets. At times it felt as though the train could easily drop off the embankment into the sea!

The journey had taken over four hours by the time we reached Porthmadog. The station building seemed in need of attention and was unstaffed though I took note of a real ale bar in a converted part of the premises. From here it was a fifteen minute walk along the High Street to our holiday flat located in Harbour Court. Its proximity to Porthmadog Harbour would be of great benefit for the next few days.

After unpacking and partaking in a cup of tea and coffee, we embarked on a short walk which was recommended by our landlady. Firstly, we skirted the harbour and the yacht club; we then followed a lane which took us to Borth-y-Gest. This is a quaint village within a bay and is probably the nearest beach to Porthmadog. There are a few shops and restaurants and a public WC. As we approached late afternoon and dusk, we were able to appreciate the beauty and tranquillity which the residents probably took for granted.

Although Porthmadog enjoys evening bus and train services, it seemed sensible to stay in the town that night as frequencies are not conducive to convenience. A local public house named “The Ship” was only five minutes away from our residence and offered real ales and good food.

The next day we embarked on our trip to Portmeirion. Although the number 3B bus service will take you in the direction of Portmeirion, there is a long private road towards the entrance of the attraction. This is not part of the bus route. The train option to travel to Minffordd also involves a considerable walk from the station. With this in mind, it was easier to book a taxi from Porthmadog Harbour and considering the fare was only £5, it made sense.

The Italianate village of Portmeirion

Portmeirion is a themed village created by Sir Clough Williams-Ellis between 1925 and 1975 in the Italianate style. It stands out from the surroundings with its brightly coloured buildings. Despite the contrast with traditional settlements, the mixture of primary colours and pastel shades is very effective. It was not until we started to explore the grounds that we realised many of the structures were scaled down from their real-life models. Nearly all locations within Portmeirion are accessible except for private apartments rented out to visitors. There are cafes and shops where souvenirs can be purchased. The most popular of these mementoes are those related to the cult television series, "The Prisoner". This enigmatic program was the creation of actor Patrick McGoohan and was screened in the late 1960s. We spent nearly four hours at Portmeirion and we could easily have found enough to fill a complete day. We were very impressed and grateful for senior discount on our admission fee and seasonal reduction too. This resulted in obtaining entrance tickets for a mere £7 each.

Tuesday would not have been complete without an evening stroll down Porthmadog High Street. The obvious port of call was "The Australia" bar. This is the tap house for locally brewed "Purple Moose" ales. I enjoyed two elderflower flavoured bitters and I could easily have supped more!

On Wednesday morning, we were very fortunate that the Welsh Highland Railway was operating, albeit on a reduced timetable and over only a portion of the full route. The WHR is a narrow gauge railway. It starts from Porthmadog Harbour Station and extends to Caernarfon, a distance of 25 miles. The beautifully restored Harbour station and the vintage rolling stock are a credit to the volunteers who operate the WHR. We caught one of two round trips to Hafod-y-Llyn. Many of the carriages had been reserved for parties who had arrived by motor coach. The steam hauled train trundled over the harbour road and meandered through farmland, crossing several waterways. This service called at only one halt, Pen-y-Mount Junction, where it intersected the Welsh Highland *Heritage* Railway.

The interior of a Welsh Highland Railway coach

Visitors to Porthmadog could easily confuse the two railways because of only one extra adjective! The *WHHL* was not operating on this day because it was out of season. To be honest, it did not appeal to me because of its very short course and I would have to spend more time outside of the carriage. This does not mean that the associated workshops, museum and miniature railway are not worth a visit, especially for families with children.

There is a third heritage railway in Porthmadog which operates out of Harbour Station. This is the renowned Ffestiniog Railway. The service was not operating during the period of our visit. However, I have travelled on this narrow gauge railway in years gone by. Not only is it one of the first restored lines in the United Kingdom, it is one of the most scenic.

