



steamsounds in North Wales

1. Let's start our steam hauled tour around North Wales travelling, as many have done in the past, by steam hauled train on one of the main routes into the Principality, often used by holiday makers, on the line from Shrewsbury through Welshpool, the route of the Cambrian Coast Express.

This route was one of the last in Wales to see regular steam haulage in the 1960s and, in due course, steam returned to the route.

One of the first trains ran in June 1991 hauled by the Great Western Railway Manor Class 4-6-0 7819 *Hinton Manor* which is heard in this recording departing from Welshpool heading for the coast.

2. Before leaving Welshpool we shouldn't miss the opportunity of taking a look at the 2' 6" gauge Welshpool & Llanfair Railway.

Unlike most other narrow gauge lines in North Wales, which were built to serve quarries or mines, the W&LR was built to serve the rural communities along its route. The line, opened in 1903, was first operated by the Cambrian Railway then by the Great Western Railway after the Grouping and survived to become part of British Railways only closing in 1956.

I first rode on the line back in 1968. At that time the railway was only operating between Llanfair Caerinion and Castle Caerinion and, if I am perfectly honest, I don't remember much about the ride.

What I do remember was that, thanks to an ailing Class 24 diesel on a train from Aberystwyth, we missed the connecting bus from Welshpool, had to walk the 4 miles to Castle Caerinion and then only had time to make a single journey to Llanfair Caerinion behind 822 *The Earl*, one of the two locos specifically built for the line.

On a later visit in July 2001 I was delighted to find that *The Earl* was in use once again and it was nice to have a ride both ways over the full length of the line behind this engine.

As originally built the line ran right through the town of Welshpool to make a connection with the main line and, unless things have changed since I was last there, traces of the route still remain.

Nowadays passengers begin their journey at a new station on the outskirts of the town at Raven Square and in this recording we can hear 'The Earl' departing for Llanfair Caerinion with the last train of the day.

3. The line abounds in steep gradients and the most difficult of these is encountered on leaving Welshpool, Golfa Bank with it's 1 in 29 gradient.

In this on-train recording you can hear *The Earl* approaching the road crossing at the site of Golfa Halt.

The loco pauses at this open crossing while the crew ensure that the road is clear of traffic before continuing to the top of the bank on easier gradients.

4. As far as the UK is concerned, North Wales has cornered the market in preserved narrow gauge railways. Thanks to the difficult terrain, many were built, usually to serve mining or quarrying and a remarkable number have been re-opened as tourist lines.

The first narrow gauge preservation scheme, indeed the first railway saved by volunteers in the UK was the Talyllyn Railway. This line runs through some very attractive scenery inland from the coastal town of Tywyn and was built to serve the slate industry around Abergynolwyn and Nant Gwernol.

After leaving Tywyn Wharf station the first stop is at Pendre where the railway's loco shed and workshops are situated.

In this on-train recording made in July 1984 the Hughes 0-4-2ST *Sir Haydn* is heard departing from Pendre after a brief stop and starting to climb the gradient beyond.

5. As well the main stations at Tywyn, Dolgoch Falls, Abergynolwyn and Nant Gwernol, the Talyllyn Railway has a number of request stops, some of them far from obvious, one in particular consisting of nothing more than a sign and a stile over the fence!

The halt at Cynfal is one such but, as an estate agent might say, does have the benefit of a platform, albeit a very short one, to add to the sign and the stile.



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As Cynfal is at the top of one of the main climbs on the line I have often visited the area for recording purposes and, on one visit in May 2005 arriving at Cynfal in good time for the first train from Tywyn was surprised to find a couple of people wandering about looking for the station. Not being able to find Cynfal Halt, even when you are on the road bridge next to it is quite understandable as the platform is no more than 10 feet long and access is far from obvious.

I was able to point them in the right direction and I realised that this gave me a different recording possibility.

Trains rarely stop at this tiny halt so I thought that, rather than go for a recording down towards Tywyn where the gradient is steeper, I would try for a recording at the other side of the halt of the train departing.

