



steamsounds

on the Ffestiniog Railway

1. As the overwhelming majority of passengers start their rides on the Ffestiniog Railway at Porthmadog it seems only right that this CD should start with a recording of a train departing from there with one of the railway's iconic Double Fairlies as motive power.

The high tide, assisted by a strong westerly breeze, laps against the stones of the Cob as *Earl of Merioneth* leaves Porthmadog with 11 well filled coaches on the 10.25 departure for Blaenau Ffestiniog on 30th May 2002.

2. Moving a little further up the line we come to Minffordd for this recording made in 1998 and, while the railway is primarily a steam railway, they do occasionally have passenger trains hauled by diesels. Indeed, in the peak months of that year the first two trains from Porthmadog were booked for diesel haulage however, fear not, this isn't going to be a diesel recording.

It was most fortunate that the availability of the Ffestiniog Railway's steam locomotives proved better than that of its diesels since, quite frequently, they did not have two serviceable passenger diesels.

Such was the case on 31st August when Alco 2-6-2T *Mountaineer* worked the second diesel turn and is heard in this recording leaving Minffordd.

3. The next station after Minffordd is Penrhyn and on 5th July 2006 the last train of the day from Porthmadog was hauled by the Double Fairlie 0-4-4-0T *David Lloyd George*.

Heard a little way from the station at the level crossing the loco can be heard starting from the station as thunder rumbles around the mountains.

Time to mention one of the problems that sound recordists face when recording in Snowdonia; the RAF who seem to spend every day disturbing the silence with their flights over the National Park, often at quite low levels. Over the years I've reached the conclusion that they know when I'm recording and must have a copy of the timetable in the cockpit so that they know just when to arrive to spoil my recordings!

On this occasion they failed as the train actually left Penrhyn a couple of minutes early but, as you can hear, my friends from RAF Valley must have expected that it would be on time.

4. *Mountaineer*, which we've already heard leaving Minffordd, is one of my favourite locos on the railway as it could almost always be guaranteed to make plenty of noise. Sadly, as I write this, it has been out of service for some years and, as far as I know there are no immediate plans to return it to working order. Mind you, if I win the lottery...

Mountaineer was in use on 28th May 2003 and is heard in this recording making a fine sound departing from Tan-y-Bwlch heading for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

5. Back in 2002 the England 0-4-0 *Palmerston* was something of a rarity and wasn't usually permitted to work trains beyond Minffordd or, occasionally, Rhiw Goch. Being coal burning, the risk of starting lineside fires was considered too great.

During the weekend of the Vintage Gala in 2002 the conditions underfoot were considered sufficiently damp to allow the loco to work over the whole railway.

Working a double headed demonstration slate train, the England loco had already worked as far as the summit before Tanygrisiau. When this train returned from Porthmadog by gravity *Palmerston* remained at Dduallt to await the arrival of a mixed train and took the slate waggons off this train by itself from Dduallt up to Blaenau.

The loco is heard in this recording heading for Blaenau not far from Glanypwll.

6. During the steam gala in May 1999, due to the dry conditions only oil fired locos were permitted beyond Penrhyn and *Lilla*, a coal fired Hunslet 0-4-0ST, had been booked to work a demonstration freight to Rhiw Goch.

Now some railways might simply have cancelled the train but the FR rearranged the timetable so that the goods could run to Penrhyn and back instead.



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Heard at Gwyndy about half a mile from Minffordd *Lilla* has just departed from Minffordd as this recording begins and makes a very fine sound climbing the 1 in 82 gradient to Penrhyn.

To say that I was impressed with the noise that this little loco produced would be something of an understatement. I have heard quieter locos on the Snowdon Mountain Railway.

7. We have already heard a recording of *Palmerston* made during the 2002 Vintage in which I mentioned that the loco had worked a double headed slate train to the summit of the line near Tanygrisiau. In this recording we hear *Palmerston* with the Single Fairlie 0-4-4T *Taliesin* passing Rhiw Goch on their way to the summit with 50 slate waggons.

8. A little later *Taliesin* and *Palmerston* are heard coming up the last part of the climb alongside Tanygrisiau Reservoir approaching the summit.

