



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

The rail golden age of travel

Whenever I find myself on a train, it is because I am travelling to somewhere for the sole and express purpose of having lunch. Not just because I review restaurants, but because I have never been averse to going a fair distance, if a decent meal is at the end of it.

And when I smugly survey my fellow 'customers', as the bloody marketeers now call us – trudging back forlornly from the buffet and clutching their little brown bags of radioactively scalding and fatty bacon rolls... I remember with a pang the golden days of the railways, when you could dine magnificently on a train.

These days, if you travel first class on Virgin, they'll bung you a drink and a salad, or something... otherwise, you're at the mercy of the trolley, the architects of which are apparently unshakably convinced that all we crave by way of sustenance during a train journey is little salty cheese biscuits, muffins, and miniature bottles of gin.

I recall with a perverse fondness the Brighton Belle at breakfast time. The journey from Victoria is a short one, and by the time the waiters – natty in white bolero jackets and black bow ties – took the orders and delivered the traditional English fare under silver domes, you weren't that far from pulling in to Brighton station – whereupon the swoops and curves on the track caused everyone's tea and coffee to slop all over the perfect white linen cloths, as people grew scarlet in the face with the exertion of bolting down their eggs, kidneys, sausages and black pudding before they were chucked off the train.



■ The trains are state-of-the-art but sometimes the catering is Virgin on the ridiculous

All regular users of the line had by now persuaded themselves that here was truly the acme of having a good time, and when both the train and silver service were eventually withdrawn, there was mourning on a national scale.

But a pocket of old-style fabulousness survive! I thought fine dining on trains in this country was confined to those British Pullman excursions run very beautifully by Orient-Express – they take you to rather nice English destinations, feed you royally, and relieve you of a not-so-small fortune. But for years the Great Western Railway also has been quietly supplying good food and grog, properly served on properly set tables.

The opportunities are limited – London to Penzance, a dozen trains a week – but the restaurateur Mitch Tonks is on board (as it

were) and he has seen to it that such as scallops, lobster, Dover sole and fillet steak are laid on by top suppliers along the route – and good wines as well. Now the cost of all this, when combined with the necessary first class ticket to Cornwall, works out at a not-even-remotely-small fortune – about £90 a head for lunch alone. But never mind – listen to this four-course menu: consommé fermière puree parmentier, baked turbot in sauce cardinal, roast sirloin with sprouts and potatoes, apple tart and Devon cream. Sounds good, yes? Well ... nothing to do with Mr Tonks and GWR – this particular lunch was actually offered by the London and South Western Railway in 1910 ... at a cost of half-a-crown (twelve-and-a-half pence, for any kids in the audience).

Or how about this? Consomme

Julienne, fried fillet of plaice, Chicken Stanley, roast beef with green vegetables, roast and boiled potatoes, peach meringue, cheese and biscuits. This was served by the London & Eastern on the very day that war was declared on Germany in 1939. In Third Class.

And finally, from even further back – 1886. Here is a journalist's scathing critique of a railway waiting room: "bare floor, bare table, bare wooden chairs, eternal grained woodwork, French grey walls, dead-white ceiling". Does that not sound exactly like the oh-so-chic Farrow & Ball drawing room lusted after today by soulless and biddable fashionistas, as created by vain and moronic architects in all the endless TV makeover programmes? Dear Lord: this country is changing all right, and all for the worse.

The legend of Harold and his trademark pipes

Recently, the centenary of Harold Wilson's birth came and went very quietly ... but it is also the centenary of his wife Mary's birth as well – and she is still alive.

This reminded me of when I worked at the publisher Hutchinson and was despatched (in the MD's chauffeur-driven Bentley – that's how publishing was in those days) with a box of her phenomenally successful book of poems for her to sign.

The whole house was crammed with trays of Wilson's trademark pipes. "I hate them," she said. "They are like dummies for grown men. And anyway – Harold actually prefers cigars".



Thank heavens for the experts

The antiques expert Judith Miller ('author of more than 100 titles!') was asked in an interview recently to explain the allure of antiques. She said, and I quote: "they are tangible things you can touch". And not for the first time I was driven to ask myself: where on earth would we all be without the experts ...?

■ www.josephconnolly.co.uk
Joseph Connolly's latest novel **STYLE** is now out in paperback (Quercus)

Former Mirror editor's entertaining glimpse of Fleet Street in its heyday

From the outside, newspapers always appear to be so very calm and ordered. The masthead, the layout, the columnists, the scoops, the leaders, the letters ... all combine into an authoritatively tranquil and dependable rock.

On the inside, baby – it's like being trapped in a doodle by Hieronymus Bosch. There is rush, and there is fear. No one ever knows quite what is going on, everyone is afraid to make a decision because it may not be the right decision, internal politics are rabid, budgets are cut to the bone, and occasionally you will hear someone saying that he is on the inside track and is party to all the secrets and future plans, and that person is lying.

If you want a hugely entertaining glimpse



into Fleet Street in its heyday, when expenses flowed like alcohol, you can't do better than a memoir by Mike Molloy called *The Happy Hack*, just published by John Blake. Mike is a very kind and witty fellow who left school at 14, went to art school, got a job as a messenger boy

on the Daily Express ... and eventually rose to be editor of the *Mirror* at a time when it was the bestselling paper in the world, with a circulation of close on six million. The book is packed with fantastically funny (and true) anecdotes, and here is an example: the film critic Fergus Cashin was in Ronnie Scott's in Soho and had been talking throughout a set by the blind multi-instrumentalist Roland Kirk. Ronnie Scott admonished him: "God, Fergus – the man is blind ...!"

Fergus was mortified, and offered Kirk a drink. He asked for his usual. "What's that?" asked Fergus. "A long glass filled with three shots of vodka, two of grenadine, and a triple brandy on ice". "Jesus Christ," said Fergus, "no wonder you're blind ..."

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