After eating a light lunch back at our holiday flat, we set out again, this time for Pwllheli. We caught the number 3B bus having purchased all day rover tickets at £4.50 each. The road journey takes in the town of Criccieth and a Haven holiday park at Hafan-y-Môr. The gateway to Pwllheli is not attractive. The bus terminus and surroundings badly need a makeover. We did not explore the town but instead, made our way to the beach. This stretch of beach is surprisingly tranquil and not the least bit commercial. It did enable us to walk for a mile or so towards the cliff edge and admire the view from there.

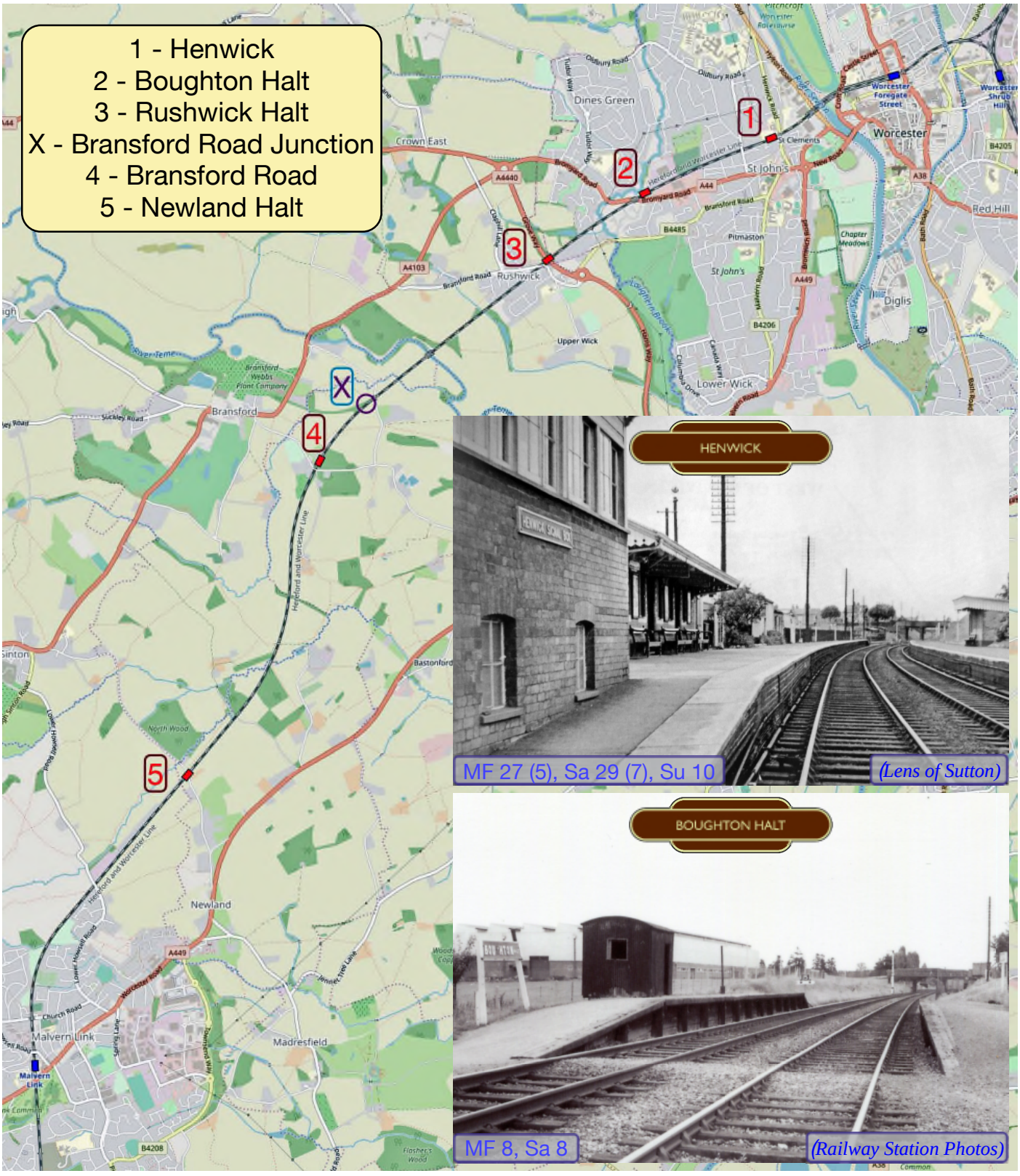
Spooners Bar on the platform at Porthmadog Harbour station