The next train was hauled by *Douglas*, which at the time carried the name *Duncan* with a face adorning the smokebox to keep the kiddies happy!

Douglas can be heard approaching up Cynfal bank before stopping at the station.

The passengers are soon on board and the train departs for Abergynolwyn and Nant Gwernol.

6. Aside from Tywyn Wharf, the next most important station on the line is at Abergynolwyn. There is a passing loop here and trains often make a prolonged stop so that passengers can make use of the excellent café on the station where the freshly made turkey with cranberry sandwiches have my personal recommendation!

From Abergynolwyn the line continues to Nant Gwernol beyond which were rope worked inclines to the slate mines in the hills above.

In this recording the 0-4-2ST *Talyllyn*, one of the locos originally built for the line, is heard leaving for Nant Gwernol as traffic hurries by on the nearby road.

7. Time to return to the standard gauge and the Cambrian Coast line.

The Talyllyn Railway's Wharf station in Tywyn is next to the standard gauge and at one time goods were transhipped here from one to the other. Nowadays only passengers are carried on the Talyllyn but the standard gauge station is just a short walk away.

In the late 80s BR ran a regular series of steam hauled trains between Machynlleth and Barmouth and, hauling one of these, we hear GWR Manor 4-6-0 7819 *Hinton Manor* departing for Machynlleth in July 1987 and, soon after the start, one of the Talyllyn's locos can be heard whistling as we pass Wharf station.

8. Travelling north now, on the Cambrian Coast line we eventually reach Porthmadog, home of the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways but before changing gauges again let's travel a little further north with *Hinton Manor*.

As well as running a regular service between Machynlleth and Barmouth in the late 80s, on a number of Sundays steam hauled trains ran to Aberystwyth & Pwllhelli and it is with a train heading for the latter destination that we hear 7819 'Hinton Manor' departing from Porthmadog in August 1987.

One feature of this particular day was rain which got worse as we proceeded northwards.

As you can hear *Hinton Manor* has a little difficulty with slipping in the wet conditions on the 1 in 50 gradient to the summit at Wern.

9. Now, while I have no wish to sound needlessly melodramatic, I have to say that, if on my deathbed I was offered a couple of hours for a final train ride before the end, I would choose the Ffestiniog Railway!

I wouldn't care to even attempt to try to count the number the journeys I have made on that railway but, over all the years, I cannot recall a single one that I haven't enjoyed. Yes, even those made in the foulest Welsh weather!

It is impossible to choose one particular aspect and say that is what makes the line special. There is the varied scenery, the engineering of line itself, the rolling stock and, of course, the locos which, while compared with those on the main line, they may be small, but they do have to work very hard and produce plenty of noise.



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Most passengers begin their journey at Harbour station in Porthmadog where the railway has its headquarters and in this recording we hear the Double Fairlie *David Lloyd George* departing and starting to cross the Cob over the Traeth Mawr with a train for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

10. One place on the Ffestiniog Railway that I will never become tired of is Tan-y-Bwlch, the main intermediate station on the line. A more pleasant location for a railway station is hard to imagine and missing a train here is never a hardship. There is a café if refreshments are required and woodland or lakeside walks if you feel like some gentle or not so gentle exercise.

All trains stop here and up and down trains often cross in the passing loop with the up trains taking water for the remainder of the climb to Blaenau Ffestiniog.

In this recording, after taking water the Alco 2-6-2T *Mountaineer* is heard departing and making a fine sound on the rising gradient away from the station heading for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

11. The Ffestiniog Railway boasts things found nowhere else in the British Isles.

One is the only railway spiral in the United Kingdom. This can be found at the isolated station of Dduallt and had to be constructed when the original route of the line was flooded by the Central Electricity Generating Board during the construction of the Tanygisiau pumped storage hydro electric power scheme.

If the Ffestiniog Railway were ever to return to its terminus at Blaenau Ffestiniog a new route for the railway would have to be found. The route eventually chosen required a large gain in height at the western end compared with the old route and to achieve this height gain a spiral formation was the solution.

