

A journey fit for film stars, the great and the good – and me

Adrian Bridge steams to the south coast in a recreation of the Bournemouth Belle's first seaside trip 90 years ago

I started the day as I meant to go on: cheekily ensconced in the upholstered chair favoured by the late Queen Mother when travelling by train, ready to raise a hand for a royal wave or indeed to receive a large gin and tonic.

It was a bit early for the latter, but as I savoured the moment before heading to my allocated seat elsewhere on the train, impeccably dressed members of the Northern Belle staff were discreetly preparing a welcoming Bellini and a three-course brunch that would include cheddar cheese soufflés and hot smoked salmon.

"Welcome on board," they declared as the distinctive brown and cream-coloured Pullman carriages on London Victoria's Platform One slowly began to fill. "We hope you will enjoy your day trip to the south coast."

As the name suggests, the Northern Belle is generally associated with journeys taking in some of the most breathtaking scenery in northern England and Scotland: the Settle to Carlisle route; Fort William via the West Highland line. But earlier this week it laid on a special trip marking 90 years to the day since the inaugural run of the Bournemouth Belle, one of a cluster of Belle trains that became synonymous with stylish travel to some of England's most famous resorts in the years between the wars and even afterwards.

The Bournemouth Belle ran from July 1931 until 1967 and in its heyday carried royalty and film stars, the great and the good – some alighting at Southampton to embark on transatlantic voyages, others carrying on to the sandy beaches and pine-filled woods of Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch. While lacking the rakish charm of seaside rival Brighton, Bournemouth acquired a reputation for more genteel pleasures: sophisticated gatherings at the Pavilion Theatre and Ballroom; strolls through its sculpted gardens and "chines" (wooded ravines); afternoon games of bowls and tennis. By the early 20th century there were no fewer than five Bournemouth hotels that *Tatler* felt could be recommended to its readers.

"There was a concerted effort to turn Bournemouth into an upscale destination," says luxury railway travel specialist and author Martyn Pring. "It came to be seen as one of the places where society decamped for winter breaks. A resort of such style needed a stylish way of getting there – and nothing could be more stylish than travelling by Pullman train."

There is still something thrilling about travelling in this way. And there is something even more special when, as with this week's anniversary jaunt, the



ADRIAN BRIDGE: ROSEGER ALLEN; GETTY IMAGES; DECLAN PITTS

▶ Call my bluff: Adrian Bridge with the Tornado, which this week hauled the Northern Belle along the route the Bournemouth Belle took from 1931 to 1967

▶ Old Harry Rocks, named after the pirate Harry Paye, can be glimpsed on a boat trip around Poole Bay

train is being pulled by a steam locomotive, particularly one with the credentials of the Tornado: completed in 2008, it is the first new-build mainline steam locomotive built in Britain since 1960.

As passengers lined up to be snapped next to the engine room and enjoy the hiss of steam, there were broad smiles and a tingling sense of relief. Relief to be travelling anywhere, to have the excuse to dress up, to once again be celebrating special birthdays and anniversaries – or simply the chance for a fun day out.

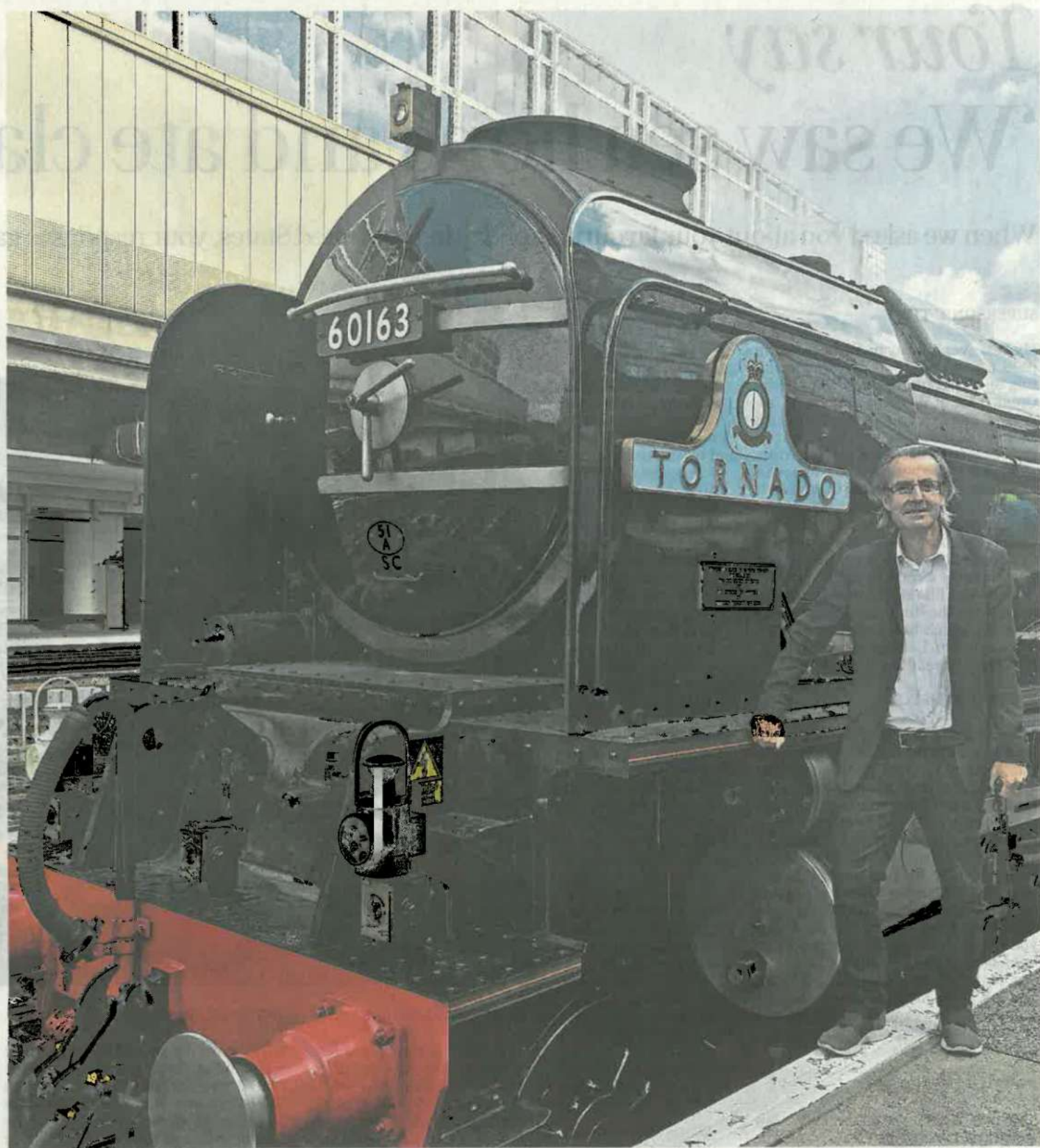
"For two years running my mum and I have wanted a day at the races at Ascot and have had to cancel," said one lady in a pink floral dress, pink shoes and matching pink mask. "We decided to take this train instead – and we are loving it."

