

The
»UNDERGROUND«
Storyteller



THE MUMBLES TRAIN

ALEX DAY

Chapter 1

The Mumbles Train

People interested in the Tube largely fall into three categories: student photographers, old people and me. The London Underground, on the surface (if you'll pardon the expression), is nothing more than a network of trains running underneath the city of London, ferrying people from here to there – although perhaps 'ferrying' isn't quite the right word because, as I said before, they are trains. I believe there are many great quirks, curiosities and stories sitting all around us whenever we take a journey on that network of trains, but of course, most people let it pass them by. Commuters are solitary, grievous beasts, content to flush their senses away in headphones and newspapers, having perfected the truly remarkable and uniquely British art of pretending that nobody else exists on the Tube but them, even when they are literally nose-to-nose with other people. The game is to avoid any form of contact with another breathing creature and you win when you can escape the dark and emerge to the surface to rejoin the world that matters.

I guess you could argue the Tube was designed to be ignored. It is, after all, a way of moving people from place to place without causing any disruption, hence the trains being built underground – although, despite being called the London Underground, over half the stations are actually above the ground, meaning it's been masquerading as the London Underground all this time, when it

doesn't deserve the title any more than I can say the house I grew up in is underground simply because it has a basement. In any case, perhaps commuters are just obeying the rules by moving solipsistically from platform to platform instead of taking time to appreciate their temporary subterranean dwelling; but even if that is true, I definitely think this is a rule that needs to be broken. Nobody ever has fun by obeying rules. When I first moved out of my mum's house four years ago and into a rented flat with my best friend, Charlie, we didn't like the lampshades - they were black, which was stupid, because it dimmed the light - so we took the lampshades down and wore them as hats. Charlie and I agreed that this was the most fun we'd ever had with lampshades or hats. Doing what something was designed to do is rubbish. Ignoring what something was designed to do and finding your own way to enjoy it can be brilliant. If nothing else, you find yourself in a situation you never could have predicted when you woke up that morning, like standing in the middle of your living room with your best friend wearing a lampshade on your head.¹

Like many journeys, mine started on a train. I was headed to Swansea, in Wales, because two hundred years ago, a train line opened in Swansea called the Swansea & Mumbles Railway and it was the first railway in the world to come up with the idea of allowing passengers to pay a fare to ride the train. In essence, this makes Swansea the home of the Underground's issue zero, the origin story of the Tube, and I love the Tube, so I wanted to explore its beginnings in person. (I suppose it sounds a bit strange to say 'I love the Tube' because it suggests I get sexy for trains or something; I don't get sexy for trains, but I do - as I've made clear - hold the belief that the London Underground is one of the most interesting places

¹Charlie declared us the Kings Of The Flat that day, and then we put the lampshades into our 'Cupboard Of Shame' - the space where you keep all the things you don't want but can't get rid of because you're only renting.

on the whole of this planet, and remember, this is coming from someone who's been to Swansea.)

For me to get to Swansea, the first thing I had to do was ride the Tube to Paddington station, since I can't drive, which I'll have you know is normal for anyone living in London. I know barely anyone who can drive. Even people who can drive just took the test to avoid the sneering of their elders and then carried on using trains. I left my flat just before 11:00 a.m. and the train journey was a typical one – defined by the amount of people who run at the train doors right as they're closing in an ill-thought-out attempt to make it onto the departing locomotive, instead of enjoying the break and waiting literally less than two minutes for the next one. None of us helped these hapless passengers as their stray limbs dangled inevitably out of the sliver between the train doors, because nobody ever speaks to anyone on the Underground for any reason, with the exception of people who dip their head in to ask where the train is going before jumping on. Those interactions are always fine because the interacted party knows there is a time limit to the question, following which everyone can resume retreating into themselves like metropolitan turtles.

It's always saddened me that you can't really talk to strangers on the Tube. On the way to Paddington there was a woman sitting next to me, a motherly type, who smelled nice, and I thought it would be polite to make it known that I thought that. Obviously I didn't say anything because I know it would be weird to have a stranger tell you they've noted your scent, no matter what the reason, but isn't that a shame? It's good to be complimented. She went through that whole day and might never have been told that she smelled nice, but she did and I wish she'd been told.

I was reading a book as the train approached Paddington and there was a bulky guy with tanned skin sitting next to me, everything about him screaming 'don't interact with me' – loud

music beating out of his pearl-white earbuds, his head down, eyes obscured by dark shades (who wears sunglasses underground?) – but I noticed his head tilting subtly to read my book. I'd have been more than happy to share, but I couldn't make that known to him because he'd be all embarrassed that I'd caught him out, even though I didn't mind, and he would never just come out and ask me what I was reading because he didn't want me to know that he was being, as he would see it, nosey. So we had to keep up the pretence all the way to Paddington, him pretending he wasn't reading, me pretending I hadn't noticed, when it would have been a lot easier for us to just have a conversation like normal humans. The Tube does that to people. All the regular emotions and protocols are pushed ... well, underneath the surface. Perhaps that, rather than its depth, is the real reason for the name; it is, literally, London underground.

