



Railway Ramblers – South Western Area

2021 Newsletter 5 – May Blossoms

‘Touch wood, cross fingers, cue fanfare | Out we come’

Introduction

Welcome to the final ‘Lockdown Newsletter’, or at least ‘final’ if all continues to go well. I plan to publish a programme of walks for July to December next month, and to start leading walks again from late July. (I include a list of intended summer and early autumn walks below.) Unfortunately but unsurprisingly, **some logistical problems remain**. The government is good about issuing guidance on and after each of its milestone dates arrives, but nowhere near so good when it comes to issuing guidance in advance of those dates. As I write this in early May, I have several unanswered questions which are crucial for the resumption of normal activities:

- Will buses and trains still be operating to reduced timetables with half of their seats unavailable? GWR has warned passengers that its timetables this year are liable to frequent change, while on 8th May it withdrew all of its Class 800 trains following the discovery of large fatigue cracks in welds.
- Will we be able to offer one another lifts in our cars where public transport is unavailable or does not operate at times convenient to us?
- How safe do members feel?

The last question is a crucial one, especially for members in our area who contracted Covid, or are living with the effects of Long Covid. Optimists hope for a return to normal life from 21st June, but many have been terrified by the pandemic, and those who caught the virus, and survived, do not want to get in harm’s way again. Their understandable anxieties will have a bearing on this year’s arrangements for pub lunches and any pre-Christmas social event, especially if a new variant emerges which is resistant to the currently available vaccines.

However, enough about worry and fear; we can talk ourselves up, or we can talk ourselves down! There is a chance that 2021 will see the UK clear the worst of the pandemic, and we must all feel grateful that we live in a country which, in vaccination terms, is a world leader. I set out below the dates for our summer and early autumn walks, and will publish full details in June, when firmer times should be available for buses, trains and the Cornish museums we hope to visit in October.

- **Sat. 24th July.** Moretonhampstead to Bovey Tracey, Devon, 7 miles. The new Wray Valley Way, opened in December 2019. Leader: JV.
- **Sat. 21st August.** Hamworthy Junction to Wimborne via Broadstone, Dorset, 7 miles. Part of the Castleman Trailway, which derives its name from Charles Castleman, the Wimborne solicitor behind the original main line from Southampton to Dorchester via Ringwood and Wimborne. Leader: Tim Chant.
- **Sat. 25th September.** Wellington to Beambridge Circular, Somerset, 7 miles. This is something a little different: a walk from Wellington to Holywell Lake via the Grand Western Canal (whose ‘tub boats’ had wheels for the rails of Wellisford Incline), returning via Beambridge on footpaths close to the West of England main line. The significance of Beambridge will be revealed on the day! Leader: JV.
- **Tue. 19th October to Sat. 23rd October:** Four days in five of railway walks in Cornwall, run jointly with the Midlands (S&W) Area, comprising Portreath to Devoran (11 miles); Tramways of the Great Flat Lode (ca. 7 miles); Cornish branch

line bash using a 'Ride Cornwall' ticket (£18); St Austell China Clay Trail (distance TBA); and a Luxulyan Valley walk from Par (7 miles). Leaders: Bob Prigg and JV.

