

## A GREAT DAY OUT FROM THE STOURBRIDGE LINE by Keith Flinders

'I only sell about two of these a year!' said the booking clerk. Indeed it's a bit of a secret. I have never seen any printed publicity, perhaps because it is such good value.

My circular day tour of Mid and North Wales uses a ticket called 'Ffestiniog Round Robin'. In its basic form, it is one journey from any station round the circle of Shrewsbury, Barmouth, Porthmadog, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Llandudno Junction and Chester. There is an add on to start and finish at West Midlands stations served by Arriva Trains Wales, such as Smethwick Galton Bridge. All we needed to do was buy a single to Galton Bridge because it was before 09.30, but our concessionary passes were valid for the evening journey.

From Galton Bridge at a civilised 08.32 (we could have taken the 06.31 and had a couple of hours visiting the Fairbourne Railway), it was a through train all the way to Porthmadog, a comfortable Class 158 with a buffet trolley. We chose our seats carefully because the train splits at Machynlleth, from where the front set goes to Aberystwyth. However, because the train reverses at Shrewsbury, we made sure we were in the front set at Galton Bridge, choosing seats that faced backwards and on the side of the train furthest from the platform so that we were looking at the sea all the way from Aberdovey.



A Class 158 DMU on a service to Pwllheli and Aberystwyth arrives at Smethwick Galton Bridge

Our Ffestiniog Railway service to Blaenau Ffestiniog waits at Porthmadog Station alongside a service to Caernarfon



(Keith Flinders)

Arrival was at 12.51; a welcome leg stretch along the main shopping street to the Ffestiniog station took ten minutes and we were in time to see the Welsh Highland train depart along the street and over Britannia Bridge [a sort of stretched out level crossing] to Caernarfon, hauled by a Garrett.

Our Ffestiniog train at 13.35 was a heavy 11 coaches. We chose the coach right behind the engine, Earl of Merioneth, because it was an open coach - no windows - remembering to take a deep breath and close our eyes before entering Moelwyn Tunnel!

The Ffestiniog's top station is shared with the big railway and a Class 150 was waiting for us. As we looked across the tracks, I recalled that an American tourist had recently asked a member of staff if there was a subway here. 'No Sir', came the reply. 'You have to use the footbridge'. 'No, no', said the American. 'Subway, Subway! Food!!'

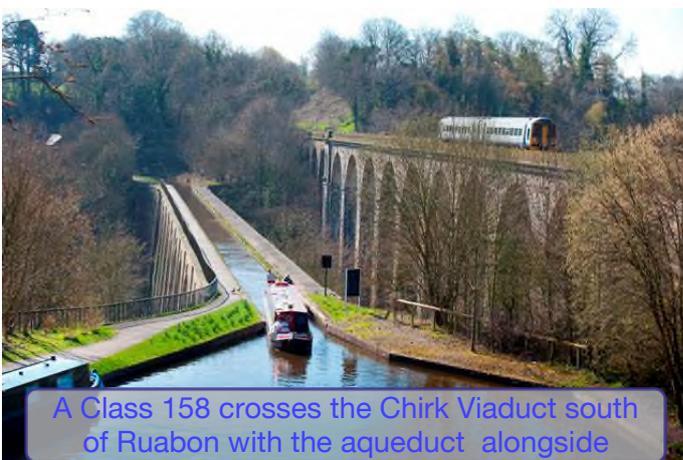


The impressive Betws-y-coed station on the Conwy Valley line to Llandudno Junction

The one hour journey down the Lledr and Conwy valleys is one of the best rail journeys, if only someone would trim back the vegetation. The next leg stretch is a break of three quarters of an hour at Llandudno Junction. Next door to the station is Asda, so we stocked up on food and drink before the Holyhead to Birmingham International train arrived at 16.46. It was another 158, but unusually this train is non stop to Chester. A quick

reversal and we were heading up to Wrexham. This section was singled to save money but now the second track has been relaid at a cost much greater than any savings. Ironically, the second track just sat there, rusting for years as no one could come up with the money to repair damaged signal cables until this month.

Beyond Ruabon, there are two good viaducts and the challenge of aqueduct spotting. The return journey is faster than outwards, with Smethwick Galton Bridge reached at 19.22.



A Class 158 crosses the Chirk Viaduct south of Ruabon with the aqueduct alongside

The cost of the Round Robin was just £27.05 each with a railcard - and that includes the ride up the Ffestiniog which, on its own, would have been £13.80.

Our timetable for the day is shown below, but remember to check the times before you travel, especially on the Ffestiniog Railway where different timetables operate depending on the date. Details are at <http://www.festrail.co.uk/timetable-fr.htm>

Stourbridge Junction	07:57	Smethwick Galton Bridge	08:17
Smethwick Galton Bridge	08:32	Porthmadog	12:53
Porthmadog	13:35	Blaenau Ffestiniog	14:45
Blaenau Ffestiniog	14:57	Llandudno Junction	15:57
Llandudno Junction	16:46	Smethwick Galton Bridge	19:22
Smethwick Galton Bridge	19:37	Stourbridge Junction	19:57

A final tip: if the booking clerk can't find the ticket in the system, putting in the destination, 'Ffestiniog' gets it.