There are two types of trains in my life, city trains and country trains. This is not a metaphor; I am still literally talking about trains. I'm not going to list all the differences between city trains and country trains because, frankly, they're incredibly dull, and this is coming from the guy who literally wrote the book on trains. Trust me, signalling methods aren't interesting to me and I'm gonna take a gamble and say they wouldn't interest you either. All you need to know is that the 'city trains', the London Underground tube trains sprawling beneath the capital, take you from London to other bits of London. They're generally small and round, designed for tunnel-travel, hence the nickname 'Tube'. The second type, 'country trains', are much larger trains that cradle you from London to other cities across the UK. These are run by a company called National Rail whose company slogan is the endearing 'we're getting there', which, while clever as it's a train and it gets you places, also sounds a bit defensive.

Much as it would make sense for all the National Rail trains to converge on one single point in London, from which you can travel

anywhere else, like a central heart pumping people to different parts of the country, they don't. There are no less than twelve National Rail stations surrounding London – you can see it if you look at the Tube map, the twelve of them dotted along the yellow Circle line. Twelve different ways to leave London, all going to different places. Twelve hearts. To explain this with a funky rock 'n' roll analogy: I'm a big fan of the Beatles, so I've spent a lot of time watching concert footage on YouTube of their performances, and it always strikes me, when watching videos from their beginnings as a group, just how frenzied the crowd are for their subjects. They literally care about nothing at that moment apart from the Beatles; they're in a state of mania. Historically, the early 1960s in Britain are indisputably referred to as 'Beatlemania' for that reason. Picture that crazy fangirl in your mind, screaming and crying and going nuts, while I tell you that the UK had another far less well-known 'mania' which took place at the start of the 1840s and it was for trains. Now imagine that fangirl going just as mental, but for trains. This is genuinely true, and is the reason London has twelve hearts (locomotively speaking); like Beatlemania, historians refer to the 1840s as 'Railway Mania'.²

Here's what happened. At the start of the 1840's, all these cross-country rail services were popping up all over the place. Trains were the newest technology England had. To the people of the mid-nineteenth century they were like iPads. And just like how everyone is making apps these days, in the 1840's everyone was making railway lines. Pretty much anyone could get permission from the government to build some track, which everyone saw as a foolproof investment because once the track was built they could charge customers a fare to ride it and they'd make their money back straight away. The government didn't even bother checking the routes, because lots of railway investors were also government MPs and

² Before you get too excited; none of the trains wrote songs.

they wanted to get the tracks down quickly so they could profit as speedily as they could. More and more train lines were approved and built, and everyone was simply overjoyed – after all, during Beatlemania, you couldn't just make more Beatles!

The problem was that everyone was in it for themselves. Imagine if everyone who lived near you decided to build their own little train station perfectly located for them, made their own train line that went to wherever they specifically wanted and didn't check with anybody else that none of the other trains were going to the same place. That's basically what happened. In 1846, the final year of Railway Mania, 272 Acts of Parliament were passed, all granting permission for separate railway lines to be built. That's one Act of Parliament every 32 hours, non-stop, for the whole year. About a third of them never even got built because a lot of people just saw the opportunity to make a quick buck from the government; they'd ask permission to build a railway route, then spend the production money on something else. If all the proposed routes *had* been built, they would have spanned nine and a half thousand miles of new track, which is enough to take you on a train from England to Indonesia.

We've been coping with the fallout of that brief train-crazed period in British history ever since. It's why we now have multiple London stations taking you out of the city (no less than twelve) and some of them are ridiculously close together and many of them go to the same parts of the country but none of them join up. It's also how the bubble burst on Railway Mania. The government realised things had grown out of control and put a stop to it all. They decreed that the centre of London should always be preserved from overground trains – no railways are allowed between Euston Road in the north and the Thames in the south. You can see this on a London Tube map; it's basically the space inside the Circle line, where you'll notice there aren't any National Rail stations at all.

I arrived at Paddington station just before midday, because that's the heart that beat to Swansea. It's one of my favourites, partly because it services Bath, Charlie's hometown (my aforementioned lampshade-wearing compadre) but also because of its connection to a guy called Isambard Brunel. Born in Britain, Brunel recently came second in a BBC poll of 100 Best Britons. Seriously, it went 'Nelson. Lennon. Shakespeare. Darwin. Princess Diana. Isambard Brunel'³. So that's the level of important that we're talking here. Brunel was a total dreamer, always reaching to do more, make more, push the world forward. You know how people jokingly say 'danger's my middle name'? Isambard Brunel's middle name, I kid you not, was 'Kingdom'.