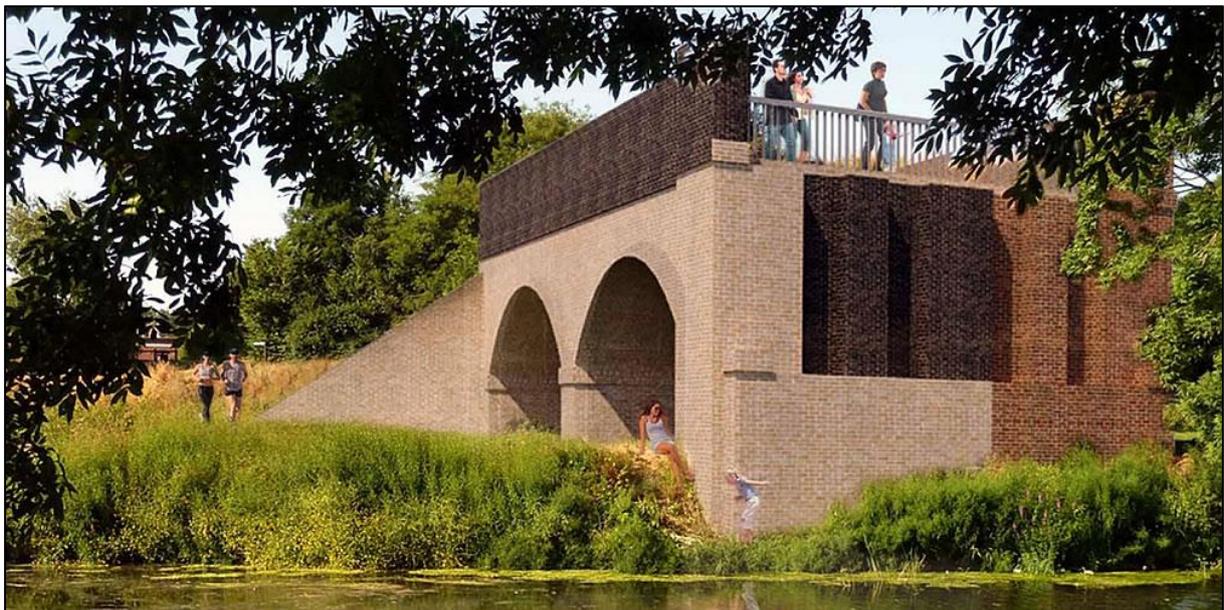
Currently, I expect to be able to accommodate at least 30 on each of these events, so let me know if you require a place. In the unlikely event that any walk is over-subscribed, I will maintain a reserve list.

Finally, this month's quotation comes from 'Cocoon' by the Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage. It is a charming piece, so, if you have not read it already, I recommend it. Here is the link:

- <https://www.writeoutloud.net/public/blogentry.php?blogentryid=113705>

The Railway Arches Project, Blandford Forum

Fans of the Somerset & Dorset Railway may remember the viaducts which carried the line across the valley of the River Stour and parts of Blandford Forum. Near the river, two arches remain, which for many years were in a parlous state, but Blandford Railway Arches Trust ('BRAT' – what an acronym!) has brought them back to life as a viewing platform. Western Design Architects were responsible for the design, and the image below is one of their early visualisations.



Above: How Western Design architects intended to restore and re-purpose the two remaining Blandford Arches. Source: www.westerndesignarchitects.com.

Wimborne-based member Tim Chant reports that the work is now complete and, from September 2020, the gate to the access staircase was open daily from 9:00am to 2:30pm for people to access the deck and enjoy the view over the meadows. Interpretation boards describing the wildlife on the meadows and the history of the railway have also been installed.

Had these arches fallen into the hands of Highways England or the Historical Railways Estate, it is almost certain that they would have been demolished as of no possible use. This project demonstrates the imaginative power of local communities, who

understand their history and appreciate their historical artefacts far more than any government department or government-run company. For further information, see page 8 ('Opposition to Highways England's "Wrecking Ball" Continues').

Trail Improvements at Ringwood

Tim Chant reports that the trackbed of the former London, Southampton & Dorchester Railway ('LSD' – another unfortunate acronym) has been improved east of the site of the former Ringwood station, where it forms an eastward extension of Dorset Council's Castleman Trailway.



Above: *A delightful spring scene featuring what used to be the main line from Ringwood to Brockenhurst and Southampton. The picture was taken from the east end of Ringwood station site and is looking towards the village of Crow, now much expanded. Photograph by Tim Chant, 26th March 2021.*

The surface of the trail is now tarmac to Crow Arch and Crow Lane in order to provide an off-road, all-weather multi-use route into Ringwood. Within Crow, builders have erected new housing either side of the old line, and have installed connecting gates so that residents can access the trail directly. Tim believes that the builders paid for these improvements via a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) imposed by the local council. CILs are the successor to the old 'Section 106' grants, also levies, which paid for such development-mitigation works previously.

Extension Sought to Bristol's Whitchurch Rail Trail

If you ask most people who walk or cycle in the British countryside to name a major piece of walking and cycling infrastructure in Bristol, they will probably mention the Bath to Bristol Railway Path. However, Bristol has another railway path south of the city on the former Bristol & North Somerset Railway's line to Radstock West via

Hallatrow; this was opened in 1873 to exploit traffic from the Somerset coalfield, which was based around Radstock.

