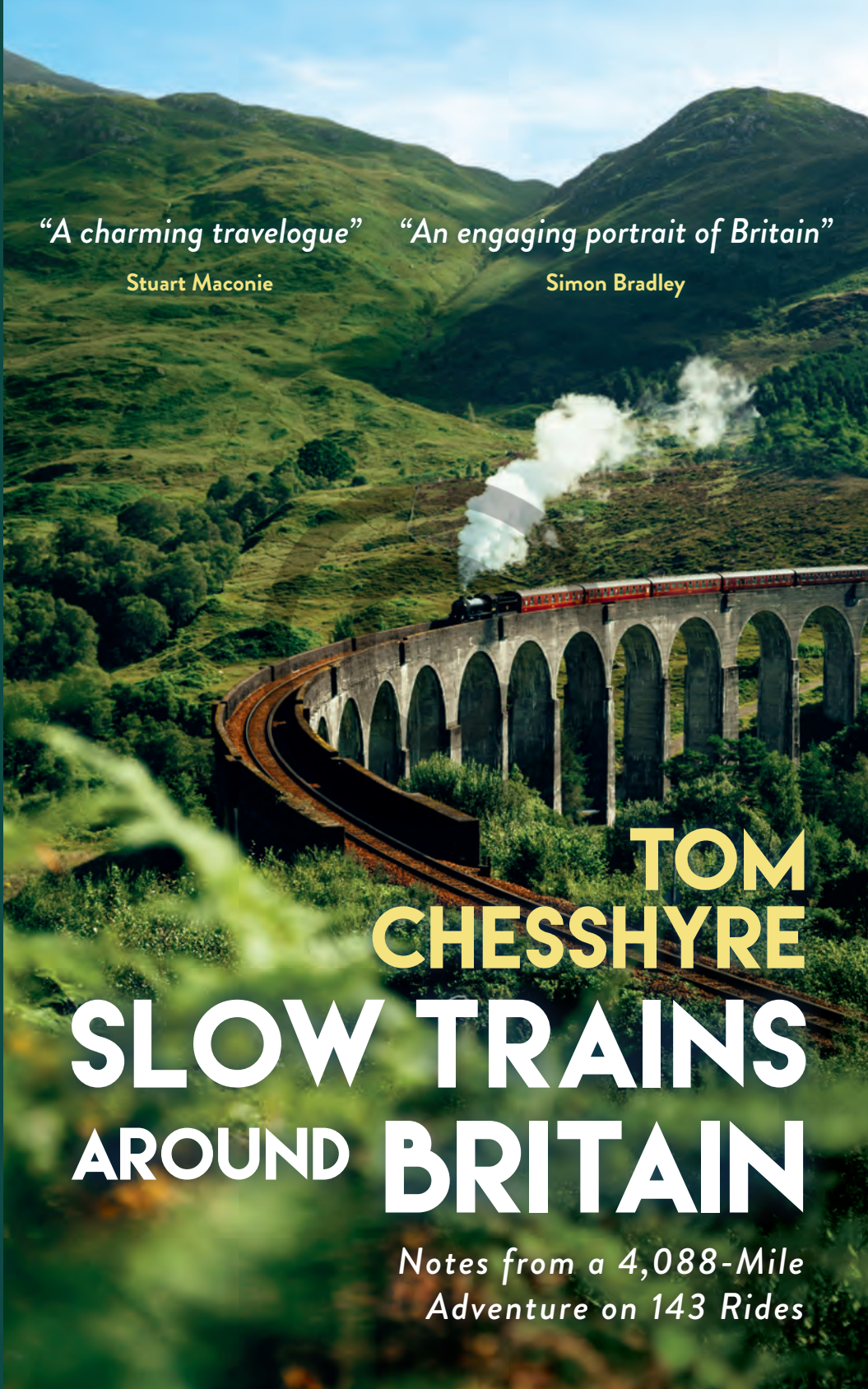

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SLOW TRAINS AROUND BRITAIN
Notes from a 4,088-Mile Adventure on 143 Rides