The other unique feature on the Ffestiniog Railway is the presence of Double Fairlie locomotives. These too were a clever solution to the problem of how to provide a more powerful locomotive for use on narrow gauge tracks that could also cope with very sharp curves. The answer was a double engine having a double ended boiler around a single firebox providing steam to two power bogies, one at each end of the locomotive.

In this track we combine the two with Double Fairlie 0-4-0+0-4-0T *Earl of Merioneth* passing around the spiral at Dduallt.

As the recording begins *Earl of Merioneth* can be heard approaching and passing through the station. Dduallt is a request stop and not required on this occasion. Once through the station *Earl of Merioneth* begins to climb around the spiral passing behind the microphone before reappearing and passing in front of us once again as it continues the journey to Blaenau Ffestiniog.

12. Porthmadog has two narrow gauge railways. In addition to the Ffestiniog we mustn't forget the Welsh Highland Railway.

I can still recall when visiting the area for the first time in the 1960s seeing the trackbed of this line running through the Aberglaslyn Pass and feeling sad that I would never ride on it.

I'm glad to say that it looks like I was wrong about that and provided I make it to 2009, I should be able to ride over the whole line.

The first preservation scheme for this line started in the early 60s in Porthmadog and the Welsh Highland Railway Society eventually began running from a station adjacent to the Cambrian Coast line over a short length of the route, the eventual aim being to gradually re-open more of the line.

However, during the 1990s, the Ffestiniog Railway became involved and began the reconstruction of the Welsh Highland from the other end starting by laying narrow gauge track on the previously standard gauge route from Caernarfon to Dinas where the original Welsh Highland terminus was situated.

Most trains on the Welsh Highland are hauled by one of the two South African Beyer Garratt locos but from time to time locos transfer from the FR for use on the line and in this recording we can hear the 0-4-0ST *Prince* climbing the 1 in 40 gradient near Bontnewydd on the climb from Caernarfon and Dinas in August 2002.

13. In August 2004 a rather interesting opportunity came my way when I was asked to make some recordings on the Welsh Highland Railway to be used with the Microsoft Train Simulator. Although this would also mean recording a few diesels I was only too happy to agree!



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I have tried over the years since the railway re-opened to get recordings of the Beyer Garratts but, aside from one lineside recording, generally without success, particularly with on-train recordings so I was most interested to see if the two NGG16 Garratt 2-6-2+2-6-2T locos could be persuaded to make some noise!

After spending the morning at Dinas making recordings of various diesels moving about the yard and some static recordings of the Garratts on shed, the main attempt to record was to be on the last two trains from Caernarfon up to Dinas, these being the quietest trains (from the passenger numbers point of view).

On the first of these with No. 143 on 6 bogies plus the bike waggon and, after having a word with the crew to explain what was required, I settled back in the first coach not really knowing what to expect but, soon after departure it became apparent that Garratts could make some noise when worked hard.

With a relatively light train these locos accelerate to line speed quite rapidly and the exhaust soon becomes a roar. Probably the best bit was the start from the rarely used halt at Bontnewydd, the stop being put in especially for sound recording purposes!

14. For the last train up from Caernarfon as I had already got a satisfactory on train recording and as the Railway had gone to the trouble of providing a footplate pass for the day it would have been a pity not to take advantage of it!

The ride from Caernarfon to Dinas on the footplate of Garratt No. 138 was a very interesting experience. The driver and fireman were both, I believe, more usually at work on the Ffestiniog Railway, and to my eyes looked very young. Perhaps footplate crews looking young is a similar effect to the youthful appearance of policemen, a sign that one is getting old! However, despite their apparent youth they were both real professionals in the way that they handled the engine. It was a genuine pleasure to watch them both at work.

The driver did his best to produce plenty of noise from the engine for me with the regulator well open and 140 - 160 lbs. indicated in the steam chests. Unfortunately we had a light shower just before starting from Caernarfon and the front engine showed a marked tendency to slip with anything more than 120 lbs. in the steam chests. Bear in mind that under normal running conditions with 6 bogies generally no more than 80 lbs. pressure is required and usually much less.