This other Bristol railway path starts at Whitchurch at grid reference ST 615676, then passes through Stockwood before leaving the trackbed at ST 614695 near Brislington. However, at Brislington, the trackbed is still extant, and the two bridges on it are owned by the charity Railway Paths Ltd, which seeks to re-use old railway structures for public benefit. Another charity, Greenways & Cycleroutes, is currently pursuing a project which effectively will extend the Whitchurch rail trail (with a few diversions around obstructions) to near the Sainsbury's superstore at ST 615705.

Unfortunately, this trackbed-based extension would only be a 'meanwhile use' because Bristol City Council intends to use the old railway for a new road alignment. Details of the project can be found at the link below:

- <https://bristolcycling.org.uk/could-we-have-a-temporary-brislington-tramway-railway-path/>

For members unfamiliar with Greenways & Cycleroutes, it is John Grimshaw's new path-building charity, the one which brought us the new Tintern-Chepstow route which opened on 1st April. John is well known as the founder of cycling charity Sustrans and, more importantly, the National Cycle Network, for which he received a CBE ('Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire'). John's public recognition was well deserved, even if his honour sounds a tad anachronistic!

Midsomer Norton to Chilcompton



Above: The Somerset & Dorset Railway has returned to Midsomer Norton, and with it has come a relatively new rail trail to Chilcompton. Photograph by Jeff Vinter, 15th April 2021.

During our limited-number April visits to the Somerset Coalfield, RR SW members walked from Midsomer Norton to Chilcompton and back along the route of the former Somerset & Dorset Railway. The S&D Railway Trust, based at Midsomer Norton South station, using a grant from NatWest Bank, has installed a footpath alongside its running line, which currently ends at the start of the infilled Chilcompton Cutting. The local farmer has kindly established a permissive footpath which takes walkers over the infill (now a gently graded meadow) and across Chilcompton Tunnel to come out a few yards away from a trackbed-based public footpath which leads to the Fry's Well area of Chilcompton. The specific details, taken from *Vinter's Railway Gazetteer* (latest edition, currently unpublished) are as follows:

'Midsomer Norton (South)–Fry's Well, Chilcompton: walkers only, disused railway, 1³/₄m, ST 665538–ST 649515. Partly a permissive path alongside the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust's restored running line from Midsomer Norton South, with access from Silver Street Nature Reserve, adjacent to the station. At the end of the running line, a connecting permissive path continues over the infilled Chilcompton Cutting (ST 654525–ST 652521) to come out on the aptly-named Tunnel Lane a few yards from the south portals of Chilcompton Tunnel, where a public footpath continues on the trackbed to Chilcompton.'

This news may also be reported in the summer edition of 'Railway Ramblings'.

Lydney to Parkend

Many readers will recognise Lydney and Parkend as the terminus stations of the Dean Forest Railway. This summer, Greenways & Cycleroutes is holding a work camp to help build a new cycle trail between these two communities. Currently, it is not known how much trackbed will be used in the scheme, but the old 'Mineral Loop' in the forest, which linked Whitecroft with Parkend, makes an obvious candidate for the north end of such a trail. It is no exaggeration to say that the Forest of Dean is riddled with former tramways, so there may be other candidate trackbeds south of Whitecroft. If any reader can provide further details, please get in touch. What little the club knows so far can be viewed at the following link:

- <https://greenwaysandcycleroutes.org/dean-forest-greenway/>

This news may also be reported in the summer edition of 'Railway Ramblings'.

Kemble to Cirencester to Re-Open

After all the Devon news in the previous newsletter (i.e. the Okehampton re-opening and plans for new rail trails in the county), Ivor Sutton has forwarded a report which assures us that the Kemble to Cirencester branch line will re-open.

'Ambitious plans to re-open a railway line in Gloucestershire are moving forward, and the team behind the proposals say the multi-million pound project will go ahead. The Cirencester Community Railway Project has been set up in a bid to restore the railway line between Kemble and Cirencester – closed by Dr Beeching in the 1960s. The market town's railway station was replaced with a car park and what is now Waitrose, but the group intend to re-open it with what is known as Very Light Railway on a single 8km track between the two towns.

‘A new bridge would have to [be] built and the trains would use the latest in technology reducing the project’s carbon footprint and using the latest in Covid-safe techniques. In all, it is expected to cost £52 million but could mean millions more is brought to the local economy by linking Cirencester to Kemble and then to London.’



