Feature

Heritage Railways as Museums: Occupations and Landscapes

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By their very nature, all heritage railways recall the past, but not all operators nor all visitors are deeply concerned about the way this past is presented. To draw upon a definition[1, 2] proposed some years back by Peter Ovenstone, museum railways are those that take seriously the task of collecting, preserving and operating old equipment and infrastructure to present a vision of 'the past.' It is with such heritage railways that I am concerned here. How do they represent the past, and what kind of past is represented? And what techniques might be borrowed from other museum sectors in order to improve visitors' engagement with, and appreciation of the past?

Museum Railways and Mimesis

At their best, museum railways' infrastructure and operating trains make up a complete package of sensual and historically 'authentic' experiences, creating open-air museums that happen to be several miles long. They are spatially ordered presentations of the past that draw heavily upon the visual conventions of the *technological sublime* and the *picturesque*—two terms I employ at greater length in my book written with Andrew Scott, *Making Histories in Transport Museums*[3]. Simulation extends to offering visitors a ride, and in this sense museum lines use 'living history' techniques, although there are, as I shall argue, strict limits to the re-enactment of the historical social order. Overall, the ideal is *mimesis*, the 'staged authenticity' of a facsimile of the past brought to life which visitors are invited to enter and experience[4-9].

The heritage railway as museum—a package of sensual and historically 'authentic' experiences with this ex-Southern Railway Light *Pacific* under steam on Swanage Railway in Dorset, England (1996). (Author)

My criticism of museum railways is not that they fall short of the mimetic ideal—that is impossible, and most preservationists know it—but that like many other sectors of industrial archaeology, they are more concerned with physical conservation than elucidating the social parameters of industrial development[10]. Recreating the past (accepting for the moment that this is possible in some sense) should not just be about an authentic physical environment. It is also about making the past come alive—taking the empty stage setting of a railway and animating it with historical characters. Preservationists tend to give this less thought. Of course, all museum lines need staff to run trains, but they only do the jobs needed to allow visitors to travel. True, operating is a kind of experimental archaeology in which old skills are demonstrated[11, 12]. But important though this is, it hardly exhausts what can be said about the social history of transport. Operating staff are not true 'character interpreters'—costumed performers impersonating historical railway workers. No-one explains to visitors about the way the job was done in the past, what working conditions were like, etc.

Does this matter? Certainly museum

railways often overplay their strengths when they claim to offer an authentic experience of travel in the 1950s, or whenever. But such boasts should not be taken too seriously and visitors should be credited with some common sense. It seems unlikely that they really believe that everything they see, hear and smell is as it was. Perhaps visitors knowingly, even playfully, engage with the so-called authentic experience, acknowledging its inevitable shortcomings while at the same time taking the opportunity to let their imaginations work. These are all hypotheses that badly need investigating. On the other hand, it seems wise to apply a precautionary principle, to acknowledge that mimesis is potentially a very coercive and conservative form of exhibition. The highly evocative sensual experiences of smells, sound, etc., associated with moving trains all help to anchor the 'reality' of the spectacle even as visitors know they are not literally travelling in the past, making it difficult for them to engage critically with the partial nature of the past represented by the ensemble. It is all very well knowing that one is reading a historical novel, but unless one knows about the history of the period it is impossible to say where and how the novel departs from the truth. Preservationists and visitors alike may fail to reflect upon deep-set assumptions about the past, seeing it in terms of myths that bear only a passing relationship to historical 'reality' (a concept not without its own problems). Some of the more important of these myths relate to the nature of railway work and the meaning of the places and landscapes through which trains travel.

The Journey and Railway Work

Most visitors to museum railways take a trip on the train and so engage 'the past' in a highly directed fashion; a journey is a pattern of circulation through the major parts of the exhibition—the railway. The fact that visitors move as passengers helps sustain a particular understanding of the past. More particularly, the past is prefigured to provide for an uncontroversial reading—social and natural harmony are key themes.