By Wednesday evening, we were preparing to return home but we had one more treat in store. Less than five minutes away from our flat was a bar/restaurant which we had ignored on our first visit to Porthmadog Harbour Station. "Spooners" bar is part of the station and not dissimilar from "The King and Castle" at Kidderminster SVR station. As well as enjoying Purple Moose ale again, I tucked into a delicious Chicken, Gammon, Leek and Cheese pie. I am happy to support the Welsh Highland Railway in this manner!

After sleeping on very full stomachs, we set back to Stourbridge the next morning. The return journey was equally as pleasant as the outward one. Would we try another out-of-season holiday? Definitely, YES! Despite the affirmative, I must mention that the week following our short break, it rained, sleeted and snowed. Did I mention the winds and gales?

NO LONGER STOPPING AT … EXTRA
by John Warren

After reading the article on Cutnall Green Halt, which mentioned five stations west of Worcester that closed on the same day, a SLUG member asked me if some information was available on these stations. As mentioned in the previous article, there were two intermediate stations at Henwick and Bransford Road, and three small halts at Boughton, Rushwick and Newland. The map below shows the location of each station, plus a junction to a branch line that served Bromyard and Leominster.



The line from Malvern Link to Henwick with an intermediate station at Bransford Road (so named because the village was ¾ mile away) opened on 25 July 1859 and was extended across the River Severn to Shrub Hill on 17 May 1860. This date also saw a westward extension to Malvern Wells, with the line through to Hereford opening on 13 September 1861.

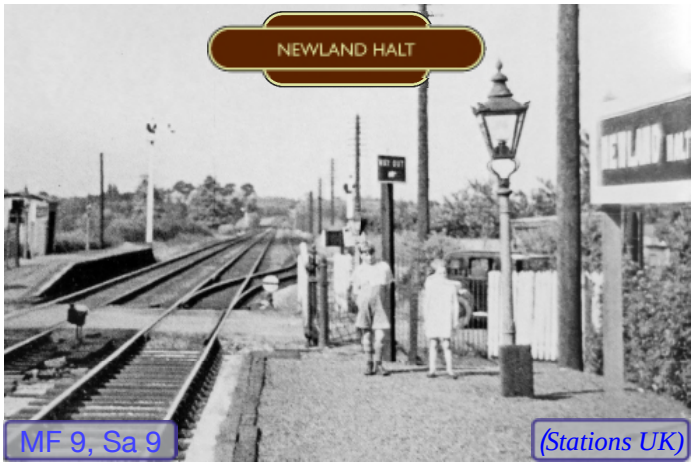
On 2 May 1874, a new junction just north of Bransford Road station saw a branch line to Knightwick opened, and this was extended to Bromyard in 1877 and finally to Leominster in 1897. This branch line closed to passenger traffic in two stages - Leominster to Bromyard on 15 September 1952 and Bromyard to Worcester on 7 September 1964.

During the 1920s, the three halts were opened - at Boughton Halt (in the St John's area of Worcester) and Rushwick Halt (on the western extremity of Worcester) on 31 March 1924, and at Newland Halt (just north of Malvern Link) on 18 March 1929.

MF 8 (2), Sa 8 (2) *(Stations UK)*

(PJ Garland / R.S. Carpenter)

MF 17, Sa 17, Su 7 *(Lens of Sutton)*



MF 9, Sa 9 *(Stations UK)*

The stations never saw frequent services, and the number of services stopping at each station in 1960 are shown on the appropriate station photograph. The halts had no Sunday service, while Henwick and Rushwick Halt saw a small number of Bromyard services stopping, with this figure shown in brackets.

All five of these stations saw their final passenger services on 3 April 1965 and nothing remains of them, apart from the stationmaster's house at Bransford Road. However, Worcestershire County Council has aspirations to build a new park and ride station at Rushwick in the future, close to the Worcester western relief road.