Left: *The Gothically-styled Cirencester Town station, believed to be the work of Brunel’s assistant, R.H. Brereton. The Grade II listed building is owned by Cotswold District Council, but in 2016 was reported to be in poor condition internally. Passenger services were withdrawn on 6th April 1964 as part of the Beeching cuts, but could trains return here in a few years’ time? Photograph by Jeff Vinter, 18th April 2015.*

- <https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/multi-million-pound-railway-project-5224991>

Direct Line to Looe

During the 1930s, the GWR was developing a direct line to Looe, which would have left the Cornish main line at a new junction at Trerulefoot, two miles west of St. Germans. According to the ‘Saltash History and Heritage’ website, viaducts were planned at Keveral and Millendreath, tunnels at Hessenford (1 mile), Seaton (1 mile 528 yds) and Looe (700 yds), with stations being provided at Hessenford, Seaton Bridge and Looe. Unsurprisingly, the military activities of a rather unpleasant Austrian Lance Corporal in the German Army put an end to the scheme.

Local landowner Caroline Petherick wrote to us as follows: ‘I live above the proposed Seaton tunnel, and on my land are the remains of the golf links that GWR actually constructed, and which [were] played on, in the 1930s. GWR had also planned a 60-room hotel, which was never built.’ Ms. Petherick continued: ‘If any of your members

would like to come and have a look, they'd be welcome.' This sounds like a possible mission for our Looe-based member, Mike Smith, although it would be over a year before a club event could be arranged due to the large backlog of walks postponed by the pandemic.

Mike: Please contact JV if this suggestion is of interest.

Mystery Photograph



Above: After Mike Roach's tricky poser earlier in the year, here's an easy one for local members with a location well within our region. So, where is this, and what line was it on? The solution will be published in our Programme of Walks, due out in June. (Ivor Sutton: we'll send the boys round if you don't get this one!)

Dousland Station

Steven Hills forwarded a recent article by The Plymouth Herald on Dousland station, the first stop out of Yelverton on the GWR's branch line to Princetown. The station survives as a private residence, complete with lots of railway memorabilia, including a prominent running-in board. Before the railway arrived, a building called 'Dousland Barn' was used as a stop on the march taken by prisoners bound for Princetown Prison, and The Herald implies that this was the seed of the village's importance.

Members may be unaware that the original junction for Princetown was Horrbridge, until in 1885 the station at Yelverton was completed as the new start of the branch. The trackbed from the edge of Dousland to Princetown is one of the finest railway walks in the country, but is best undertaken in the opposite direction: Princetown to Dousland is downhill all the way, and, on a clear day, the views – right over Plymouth Sound – are exceptional. This walk is on the radar for a future programme!

- <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/plymouth-news/fascinating-past-dartmoors-lost-railway-5309181>

Opposition to Highways England's 'Wrecking Ball' Continues

The HRE Group, which opposes plans by Highways England and its Historical Railways Estate subsidiary to infill or demolish 'dormant' railway bridges and viaducts, has published a new seven-minute video which explains what these agencies are doing, and what better uses could be made of the threatened assets. This is the link:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_JUNXUPkFQ

On the same subject, member Mike Ross recently supplied two cuttings from The Times (Tuesday 4th May) which made similar points in an article and accompanying leader. The Times concluded that, 'Their [HE's] reasoning is as spurious as their motives' and 'Our rural heritage belongs to all'.

The HRE Group's online petition against HE/HRE's activities and future plans has now attracted nearly 14,000 signatures. When it exceeds 15,000, it will become one of the leading campaigns by 'change.org'. If you have not thought about signing the petition yet, here is the link:

- <https://www.change.org/p/securing-a-beneficial-future-for-queensbury-tunnel/u/28293088>

The Yealmpton Branch

You might think, 'None of this could have been converted into a trail' ... but you would be wrong! A short section from the edge of Elburton to just south of Brixton station has been open for years as part of National Cycle Network Route 2 (NCN2); this starts at grid reference SX 538531 and continues to SX 541523. However, now more of the line is being converted at the Plymouth end.

