



Meet Ivor the Engine



The Merioneth and Llantysilly Rail Traction Company Limited (henceforth known as the M&LRTCL) has a unique place in Welsh railway history. Forgotten in 1921 when all the small companies were swallowed up by the 'Big Four', ignored in 1948 when the railways were nationalised, and somehow missed when the Beeching Axe fell on unprofitable lines; Rumour has it that Mrs Porty, the eccentric owner at the time, had some influence in this. The Railway lies in the top left hand corner of Wales, linking the village of Llaniog to the main line down by the coastal resorts. It is better known as the home of Ivor the Engine, familiar to children of all ages through Oliver Postgate's animations. Many will be surprised to know that not only was the M&LRTCL a real railway, but that it still operates a weekend service throughout the year, and daily services in the summer months. And Ivor still creaks and groans along the tracks, though Jones the Steam, his driver for many years, has long since retired - thankfully as his eyesight wasn't exactly 20/20 all those years ago.

Throughout its working history it has been possible to send a railway letter via the M&LRTCL, though from 1945 till 1975 the service was very rarely used.

In 1891 the GPO and 75 railway companies signed up to the Railways Letter Agreement. This was necessary because customers saw that the railways could provide an alternative delivery system for letters, but the GPO had a monopoly on transport and delivery of letters. The Agreement allowed the signatories to carry mail handed in at a station to another station. There, it could be collected in person or, providing there was the correct postage stamps affixed, be forwarded to the GPO for delivery. There were some stipulations. Railway letter fees were to be double the GPO rate. The stamps also had to be of a standard design. However this only applied to letters as the GPO had no monopoly on parcels or printed matter. So the railway companies had a freer rein when it came to these. So the M&LRTCL had its own railway letter stamps, in the standard green design, from its inception in 1905 right up to 1939 when war broke out. Two pence and three pence stamps in a variety of shades and small variations are known. The company would transport newspapers up to Llaniog for ¼d for single editions, or 2d for a bundle. Because printing ¼d stamps would have swallowed up any profits a single paper was merely rubber stamped, but there were 2d crimson stamps available for the weekly magazine delivery. There was much speculation about the magazines that Dai Station received; he always insisted on opening the package on arrival and would then disappear for 15-20 minutes. These original stamps have rather crude perforations, but it is said that each sheet was hand perforated on an old maid's thigh. Specialised collectors claim to be able to identify the individual perforation styles created by these old ladies and strive to have examples from each of them in their collections.



The railway continued on its own sweet way after being excluded from nationalisation in 1948, but never made a profit despite being run on a shoe-string. A lifeline of sorts came in 1958 when the original animation series was broadcast, though in those days children's television wasn't big business like it is today and merchandising (aka cashing-in on a good thing and milking fans dry) was almost unknown. Luckily, the films were remade in colour in 1975 and the railway's fortunes turned. Ivor even got a new boiler and new coat of paint. The railway letter service was restarted, but now, with the railway more of a tourist attraction, the letters are mostly souvenirs or collectors items.

There have been many issues since 1980, and it is beyond the scope of this little sampler to even list them all. If you like these it should be possible to collect most of the post-1975 stamps, even in all their varieties. Here, though, are a couple of examples.

The first is the 30p stamp from 1995, and shows a latter day Ivor in steam and a pair of coaches waiting at Llaniog station. The sharp eyed amongst you will have noticed the slight change of name of the railway. This was a legal necessity when the railway was taken over by "paid volunteers" in 1978. The letter fee was raised to 35p in March 1996, but due to a freak accident at the printing works involving a balloon, a tin of baked beans and a descendant of Bluebell the donkey (she was Ivor's friend) the new stamps were not ready on time, so the 1995 stamps were overprinted.

The other stamp also has a bit of a story behind it. As everyone who has watched Ivor the Engine knows Ivor was a keen member of the Choral Society after his whistle was replaced by three organ pipes. In late December though, because the days are so short, if Ivor kept to the usual timetable he would get to practice late. So for the last journey of the day from 15th till 31st December Ivor was allowed to shave nearly 5 minutes off the journey, which suited Ivor who hated timetables anyway, and this run became known as the Solstice Express. This tradition was resurrected in 2004 and a special stamp just for this run has been in use since 2004 at a premium rate of 50p. The stamp shows a still from the animations with Ivor and passengers (travelling 2nd class). Ivor is fitted with a snow plough just to ensure he arrives for choir practice on time. It should be pointed out that during the longer days of summer Ivor can take his time on his last run, again much to the annoyance of Dai station,