

There's nothing like a TRAIN!

On my third house sitting I was fortunate enough to be situated just five minutes walk away from Alresford Station on the Heritage Preservation Steam Railway of the Mid Hants Water Cress Line. Closed in 1973, when I was attending the nearby King Alfred's Teacher Training College as a student, now the University of Winchester, the line reopened between Alresford and Ropley in 1977 and was extended to Alton in 1985. As a child, I paid little attention to trains in those days, impatiently wanting them to leave the platform, urgent to reach my destination on time, now I don't want to see the old 'Iron horses' leave. As a boy, I treasured my Triang-Hornby Model Train set, including the luxurious 'Pullman' carriages, complete with mini table lamps! As the MHRL was celebrating their 40th anniversary, they had a special Autumn Rally. Clutching my £15, I eagerly walked to the station to buy my rail pass, which entitled me access to the four stations, railway yard and a round trip on one of the early 1960s Pullman coaches to be pulled by an iron horse to Alton.



On entering the platform I came across serious train spotters, complete with engine numbers spotters' book, timetables, cameras and the all important sandwiches!! There was a buzz of excitement as the unmistakable shrill sound of a whistle announced the arrival of a train. We jostled for best position on the platform or footbridges to capture the belching smoke stack of the approaching star performers, as if at the premier of a smash hit movie.

Why, I ask myself, did my heart pound with excitement? Was it the nostalgia, the style of a bygone age, the recapture of my youth, and the smell of grease mixed with soot and smoke? Was it the furnace in the cab, the heart of the locomotive engine, the guard signalling imminent departure with the waving of his green flag, the slamming of carriage doors, the shrieking whistle, the arm signal raised to announce the coast was clear, the anticipation of the journey ahead, the silhouette of the rushing carriages through open countryside fields as seen from the carriage? Suddenly I was turning into a steam railway enthusiast! After such excitement of seeing the goods wagon train, the breakdown crane and the 'Cunard' headboard mounted on the front of the train, I was in seventh Heaven. I even returned the following day to stand in a cold barren field alongside the track, to capture the 'Pullman' in full flight. As in the words of the song from 'South Pacific', there is nothing like a TRAIN

John Clarke