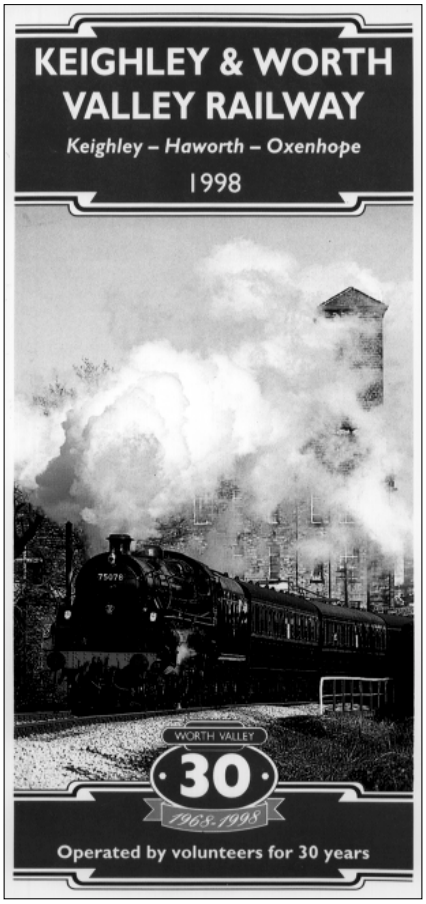
Playing as passengers is a 'natural' role for many visitors (many, but not all); something that is done without being thought about. But travel is also a highly socialized activity, relying on formal and informal norms essential to the smooth, industrialized processing of people. So the fact that visitors 'naturally' fall into the role of passengers suggests that despite railways somewhat reduced importance in everyday life, these basic rules of railway travel are still quite widely known. Most people do not need to be told to buy a ticket, to wait on the platform or in a waiting room, to get into and out of carriages at stations, etc.

This is of great value to museum railways because it means that the public does not have to be closely supervised in what is potentially a very dangerous environment. But it also means that visitors literally and metaphorically see the railway only from one perspective. Railways have always been highly regulated and ordered spaces; there are many areas to which the public has normally had no access—ticket offices, track, locomotive footplates, signal boxes, etc. Museum lines faithfully reflect this exclusion, and so much of the 'arcane and complex mystery of the railway' remains hidden or partly hidden from passenger-visitors' gaze[13].

This means there are few chances to learn at first hand about a whole range of railway occupations—what skills are involved, what working conditions used to be like, how the post fitted into the railway hierarchy, etc. Much more research needs to be done on this, but it is possible, probable even, that lacking the chance to find out anything to the contrary, visitors leave museum railways continuing to believe those bits and pieces of much older ways of understanding railway work that have survived in popular memory. These ideas and images were always selective and partial. Thus, if I am right, without realizing it, preservationists and visitors tend to see 'the past' through lenses that provide a misleading image of the historical social order. As David Wilson has remarked[14], they tend to reproduce an image of railway work 'taken on board through books, magazines, poems, seaside holidays and films—a mythologized account of working class life... idealized, by boys both small and large on a thousand platform ends throughout the 1950s and 1960s.' The result is a partial representation of the past that smoothes over the tensions, conflicts, ruptures and transformations of history as it was played out, for example, in the railways' industrial relations. For example, Wilson argues that in Britain the heroic image of train drivers deflected public attention away from their harsh working conditions[14]. Such claims raise the important issue of the politics of occupational identity, and in particular of the way in which this might still contribute on museum lines to an image of social harmony which, at the very least, is a simplified picture of the truth.

Place and Landscape

The relationship between museum railways and the locations through and to which they convey their passengers is another important aspect of their narrative structure. Here I build on the idea that museum railways trade on long-standing and deep-set cultural images associated with tourism. Although modern visitors cannot experience the railway in exactly the same way as their



The Keighley & Worth Valley Railway in northern England makes much of the scenery through which it passes, including the old mills seen here—picturesque monuments to former industrial glories. (National Railway Museum)

forebears—most obviously, a museum railway is now more clearly itself a destination, the journey an experience to be consumed—the ways in which a line is defined in relation to place and landscape draws upon a long history of tourist imagery dating back before even the earliest main-line railways. Chief among these were notions of the *picturesque*, the definition of locations as landscapes or places as to be gazed upon or consumed aesthetically. Defining locations in terms of a historical gaze—that is, as heritage—was another important facet of this process, and not only in Britain. The railways contributed heavily to the evolution of such images from the late 19th century through posters, travel literature and other forms of advertising[4, 15-19].