THE OUTER LIMITS
by Rob Hebron

The Stourbridge Line is an entity in its own right and is defined as the route between Worcester and Birmingham via Stourbridge Junction. However, only a small number of trains run as short workings between these two cities. Most journeys are planned to commence or terminate at points beyond Birmingham or Worcester. Since the transfer of Stourbridge trains to Birmingham Snow Hill, the line has become "cross-city".

The first named Cross-City Line in the region was the 32 mile long Lichfield to Redditch route. This diagram was designed to assist suburban journeys. It was also intended to free up platforms at Birmingham New Street by combining two terminating trains, either of which could impede the other while waiting for paths out of the station.

A Cross-City service to Longbridge approaches Bournville

The Cross-City Line opened in 1978 and was funded by Centro. Initially, services terminated at the boundary stations at Four Oaks and Longbridge until 1980 when the outer limits were Redditch, Lichfield City and occasionally, Lichfield Trent Valley. The fact that trains stopped at all intermediate stations allowed multiple permutations of journey opportunities. The key factor in operating such a service was electrification implemented in 1993 which permitted better acceleration and deceleration to speed up an otherwise tedious ride.

As Birmingham New Street became ever more congested as a result of more intensive services, it was decided to divert Stourbridge Line trains. The former GWR line from Smethwick Junction to Birmingham Snow Hill was reinstated in 1995 and branded "The Jewellery Line". The Jewellery Quarter which gave it its name was one of three new stations built along this new alignment - each of these stations and those towards Stourbridge became part of a brand new cross-city line.

Compared with the original cross Birmingham route, the new one splits into two lines east of Birmingham. However it has enabled single through journeys to be made from Stourbridge to Stratford-upon-Avon, Dorridge and occasionally, Leamington Spa. The timetable for the line spreads the destinations fairly evenly with a two-pronged choice of direction from Tyseley.

The two-pronged diagram was replicated on the original Cross-City Line: Bromsgrove station was moved and completely rebuilt in 2016 as a four platform station in preparation for the splitting of Cross-City Line services at Barnt Green to run alternately to Redditch and Bromsgrove.

The West Midlands Combined Authority contributed to the scheme which also involved electrification of the new spur. The new enhanced service at Bromsgrove commenced on 29 July 2018 and supplemented the existing Birmingham-Bromsgrove-Hereford service.

A Class 350 EMU arrives at Dudley Port on a Walsall to Wolverhampton service

There used to be another very useful cross-city line from Wolverhampton to Coventry serving communities such as Adderley Park. As a local stopping service, it filled the gaps in the timetable of the West Coast Main Line and provided extra trains to Birmingham International. This straightforward linear route from North West to South East was sabotaged by the introduction of extra Virgin services. The diagram was replaced by a somewhat artificial route from Wolverhampton to Walsall which takes over an hour to join two stations less than 7 miles apart. This was a token gesture for the withdrawal of direct trains between Wolverhampton and Walsall via Willenhall, a service which could reappear in 2022.

The cross-city principle is a winning formula and in theory, could be applied elsewhere. In practice, the city which is being crossed must have a high population and many suburbs surrounding it. The suburban stations must be located in areas of employment or education and in anticipation of passenger growth; adequate car parking must be provided. Worcester might seem a likely candidate for a cross-city service but out-lying stations are very rural in nature. Not only is there a poor business case but infrastructure at Worcester stations is now inadequate to cope with the existing services.

Are we likely to see another cross-city service in the West Midlands? I predict that any new venture will have a Birmingham axis again. Who knows how the Camp Hill Chords will transform the local network and where the outer limits will be.