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SLOW TRAINS AROUND BRITAIN

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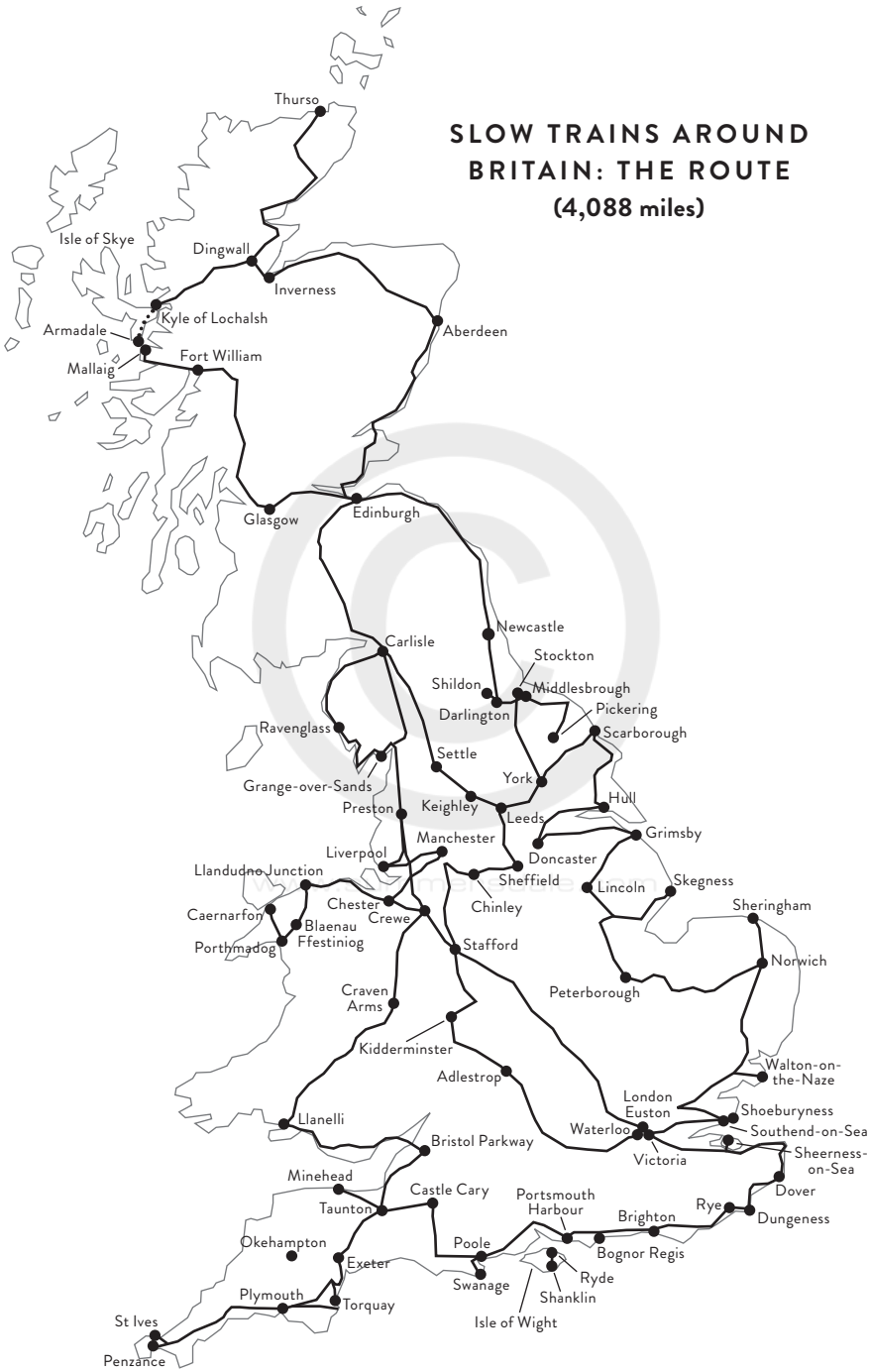
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SLOW TRAINS AROUND BRITAIN: THE ROUTE
(4,088 miles)
Thurso
Isle of Skye
Dingwall
Inverness
Kyle of Lochalsh
Armadale
Aberdeen
Fort William
Mallaig
Glasgow
Edinburgh
Newcastle
Carlisle
Stockton
Shildon
Middlesbrough
Pickering
Darlington
Ravenglass
Scarborough
Settle
York
Grange-over-Sands
Hull
Preston
Keighley
Leeds
Grimsby
Manchester
Doncaster
Liverpool
Llandudno Junction
Sheffield
Lincoln
Skegness
Chester
Chinley
Sheringham
Caernarfon
Crewe
Blaenau Ffestiniog
Porthmadog
Stafford
Norwich
Craven Arms
Peterborough
Kidderminster
Adlestrop
Walton-on-the-Naze
London Euston
Shoeburyness
Llanelli
Waterloo
Southend-on-Sea
Bristol Parkway
Victoria
Sheerness-on-Sea
Minehead
Castle Cary
Portsmouth Harbour
Dover
Taunton
Brighton
Rye
Dungeness
Okehampton
Poole
Bognor Regis
Exeter
Swanage
Ryde
Plymouth
Torquay
Shanklin
St Ives
Isle of Wight
Penzance

