



Leaving Aberystwyth



To appreciate this issue of Welsh Postal Oddities more fully it helps if you are familiar with the Louie Knight Aberystwyth novels of Malcolm Price, the 'King of Welsh Noir'. Aberystwyth may on the surface appear to be an archetypal sea-side town, with pier amusement arcade, the aromas of hot dogs and candy floss, buckets and spades, and sticks of sea-side rock, but beneath this is a dark underbelly. It is a town where the 24-hour whelk stalls hint at an underworld in the grip of the Druid crime lords, and populated by people with more skeletons in their cupboards than a wholesale anatomist's supplier's warehouse: many of these skeletons are not for those of a sensitive nature. Against this backdrop there will be those who want to, and those who need to leave Aberystwyth for good. Put simply, they wish to disappear. In the old days they might emigrate to Patagonia or Hughesovka (the Welsh-speaking city on the River Volga), or join the Welsh Foreign Legion for life. More recently making an informal declaration of leaving is the acknowledged way of wiping the slate clean, but by doing so you effectively cease to exist, and can never return. Contracts taken out on you or warrants issued are cancelled, newspaper archives are altered and even school records are redacted. Photographs are taken down and burned, and your name will never be mentioned again. You no longer existed in Aberystwyth. The correct term for this is 'Exigistence'. There is no prodigal son type return either. If you do there are those whose duty it is to rectify the matter, even if in disguise as a tourist many years later. Sufficient to say that Aberystwyth has a good supply of deep water and quick setting cement.

Surprisingly for a small town Aberystwyth is the starting point for three rail journeys. There is the main line which winds across Mid-Wales heading across the border to Shrewsbury. It is certainly picturesque, passing sea, estuary, forest and mountain, but to leave the town this way lacks finesse. It is too easy and too quick. Then there is the narrow-gauge Vale of Rheidol Railway which clings to the hillsides on its way up the valley to Devils Bridge. There is not much here - a large hotel of faded glory, where in a corner the former ballroom you can have a cup of tea at a table with a plastic table cloth. And of course there is a bridge. Actually you can't see this from the road, but a path takes you below where you finally see a stream at the bottom of a crack in the rocks, and looking up you see it is actually three bridges built on top of each other. Will the most recent bridge fail too and will they build a fourth on top of it? Leaving Aber by this route is quaint but touristy. You should be able to just fade away; hard to do in the midst of families from the Midlands with children misbehaving, and photographs being taken every which way.

This leaves the Aberystwyth Cliff Railway. Starting at the north end of the promenade it rises unswervingly up Constitution Hill. There are no stations or stops on route, just a final destination - the top of the hill. The Aberystwyth Cliff Railway is arguably the shortest railway in Wales, at just 778 foot, but for those leaving the journey is probably the longest. Tradition states that those leaving town catch the first trip of the day. Call there at that time of day and there is a notice put out saying 'No Return Tickets Available'. This is the Point of No Return, you *will* have been observed. The motors start up, the cable tautens and the carriage starts to crawl up the hill at an undizzying speed. Time to reflect back on why you are leaving as more of the bay comes into view with every inch gained. The railway acts as a synapse between a past being left behind, and an uncertain future.

The origin of this railway was also escapism. At the top of the hill the Victorian entrepreneurs built an entertainment centre. Luna Park boasted rides, tearooms, ballrooms and various amusements; but try and find a picture of any of it now. Not even an old postcard view can be found. There is nothing left of it. Even the Camera Obscura there now is not the original.

This is where the stamps come into the story. They are not on general sale to the public, but are kept under the counter at the café. Those in the know know what to ask for. Over a steaming cup of tea they write their farewell cards to family, friends if they have any left, the police of courts, or the Druids. The stamp is affixed and the card is posted in the box just outside. A special arrangement with the local post office ensures these cards are collected on that morning and delivered without further postage to addresses in the town by midday. By the evening you will not even be history.

The stamps have, over the past 30 years, only been issued in four values and with four illustrations, views all of which will be experienced by those taking this course of action. They have used the same design format but with some colour changes. All stamps have a large coloured X to help them be identified easily in order to be delivered that same morning. The original 50p stamp from 1981 had green text and a picture of the camera obscura standing on top of the hill. In 1988 the value rose to 75p and appropriately the text changed to rose. It showed the carriage just coming into the station. By 1997 a £1 stamp was in use with a sort of gold coloured text and a view of the bay from the top of the hill, with the carriage leaving empty. A £2 stamp came in 2003. This had rusty coloured text and depicted the station at the end of the promenade. The cost may sound expensive, but a postcard was supplied with each stamp and it would deter casual buyers. The postcard pictures may seem an odd choice, but they are designed as a final stab of irony. However some of the cards messages were not as contrite as the recipient may have wished. Positioning of the stamps was also said to be a code, but what it was has been lost. The stamps were cancelled (some say obliterated) with a Constitution Hill Summit handstamp. The stamps were sold under strict conditions and collecting unused examples often necessitated the collector to adopt the despondent and haunted look of someone needing to leave their home town. Used examples may be rarer as the postcards were invariably burned soon after delivery, though some postcards were kept by the authorities and filed for reference.

After posting the cards you turn your back on the town forever and take the cliff path. You may stay awhile at Clarach Bay, living for a while on the beach in a shelter made of driftwood, seaweed and discarded supermarket bags, scavenging for food on the foreshore. Or they may get a job at the holiday camp swabbing the floors and walls of the guest accommodation, and still scavenge for food on the foreshore. Eventually though everyone takes the cross-country path to Talybont¹ and then heads inland and uphill, skirting the Nant-y-Moch reservoir, and crossing the Pumlumon range. From here your path depends where you cross the mountain, for just on the east side, a mile or so apart, are the sources of two long rivers. Following the River Severn leads to England, while the Wye valley takes you down to South Wales. Most make no conscious choice; they go where their feet take them never to be seen again; literally in some cases when animal gnawed human bones are found on the moorland; evidence for The Beast of Bala, *Felis cambiensis*.

¹ In 1898-99 the leavers may have been able to catch yet another train just outside Clarach, at Llanfihangel where the Plynlimon & Hafan Tramway could have taken them halfway up the mountain; but only on a Monday when the solitary passenger carriage was used. The tramway went bust after under two years.