ALL CHANGE AT … HAGLEY
The changing scene at one of the Stourbridge line stations

1962 (Joe Moss Collection)

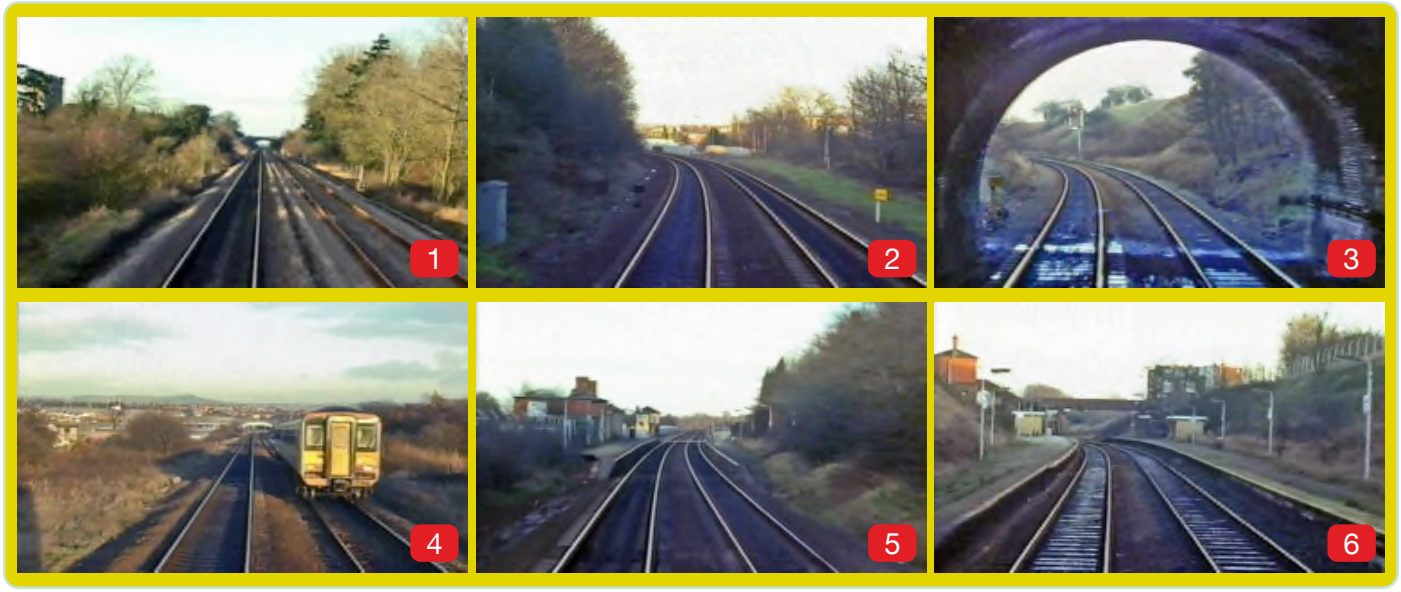
2014

BACK TO THE FUTURE … RAILWAY STYLE
by Roger Davis

As a five year old, at primary school, I was taught how to tell the time and learned that 9 o'clock came before 10 o'clock and that five to ten came before twenty past ten. Therefore, all that I learnt all those years ago was thrown into doubt at Snow Hill when the departure board on platform 2 showed that the next three trains - all running on time - were, in order, the 22:27 service to Whitlocks End, the 21:55 service to Great Malvern and the 22:20 service to Stourbridge Junction. Have they bought DeLorean trains?

WHERE ARE WE ? - NO. 5

The following are views taken from the driver's cab between Worcester Shrub Hill and Smethwick Galton Bridge taken in 1988. Can you name the locations?



AEGEAN SWARMS NARRATES (or ANAGRAM TEASER ANSWERS) - No 5

The answers to Anagram Teaser No 5 were as follows :-

1 - Lichfield City, 2 - Telford Central, 3 - Sandwell and Dudley, 4 - Marston Green, 5 - Watford Junction, 6 - Wellington, 7 - Barnt Green, 8 - Chester Road, 9 - Liverpool Lime Street, 10 - Sutton Coldfield, 11 - Rugeley Trent Valley, 12 - Milton Keynes Central, 13 - Hampton-in-Arden, 14 - Birmingham International, 15 - Lichfield Trent Valley, 16 - Bescot Stadium, 17 - Tame Bridge Parkway, 18 - South Liverpool Parkway