CONTENTS

Preface | **17**

Chapter One | **19**
Darlington via Shildon, back to Darlington:
"A small railway that changed the world"

Chapter Two | **41**
Darlington to Settle via Middlesbrough, Grosmont,
Pickering, York, Leeds and Keighley: Lost in locos

Chapter Three | **73**
Settle to Manchester via Carlisle, Ravenglass, Grange-over-
Sands and Liverpool: "Disrupting the established order"

Chapter Four | **111**
Manchester to Llanelli via Blaenau Ffestiniog, Porthmadog, Caernarfon,
Prestatyn, Crewe and Craven Arms: Voices from the tracks

Chapter Five | **147**
Llanelli to Taunton via Penzance, St Ives, Torquay,
Exeter and Okehampton: Brunel's Britain

Chapter Six | **185**
Exeter to Hythe via Taunton, Minehead, Poole, Swanage, the Isle of
Wight, Bognor Regis, New Romney and Dungeness: Steamy in the south

Chapter Seven | **221**
Hythe to Grimsby via Dover, Sheerness-on-Sea, Southend, Walton-
on-the-Naze, Sheringham and Skegness: Dreaming up the east

Chapter Eight | **253**
Grimsby to London Euston via Doncaster, Hull, Scarborough, Chinley, Stafford and Adlestrop: Snakes and ladders

Chapter Nine | **285**
London Euston to Darlington via Aberdeen, Thurso, Kyle of Lochalsh, Mallaig, Glasgow, Dalmeny and Edinburgh: Back to the beginning

Afterword | **315**

Acknowledgements | **325**

Trains Taken | **326**

Index | **331**

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"An engine on a public railroad would be a perpetual nuisance"
George Overton, original surveyor for the
Stockton and Darlington Railway, 1825

"I am never sure of time or place upon a Railroad…
I can only dream… I know nothing about myself –
for anything I know, I may be coming from the Moon"
Charles Dickens

"You go away for a long time and return a different person –
you never come all the way back"
Paul Theroux

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In some instances, names of those encountered during the train journeys for this book have been altered.

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PREFACE

In a small market town in the north-east of England 200 years ago (in 1825), something momentous happened: ticket-bearing human beings began moving along wrought-iron tracks on a contraption with wheels powered by an engine.

This contraption was called a "train". The name came from a French word around since the Middle Ages – *traîne* (to be in tow, tugged behind) – first used to describe parts of gowns trailing after the wearer. Over the years, the word morphed to refer to those following VIPs in a procession, a line of people/animals, and eventually to carriages clattering down tracks.

However, what happened in Darlington along a 26-mile line to Stockton, chosen as it connected collieries, was groundbreaking.

Horse-tugged trains had been around for years, yet this was quite different. A machine known as a "locomotive" was now up front: a combination of two Latin words, *loco* ("from a place") and *motivus* ("causing motion"), welded in French in the seventeenth century to form *locomotif*, meaning "pertaining to movement".

Over time this had morphed too, becoming *locomotive* in early nineteenth-century Britain, and referring to an engine travelling along rails under its own power.

By the mid-2020s, 1.3 million miles of railway lines criss-crossed the planet.

The invention seemed to have proved quite popular.

And I was about to find out why.