This recording begins as the driver gets the right away from the guard and we make a gentle start away from the platform at Caernarfon station. The gradient here is steep and the regulator is soon opened wider and 138 demonstrates that a Garratt, driven hard, can make plenty of noise!

15. The Welsh Highland Railway isn't far from the UK's only mountain rack railway, the Snowdon Mountain Railway.

Although I have been to the summit of Snowdon quite a few times I have only made the journey by train once. That was in the 1980s when the line was entirely steam operated. Nowadays, diesels are often used and, as the five mile ride to the summit is rather expensive, I think I'll stick to Shanks' Pony for as long as I am able rather than take the gamble on being diesel powered!

However, on a particularly fine day in September 1999 there were no fewer than four steam locos in use on the mountain and, in this recording, the mountain's namesake No. 4 *Snowdon* is heard pushing it's single coach up the initial gradient from the lower terminus at Llanberis, which is as steep as 1 in 6 in parts, past the site of Waterfall Station at the start of the long climb to the summit.

16. Between Llanberis and the Summit there are a number of stations. The upper two, Halfway and Clogwyn, see passenger use when trains are unable to proceed further, usually due to high winds on the mountain or ice and snow on the track early in the year, but the main reason for these stations along with a third lower one at Hebron is to provide passing places where trains proceeding up the mountain can pass those descending. Heard not far from the lower station, Hebron, is No. 2 *Enid* climbing towards Halfway and the Summit.

17. Time to return to the standard gauge.

The route from Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth and the Cambrian Coast isn't the only railway access to North Wales, there is also the line from Chester which runs along the north coast to Holyhead with branches down the Conway Valley to Blaenau Ffestiniog and to the seaside resort of Llandudno.



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The late 1980s saw steam return to this route when BR started running a regular programme of trains through the summer months from Crewe to Holyhead.

The very first of these was hauled by the LMS Princess Royal Pacific 6201 *Princess Elizabeth*.

As well as the BR sponsored summer trains other railtour operators also used the route and in October 1989 *Princess Elizabeth* worked the Ynys Môn Express from Crewe to Holyhead and back, Ynys Môn being the Welsh name for the Isle of Anglesey.

After a fairly quiet outward run 6201 is heard in this recording departing from Holyhead and tackling the steep climb which starts just beyond the platform end.

18. 6201 was a good choice of loco for the route as the class regularly worked trains to Holyhead in steam days but an even better choice was one of Stanier's ubiquitous Black 5 4-6-0s which once worked all kinds of traffic on the line and in March 1999 45110 worked an Ynys Môn Express.

Around this time some concerns were being raised about the problem of fire risk from sparks thrown from the chimneys of hard working steam locos and it was deemed essential that all locos working on the main line should be fitted with effective spark arrestors. The test to see if a spark arrestor was effective was quite simply to work the engine hard and see if any sparks were visible, a test best carried out at night.

As 45110 had been fitted with a newly designed spark arrestor and much of our run back from Holyhead would be in the dark this was as good an opportunity as any and the first test was made departing from Llandudno Junction.

As you can hear in this on-train recording the loco was worked particularly hard, the firework display visible from the front coach was quite impressive and as most of the fire was soon spread around the surrounding countryside the engine was rather winded by the time Colwyn Bay was reached. Back to the drawing board!

19. In May 1998 the Conway Valley line from Llandudno Junction to Blaenau Ffestiniog saw the return of steam haulage and, although I travelled on the first train, I still have never reached Blaenau Ffestiniog behind steam, not standard gauge steam at any rate.

That first train started from Crewe and the loco was BR Standard Class 4 2-6-4T 80079 which worked the 6 coach train running bunker first as far as Llandudno Junction.

At Llandudno Junction, while the loco was running round the train and taking water, we got in to conversation with a retired railway man who, on hearing that our train consisted of 6 coaches and was single headed remarked that, on the curves above Pont-y-Pant, 'With that load', he said, 'you won't get past Milepost 19!'. We thought he was being needlessly pessimistic but he wasn't, Milepost 19 was indeed as far as we got.