Brunel was a designer, and came up with the design for Paddington station, where he also invented the Great Western Railway, which ran from Paddington to the nearby city of Bristol. Because it was a train and people went crazy for trains back in the day, the GWR was nicknamed 'God's Wonderful Railway'. Brunel didn't stop there, though; with not even a railway of God being enough for a guy called Kingdom, he extended the route all the way to *New York City*. That's actual New York. In America. Right the way through Railway Mania, you could buy a train ticket at Paddington station, get the Great Western to Bristol, and from there, use that same ticket to board the SS Great Western and sail across the Atlantic Ocean in a sixteen-day journey that landed you in New York City. With a train ticket! In the 1800's!

Paddington station was also the western end of the very first London Underground line that ever opened, the Metropolitan. The Metropolitan line was not only London's first underground line but the very first underground subway in the entire planet. This is the reason Paris and Moscow call their train systems 'Metro', as well as

³Winston Churchill was first.

the general use of the word ‘metro’ to define any public rail system in a city. The whole world got that word because of what we called our railway.

All of this history coalesced with me, standing at Paddington station, a place that had sent the very first subway trains on their journey underground, sent ordinary London commuters across the sea to New York City, and was now sending me to Swansea to visit the oldest passenger train that ever existed.

They’ve got a really good Krispy Kreme, as well. It’s the only Krispy Kreme I’ve ever seen in the UK which is a full shop, seating and shelter and shade, not just a stand. Outside that Krispy Kreme is a statue of Paddington Bear, the star of a children’s book about a bear with no home who is found at Paddington station with nothing but a battered suitcase and a note saying ‘please look after this bear, thank you’. They have a little merch stand near the station entrance selling cuddly Paddington Bear toys and keyrings and things. It seems irrefutable that the secret to having your literature immortalised forever is to have an association with a Tube stop. Baker Street has Sherlock Holmes. King’s Cross has Harry Potter. What if JK Rowling had set her magic wizard platform in Scunthorpe? Maybe she’d still be writing on napkins. We will never know.

I walked past the statue of Isambard Kingdom Brunel that stands in the station centre, stepped on to the National Rail train and got myself comfortable. My trip to Swansea would take three hours.

It occurred to me as I departed Paddington for pastures new that I didn’t really know what to expect from my day in Wales. My main plan was to walk along the route of the track; the line’s been out of service for over fifty years, though I had no idea why. I conjured up all these dramatic mental paintings of what my day would be like, a bold trek across the broken tracks of the deserted railway line that sparked the world, the dust billowing away from the wood as I

marched forward like those awkward children in *Stand By Me*. Every now and then in school we'd have a teacher training day where the school would technically be open and we were all required to attend, but hardly any of the teachers were actually there, so we just played games and messed around in every class. Without exception, our Religious Education teacher Mr Bowen would put on a VHS tape of *Stand By Me* on every one of those days, but our classes were only an hour long, leaving me (and the rest of Emerson Park School's 2005 class) incredibly familiar with the opening half of the film but with no frame of reference for its conclusion. Maybe, at Swansea, I reasoned, I could live the rest of that train track tale in real life⁴.

Train journeys put you in a sort of stasis where you can simultaneously do everything and nothing all at once. It cocoons you in a bubble away from society. You can work on whatever you want to, but you can't share any of it until you emerge at the other side. I don't want to get too heavy about this, but if we can very briefly dip our toes in a bit of quantum mechanics: there's this theory called the Copenhagen Interpretation which talks about subatomic particles at a micro level being in undefined states. Have I lost you already? To be honest, I don't know the technical terms or really understand it fully; I'm not a quantum mechanic myself. The gist of it, though, is that, at a microscopic level, things can be in more than one state at once until someone checks to confirm which of those states it's in. It'd be like if you threw a cat in a box with some poison and closed the box and then came back in an hour to see if the cat was alive or dead. According to this theory, the cat would be alive *and* dead for that hour you weren't looking. Although it's not really anything like that – because that would be obviously mental and untrue – and this is a good example of how quantum mechanics

⁴ Although I've looked it up and it turns out someone dies and I don't want that.

applies only to subatomic particles and not cats. It is also why you should never be taught science by someone who doesn't understand science. What I'm getting at is that being on the train to Swansea felt like being that cat in a box. I'm able to do whatever I want, with all the freedom in the world, but I'm also simultaneously bound on a journey to Swansea. My story could not deviate from that path⁵.

About an hour into the journey I decided to buy some Hobnobs from a man called Steve, who stood behind the counter of the train's refreshment bar, gesturing with thin-framed hands like a magician whenever he spoke. The lower half of his mouth seemed slightly disconnected from the top half, but he smiled earnestly enough and his voice sang to me in a soothing Welsh accent. I asked him about the railway footpath and how to get there from the station.