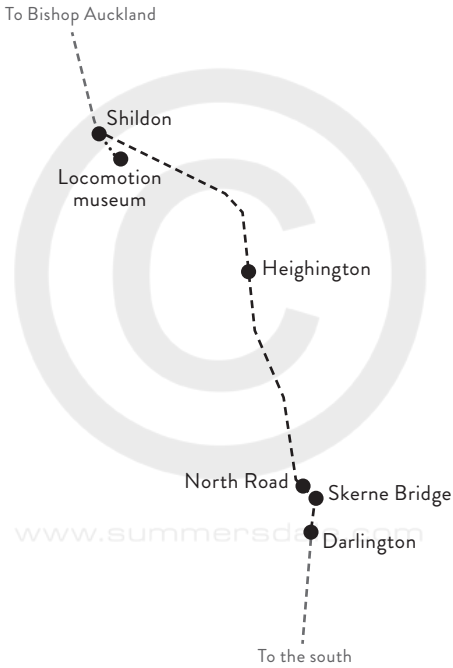
On a whole bunch of trains round Britain.

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CHAPTER ONE

DARLINGTON VIA SHILDON, BACK TO DARLINGTON

"A SMALL RAILWAY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD"


To Bishop Auckland
Shildon
Locomotion museum
Heighington
North Road
Skerne Bridge
Darlington
To the south

Not much was going on, but then again, quite a lot was really.

On platform two of Darlington station, on a cold February morning in North-East England, a rumble and hum emanated from a yellow and orange train with "COLAS RAIL FREIGHT" written on it.

A man nearby was observing this unusual yellow and orange two-tone train. This man, Dave, had a beard and glasses and wore a woolly hat. He held a small camera, which he occasionally raised as though struck by some inner impulse. His general demeanour was, perhaps, best described as *transfixed*.

"Ballast wagons," he said, affectionately, glancing at some rusty old wagons connected to the yellow and orange train. These wagons were, frankly, filthy, with "NETWORK RAIL" written on them. Additional mysterious messages, just legible beneath a veneer of grime, said, "DO NOT WELD ON THIS WAGON, CALL REPAIRS ADVICE FOR INSTRUCTIONS. NOT TO BE LOOSE/HUMP SHUNTED."

The "train" to which I had been referring was more accurately a "locomotive", which was pulling the wagons. The entirety, the locomotive and the wagons put together, constituted a "train". When I had arrived at Dave's side, gestured at the yellow and orange locomotive and commented in the spirit of railway camaraderie "nice train", he had swiftly corrected me on this point.

We stood wordlessly in the gloomy, echoey hall. Darlington station had surprisingly high, damp red-brick walls. Fluted wrought-iron columns rose all about with decorative shields depicting trains, crosses and castles, while a fine old clock from when the station was built in 1887 curled out above the platform, connected to a red and gold fitting; redolent of the age when folk used to set their watches by such station necessities.

In between the two platforms, on a wide island-like space, was a cramped WHSmith selling a great number of magazines and books about trains, with names such as *Today's Railways*, *Trackside*, *Classic Locomotives of the UK* and *Railway Track Diagrams, Book 5: Southern & TfL*. Beside this was a spacious Pumpkin Café offering expensive coffees. Inside, old horseshoe-shaped leather armchairs were scattered at

one end beside dingy walls, a bar area with spirits on mirrored shelves and a restlessly flashing Beat the Banker fruit machine.

Dave's eyes remained fixed on the yellow and orange "COLAS RAIL FREIGHT" locomotive. "It's come from Doncaster," he said, though how he knew this I did not know. "I started watching these when they first came out in the late 1970s. It's a Class 56 loco. I've seen it quite a few times."

Dave, who was aged 58, he told me, wore a dreamy expression. "It's from when trains used to be trains. Nowadays, at almost any rural station there's a couple of platforms and a car park. There used to be goods traffic and sidings [at those stations]. There used to be an open ticket office." Dave used the word "open" pointedly. Many ticket offices in the UK had recently been threatened with closure as part of a cost-cutting exercise, although an outraged-public backlash had caused a political U-turn, and they were no longer shutting down (for the time being).

He returned his gaze to the "COLAS RAIL FREIGHT" loco. "That was when they were horrible polluting things," he said, referring to "when trains used to be trains". He did not say this in a censorious manner as though horrible polluting things were bad things. Quite the opposite. A stench of diesel was emanating from the loco, hanging in the atmosphere of the big, damp hall. "COLAS RAIL FREIGHT" was one of his *horrible polluting things*: a somehow lovely, *horrible polluting thing*.

"They're hardly ever made like that any more. Heritage lines, that's just about the only place you'll see them. Most of the ones [the locomotives] I remember from when I was a boy [were diesels]. Trainspotting they used to call it."

