

The Great Western route to Ireland

This article is based on a rail & sea journey from Paddington to Ireland via Rosslare in 2013.

It's 7.30pm and I've just entered the Brunel masterpiece that is Paddington station. The roof is its defining feature, other aspects include the clock on platform 1. An array of shops and eateries are available. The station is the opening setting for Paddington Bear stories authored by Michael Bond. A Paddington statue and shop selling collectables are in the station.

The departure screen displays our itinerary: "20:15 Swansea Platform 9...change at Swansea for Carmarthen, Whitland, Fishguard Harbour and Rosslare Harbour".

Precisely on time the high-speed train moves away effortlessly and begins proceeding through the suburbs of west London. At no extra cost I'm in the entertainment carriage which is equipped with TVs. Inter alia the TVs can display the train's location and speed. Slough is passed at 120mph! Windsor, known for its castle and Legoland, is a six minute journey by local train from Slough.

The Thames is crossed at Maidenhead; this bridge held the record for the flattest arches. Soon the Berkshire town of Reading, twinned with Clonmel, is reached. Its station is in the throes of a major upgrade. The next station stop is the smaller town of Didcot – change for Oxford. Closer to Swindon, at Uffington, the figure of a white horse formed by chalk is glimpsed on the hillside to the left. Swindon's growth is attributable to the coming of the railway. Part of the former railway works houses a museum. We soon skirt the Cotswolds and make for Bristol Parkway.

After passing Pilning station we enter the Severn Tunnel. Emerging on the Welsh side the city of Newport is our next stop. Another fifteen minutes sees arrival in the Welsh capital. Millennium Stadium is a stone's throw from the station as are the olde-worlde shopping arcades leading to the Hayes, beyond which lies the main thoroughfare, Queen Street, immortalised in Idris Davies' poem.

Around an hour later we find ourselves in Swansea and change onto the Fishguard boat train which serves several wayside stations and larger towns like Llanelli and Carmarthen. The former is a well-known area of Wales' rugby heartland. Carmarthen is the county town and a complement of passengers bound for the ferry board. Between the towns there is a stretch of line along Carmarthen Bay.

At 1 o'clock the train pauses alongside a signal box beyond Clarbston Road station. The signaller hands the driver a token allowing the train to traverse the Fishguard branch. I ponder if any inhabitants are awake to see the silhouette of our train as it proceeds through the woods and along the banks of the Western Cleddau river. After twenty minutes we call at Fishguard & Goodwick station serving the synonymous twin towns.

A few moments later we are approaching the harbour station. The ship, Stena Europe, is at her berth beside the station. For a few minutes the platform is a hive of activity as we alight and proceed to obtain our boarding cards at the ferry desk, while passengers who have arrived from Rosslare board the train. The rail station and ferry terminal share the same building allowing an easy and sheltered transfer.

The harbour occupies a platform of land laboriously blasted out of the cliff-face over a hundred years ago. The former railway hotel, trading but in private ownership, may be found atop the cliff. Pembrokeshire's spectacular coastline forms a national park. Coastal buses make this easy to explore. St. Davids, Britain's smallest city and the Welsh ecclesiastical capital is under an hour away. A bus awaits the daytime ferry from Rosslare and operates to Fishguard Square facilitating journeys locally and to places further afield (e.g. Aberystwyth).

Once onboard I arrange a cabin. The distance across the South Irish Sea (St. George's Channel doesn't seem to be used much nowadays) to Rosslare is 54 nautical miles. It's common for the ship to shave several minutes off the scheduled 3½ hours passage.

At 5.45am there's a rat-a-tat-tat on my door as a member of staff performs the customary wake-up call. Glancing out the bright beam of Tuskar Rock lighthouse is seen. Many vessels foundered here and several lives were lost during its construction. Time remains for a shower before going on deck.

Punctuated by its red lighthouse, Rosslare Pier is akin to an arm welcoming travellers to the Model County and country at large. A new ferry terminal was opened in 1989 by the late Séamus Brennan integrating ship, rail and bus. In 2008 the rail station was relocated to the periphery of the europort at the foot of Delap's Hill.

The first buses of the day, the rail replacement via Wellingtonbridge and the expressway, each depart for Waterford with a small complement of passengers from my ferry. The Rosslare-Waterford train enabling rail travel to the port's traditional catchment area of cities and towns across Munster was suspended in 2010. I begin the open-air walk to the station for the Inter-city train. The railway journey through counties Wexford and Wicklow to Dublin presents a rich variety of scapes and scenery – a splendid introduction to Ireland.

The rail-sea route via Rosslare through Wales to London offers a pleasant, relaxing experience; the journey time can be productively used to work, rest and dine. Comfort levels on trains and ships have improved significantly. Passengers of bygone days could only have dreamt of the facilities! Interestingly the classic rail-sea means of travel, the way all travelled prior to car ferries and budget airlines, is experiencing a revival recently as documented by several ferry companies. At Fishguard all sailings have train connections whereas at Rosslare the overnight sailing each way has a rail connection and all sailings have a bus connection to/from Waterford.

The founders of this rail-sea route have long passed away but their legacy of a route with an integrated timetable, through ticketing and integrated terminal at Fishguard continues with quiet efficiency to benefit passengers every day and night. For decades steamers and trains were operated by the Great Western Railway hence the title of this piece.

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