

# From A Railway Carriage

An essay by Jacqueline Winspear

*FASTER than fairies, faster than witches,  
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;  
And charging along like troops in a battle,  
All through the meadows the horses and cattle:  
All of the sights of the hill and the plain  
Fly as thick as driving rain;  
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,  
Painted stations whistle by.  
Here is a child who clammers and scrambles,  
All by himself and gathering brambles;  
Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;  
And there is the green for stringing the daisies!  
Here is a cart run away in the road  
Lumping along with man and load;  
And here is a mill and there is a river:  
Each a glimpse and gone for ever!*

—From “A Child’s Garden of Verses” by Robert Louis Stevenson

I’ve always loved railways, not just the boarding of a train and the excited anticipation of a journey, but watching a train making its way across the land, the engine pulling carriages and freight from here to there and back again. Last month I rode my bike from Ojai in California down to the beach in Ventura and, as the train went through I automatically waved to the driver, who leaned out of his window and waved back. And instead of a woman in her middle years, I was a small child in England again, running to the bottom of our garden as the train went through on the Hawkhurst to Paddock Wood branch line in Kent. A child waving furiously and calling out as the driver extended his hand to wave in return. Then the whistle would blow, just for me.

“He’s seen me, he’s seen me!” I’d squeal.

I was no more than a toddler at the time, but I remember it clearly, remember the waft of smoky steam pressing up through the trees, the kerCHUFF-kerCHUFF of the engine, and the driver’s smile as he leaned out to acknowledge me. And that whistle really was for me, because the drivers knew who was who along the branch line. We arrived at the station in Hartley late one day, my parents running to the platform only to see the back of the last carriage as it pulled out. But the driver had looked around at just the right moment and seen us, so drew his engine to a steaming halt and shunted the carriages back again so that we could climb aboard. That was in the days when a guard would walk ahead of the train to the first level crossing at Bishops Lane, to close the gates so that the train could pass safely. Not that there was much traffic on

Bishop's Lane. The odd tractor, perhaps the farmer's old Morris, Fred Cooke delivering groceries, or the doctor on his rounds. And that was on a busy day.

That line has long gone now, a lifeblood drained by effective wielding of what became known as the Beeching Axe, when Britain's Chairman of the Railways Board, Dr. Richard Beeching, decreed that some 6000 miles of track in Britain should be eliminated, which led to the closure of the branch lines—though it is also true that the closure process had started before Beeching came to power, supported by a government influenced by those whose wealth came from the building of roads. It was a move in the 1960's that brought to an end not just to a means of travel, but an era. Since then, some of those old lines have been resurrected, slowly but surely renovated and reopened by steam enthusiasts, and supported by those who want to remember or experience for the first time, the wonder of a journey in the age of steam. How could I resist such a journey this summer?

The Kent and East Sussex Railway extends from the picture-postcard town of Tenterden in Kent, to Bodiam in Sussex. From the moment passengers—tourists and day-trippers—make their way from the car park to the station in Tenterden, they walk back into the 1940's and 50's. My American husband, steeling himself for another one-sided conversation beginning with the words, "Of course, when I was a child . . ." was reading the notice board, and smiled as I bought the tickets. It seemed that local ales from the Rother Valley Brewery in Northiam were sold on board, so the promise of a good day had been elevated to a banner day.

Hanging baskets bright with flowers reminded me of that last day of business on our local branch line. Our station had been decorated from platform to roof and the trains were full, as if such celebration might ward off the looming silence that already echoed along tracks, into sidings and through tunnels. I remember clearly the luggage that people carried with them in the days before the station closed, when we would take the train to Paddock Wood and change for the London train. There were leather cases with straps for those who could afford such luxury, bags and stuffed pillowcases for hop-pickers, the seasonal workers for whom our line was a means to a late-summer holiday and a few quid more than they started with. When we went to London to see my grandparents, my dad would carry a small attaché case, my mother her shopping bag, and she would be wearing her London clothes, clothes that she had bought years ago before she was married, before she came down to Kent. They were the "New Look" clothes she bought when hemlines dropped, because clothing had just come off rationing. John and I walked out onto the platform, where a pile of well worn suitcases and trunks were stacked on an old porters' trolley, a carefully-placed station decoration to trigger nostalgia in those old enough to remember, and delight children running back and forth in shorts and t-shirts, children pursued by parents dressed just the same. A smiling guard, his black uniform pressed, white shirtsleeves pushed up with black bands, his tie pinned just so, pointed this way or that, directing people to the buffet, or the first class carriages. We took our seats in first class, just one pound more for the pleasure of privilege, payable to the conductor en route. The guard helped some passengers secure bicycles in the goods wagon, then consulted his pocket watch before looking both ways and shouting, "All aboard!"

