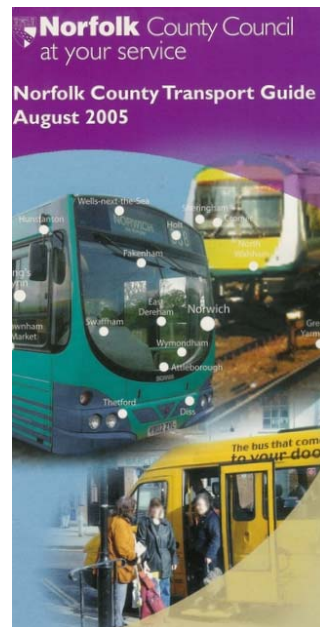


TIME & THE TIMETABLE

"I have always enjoyed reading bibliographies as I enjoy reading railroad timetables, recipes, or, indeed, any kind of list."

W. H Auden's own preface to B. C. Bloomfield, W. H. Auden: A Bibliography. Charlottesville, 1964, p. vii.

Man is a driven animal and one of my drives is the railway timetable. This much maligned object is actually an object of culture and of historical significance. Novelists and historians have held it in high regard from A. J. P. Taylor to Dorothy Sayers and John Betjeman. Yet in the early 21st century our access to timetables, the raw data system is under great threat. The threat comes from the internet. A supposedly information enriching system is impoverishing us. The user who once was able to leaf through a printed compendium whilst travelling through Britain or the historian able to examine exactly what happened fifty years ago is being pressed by the exchange of data for information. The internet journey planner or the Traveline phone line are where we are being pressed to go for information and there we might receive an answer to a question but struggle to find a browsable overview. Network Rail abandons its printed one volume national timetable in December 2007. Many shire counties are rapidly exiting the provision of printed information. At Aylsham in Norfolk in 2007, the Tourist Information Centre public transport information rack was empty to the explicit frustration of the information assistant. How could she explain to visitors that to answer their questions they had to find an internet terminal and spend their time wandering through and choosing screens when a couple of years before she handed out a Norfolk County Public Transport Map and a few timetable folders. The tourist, anyone for whatever reason uncomfortable or without access to the internet, will be hard pressed in future to make informed choices about how to use public transport in many areas. And even those who do use the internet narrate to me tales of cursing and swearing at the system.

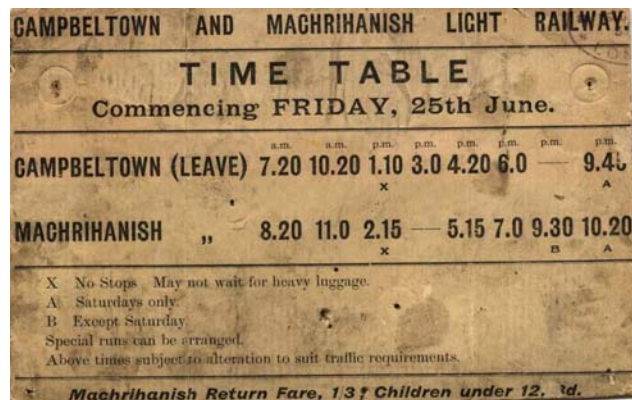


My love affair with the timetable started when I was about 12 and living in Norfolk. The other parallel enthusiasm I had developed was for maps. My art classes consisted of drawing large imaginary Ordnance Survey maps. Both to me offer a picture, a picture as vivid and as valuable as a Constable or Van Gogh. Though like all creations, there are the good and the bad, the inspired and the hack. Just because something is a timetable does not necessarily equate to transcendence. At the best, it is an adjective I use; a timetable can be a transcendent document in a manner an internet journey planner can never hope

to be. That transcendent capability perhaps explains why some of the great timetables of the past have been reprinted or why publishers regularly come to me seeking to reproduce material from our collection.

At a raw level, a timetable is a collection composed to its great extent of place names and timing numbers. As a technical challenge, there are all sorts of fascinating ways of presenting this information depending on the mode and objective of the publication. A shipping line sailing list will be different to a London borough transport guide. The manner in which text, illustration and mapping may be used to complement the raw task can provide infinite variety and attraction. A timetable is a design concept and can excite the best in design. The great sculptor Eric Gill was to have immense influence in timetable design. In the 1960s, the British Rail corporate identity programme was to entirely re-present the railway's timetable and printed output and along the way received international recognition and imitation. Symbols like the double arrow or brands like Pullman, Wagon-Lits, Intercity, Sealink, National Express are all intimately tied up with timetables.