"As you come out of the station, turn left – not an *immediate* left," warned Steve, "but after you leave, walk left, and go as left as you can go." Surely, I thought, if I went as left as I could go, I would at some point end up going right?

"It's just pavement along the beach now, though," he added.

What? I was in despair! No dramatic railway trek?

I thanked Steve for his help and slumped back into my chair. I'd never wanted a Hobnob less.

As the hours passed, along with the stations on the line, I noticed on the monitors that London Paddington had become Llundain Padd'ton, the first sign that I was now in Wales. Soon afterward, I spotted my first castle, which confirmed it. While dwelling on the details I knew about the train line in Swansea, I remembered a place called the Bush Inn; apparently, the decision to build the Swansea & Mumbles Railway was made in that inn. I love the past. There are some things that only make sense with the context of history and an inn is one of them. Never in my life have I heard someone say that

⁵ I'm not convinced that was a point worth making, but hey, we got to talk about cats for a bit.

they have evening plans at an inn. It goes hand-in-hand with horse-drawn carriages over cobblestone streets; outside of Coronation Street, it only exists in history. Dick Whittington probably visited an inn. James Bond definitely hasn't. A Google Map search revealed that the inn was less than five minutes' walk from Swansea station. I had my first destination.

The first thing I noticed about Swansea was the smell – in a good way. When people say they notice the smell of things, it always seems to carry a negative association. Swansea smelled sort of dusty, but I liked it. It looked like a place that had been built and then simply maintained, not trying to keep up with the time as it passed through. There was a man standing at the ticket barrier who said hello as I approached, reached out for my ticket and then put it into the barrier for me, at which point the electronic doors swung open as they are programmed to do. He beckoned for me to move through, and I did so. That, I guess, is what's essentially lovely about Swansea; they'd upgraded the ticket barriers to operate electronically but hadn't removed the man who checks the tickets, even though his job is now entirely redundant. It was nice.

As I walked through Swansea's high street on the way to the Bush Inn, I passed a place called Champs, which claimed to have something called a 'Lady Gaga Experience'. The picture outside was of a woman called Donna Marie who had blonde hair and a shiny dress, and they used lots of Gaga-esque phrases like 'grab your disco stick and just dance'. They said there was going to be a competition that night for the best-dressed Gaga and I thought surely the winner of that competition should be Donna Marie, otherwise people aren't getting what they pay for. So distracted was I by the sign that I completely missed the Bush Inn, only realising my mistake when I got to the end of the high street. I hadn't seen it anywhere. I checked Google Maps to make sure I hadn't gone down the wrong street or failed to turn as left as I could turn; my

phone said I was in the right place.

I turned back, started walking slowly, and just before Changers I saw a building that could only, sadly, be described as derelict. I knew what it was as soon as I saw the faded letters on the front spelling out the remnants of the word ‘accommodation’, the original lettering taken off and now only marked by the dirt that was left behind, an imprint of something long since gone. The windows had silver bars across them and the colour of the walls had faded. I squinted at the entrance and could faintly make out the outline of the place where the letters had once spelled out the words ‘Bush Inn’, but then humans are wired to find patterns in nothingness, so perhaps I just wanted to find something of the old still there.

Even though I couldn’t make it inside the Bush Inn, I can still tell you about it. The railway I was looking for was called the Swansea & Mumbles because, predictably, it ran from Swansea to Mumbles, which is a tiny village of about four thousand people; it sounds like a lot, but Swansea by comparison has over two hundred thousand (and Greater London has several million). Mumbles is connected to Swansea by a huge road, appropriately called Mumbles Road, that goes in a big C-shape around a bay with Swansea at the top of the C and Mumbles at the bottom and the bay in-between. Mumbles was a mining town; the workers used to dig for things like coal and limestone and then they’d load up their boats with all their spoils and send them across the bay to Swansea. It was incredibly time-consuming just to get the stuff across, and a lot of the minerals would fall out and get lost on the trip, so the local investors met in the summer of 1802 – at the Bush Inn – to try and come up with a better solution.

The outcome of that meeting was the railway, designed to run around the C of the bay. It would become the first ever passenger railway in the world, but it wasn’t built with passengers in mind, it was just a practical thing to shift some limestone. The line was

originally christened the Oystermouth Railway, named after this little fishing village near Mumbles called Oystermouth. I desperately tried to find some proof that this was why Oyster cards (the electronic tickets used on the Tube) have the name 'Oyster', as it would have been a lovely connection, but unfortunately, I couldn't find anything to back that up. I used to know a bus driver who told me that Oyster cards are actually so called because of their design; they're made up of an electronic chip shielded by two pieces of plastic, akin to the way an oyster protects its pearl.