*Scccchhhhhhhh, kerCHUFF.* Smoke, steam and the fumes from Welsh boiler coal billowed alongside the carriages. I grinned from ear to ear, no less excited than Harry Potter on his way to Hogwarts. The engine was ready, the guard checked the platform one more time, sounded his whistle and waved the green flag. *KerCHUFF*, the train began to move. I looked around and there was not one face bereft of a broad smile. Slowly but surely we picked up speed, the signalman returning waves from passengers young and old as we passed. And with each blast of steam that wafted past the window, I was taken further back, as if in a time machine that reversed a decade with every turn of the wheels. Already the woolen seats had begun to chafe the back of my bare knees, just as they had when I was five years old.

They said that the Hawkhurst branch line was one of the most beautiful in England, making its way through Kent's High Weald. When my mother worked on the farm, we would look up when we heard the whistle, the steam punching its way upwards and splaying out through the trees. I'd run to the gate with the other children, to wave again, or to race the engine until we could go no further. And onward the train would go, through farmland and forests, coming and going with passengers and freight. For a country community, the train wasn't just for travel to and from the towns, but brought our food to the shops, our coal to the yard. It was our lifeblood. John decided the three hour journey to Bodiam and back warranted a sampling of Blues, a local ale named for the infamous gang of 18th century smugglers whose territory had extended from the Romney Marshes to Hawkhurst. His ale poured, he sat back to enjoy the journey and the view, the taste of fragrant hops intermingled with coal-smoky vapor. The Weald of Kent is distinguished by rolling green hills, patchwork-quilt farmland and ancient forests. There are small villages, compact hamlets, large towns and towns so small they would be villages but for the church, the size of which dictates the distinction between city, town, village and hamlet in England. And of course there are castles. When I was a child, Bodiam castle sat in the midst of the Guinness hop gardens, in fact, it seemed that as far as the eye could see, there was no other crop. The train stopped at Bodiam, the end of the line, where most of the passengers disembarked to amble over to the castle, or simply stroll along a country lane overhung with cow parsley, until the next train arrived to take them back to Tenterden.

I was six when the last train rumbled out of the station at Hartley. I don't think we ever became used to the silent railway lines. I remember walking along "the lines" as we called them, and kneeling down, my ear to the tracks, see if I could hear a train coming. But there was no train, and even, in time, there were no tracks, for they were torn up. My dad would often suggest a walk along the lines on a Sunday afternoon, or perhaps on a June evening with the midges flying above our heads, and the breezy tail end of a warm summers day skimming over bare arms and bramble-scratched legs. And as we walked, one of us would look back every now and again, just in case. Sometimes, when I was working on the farm, the wind would blow a certain way and I'd hear the old train whistle. Looking up, I half-expected to see steam above the trees and the engine coming around the corner, but there was nothing there, the trains had gone. Except, when I turned around, I'd see that someone else had looked up at exactly the same time, and I'd wonder whether trains could become ghosts.

We remained on board, with John taking the last sip of his ale as the engine was shunted along to the front of the carriages for the train to begin the homeward journey to Tenterden. Even though we had seen the view on the outward journey, already the late afternoon light was changing our perspective. Long shadows stretched out from the trees as cows ambled in for the milking and horses looked up for their feed. From our seats by the window we saw Canada geese in migration and a field of golden barley swishing back and forth, while around us sun-burnished faces told of a warm day out in the Kent countryside.

The Kent & East Sussex Railway seems to be flourishing, often used for films and documentaries, and offering Pullman car dining for weekend lunches and dinners. A Fawley Towers dinner will have you supping with Basil, and on a *Sherlock Holmes* night you'll be caught up in a mystery. There are forties evenings—blackout curtains a must—and corporate parties, and on all trains the staff are volunteers, with tips contributing to upkeep of the line. There's talk in the area that the train will eventually go through to Robertsbridge, where, according to the locals, it will connect with the London train. My dad, who always said that Beeching couldn't see to the end of his bulbous nose, predicts that, if they do extend the line, there will be commuters traveling alongside the tourists and day-trippers. New commuters on the old steam train, now that's a thought. Even though it may be a pipe dream, a last laugh for those who so correctly predicted traffic-blocked roads and villages ruined by freight-hauling trucks, today it seems that this is one line where the Beeching Axe didn't go deep enough, and the roots held firm for another season.

To find out more about the Kent & East Sussex Railway, go to [www.kesr.org.uk](http://www.kesr.org.uk).

Note: Maisie Dobbs fans will note the similarity between the cover designs and the brochure/web page for Pullman dining on the [KESR website](http://www.kesr.org.uk).