The process of naturalization is an important aspect of the way museum lines are presented. By becoming redefined in terms of the tourist gaze, railways become absorbed into a picturesque rural landscape and thus divorced from their history as parts of industrial society[16, 20]. This process is clearly evident with the archetypal heritage railway, the country branch line or secondary route. Culturally—and for that matter, politically and economically—railways transported the values of industrial modernity through and into city, town, suburb and countryside alike[21]. Historically, however, the railways own cultural practices downplayed this alien invasion, and so too, in a modern idiom, do even the most museum-oriented of heritage railways. They present an image of the railway as an organic part of a pastoral idyll. Their publicity often stresses the 'happy coincidence of landscape and line,' emphasising the pleasurable connotations of the countryside through which they pass, whether it be the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway's 'evocative West Yorkshire scenery' in the north of England or the Strasburg Railroad's transformation of the gently rolling landscape of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania into 'spectacular farmland.' This pastoralizing movement extends to station buildings and certain other structures, such as signal-boxes. These become redefined as examples of rural vernacular architecture, another aspect of the picturesque gaze, rather than acknowledged as standardized or semi-standardized industrial products[22].

Other kinds of image projected by heritage railways help displace their industrial character. Associations with historical places or landscapes are fairly common, a strategy also inherited from the old companies. The Strasburg Railroad, for example, combines historical tradition and the American rural idiom of 'hard work, discipline, frugality and self-reliance' in its invitation[23] to 'experience first-hand scenes of Amish families working fertile farms just as they had a century ago.'

A Future for the Past on Museum Railways

How then might museum railways move towards a more critical popular history? By reworking their visitors' experience of the railway itself, museum railways could provide opportunities for visitors to develop skills in decoding the social meanings of the spaces and landscapes through which they pass[24].

As I have already argued, the most significant feature of the narrative typology of museum lines is the more-or-less unconscious constraints placed on visitors as they circulate as passengers. While free access to the likes of signal-boxes and locomotive footplates is not possible, opening up more of the railway and enabling visitors to circulate through it in novel ways would be one way of starting to reconfigure their experience and thus their comprehension of the past. A brief comparison with the circulation through country houses is instructive. A museum railway is rather like a country house in which access to the servants' quarters and the service part of the house is denied or glimpsed only from afar. Yet just opening up the railway equivalents like the ticket office, goods agents' office, signal-boxes, etc., would not be enough. The order, in which the parts of a house or railway are met, informs a visitor's perception of their meanings and the social order that sustains these meanings. For example, to see the servants' quarters first and then move upstairs to the living rooms of the master and mistress has a different impact than the usual reverse flow. In the former case, the living rooms are more likely to be understood primarily as places that had to be serviced rather than (as with the normal

The world's first heritage railway—the Talyllyn Railway in N. Wales, run by volunteers since 1951 and seen here in the mid 1990s with *Talyllyn* hauling carriage. (Author)

circulation) places of gracious living[4].

Then perhaps museum railways could offer alternative patterns of circulation to the journey. For example, visitors might be given the chance to arrive at and move around a station as someone wishing to dispatch or collect livestock, goods or merchandise by rail. Even at the small country stations typically found on heritage lines, this would involve a very different set of sites (and sights). Thus, a visitor might enter the station through a separate yard gate, visit the goods agents' office and then move onto the interior of the goods shed or out to the yard sidings. This would at least start to bring home the fact that well into the 20th century railways were important carriers of goods for any but the most local of journeys.