Naturally, I was sad I couldn't sit inside the Bush Inn, taking in the history, imagining the many ghosts of those who'd sat where I was sitting, drank where I was drinking. I felt deceived by Google Maps for showing a Bush Inn pin when I did my search, even though the place isn't really there anymore. Still, onwards. My next Google Map search told me that the Swansea Museum was only a short walk away and I figured there might be something there about the railway. So long as it didn't turn out to be desolate like everywhere else in the world of Google.

It was the first day of the year that felt warm enough to walk around in just a t-shirt, no hoodie or coat shielding the sun from my bare arms. I strolled leisurely through the seaside town with sunglasses on and headphones in. It didn't take long for me to reach the museum. Swansea Museum is the oldest museum in Wales and admission is free. Most museums have a natural path that ends in the gift shop, but Swansea Museum is so small that it only has one way in or out, so as soon as you walk through the doors, you're in the gift shop. My eyes flittered to the sign above the main stairway, indicating what was on display at the museum: the Main Gallery to the left. The China Gallery to the right. All fairly boring-sounding. Then, upstairs they had Archaeology, Egyptology ... what? *Egyptology*? In Swansea? That couldn't be right, but that's what it said. Egyptology. Followed by a room marked only as 'cabinet of

curiosities'. Needless to say, I raced around the ground floor like a bull in a china gallery.

Ultimately, the museum had not one piece of information or artefact about the Swansea & Mumbles Railway, so in that sense it was a disappointment, and isn't technically relevant to the story anymore, but they did have an Egyptian mummy and I want to tell you about it. Up the stairs, there was a recreation of an Egyptian tomb waiting for me and it contained a real Egyptian sarcophagus housing a real Egyptian mummy. As I saw it, I suddenly became very stupid. It's obvious that they didn't have actual Egyptian mummies in Wales, and so of course I didn't expect to find one in the Swansea Museum, but the first thing I did was simply mark it off as my individual ignorance. "This is why I love travelling," I thought, "because you learn amazing things! I'd never have suspected that the ancient Egyptians colonised the south of Wales!" What a moron. Of course they hadn't. A Victorian collector, I later learned, had bought the mummy and had it shipped to Swansea. I'd instantly jumped to the more fanciful explanation, explaining away the geographical impossibilities by telling myself, "Maybe a nice Egyptian family wanted a seaside break. They say they were an advanced civilisation. It's nice in Wales." Shut up. You're an idiot.

Victorian collectors were abundant in the history of Swansea, it turns out, and nowhere was this more evident than when I entered the cabinet of curiosities. It was a room filled with a strange assortment of objects, a bit like Ripley's 'Believe It Or Not' museum, except this place didn't celebrate the weird; it was more about working things out, trying to understand the things around them by preserving them and collecting them together. Simple, understated curiosity. Eccentric Victorian collectors used to try and get a bit of everything, reminding me of what it was like for me as a kid collecting Pokémon trading cards, except that in the Victorian age, you would be a collector of life. There was a collection of

stuffed birds in the room, for example, and a plaque that said there used to be one of every species of bird in the country, all donated by Victorians passionate to try and get one of everything. Some of the items couldn't even be identified – one object was black like a battered grenade and shaped like a banana and was simply labelled 'curious object'. I liked that room because the things that were in it would never have been put together if it weren't for human imagination uniting them all, finding them interesting enough to share one roof.

I approached the museum's exit none the wiser about the railway, unsure where to go next or what I would do when I got there. I was about to leave when I caught the eye of an older woman on guard by the door and figured it couldn't hurt to ask her if she knew much about the old line. I have to apologise here because the woman said her name was Katherine, but it might be Catherine and I didn't ask whether it was spelled with a 'c' or a 'k'. In the interest of fairness, I'll use both.

Catherine was sixty-one, with short white hair and a smile that faded into her face like a worn newspaper. I approached her about the railway, with the most pressing issue coming first.

"Is there anything left of the line?" I asked, hesitant.

"No," she confirmed, shattering my *Stand By Me* dreams for good. "There's nothing left of it now."

I asked more questions. The train closed down in 1960, Catherine said. She was ten when it happened. And then she said something I didn't expect.

"Hand on heart," she said – and she placed her hand over her chest – "I rode the Mumbles train."

"You rode it?!" I said. I was so excited. "What was it like?"

"Really bumpy," she chuckled. "Heaving with people. Lots of stops." She seemed eager to talk about the train. I imagine people didn't ask about it much.

“But there’s really nothing left of it?” I asked.

She hesitated. “Let me show you.”

Ckatherine led me out of the Museum, beckoning for me to follow her around the corner to an old tramshed. “The old train is in there. That’s where the route starts. After that, it’s just a footpath.”

“Is there any sign of the old line at all, a plaque or something?” I asked.

“There’s a place called the Junction Café on the way to Mumbles,” said Ckatherine. “There might be something there.”

I thanked Ckatherine for her time and walked to the front of the tramshed.