What's not to like? These journeys are intended to transport us to another age, a golden, glamorous age of travel in exquisitely-crafted carriages where service comes with a northern smile and beautifully prepared food is presented on bone china. At our tables, masks could be removed as we savoured the luxury of travelling slowly, and tastefully, while enjoying tantalising views of the Thames at Barnes, the hills of Surrey, and the forests of Hampshire.

For this particular trip, time was allowed to explore the destination. While some made straight for the shops and bars, my brother and I – long due a leisurely catch-up – headed down to the pier to board the Dorset Belle, a classic 1970s-built pleasure cruiser that after a gap of almost a decade has just returned to service along the stretch of coast for which it was originally built.

Our 40-minute cruise around Poole Bay took us past long stretches of sandy beach and the famously expensive mansions of Sandbanks popular with film stars and football celebrities alike. We glimpsed the entrance to the vast Poole Harbour, the hills of Purbeck and the Old Harry Rocks, named after the famous pirate and adventurer Harry Paye.

"Two hundred years ago there were no buildings along this coastline and



▶ Towering achievement: Russell-Cotes's flamboyantly turreted house is now an art gallery and museum

▶ Bon appétit! Passengers were treated to a three-course brunch and a five-course evening meal

smuggling was rife," Captain Ali informed us. "The chines provided good cover for items such as brandy and lace, tea and tobacco."

A century later the town had expanded dramatically and from the sea we spied one of those landmark grand hotels, the Royal Bath, close to the town's more modern international conference centre and the leafy residential enclaves so beloved of those seeking scenic splendour and sea breezes in their sunset years.

Back on land, we popped into the extraordinary house built by Merton Russell-Cotes, the man who used to own the Royal Bath and an instrumental figure in turning Bournemouth into an upmarket resort worthy of a Pullman train service.

With its turrets and towers and playful exuberance, the house – a gift to Merton's wife Annie – is a wonderfully flamboyant expression of the late Victorian era. Subsequently bequeathed to the town, it is now both a museum and a gallery containing a cornucopia of artworks including Dante Gabriel Rosset-

HOW TO DO IT

The Northern Belle (01270 899681; northernbelle.co.uk) offers a variety of outings along scenic routes throughout Britain. Afternoon tea trips from £210 per person. The next Bournemouth Belle journey will be in July 2022. From £399 per person.

The Dorset Belle (01202 800580; dorsetbelle.com) runs cruises of Poole Harbour and trips to Swanage. From £10 (adult); £5 (child). The Russell-Cotes House and Gallery (01202 128000; russellcotes.com) opens Tue-Sun. Admission: £7.50 (adult); £4 (child).

For more on what to see and do and where to stay in Bournemouth, see telegraph.co.uk/tt-bournemouth and coastwiththetmost.com Martyn Pring's *Luxury Railway Travel: a Social and Business History* (Pen & Sword Transport) contains a chapter telling the colourful story of the Bournemouth Belle.



ti's *Venus Verticordia* and Albert Moore's *Midsummer*, a particular favourite of Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The Royal Bath Hotel is, alas, no longer the grande dame it was. With the advent of air travel, the rich and the famous began to set their sights further afield and, along with its Pullman train service, the town, while remaining a popular resort, lost some of its five-star allure. But the Russell-Cotes house provides a thrilling glimpse into the world of a successful Victorian entrepreneur, a lover of art and travel and a man who very much succeeded in putting Bournemouth on the holiday map.

We would have loved to have lingered in this treasure trove of a house, but we had a train to catch: the 17.50 Bournemouth Belle to London Victoria via the 1930s. Awaiting us was a convivial evening involving glasses of champagne, a five-course meal, amusing exchanges and entertainment in the form of jazz musicians and a magician wandering from table to table.

Magic in motion. What's not to like indeed?

What's not to like? It transports us to a golden age of travel where service comes with a smile