Another possibility would be to allow visitors to move around a station from the perspective of different grades of railway worker. For example, seeing a booking office first from inside, looking out through the ticket window at passenger-visitors in the booking hall could be a first step in developing a basic historical appreciation of the distinctive culture of railway work that is lacking on most museum lines. Again, the lad-porter would have known a different set of spaces at a station from those of the more senior traffic grades of signalman-porter, signalman or stationmaster. Even the smaller stations often retain buildings that serve as signs of trades not commonly acknowledged by museum railways; the lampman or boy was very familiar with the small hut—often set away from the main buildings as a precaution against fire—where he filled signal lamps with oil.

There are also spaces away from stations that could be opened up in a controlled way despite the increasingly legalistic framework of health and safety. For example, non-operational signal-boxes could be fitted out with visitors in mind (as one or two already have). And the very humble permanent-way hut, a place of shelter and respite for the gangs of labourers who worked on the track, is, in its very crudity and location removed from the usual public view, a good sign of its occupants' historically low standing in the railway hierarchy.

The fabric of railway buildings could also be valuable in giving a sense of historical change, but only if the dominant ethos of ruthlessly rebuilding back to earlier appearances is modified. Several museum railways are prepared to break with consistent mimesis to the extent of restoring individual stations to a condition representing a different period from the rest of the line; what none does is deliberately leave a station, or a part of it, with the minimum of intervention so that, just as with the Lynton and Barnstaple coach exhibit in the National Railway Museum, the multiple layers of physical evidence could be used by visitors to explore the changing patterns of usage and ownership[24].

There are many difficulties to introducing these ideas, and they will not all prove feasible, even on the best resourced and motivated of museum lines. But looking at how other open-air museums interpret the past suggests some ways forward for railway preservationists.

One possibility is a much greater degree of intervention at the point of transition from the modern world to the constructed 'historic zone.' More by accident than design this boundary is usually more blurred with museum railways than with many open-air museums. For example, while visitor facilities such as cafés and shops are usually located in historic station buildings or in new buildings disguised by neo-vernacular architecture, once inside there is no mistaking the modern nature of the economic transactions that take place. This helps to rupture the illusion of mimesis and serves, perhaps, to emphasize the financial realities of maintaining the railway[25, 26]. Yet for all this, as visitors walk from their cars into the station and buy tickets at the ticket window they cross from the site's outside to its inside, moving from 'the present' to 'the past.' Here is the best point for greater intervention, perhaps initially by way of an orientation centre.

Visitors might, for example, purchase their admission tickets in a modern structure, or an older but clearly adapted building, offering the chance to think about the history of the railway, its workforce and its relationship to the surrounding places

Now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in India still allows visitors a far greater degree of access to the arcane mysteries of railway work than most heritage lines in northern countries. (Author)

and landscapes. Only then would they pass onto the terrain of the railway itself. Naturally, the form and content of these displays would be of the utmost importance if they are to be attractive to visitors and are not simply to reproduce the kinds of myths heritage railways already trade on. The most valuable role the exhibitions might perform is encouraging people to think about historical re-enactment as a form of play; this in itself might alert visitors to the different ways the past can be represented and call their attention to the partial nature of the representation they are about to witness. Providing insights into the history of the railway in its museum phase would be an essential aspect of this.

A lot more thought also needs to be given to intervention in the historic zone itself. The presentation of the past here is already theatrical in some degree, and so it would not be a big step conceptually to offer more drama as a way of introducing topics and perspectives and, most importantly, a sense of historical process and change that elude mimesis. The roles of first- and third-person interpreters also demands careful consideration. I have already mentioned the very limited sense in which operating staff behave as character-interpreters; it seems likely that this casts confusion in visitors' minds since there is no way of knowing what is and what is not historically 'authentic.' A multi-pronged approach, like that often found in living-history museums, particularly in the USA and Australia, is needed. Perhaps costumed staff could be made more aware of the circumstances of their historical roles and become proactive in explaining these to visitors. Indeed there is an argument for saying that operating staff should not be costumed since visitors would then be less likely to think that what they are seeing is 'authentic.' In any case, since many operating staff cannot, for reasons of safety, act more fully as interpreters, other ways must be found to explain their jobs. One possibility is the introduction of third-person interpreters at major sites and on trains whose role would be answer queries and offer visitors a fresh perspective on what they see—or perhaps more importantly, do not see. Dressed in ways that break the mimetic illusion and that place them firmly in the present, the challenge for interpreters would be to provoke and facilitate the reworking of visitors' experience.