The purpose of running this train was for it to return to Porthmadog by gravity.

When originally built, transporting slate from the quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog was the line's raison d'être. At first, before steam power was introduced, horses hauled empty waggons up from Porthmadog and as the railway had a continuously falling gradient, the loaded trains could run back by gravity. Once the deviation was completed after the line was flooded by the CEGB building the pumped storage power station, that continuous falling gradient was broken by a short climb in the 'down' direction at Tanygrisiau so now, demonstration gravity trains can only be run from the summit.

Once *Palmerston* and *Taliesin* reach the cutting by the power station and the train stopped, the brakemen apply the brakes on the slate waggons before the locomotives are uncoupled ready for the run back down to Porthmadog by gravity.

9. Once the locomotives are uncoupled and the brakes on the waggons released and '*Taliesin*' and *Palmerston* provide a gentle push to get the train rolling.

Whistles from the engines are answered by a brakeman in the leading waggon with a bugle. He sounds to be having a little difficulty raising steam at first but, as the train begins to accelerate on the falling gradient soon has his instrument working well as the 50 waggon slate train rattles past on its way down to Porthmadog.

10. On the previous day there had been another shorter gravity train run from Dduallt and at Tan-y-Bwlch as this recording begins ex Penrhyn Quarry Hunslet 2-4-0STT *Blanche* piloting sister loco *Linda* arrive from Porthmadog and stop in the station.

A little later the train of slate waggons which had been hauled up to Dduallt earlier can be heard approaching, returning down the line by gravity and passing through the station at some speed.

With the gravity train out of the way the guard of the up train encourages passengers to rejoin his train which was now running a little late and with almost everyone back on board the train leaves for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

11. Aside from the trains, there's another reason why I like the Ffestiniog Railway. I also enjoy walking and now that I've reached a certain age there are plenty of not too strenuous walks that I can still cope with around the railway. One that I always enjoy (particularly the downhill parts!) is from Dduallt to Tan-y-Bwlch and in August 2004 while doing this walk I was able to get this recording of the Hunslet 2-4-0ST *Linda* accelerating away from the speed restriction through Garnedd Tunnel heading for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

12. On that particular August day I had spent the morning at Dduallt once again trying to get some recordings of trains passing round the spiral.

Having tried a few locations over the years I'm still not sure what is best.

This first recording was made at a point outside of the spiral on the west side about 50 yards north of Rhoslyn Bridge with the microphone pointing towards the station.

Double Fairlie 0-4-4-0T *Earl of Merioneth* is heard approaching from the left and passing under the bridge on the approach to the station.

A stop was not required here this time and the train continues through disappearing behind the mound



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beyond the station.

A short time later the train is heard re-emerging and continuing to climb around the spiral before disappearing towards Blaenau Ffestiniog.

13. The next train was hauled by Double Fairlie *David Lloyd George* and this time I tried a recording from the mound to the south of the station right in the middle of the spiral with the microphone pointing north so the train is heard passing from left to right twice, the first time as it arrives in the station and then after passing behind the microphone, again more distantly as it passes on the north side of the spiral.

14. This third attempt was made on another occasion in July 2001 when I tried a spot to the east of the station just off the original trackbed leading to the old Moelwyn Tunnel. Hunslet 0-4-OST *Blanche* was the loco.

Initially the sound approaches from a point almost head on before passing to the left.

Then, as the train continues round the spiral over the bridge at the west end of the station, the sound moves over to the right and the train passes by once again at a higher level heading for Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Try this one on headphones with your eyes closed, I'm sure that you will get the picture!

15. This fourth and final recording at Dduallt is of the other Hunslet 0-4-OST *Linda* and was made from inside the spiral at the east end of the station where the line curves away to the right as it starts to climb around the spiral.

As the recording begins *Linda* whistles for the foot crossing before stopping in the station then once the few passengers have detrained slips a little getting 9 coaches away on the sharply curved climb.

The sound dies away as the train passes behind the microphone and round the spiral but soon becomes audible again as it passes now at a higher level.