The last existing tram of the old railway was a classic maroon colour, tall, with an open roof. It was sitting right in front of me, defiant behind double-glazed glass. In front of the tram, I could see two strips of metal running underneath the tramshed door, slicing through the concrete underneath my feet. It ran for about fifty feet before petering away. This unremarkable slab of pavement was all that was left of the old railway line. I watched a businessman walk straight over it, not stopping to notice.

Reading about it at home meant I fully understood how the Mumbles train had been a hugely important thing for Swansea, and ultimately for the world at large, so I hadn’t expected everything to be so minuscule. The Tube helps me visit my friends. It takes me to the airport. It’s showed me the sights of the city I live in and love. I’ve slept on it. I’ve made new friends and had first kisses on it. I didn’t expect its conceptual birth to be covered over and forgotten in a seaside town in Wales.

I started to think about going home. If Ckatherine was right and there really was nothing at Mumbles beyond a sign at a café, then the old tram and the whisper of its track was as much as I was going to find. She did say, though, that the track was now a footpath. The C-shape of Swansea Bay, alongside Mumbles Road, was the route of

the railway. I was able to walk the route the train once took and I already knew that I couldn't come this far without doing so. The journey would take about two hours.

The sunlight slid across my face like silk as I bought an ice cream cone and set off. I thought about the Tube, about how constant it's always been in my life and how it probably seemed impossible to a ten-year-old Ckatherine that the Mumbles train would ever disappear, as it seemed impossible to me now that the Underground ever would. For a moment, I imagined the life of a man in futuristic London, walking past faded roundels broken into the dirt beside grilled subway gates, pondering to himself what it used to be like when the railways ran.

The old railway line is now a foot and cycle path, sprinkled with fitness equipment in various places along the route. These were free to use as part of Swansea's effort to fitten up their cityfolk. To my left was a strip of bold green trees and, beyond that, the beach and the water, while to my right was a busy road, then the pleasant urban bustle of Swansea University. All within a couple hundred metres, it went from city, to road, to path, to me, to trees, to beach, to sea. A tasting platter of Welsh land in all its many flavours.

It took about an hour for me to reach the Junction Café, but it was there, although it was closed. My phone revealed the official address to be 'The Old Station Building, Mumbles Road'. Five large signs were clinging to the walls of the café, covered in dirt, coloured in browns and greens, the sort of shades that only seem to appear on something when it gets old enough. At the top of each sign, in proud bold lettering, were the words: "The Story Of The Swansea & Mumbles Railway". This is what I had been waiting for – some small sign from the town that the line hadn't been forgotten. The signs told the whole story.

Once, there was this guy called Benjamin French. I haven't been able to find out exactly who he was. Some sources have him as a

company director, others say he was just a worker for the railway. What I do know is that, by the time Benjamin French became important to the story, the Mumbles train had already been running for a year, very low-key, moving limestone from Mumbles to Swansea by horse-drawn-carriage and doing a fine job at that and nothing more. Benjamin is important because he noticed that kids loved the line; local children from Mumbles would ride the rickety carriages all the way to Swansea and back like a roller-coaster. They thought it was great fun. When he saw those children, he saw the potential of the line for transporting more than just limestone and developed the idea of using the railway to ferry *people* to and from Swansea.

Taking his idea to the railway company he either worked for or owned, he changed the world forever by creating the first passenger railway in the world. Historically, 25 March 1807 is notable for being the day the British Parliament abolished the transportation of slaves from Africa, and of course I don't mean to undermine the global importance of that day, but I want you to be aware that it was also the day that ordinary members of the public in the south of Wales began paying a shilling to sit in groups of twelve and let themselves be carried along Mumbles Road by a horse.

The line ran for 156 years and ended up carrying millions of people every year. It broke a world record, which it still holds, for having the most forms of traction of any railway in the world, seven in total: horsepower, sail power, steam power, battery power, electric power, diesel and petrol. Everyone in Wales loved the line. The only reason it closed was because of a competing bus service called the South Wales Transport Company. Their bus route ran alongside the Mumbles train, putting the two in direct competition with each other. The train was hugely popular and the bus company couldn't compete, so they bought the railway route from its owners just so they could shut it down. The signs at the Junction Café spoke about

its closure as a ‘demise’ and of how people ‘mourned its passing’. The big red trams of the Mumbles Railway burn in people’s minds as, I imagine, the Tube would in the minds of Londoners were it to fall off the Earth in a similar way.

At the bottom of the dirtiest sign was a poem. It wasn’t credited to anybody, but was titled “Last Mumbles Train, 11:30 p.m., January 4th 1960”.

*See the train going down the track
It’s sad to think it’ll not come back
It’s running now – for the last time,
For they are closing the oldest line.*

A wooden road sign nearby pointed onwards in the direction of Mumbles⁶. I continued on. If the Swansea & Mumbles Railway could make it to the end of this road every day for 156 years, I could spend an afternoon doing the same. First, however, I would have to make it past two Welsh boys on bikes.