The new section starts at the eastern end (SX 502542) of the recently restored and rather magnificent Laira Bridge. Originally, walkers and cyclists bound for Oreston (on the LSWR's Turnchapel branch) had to come off the trail here and continue alongside the busy and noisy A379. Now, thanks to new housing development, the old trackbed is being revived as a multi-use trail towards Billacombe, stopping a little short of that village at a new housing estate. When complete, this will add another mile of re-used railway to Plymouth City Council's tally. It is likely that the Council is funding this work with a Community Infrastructure levy on the developer(s).

The Council's press release made this announcement: 'Broxton Drive to Saltram Meadow roundabout walking and cycling route will run parallel to Billacombe Road [the A379] and will act as an extension to the current route that stretches back past Laira Bridge [i.e. towards the city centre]. The path will start on the eastern side of Broxton Drive, run along the route of the old railway line and meet up with the new roundabout that links Billacombe Road to the Saltram Meadow development.' Unfortunately, none of this is readily meaningful to interested non-locals because Saltram Meadow does not yet appear on any OS maps, and – as usual – the press release does not trouble itself with grid references; but thus it ever was.

Railway Topiary (WARNING: Pun Imminent)



***Above:** Member Richard Lewis continues to punish me with his puns. His caption to this photograph featuring a Covid mask across the smokebox door was, ‘This must be a Pannierdemic Loco!’ For some reason, he signed off, ‘Yours cringingly’.*

Portishead Re-Opening – Delayed Again

If you are waiting for the next train to Portishead (closed to passengers in 1964 and freight in 1981), you will have to be patient a little longer. Opening has now slipped back from 2023 to December 2024, this time because the pandemic forced the public examination of the scheme to be postponed; this in turn caused knock-on effects across the rest of the project. However, the local council is adamant that the branch will re-open as part of the wider ‘Metrowest’ project, for which funding of £116 million has been secured; the idea is to create a metro-style rail system with Bristol as its hub.

Major Improvements for Bristol Temple Meads

As one old sixties’ pop song proclaimed, there is ‘no pleasure without pain’. If you are planning to travel by train from, to or via Bristol Temple Meads this summer, check your journey carefully before setting out. This is because, for eight weeks from Saturday 10th July to Friday 3rd September, Network Rail will be changing the track layout at a major junction on the approach to the station. Amongst other improvements, a new running line will be installed to support future Metrowest services, while the station’s roof and electrical wiring will receive a complete make-over. It is a shame that this

work will disrupt services throughout the summer, when GWR must be keen to recover lost ground financially; but no doubt this period has been chosen for the length of daylight hours and supposedly better and warmer weather. Cue a summer of rain?!?

Members' Emails

Musical Train

I guess you have seen this but, if not, enjoy. It illustrates what to do in lockdown if you are bored, i.e. build a model railway which plays tunes on part-filled wine glasses as it goes round the track. Here's the link:

- <https://metro.co.uk/2021/04/07/record-breaking-musical-train-built-by-model-railway-enthusiasts-14372238/>

Richard Lewis

Three-Letter Station Names

I started a three letter station name list for an abortive RCHS quiz. This is my list but it was too big to use – the eleven stations I remembered without looking were open ones, though the status of IBM is debatable. As ever, there will be debate regarding other words in the name (e.g. Junction) or that the station closed in the 1800s. There may be more that I have missed. Rhu was called Row but is the same station. IBM was opened for the IBM offices/works near Gourock: the facility is now closed and I think there is only a parliamentary service – I'm not sure.

- **Open:** Ash, Ayr, Ely, IBM(?), Lee, Lye, Ore, Par, Rye, Wem, Wye.
- **Closed:** Aby, Bow, Box, Cam, Cwm, Ely (GWR as opposed to GER), Hoy, Ide, Kew, Lea, Moy, Quy, Rhy, Usk.

Bill Jagger

Uplifting

I've really enjoyed your newsletters. It's good to have updates and reminders that there is other life out there in these strange times. Your enthusiasm comes across in your writing and I find that uplifting.

Van Hamlin

Thank you, Van; other members have said the same – it is appreciated. JV

Will Trams Make it to Radstock?

This story from March 2019 was published by The Midsomer Norton, Radstock & District Journal (not a pithy name for a newspaper!) but slipped under the radar.