We stood in silence for a while, trainspotting ourselves, you might say. There was a train. We had spotted it. No further words were required. Trains used to be good. Now they were not so good. But there were still a few that were quite good. This was just life.

From the opposite platform, I boarded the 09:55 from Darlington to Shildon, about nine miles to the north-west; the final destination was

Bishop Auckland, said a digital display, not much further down the line. The train, a Northern service, was fitted with worn, blue-spotted seats (with USB sockets). Dirt streaked the windows. Hardly anyone was on board, just a few stragglers, and it had begun to pour. Rain swept across the rooftops of Darlington as though a gale had rolled in from the sea. Perhaps it had; we were 20 miles from the coast. The train puttered onwards alongside terraced houses and across a bridge above a swirling river, after which some muddy plots lay to one side of North Road station as though construction work was in the offing. We passed the Builder's Arms, a cluster of old warehouses and a gathering of bedraggled horses in a sodden field. Then the 09:55 drew to a halt at Heighington station, where it paused for some time and we listened to the patter of rain on the carriage roof. No announcement was made, though passengers seemed neither bothered nor especially surprised by the hold-up.

I regarded Heighington station. It had a downbeat air and was tiny, little more than a narrow platform beside a derelict, boarded-up building and an empty lot, home to a jungle of weeds and strewn with debris (old railway-crossing barriers and pavement slates dumped in a heap). No one got off at Heighington, no one got on either. Nobody did anything, except stare out, thinking whatever thoughts they might have been thinking, such as *I'm glad I'm not out there right now*. The 09:55 purred contentedly. Then a whistle blew, the doors creaked shut, the 09:55 made a grinding sound and proceeded, gathering speed beyond a small mountain of discarded washing machines in a yard, a business park, an electrical-products firm and a pair of plastic-fabrication companies. This stretch of County Durham with its depots streaked with rain and works units with billowing steam was unlikely, perhaps, to attract a tourist stampede anytime soon, though there was interest to be had if you were not just seeking "pretty sights".

The 09:55 passed onwards into more boggy fields, these ones demarcated by leafless hedgerows. No creatures dwelled in these fields. Rain descended in curtains, swirling across the landscape. Through the grimy Northern windows, all looked bleak, bleak, bleak. It was late

winter, coming on early spring. It was chilly and extremely damp in County Durham, up in the north-east of England.

Why? You may rightly ask. Why? Get a grip! Book a holiday to Barbados! This was not, however, as you may have already gathered, the point. I was on a mission. This mission involved trains. More specifically, British trains. Having had the great fortune to have travelled on many exciting railways to many exciting places elsewhere in the world, from the wide-open plains of America to the tea plantations of India, the ancient cities of Iran, the Australian Outback and the badlands of North Korea (and written about them too), I was about to set forth by means of the mode of transport that rattled down the end of my very own street in south-west London. From my home, a first-floor maisonette, I could hear these trains – ordinary British trains – rumble by at night. Sometimes, when freight wagons passed, my building even shook lightly, making me worry that roof tiles might (eventually, one day) come loose. British trains were not exotic trains like Peruvian trains or Japanese trains or trains in Cambodia or Sri Lanka. They were just regular British trains: ones that clattered by 30 metres or so from my front door, transporting me and squadrons of commuters to workplaces in the city. Sometimes late. Often overcrowded. Regular British trains, in other words.

Yet I still wanted to take quite a few of these regular, ordinary British trains – as well as some quite irregular ones too – on quite a long journey along quite a few regular, ordinary British railways.

Was I nuts? Was I losing it? Quite possibly, you might conclude. Why was I not embarking on an island-hopping jaunt in the South Pacific, or following some long, mighty river in Asia or Africa, or ascending remote slopes in the Himalayas: doing something somewhere just a little more adventurous before returning and putting pen to paper to capture far-flung tales of derring-do? Instead, my journey was starting – in effect – on tracks that rumbled by my home, or at least which were ultimately linked to them via a connection or two. Where was my Indiana Jones spirit? David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley in Africa – had I not heard of them and their exploits in search of the source of the

Nile? Sir Richard Burton had dressed up in Bedouin robes and gone undercover, risking life and limb, all the way to Mecca. Why was I not dressing up in Bedouin clothes, breaking frontiers, setting forth to Antarctica in a canoe or across Amazonian jungles in search of lost cities? Somewhere a little more "out there" than on a train from Darlington on a rainy February day.