The older of the two had his hair cut into a fringe that made him look like a miniature clone of Justin Bieber⁷. He was wearing a red check shirt and had a pristine and genuine smile. The younger was wearing a yellow football shirt⁸, had blonde hair scuffed into spikes, and small and beady features like a teddy bear. The boys cycled into my path, stopping me along my tracks. The older, more confident boy spoke.

“That girl over there says she knows you,” he said, indicating behind me, where a teenager with red hair and big sunglasses was sitting on a bench with a couple of her friends. One of them stood on a strange contraption that looked like a pair of skis welded

⁶ Or, as the sign put it, ‘Mwmbwls’.

⁷ An explanation for the old people: Justin Bieber is the codename for a new initiative by the record industry to sell creatively deficient songs to children.

⁸ Sorry I can’t be more specific, I don’t know the teams.

together. I thanked the boys and approached.

The girl – her name was Jodie – didn't really 'know' me, it turned out, but knew who I was from hearing music I've released and seeing videos I make online⁹. Her friend, Denny, remained standing on the strange ski-like frame I had seen from afar.

"It's called a Trikke," Denny answered when I questioned it. She pronounced it 'try-key', like 'tricycle', which was odd, because it looked nothing like a tricycle. It was more like if skis had skateboards on their feet and you stood atop them to move. I asked her to demonstrate and she criss-crossed along the bay with an easy elegance.

"Have a go!" she said to me.

"I'd love to!" I said, and then I did it, and it was amazing, I was a natural and I made it look effortlessly cool, and I did backflips off it and everyone on Mumbles Road clapped as I rode past, and then Jodie slept with me because she was overcome by how one person could be as cool as me.

That didn't happen. What actually happened was that I nervously said, "No, I don't know, it looks strange," and then made some sounds and backed away from it like a kid being picked last for PE. Normally I'm very much a get-up-and-go kind of guy and I'd have happily taken the Trikke for a spin, but I actually don't know how to ride a bike, I never learned, and with those two young boys being clearly proficient at the two-wheeler, I didn't wanna embarrass myself further on a whole new invention I'd never even seen before. I only write about this now in the hope that I will be foreshadowing a great trend of youth culture. Maybe everyone will have a Trikke in a year's time. They'll be like scooters. Or the Heely, remember those? Trainers with a little wheel in the back heel. You'd get really freaked out in shopping centres cos suddenly it looked like all the

⁹ Just funny, silly videos, not like in a porn way.

kids could glide. I was so taken by how effortless and elegant it looked to use Heelys that I bought a pair for myself, went to the nearest supermarket car park to try them out and found myself a few minutes later lying on my back, winded. I never tried them again. If anyone wants to buy a pair of size 7 Heelys, the link is in the description.

As I was saying my goodbyes, the two boys cycled up to me again.

“Could we have a picture with you?” the younger boy asked.

“Yeah, of course!” I grinned.

“Yeah, cool!” The older boy replied happily. There was a pause. They both looked at me with expectation in their untouched eyes, as if I was the one meant to begin this process.

“Do either of you have a camera?” I asked with a frown. They looked at each other like this thought hadn’t occurred to them.

“No,” said the older boy.

“Okay,” I said, “well, I’ll take this one and I can put it online somewhere for you if you like?”

I expected to get one of their email addresses or a Habbo Hotel account or something (who knows what kids do online) but instead, the older boy said, “Post it on Google! That’s where we go!”

I wasn’t really sure what that meant, but I nodded and took the picture and they thanked me and cycled off. Cycling back to Google, perhaps.

As I trekked on towards Mumbles, I arrived at Oystermouth. It had a castle which squatted on the hillside, one flag jutting out from its peak to mark its heritage. I also found another café – the Square Café – which promised hotdogs, burgers, sandwiches, toasties, ice cream ... and was shut. Why was everywhere shut? It wasn’t a weekend or anything. A few minutes later I stumbled upon this beautiful tiny restaurant called Trams Diner with exactly the history I’d been waiting for; there was a stencil of the Mumbles tram on the window and a plaque inside displaying information on the railway,

none of which I could read, because the Trams Diner was also shut. Did everything just shut with the railway? Did that bastard bus company kill the whole damn town?

Business idea: start a café on the route of the old railway in south Wales and open it at normal trading hours.

“Hey!”

I turned round. Those two boys again, back from Google and beaming excitedly. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“What did you name the photo as?”

“I didn’t name it yet,” I answered. “It’s just on my phone. Do you want me to call it anything specific?”

“Call it ‘Joel and Travis.’”

I nodded.

“That’s J-O-E-L,” said the older boy, “and T-R-A-V-I-S.”