'A £450,000 investment in studies to get Bath moving has been hailed as a shot in the arm by campaigners who want to bring trams back to the city. Bristol and Bath Trams Chairman, Dave Andrews, said reviving the network was the only effective way to tackle congestion and attract more businesses, and argued it should expand to Radstock and other Somerset towns. [A] West of England Combined Authority study will run alongside a £1.95 million project to assess the feasibility of a mass transit system between Bristol and Bath, that will again consider the use of trams. The scheme aims to prompt a "step change" in how people travel, but could cost £100 million to draw up plans before any construction work begins.'

Off the Rails with Connex

In the previous newsletter, I promised to recount the story of my commuting experiences with Connex, which possibly was the worst operator ever to run a train in the UK. The volume of material supplied by members this time has reduced the space for this, but here is a brief summary, followed by what my travels with Connex finally produced. Connex was a French company, and my conversations with various of its employees suggested that it entered the UK rail market primarily to access government grants in the early days of rail privatisation. In France, the company's core business areas included water and sewerage, the latter not being lost on an Indian colleague who commuted daily into work from the opposite direction to me (she from Brighton to Durrington, me from Chichester to Durrington). Brighton was, and still is, a host city to tens of thousands of foreign students every summer, and my colleague, a fluent French speaker, regularly overheard the conversations of French students berating the British for tolerating such awful trains as provided by Messrs. Connex. Her delight was to inform these youngsters that Connex was actually a French company, which moreover had interests in processing sewerage, which she suggested might explain why their trains were as they were.

Connex was an early enthusiast for the station-skipping ruse to avoid fines for their trains' late arrival at destination. This was a particular trial for me when travelling home during the evening rush hour, when it seemed that any delay almost anywhere on the network could cause my all-stations service to Portsmouth Harbour to be turned into an express. When this happened, there were rarely any announcements to explain what was going on, and even the train crews seemed to have no idea. I recall one occasion when my 'stopper' whizzed through at great speed and was followed, after an interminable delay, by a grimy unit bound for Littlehampton. As the driver leaned out of his window, presumably for some fresh air, I enquired, 'Excuse me, do you have any idea how I might be able to get home to Chichester?' 'Sorry mate, no idea, Control don't tell us.' With Connex in charge, his reply did not surprise me.

I took my revenge in two ways. When Railway Magazine published an article praising Connex for their new service from Clapham Junction to Rugby, I responded with a letter which explained why the company was viewed on the South Coast as the 'Steptoe & Son' of railways; to my surprise and delight, the editor published it in full. Later, after a week of unusually awful travel, I wrote new lyrics for 'The Gas Man Cometh' by Flanders and Swann. My words fit Donald Swann's music perfectly, and the folk group in which I used to sing performed the piece regularly until the untimely and sudden death of our keyboard player, Francis Bassett, in December 2017. So, here is that lyric. Connex was the inspiration; all their adventures are here! If you play the piano, get a copy of Donald Swann's music and use these words from now on!

The Train Cometh Not

New words for 'The Gas Man Cometh' by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann

'Twas on a Monday morning I was shaken out of bed
by the roar of an alarm clock which exploded in my head.
I staggered to the station but discovered with a cuss
that the engineers weren't finished, so we'd have to catch a bus.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

'Twas at the nearby junction that they waved away the train
before we could get on it, so we waited in the rain.
At last, another rumbled in just twenty minutes late;
four grime-encrusted carriages which normally are eight.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

'Twas only one stop further that we halted yet again;
our driver had been rostered on the next returning train.
We waited at the platform while they struggled on the 'phone
to find another crewman who was spare, and still at home.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

At last, a cab delivered him and we were off to work.
(Employers are inclined to think that all we do is shirk.)
We'd covered fifteen miles before the next announcement said
our train was now so late that it would terminate instead.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

'Twas at another junction we were all put out once more,
but the carriage lock jammed open and I couldn't shut the door.
A fitter came to fix it but he shook his head and said
the whole thing was unsafe and should be moved into the shed.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

By now the sun was setting so I knew the time had come
when I should turn around and undertake the homeward run.
I left the heaving booking hall to find the nearest bank,
withdrew a fist of notes and hailed a taxi at the rank.
Oh, it's endless fun on a long commuting run.

I wondered as the wind picked up and leaves began to fall
whether it might not be better if they ran no trains at all.
Life is not much fun till commuting days are done.

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Valete. I apologise to any contributor whose material did not make the cut for this final edition, but I ran out of time and space. JV

Contact Details

No telephone calls after 21:00 (9:00 pm) please

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