Museum lines should think more carefully about how to interpret their wider spatial histories; after all, they are linear industrial sites operating over routes that are often well over 100 years old—the line and its surrounding locations are palimpsests of the social and physical changes during this time. Preservationists should help visitors decode in new ways what they—literally and metaphorically—see before them as they journey along the railway, uncovering the layers of meaning that exist in and on the ground. This might be done by adapting theories and techniques from other areas of archaeology, becoming in the process leaders in the industrial sector[4, 10].

Part of what is needed is a reworking of the experience of the journey so that greater emphasis is given to the wider landscape and places served by the line, and less to the element of transport and the physical features of the railway itself. This would mean integrating the railway into the totality of the landscape by recontextualizing it as a site originally built to serve particular social needs. For example, the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway was built, largely with local finance, to develop textile manufacturing and engineering in two Pennine valleys. Although much of the physical evidence of these industries and their communities has disappeared, enough remains to be able to think about a more contextualized interpretation of the railway's history. The terraces and old mills strung out along the West Yorkshire valleys are physical reminders of the reasons why these railways were built and operated.

How might the physical and the social be reconnected for visitors? Some museum lines around the world have already started to do this. Live or taped commentaries on the train could give basic information on the history of the railway and its relationship to the surrounding communities and landscape. There is always the danger of nostalgia pervading these commentaries, but this is not of course inherent in the technique. A less intrusive—but by that very fact arguably less effective—method is to give passengers a leaflet or booklet on the train. Off the train, the whole battery of techniques used to interpret other historic sites could be adapted to museum railways. Leaflets, taped commentaries and interpretation boards to self-guided tours are some attractive possibilities—especially if these were to open up spaces hitherto closed to visitors. Guided tours might also prove feasible.

Ecomuseums provide a more radical model—or perhaps more accurately, a variety of models—of what might be achieved. The ecomuseum movement

has always been explicit in its holistic comprehension of place and landscape as bearers of identity. In the judgement of Peter Davis, ecomuseums attempt 'to conserve and interpret all the elements of the environment ... in order to establish the thread of continuity with the past and a sense of belonging.' Ecomuseums are truly history museums without walls, although since some focus needs to be given to the interpretive effort, in practical terms it is more realistic to think of them as networks of sites—the 'fragmented museum.' But this is not all. The ecomuseum attempts to empower local communities so that their definition of identity through place and history has a chance of being heard[27].

A few museum lines have already started to make appropriate links. But to interpret a territory holistically needs more than mutual publicity and discounted entrance fees between a couple of museums; it requires a comprehensive approach embracing the many different facets of the region's identity. A museum railway that developed as part of an ecomuseum would have to learn to cooperate with other museums and groups that might not share its views of the locale and history. This is surely more of an opportunity than a threat. An ecomuseum is rarely, if ever, a monolithic organization swallowing up and controlling its constituents; it is more a web of independent bodies sharing a commitment to the exploration of a territory's history and identity, learning from one another in the process. In practical terms, museum railways could attract visitors by moving them around the ecomuseum's territory[27]. By embracing the outward looking, inclusive philosophy of the ecomuseum movement, museum railways could throw off once and for all any suggestion that they are just 'big boys playing at trains.' Indeed thinking of heritage railways as potential elements of ecomuseums leads us to an important conclusion developed at more length in *Making Histories in Transport Museums*—that when a museum railway succeeds it ceases to be a museum of railways alone. ■

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Notes

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