

Living in the past

(Featured in The Sunday Times Home Section)

Fifty years after the last train pulled out, two neighbouring railway stations in rural Herefordshire are thriving. Terry Hope reports on their miraculous survival and rebirth as the ultimate in themed living accommodation

Guests who spend a night at Rowden Mill Station don't forget the experience in a hurry. After a comfortable night spent sleeping in a converted 1930s inspection coach that once formed part of the 'Coronation Scot' express, a diesel shunter driven by the host potters down the siding, couples up and tows them into the platform for a leisurely breakfast. It must rank as the country's best full size train set, and the whole scene is a million miles removed from the scene of desolation that once existed at this site.

The station was situated on a sleepy rural branch line that ran for 13 miles from Leominster to Bromyard in Herefordshire. The route was so quiet that it managed to get itself marked down for closure a full ten years before the infamous Dr Beeching appeared on the scene, and it's fair to say that local opposition to the plan was fairly subdued. Each train carried on average just five passengers, and there were only seven season ticket holders to be found on the entire route.

In a scenario that was to be acted out up and down the country over the following years the last train ran with appropriate ceremony on September 13, 1952, carrying a wreath with the mournful words 'Rest in Peace.' Following a chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne,' the passengers departed, the station doors were locked for the final time and nature began the steady process of reclaiming the route.

For Rowden Mill, the last day of service was just about the only human activity that it was to see for over three decades, during which time the four-acre site became totally overgrown. When John Wilkinson, an engineer by trade, came across the station in 1984 the scene was one of complete devastation. The brick and stone shell of the station was just about all that had survived, the windows having rotted completely away and fallen in on themselves, while a large tree growing inside the building had belligerently pushed itself through the roof. "Let's put it this way," says John, grimacing at the recollection. "There was no need for me to collect the keys before I went to see it."

The tranquillity of the situation, however, coupled with a brave vision of how it could all come back to life persuaded him to take the plunge. "It was just one of those instant Sunday afternoon decisions," he says. He is reluctant to reveal how much he paid for the derelict site, although he admits the price tag reflected the station's condition. "It wasn't difficult to get a mortgage because, from the perspective of this day and age, it didn't cost a lot of money."

The true cost was to come over the next few years as he toiled away to reach a point where the station building could be made habitable again. A full five years of discovering the joys of caravan living - and that on a site with few services - was to follow, before eventually he was able to experience the simple pleasure of a roof over his head once again. It took as long again until he was finally able to consider that he had reached the point where all that was left to do was some fine-tuning.

Although converted, the interior still follows the layout of the original station. "The booking office is now the kitchen," says John, "the waiting room is the lounge, the ladies waiting room is the bedroom, the porter's room is another bedroom and the gents performs a similar function to the one it did during its lifetime, serving as the bathroom and toilet. I did decide, however, to take out the slabs of grey slate that made up the original urinal."

Separated by just two and a quarter miles (by rail that is - it's four miles by road), the next station down the line is Fencote. Outwardly identical to Rowden Mill, after closure a partial conversion had been carried out to enable it to serve as a holiday let. Following this it became permanent living

accommodation, and a couple of changes of hands later it was sold in 1986 to Ken Matthews, an ex-railwayman from Swindon.

Through nothing more than coincidence and a shared interest in railway history, both station owners independently decided that they wanted to restore their properties to enable them to become not just comfortable homes but an accurate recreation of their former selves. While there are dozens of redundant stations converted to provide living accommodation around the country, many of them bear little resemblance to the buildings that once had a railway purpose: here the aim was quite different, and, in each case, the full job required everything from name boards, station lighting and even the track between the platforms to be reinstated.

The nature of the task was such that it defied all conventional house rebuilding logic. There was no question, for example, of using modern-day building materials throughout the renovations. Although neither station has listed status, and planning officers in the area proved sympathetic to rebuilding work that would improve the condition of two buildings that were important in terms of local history, both John and Ken were determined to set their own parameters and to only use reclaimed materials that had genuine railway connections.

“I don’t see it as a downside of living in a railway station,” says Ken. “I enjoy the challenge of finding things that are authentic to the period and the history of the station, and it’s a search that’s ongoing.” A common aim has resulted in a spirit of friendly competition between the two owners, and knowledge has been pooled over the years to enable both stations to be faithfully rebuilt, with leads that might result in yet another artefact being brought back to enhance the effect being passed regularly between the pair.

Another consideration in rebuilding terms was the fact that, at both Rowden Mill and Fencote, the station itself was only part of the story. Scattered all around were the auxiliary buildings that, in a different age, were vital to the operation of even the smaller country railway stations: at Fencote there was the shell of a signal box, a goods shed and a run-down waiting room. Rowden Mill, much to its owner’s surprise, had a cattle dock waiting to be discovered beneath the undergrowth, a parcels shed and the filled-in site of a weighbridge.

Finding a use for these and tying them in so that they fulfilled a role as an extension of the main house was something that stretched the ingenuity of both owners: at Rowden Mill the parcels shed has become a family sports centre, complete with table tennis table, while the Fencote waiting room now serves as a detached guest bedroom with a platform all to itself for times when relatives and friends come to stay.

Meanwhile items such as the Rowden Mill weighbridge and Fencote signal box – now linked up to four signal arms and a set of points - have been restored to their original use for no better reason than historical accuracy and the personal satisfaction of the station occupants.

Realising the interest that their homes might have to others, John and Ken decided, along with a narrow gauge railway that operates on the site of neighbouring Bromyard station, to have a joint open weekend in 1997, money raised being donated to local charities. It was so successful that the exercise is being repeated on September 14/15 to mark the 50th anniversary of the closure of the line. It’s the last public opening of the sites until April 2008 and admission is £3 for adults, £2 for senior citizens and £1 for children, a fee that includes admission to all three sites. Opening times are 12-6pm each day with tickets available from both Rowden Mill and Fencote.

“Living in a close-knit area such as this we just thought that it would be appropriate to put something back,” says Ken. “It’s quite a nice idea that, even though they have both been closed for half a century, the stations are still capable of performing a useful role in the community.”

- A commemorative booklet featuring pictures of the Leominster to Bromyard railway during its operational days plus the story of the closure and the rebirth of Rowden Mill and Fencote stations is available for £6.95 plus 65p p&p. Cheques should be made out to Rowden Mill

Station Restoration Fund, and the address is: Rowden Mill Station, Rowden, Bredenbury, Herefordshire, HR7 4LS.