Yet the answer to "why" was straightforward, as contrary as this may sound to some: I wanted to *celebrate* British railways. To travel along a roughly imagined route around the country that invented trains, as we know them, back in 1825 while taking stock of the current "train situation" and nosing about with a positive frame of mind and general spirit of train appreciation.

Had not the British, 200 years earlier, created the "iron horses" that were to go on to conquer the planet? Was this not a great British success story? A reason to take pride and bang some British train drums? Something about which to be effusive, exuberant and even, on occasion, positively gung-ho? Or at least try one's best to be, the realities of British train travel permitting. Delays, high ticket prices, overcrowding and strikes had been much in the news.

Maybe such a "celebration", given all of that (and more, when you began to consider Britain's national *rail strategy*), would be pushing it. Would the rides ahead turn out to be a long, tricky slog along lines that were in a poorly organized mess? Or a joyous journey to parts of the country you might not otherwise have visited? A hidden world unfurling along the tracks? Whichever, I would report what I saw, with the big anniversary – the bicentenary jamboree – framing the journey ahead. No more, no less. No PR job.

Hence my arrival in the town of Darlington (population 107,800). Hence my continuation to Shildon (population 9,976). I was travelling to commemorate the invention of trains – to *big up* British railways in this historic context – and glory in their many intricacies, old stories, oddities and the places you could take them on a mission to acknowledge a great British achievement. An act of patriotism, you might say. A journey in

honour of king and country! And queen and country, thinking back to Queen Victoria in the good old early train days. Maybe I should have picked up a Union Jack hat and a flag or two, like a Brexiteer "taking back control", and really gone for it. *Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the rails*… that kind of stuff. Or maybe, on reflection, better not to go down that line.

This was just the beginning. The start of what might best, in all honesty, be described as a long mooch around Britain on its trains. A long, indulgent mooch with no greater purpose than that – and *general train appreciation*, of course. A wallow in British trains. A happy wallow of gentle affirmation, assessment and "train thoughts", in the company and with the insights, I hoped, of fellow train travellers, such as Dave, encountered along the way.

Those seeking more – solutions to great mysteries of the human condition, perhaps, or the future of the planet – might find such musings few and far between. They might choose instead to consult weightier tomes published on those matters and find themselves more enlightened. I was embarking on a wallowing mooch *on a whole bunch of trains*. No more. No less. Just some thoughts from some trains.

I looked with quiet pleasure along the rows of worn, blue-spotted seats on the 09:55 Northern service from Darlington to Shildon, with their bright-yellow handles for keeping your balance, as dim light filtered through the grimy windows, illuminating a grubby grey floor, mustering as much train-style *joie de vivre* as happened at that moment to be pulsing through my veins.

I will not deny the truth of what I saw: things could be better.

But this was not the point. Not the point at all. And it was no time to grumble.

This was never going to be a journey on fancy *Orient Express* carriages with staff in bow ties dishing out caviar canapés and flutes of chilled champagne. It was, as I have said, to be a rail adventure on regular British trains. Such trains did not usually, in my experience, come with staff in bow ties delivering caviar and bubbly. Such trains were slightly

different to that. Mostly, or at least, very often, they had worn seats and grimy windows and grubby grey floors. No point in setting expectations too high early on.

Anyway, I was not after "luxury". Luxury was so overrated (and expensive). I was, as the train juddered onwards past a row of old terraced houses, quietly rather enjoying myself already. There was a certain pleasure – a certain almost illicit sense of freedom – of heading off on trains, I was finding, a *whole bunch of trains*, with no other purpose than to salute the invention of wheels powered by engines taking you down a track. Deep within, a simple "train zeal" was bubbling.

For some time, I let this rail-induced zest quietly effervesce while watching a housing estate and some more soggy fields slide by.

Yet it was hardly surprising that this "train zeal" was rising. For it was not by accident that I was heading for Shildon.

Back on 27 September 1825, the first public passenger train pulled by a steam locomotive set forth on a 26-mile journey from Shildon, via Darlington, to the town of Stockton (population 84,815) on the river Tees.

