Bewdley Memories

BRIAN GLEAVES

My visits to Bewdley visiting an old school friend Tony Winnall in recent years have rekindled my childhood memories, including several holidays taken in this scenic and very interesting part of the Severn Valley.

I was an only child and lived with my parents in Wolverhampton, which these days seems to be just up the road when driving along the A449. We didn't own a car so public transport was always used to go on holiday. When we stayed in Bewdley, we went by corporation bus into Wolverhampton and then a Midland Red bus to Stourbridge. It was here that I was usually sick in the public toilet but fortunately this travel-sickness problem only lasted for about three years! We then took another Midland Red bus to Kidderminster Railway Station where, to my great delight, we travelled on a steam train, or diesel rail car, to Northwood Halt which was the very next stop after Bewdley. This was a Request Stop so we always had to speak to the guard at the station before getting on the train. When we arrived with our suitcases, which included bedding, we had to walk uphill through some quite steep fields and find whichever caravan we had booked for the holiday. The first year (which I think was 1944) we were in a static converted railway carriage which was very atmospheric and great fun to be in but in following years we stayed in conventional caravans.

There were usually other children to play with and as far as I can remember the weather was mostly warm and sunny. The woods were a great place to explore and play in and I soon got used to the distinctive smell of the clumps of wild garlic which seemed to be everywhere. Sometimes I would go down to the level crossing with other children and open the gates for cars to pass through; usually the driver would give us a penny, threepenny bit or very rarely, a silver sixpence which we would share. Mum and Dad enjoyed walking and nearly every day we would walk up the river on the footpaths, sometimes as far as Arley where occasionally we crossed the river on a cable-ferryboat which used river currents to move between banks. When we had crossed, we would walk up the lane to the Harbour Inn for drinks, or Arley railway station to watch the trains.

Sometimes we walked down the river to Bewdley where there were lots of things to do apart from just shopping. At the end of the bridge, not in the town, there was a cinema which we usually went to if there was a suitable film to watch. Along the riverside, near the bridge, there were cafes and a fish and chip shop. One of these had a line marked high up on the inside wall and words which read something like 'Flood level Feb/March 1947'. Across the road from the cafes there were steps leading down to a long pontoon on the river where rowing boats were moored for hire.

One evening in 1945 I was taken to a bonfire in Bewdley which celebrated either the end of the war in Europe or with Japan. It was a huge fire, the first bonfire I'd ever seen, and I can still remember the heat on my face; but I don't think there was a proper firework display because of wartime rules and shortages.

In later years, when I was in the 8th Wolverhampton Scouts, a few of us would sometimes catch the last bus on Friday or Saturday night from Wolverhampton to Bridgnorth and then, overnight, we would walk along the riverside footpath to Bewdley. Then the following morning we would catch an early steam train or diesel rail car up to Bridgnorth travelling back to Wolverhampton on the bus. On our walks we often left the river path and went into the Wyre Forest, following the forest paths or just trying to walk through the trees in a straight line. Once, when we were going down a bank with patches of sand, heather, and bushes, I started to run down and jump over some fallen silver birch trees. On the other side I was surprised and interested to have to avoid three or four adders basking on the sand. We spent some time there watching them and this was the highlight of our expedition. When we were walking out of the forest, we met a farmer who asked us what we had been doing. We told him and, of course mentioned the snakes, and he said "Did you kill the blighters?" We of course said "No" and he replied that we should have done because he sometimes lost pigs when they were bitten on their snouts foraging amongst the undergrowth!

I hope that my memories have struck chords with those of you who read this and possibly share my belief that the Wyre Forest and the Severn Valley are very special places and deserve to continue to be a great source of enjoyment for all those who maintain, manage, visit, and explore them.