I grinned as they cycled off again. That was the last time I saw Joel and Travis, and I loved everything about them. I loved how they spelled out their names like Joel and Travis¹⁰ are hard names to spell. I liked how they prolonged their interaction with me by having it in short, energetic bursts. Remember how Benjamin French was inspired to turn the limestone railway into a passenger service when he saw children stowing away on the carriages? In my mind, Joel and Travis were those children.

By now, the route was harbouring a rather seaweedey¹¹ smell, indicating my approach toward Mumbles Pier. Within five minutes, I had reached the end of the footpath. It was colder there, as seafronts always are. I was disappointed at the absence of recognition, given that I was at the end of the line; there was no plaque saying ‘this is where a railway used to be’, or a tiny sliver of track like at the Swansea end where I started my quest, or even an

¹⁰ I assume those were their names.

¹¹ The word processor is telling me ‘seaweedey’ isn’t a word, but it’s my book.

inexcusably shuttered dining establishment. The only proof of the railway at that spot that day was me.

Mumbles Pier is lost in time. Their sign depicts an old woman – old as in time period, not as in age – with her hair in a neat bun and her white dress billowing against a mint green sky. Another sign nearby highlighted features of the area – ten-pin bowling, toilets, the ‘basstastic’ fishing supply shop – and over the words ‘skating rink’ someone had just taken some masking tape and stuck it over the picture of the rink, then with a biro written on the tape the word ‘CLOSED’. Isn’t that wonderful? If we lose the idea that things have to be perfect, we’ll find that most of the time we can just paper over the cracks and life won’t actually be that bad.

As seemed to be customary at the notable stepping-stones of my journey, there was a café at Mumbles Pier – the appropriately named Mumbles Café – but this one was actually open, making for a refreshing change. The café was perfectly preserved as I imagined it would have looked on the day it opened. There were silver chandeliers on the ceiling and those same mint green walls that encapsulated the rest of the town. I ordered cod and chips and listened as a Yamaha piano played pre-programmed music. The keys moved of their own accord, an echo of the ghost that had once been there, the instrument fenced off as if to preserve the privacy of the phantom artist. The whole of Mumbles was like that, I realised. Everything about the pier suggested the contentment of the old as it was. You could easily film a period drama in Mumbles without having to change anything. The sign was the same, just papered over. The music was the same, with or without the pianist. Frustratingly, the only thing that drew me to Mumbles was the only thing that was missing. To stand in Mumbles in 2011 is to stand in Mumbles in 1911 with the one notable exception of the railway.

An elderly couple passed my booth. The woman was wearing a turquoise jacket, the man a light brown, just the right shades of

colour to suit the weathered. The man walked with a dignified pride while the woman hobbled on a stick. The two of them stopped in front of the piano, watching for a few seconds. I saw the man smile, his face full of nostalgia, and I wondered if he had ever seen a real pianist sit at that spot, playing those same notes to an enraptured crowd back when the pier was busy and the trams were heaving with people. Then, through the window of the café, I noticed a middle-aged blonde woman leaning against the barriers of the pier, looking out across Swansea Bay, just staring. It reminded me of the episode of *Doctor Who* where Amy forgets the Doctor; she knows there's something important still there at the back of her mind but she can't quite reach it. Mumbles is like that. It used to be important, and everyone knows it, although nobody seems to know why, but they leave things as they are out of an undercurrent of respect. It was the best cod and chips I'd ever had.

I phoned a local cab service and was whisked back into Swansea in sixteen minutes. The cab felt like the DeLorean, pulling me back into a familiar world after my journey through time. I said goodbye to the smell of the sea at Swansea station and departed for London, where dirt and speed and urban love were waiting for me.

To get back home from Paddington, I decided it would be fitting to take the Metropolitan line; the fastest line on the Underground, a hundred and fifty miles apart from the stationary slab of railway that is all that remains of its ideological birth¹². It occurred to me that the Tube goes just as unnoticed as the Mumbles train, even though it exists in plain sight. Both, sadly, are railways buried beneath the cities they serve. The Tube is something people only use to get to the next thing they're doing. I wondered how many Tube commuters live their entire lives like that, each experience being just a stopgap until the next one. I wondered if I lived my life like that.

¹² 60 mph compared to the other lines' 50 mph to be precise.

It was on that ride home that I decided I wanted to visit every tube stop on the London Underground. I wouldn't be the first person ever to do it, nor would I be the last, the fastest or the most insightful. I simply wanted to do it because I thought it was worth doing. I would get out at every station – all 270 of them – and see what stories they have to share. Preserve what I find. Write it all down. It could all disappear, so it's worth capturing as it is right now. I could unite the stations under one space like the Victorians did in their cabinet of curiosities. I could be the Catherine of the Underground, ready to talk about the Tube to anyone who wants to know more about what may become nothing more than a curious relic. They can ask me what it used to be like, and I'll be able to say with an authoritative chuckle, "Really bumpy. Heaving with people. Lots of stops."