

Reviewed by Paul Atterbury: Boat Trains by Martyn Pring

For my generation, childhood memories of the great days of railway travel are both sharp and enduring

Martin Pring mentions a trip to Southampton docks on a school special, while mine is standing with a school friend on the footbridge at Elmstead Woods station and watching the grand blue Wagons-Lits carriages of the Night Ferry pass beneath us on their way to Victoria. Naturally, steam is a key component in these, and many similar memories, and images of steam abound in Martyn's latest book. His first book, *Luxury Railway Travel*, set a high standard, bringing together as it did railway and travel history, business and economics, politics, romance and glamour. *Boat Trains*, his new book, easily matches that standard and offers an equally enthralling ride.

One of Brunel's many revolutionary visions was the natural interdependence of trains and ships, and his Great Western Railway was conceived as the first stage in an international journey connecting Britain and America. As ever, it took the rest of the world a while to catch up but by the end of the Victorian era many railway companies were operating fast, luxurious trains that linked together rail and sea.

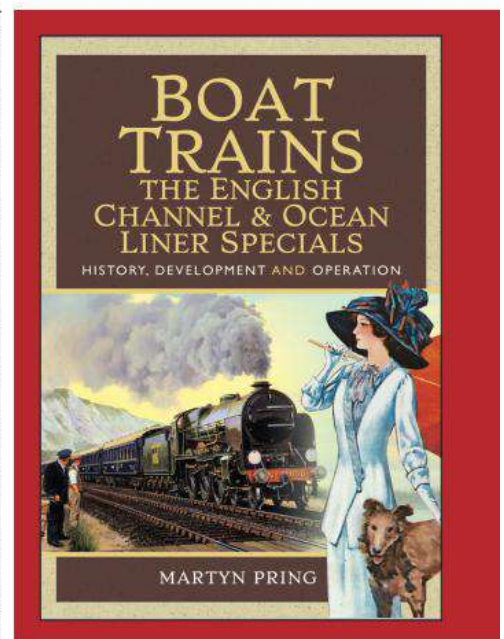
This process expanded hugely during the Edwardian era, and then probably reached its peak during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in terms of luxury, speed and glamour. The relationship between ships and trains was a complex one that went far beyond speed and glamour, though these were always important elements. In essence it took two forms, both covered in this book. First there were the boat trains that ran timetabled services to connect with ships owned and operated by railway companies, on cross channel and similar local services. Second there were the boat trains that were specials carrying passengers to and from ocean liners docked in major ports. This book examines the history, economics and operation of both, the Martyn's rich text is supported by a wonderful range of illustrations that make generous use of publicity and promotional material, posters and postcards, as well as showing the actual trains, and the life they represented.

Before the First World War, railway

companies had developed ports all around Britain and built fleets of ships to sail from these ports on international journeys. They carried freight, passengers, cars and sometimes actual trains. The impact of the war expanded this network hugely and a glance at any large scale railway map of the interwar years will show a dense network of shipping services radiating out from British ports, to the Channel Islands, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia, Spain and elsewhere, many of which survived into the era of British Rail.

This book concentrates on the routes from English Channel ports, and the boat trains that served them, mostly to destinations in France and Belgium. Hopefully, another book will cover those serving Ireland and other parts of Europe. The emphasis is therefore on boat train services to Dover, Folkestone, Newhaven, Portsmouth, Southampton and Weymouth. Martyn brings to life the great days of the named boat trains, with luxury carriages and smart headboard-carrying locomotives, the greatest of which was, inevitably, the Golden Arrow. He also looks at some of the classic luxury services that ran through Europe from ports such as Calais. There is also good coverage of the Night Ferry, that most romantic of trains that, against the odds continued to run until October 1980. Sadly, the book also marks the passing of several once great cross Channel railway stations, notably Dover Marine, Folkestone harbour, Southampton and Weymouth. In the late 1980s I travelled regularly to Dieppe from Newhaven, travelling from Victoria in a train of standard elderly EMU stock that was still labelled as a boat train in the timetable and on the departure board. This branding soon vanished.

The second half of the book is about that other kind of boat train, the ocean liner express. This is revealing about not just the development of these dedicated luxury services from the late Victorian period, but also about the close relationship between railways and shipping companies, and the importance of this passenger traffic in the development of ports in Liverpool and Southampton, and their dense rail networks



and modern terminals. It shines a light on the great rivalry between these two ports for the North American trade, and the gradual dominance of Southampton, highlighting another battle, between the LNWR and the LSWR, Euston versus Waterloo.

In some way the most interesting part of this section looks at the long forgotten ocean liner ports developed by railway ambitions, Plymouth, Bristol and Fishguard. Great images bring these places back to life, along with the special trains that served them. The final section covers the inevitable decline of the ocean liner special, as cars and planes take over, and then the successful revival of the concept as a luxury train, operated by companies such as VSOE and Belmont.

The value of Martyn Pring's books is that, while they are about trains, they tell us so much more, about social history, politics, economics and the great contribution made by the railway in the development of international travel. I shall look forward to the next one.