Worse still, a second train with the same load was booked to run the following day.

In view of the problems experienced the decision was made to reduce the load from 6 coaches to 4 and, of course, with this reduced load 80079 reached Blaenau without any difficulty whatsoever.

Heard from the lineside, this is how the 2-6-4T sounded making easy work of the steep gradients about 2 miles south of Betws-y-Coed.

20. Staying with standard gauge steam let's return to the Cambrian Coast.

A popular performer on this route was the BR Standard Class 4 4-6-0 75069 which regularly worked trains to Barmouth.

The most difficult section heading south from Barmouth comes soon after leaving Fairbourne where the line climbs steeply around the cliffs at Friog, at one point near the summit of the climb passing through an avalanche shelter to protect the line from rocks falling from the cliff above.

The recording begins as 75069 departs after a brief stop at Fairbourne and passes over the level crossing before passing the terminus of the Fairbourne Railway.

Initially the gradient is 1 in 75 but soon steepens to 1 in 55 and 75069 makes a fine sound with 7 coaches behind the tender.

Eventually we pass through the shelter and the summit of the climb is not far beyond.



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21. The southern terminus of the Cambrian Coast Line is at Aberystwyth which also is the starting point for a journey on the narrow gauge Vale of Rheidol Railway.

When steam ended on the main lines in the UK the Vale of Rheidol was still a British Railways operation. This meant that, after August 1968, BR's Aberystwyth depot had the only regularly rostered steam crews.

Now the Vale of Rheidol is in private ownership and in May 2003 the railway's 2-6-2T No. 8, looking very smart in GWR livery but no longer carrying the name *Llewellyn*, is heard departing from Nantyrnonen having taken water and heads up the valley towards Devils Bridge with a five coach train.

22. Later the same day close to a foot crossing about half a mile above Aberffwrdd No. 8 can be heard departing from the station having crossed an Aberystwyth bound train hauled by No. 9 *Prince of Wales*.

Once on the 1 in 50 gradient No. 8 makes a fine sound passing on it's way to Devils Bridge.

23. Back to the standard gauge now and it is time to head back towards Shrewsbury.

As well as the locos we have already heard, 75069 & 7819, another loco to work trains on the Cambrian Coast was the ex LMS Ivatt Class 2 2-6-0 46443 normally based on the Severn Valley Railway.

Returning from Barmouth in August 1987 we were stopped by signals at Dovey Jc. and the signalman informed the driver that he was letting us go but we would be going in front of a service train from Aberystwyth, 'So don't hang about!'

As you can hear we didn't!

On arrival at Machynlleth, judging by the grins on their faces, the driver, fireman and loco inspector appeared to have enjoyed themselves. The driver told us that he had only brought the engine back to about 65% while the loco inspector was of the opinion that, as this was the last run of the day they thought they may as well try and empty the firebox. The cinders are probably still falling!

24. Trains returning from Machynlleth to Shrewsbury first must climb the long, steep gradients to the summit at Talerddig so let's rejoin the train hauled by 75069 that we last heard climbing to Friog.

The initial start from Machynlleth is easy enough and gentle gradients allow speed to be built up for a run at the steeper gradients to come.

25. The worst part of the climb is beyond Llanbrynmair and in this section we hear the driver begin to work 75069 harder as the gradient become steeper.

26. As well as runs with 75069 we have also seen the BR Standard Class 4 2-6-4Ts at work on the route.

In steam days these locos regularly worked in the area and in May 1992 80080 worked a train from Crewe to Machynlleth and this final track in our tour of North Wales was made during the return journey from Machynlleth on the final part of the climb to Talerddig.

The gradient here is at 1 in 52 which eases slightly to 1 in 56 for the last mile and speed falls on the climb dropping to just over 20 mph before the loco is eased for speed restriction into the loop at Talerddig summit which we pass through without stopping and begin to accelerate on the falling gradient beyond towards Welshpool and Shrewsbury.