My personal response has also been driven by notions of rubbish and (un-) fashionableness. The timetable was an ephemeral item in concept; it was intended for use and disposal. It has been the butt of humour and is not something that OK or Hello make space for. Yet I have always felt driven to be interested in what is neglected especially if the potential is



GAMPBELTOWN AND MACHRIHANISH LIGHT RAILWAY.	
TIME TABLE	
Commencing FRIDAY, 25th June.	
	a.m. a.m. p.m. p.m. p.m. p.m. p.m.
GAMPBELTOWN (LEAVE)	7.20 10.20 1.10 3.0 4.20 6.0 — 9.45
	x
MACHRIHANISH	8.20 11.0 2.15 — 5.15 7.0 9.30 10.20
	x

X No Stops May not wait for heavy luggage.
A Saturdays only
B Except Saturday
Special runs can be arranged.
Above times subject to alteration to suit traffic requirements.

Machrihanish Return Fare, 1/3; Children under 12, 1d.

immense. So it is with timetables. A vast publishing operation has accompanied their production yet in the past all of the breeds of librarian, museum curator and archivist have made their excuses and left. "It does not have an ISBN or ISSN (often)", "It's not a unique manuscript" or "I'm a museum curator and only interested in three dimensions" are all tempting excuses to do nothing.

Never being one to accept these sorts of explanation and always being one who thinks that Catholic and Protestant should be put in the same room and told to sort their differences out, I started collecting timetables. 25 years later, one librarian married and one daughter created, we have a collection of about 250,000 printed pieces of travel and transport ephemera. I use the fuller description there as against the shorthand timetable. Ephemera stands for a whole genre which is now receiving wider recognition in heritage circles. So this helpful definition from *Studying Camden a student's guide to Camden Local Studies and Archive Centre*, March 2005 page 25:

"Ephemera

Ephemera is any kind of apparently trivial item, often produced for a

particular event or activity (such as cards, tickets, handbills, even beer mats), that actually reflects very clearly and individually the time, place or event it represents. These bits and pieces add another element to our understanding of the past."

We sign up to that whole heartedly and that is why we have done what we have done. Travel and tourism because we believe in transport integration, something countries like Holland or Switzerland could teach us much about if only we would learn and spend. The material collected covers a broad spread of modes and is not just railway timetables although at the tip of the pinnacle is the output of the nationalised British Railways 1948-97.

It is a romance. When I see a timetable, from the blur of names and numbers, I hear the Flanders and Swan song *The Slow Train*. There is music in the names. Auden spoke of "Paying homage by naming". The worshipper thinks of litanies. Timetables are litanies. The un-intelligible morass will if you wish conjure up images. Images of places, people, journeys past and future, favourite locomotives or buses, flying in a Douglas DC-3. The timetable can be used to anticipate pleasure or to invoke nostalgia.

To keep the artistic analogy a timetable is "*A Brief Encounter*" and to be sure timetables from Carnforth of that period will attract bidder interest if they appear on ebay. The latter has helped materially to democratise the interest and make it accessible. For years I worked through layers of postal auctions and dealt with magazine editors who sometimes showed enthusiasm but more often seemed incredulous that I could be as excited by a freebie leaflet issued yesterday as by something from 1930. This has been during the last two-three decades, a period in which good design has, relatively speaking, triumphed. How much the internet will dent this has to be measured. It will dent it and so have issues like bus de-regulation. Counties like Durham and Northumberland once in the forefront of information provision and with a great track record in output are now on the backburner. Items only dating from 1990 both appear attractive and well presented but also comprehensively now history.

The car in the 20th century was even more a liberator but in the 21st century the price of that liberation is more and more apparent. I very much hope that as the years pass, I will continue to be able to wave a piece of print around that helps me to choose when and where to travel in my own time and not with the angst of needing either a computer or of having to tell someone down a phone line the from and to details of a journey whose exact nature is only half-formed in my head.

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