I think these last two locations probably paint the best picture of Dduallt though there is still plenty of scope.

16. As I've already mentioned, trains returning from Blaenau Ffestiniog face only one short climb and that is after leaving Tanygrisiau. Where, when I made this recording of *Mountaineer* with the last train of the day it was raining and had been for most of the day which made the two waterfalls there quite noisy but, despite this, I decided to try for a recording quite near the station but from the shelter of my friend's car boot!

While waiting I was beginning to think that I was doomed to get no recording as two anglers, who didn't appear to have caught anything, returned to their cars, one either side of where we had parked, and commenced discussing the days fishing. At least, I assume that was the subject but, as it was in Welsh I can't be sure!

Fortunately, one of them decided that he was wet enough and got into his car just before *Mountaineer* arrived and, as the conversation ceased, I switched my recorder on hoping for the best.

As then recording begins *Mountaineer* is just approaching and the sounders on the first of two level crossings here begin before the loco becomes audible.

And what a fine sound *Mountaineer* makes on the short climb!

17. Here's another recording made a further away from the station at Tanygrisiau on a much drier day. *Linda* is the loco this time and having stopped for a few passengers is ready to depart as the recording begins. After a brief slip *Linda* gets to grips with the 1 in 78 climb and sounds fine negotiating the two road crossings heading for the summit not far away.

18. I'm going to finish this CD with two of my longer, more atmospheric recordings, the first of these made at Porthmadog, not a place where really long recordings are usually possible...

As part of the Blaenau 20 celebrations in June 2002 the railway decided to attempt to run trains continuously for an 84 hour period over 4 days.

One train made a number of journeys each night between Rhiw Goch and Tanygrisiau, running to and from Porthmadog or Blaenau not being considered presumably to avoid annoying the neighbours with noisy steam trains passing in the early hours! This all night running started with the 22.50 departure from Porthmadog.



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On the first night, Saturday 1st June 2002 *Blanche* was the loco for the night shift, indeed, *Blanche* worked this turn each night. Not bad for a loco that was supposed to have come out of service earlier in the year.

A few minutes after the booked departure time *Blanche* pulls out of Harbour station and heads out across the Cob.

Also running late was the Class 158 diesel unit heading north on the Cambrian Coast Line which should have been in Porthmadog at 22.45.

Sound carries well at this time of night and, as the sound of the unit fades away, *Blanche* can be heard restarting at Boston Lodge and heading for Minffordd.

19. Over the many years I have been making lineside sound recordings on the Ffestiniog Railway one place has become a firm favourite with me. That location is Tan-y-Bwlch.

With trains passing around the horseshoe curves the possibilities for making long recordings are excellent given the right conditions.

On 3rd June 2005 as conditions were excellent being fairly dry with only a light wind I decided to go up to Tan-y-Bwlch for a recording of *Mountaineer*, a favourite loco, crossing a down train.

I was far from confident that I would be successful as, recording at the spot I had chosen, just above the line about ¼ mile below the station, I knew that the whole performance would take at least 20 minutes and, in that time I would be bound to have a visit from my friends at RAF Valley!

As the recording begins the down train from Blaenau Ffestiniog can be heard arriving first behind *Earl of Merioneth* just before *Mountaineer* becomes audible well before reaching Plas and sounds good all the way round the curves into the station. Once station duties are complete the down train departs with 'Earl'

making a little bit of noise on starting and once the down train has passed heading for Porthmadog *Mountaineer* can be heard departing and climbing the gradient to Garnedd Tunnel. And no visit from RAF!

Besides the risk that the RAF might turn up there was one other drawback to this spot. Midges! Millions of midges who all seemed to think that I was the dish of the day.

As I had my recorder running for almost 30 minutes (the recording here has been edited to remove the standing time in the station) and I can tell you that it is very hard to keep still and not make any noise while trying to avoid being eaten alive. Slapping them isn't an option, all you can do is wave gently! However, just a few midge bites are a small price to pay. I can't think of anywhere else where you can regularly go to sit and listen to steam hauled trains for half an hour at a time - quite an experience despite the midges!