This locomotive was called *Locomotion No 1*, and the line upon which it huffed and puffed was built by the prolific early railway engineer, self-educated and self-made man, George Stephenson. A solitary coach for bigwigs on the inaugural ride, a bulky wooden carriage appropriately called *Experiment*, was attached to this legendary loco. Behind it, a large number of coal wagons had also been connected; the tracks had been created principally to link collieries around Shildon to Stockton, from where coal could be shipped. On the special first journey, however, many of these working wagons had been fitted with temporary wooden benches for more ordinary passengers.

As many as 600 people were crammed on board as the train trundled along, attaining a top speed of 15 mph for a brief spell on its way to Darlington, crossing Skerne Bridge near North Road station and entering the market town, where 40,000 spectators waited, cheering on the extraordinary contraption. One onlooker, as quoted in Frank

Ferneyhough's *The History of Railways in Britain*, commented, "The welkin [sky] rang with loud huzzas [cheers], while the happy faces of some, the vacant stares of others and the alarm depicted on the countenances of not a few, gave variety to the picture." Meanwhile, a wonderful painting by the artist John Dobbin also captured the moment. Dobbin, a local, who was ten years old at the time and who had witnessed *Locomotion No 1* come by, recreated the scene 50 years later (so it may not have been quite the same on the actual day), though it was nice to imagine the fellows in bowler hats and the elegant women in flowing frocks and bonnets gathered as horse-drawn carriages waited by the banks and Stephenson's loco steamed along.

In short, the Stockton and Darlington Railway, from its very first day, had been a resounding success.

So much so the line was soon lengthened to Middlesbrough, then to a tiny settlement of 25 people beyond Stockton, where the water was deeper for shipping coal, and a whole new city soon sprang up (population currently more than 148,000). The railway was rapidly, quite dramatically altering the local landscape. Middlesbrough, little more than a handful of abodes back in 1825, was to overtake Darlington and Stockton, spawning ironworks, steelworks, shipbuilding yards and, later, a university and (sometimes) top-tier football team.

Buoyed by how well *Locomotion No 1* had fared, five years after that inaugural run, Stephenson completed what some consider to be the first *proper* public passenger line between the important industrial hubs of Manchester and Liverpool. I use "proper" because it was built with both freight and paying passengers in mind, whereas the Stockton and Darlington Railway ran occasional passenger carriages, often pulled by horses, not steam engines, and was quite a higgledy-piggledy, ad hoc arrangement as opposed to a regular steam-powered service with several daily passenger trains. This first inter-city connection was an international sensation. After the Liverpool and Manchester Railway opened in 1830, covering 31 miles at speeds of up to 35 mph, pulled by *Rocket* (designed by Stephenson's talented son, Robert, just as *Locomotion No 1* had been,

along with his father), news spread far and wide, with great interest in starting up copycat railways across Britain and in many other countries.

In Britain alone, a mere thirteen years later in 1843, 1,800 miles of railway were open to traffic, rising to 6,000 miles by 1854 after an incredible bout of "railway mania", and 23,440 miles by 1914 (latest figures indicate 10,072 route miles of network tracks in the UK today, a reduction from 1914 caused partly by the decommissioning of many lines in the mid-twentieth century). Beyond British shores, railways spread quickly too, with Stephenson's advice being sought on key lines in Europe. Meanwhile in America, the symbolic Golden Spike was hammered into the tracks at Promontory Summit in Utah as soon as 10 May 1869, connecting the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. The economic benefits of transporting goods by rail, combined with the convenience and logic of getting about without the discomfort and expense of stagecoaches, were simply impossible to ignore.

Two hundred years later, railways were, of course, just about everywhere save the most mountainous and remote regions, with trains whizzing about as fast as 268 mph, the eye-watering speed attained on the Shanghai maglev electromagnetic line.

Yet it all really started, whatever champions of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway might like to argue to the contrary, on the Stockton and Darlington Railway, where George Stephenson had cut his teeth.

Where the very first journey began in Shildon.

Which was where the 09:55 from Darlington had just pulled in.

Two other passengers were on board: Paul and David from Sheffield. We disembarked and fell into step, heading in the rain down a path along the line in the direction of the Locomotion railway museum, a big warehouse-like hulk of a building a couple of hundred yards away. This museum was opened in 2004 by the then local MP and Prime Minister Tony Blair to commemorate the Stockton and Darlington Railway and to highlight the importance of railways for north-east collieries as well as for providing local jobs. And its big attraction was