

THE OLD WEST CLARE



It took an ass and cart at each end and the thrust of the great Southern and West Clare engines to get most Limerick holiday-makers to the sea some three score years ago.

Those of us who are getting long in our artificial teeth can vividly recall the momentous days of the twenties and the link with such a miscellaneous assortment of transport. The most colourful part of the journey to Lahinch and Kilkee started, of course, when we joined the old West Clare Railway, immortalised by Percy French in one of his best known songs "Are ye right there, Michael?".

Percy voiced his misgivings about when the journey would end, with:

"Are ye right there, Michael, are ye right?

Do ye think that we'll be there before the night?"

Ye couldn't say for sartain, ye were so late in startin',

But we might now, Michael, so we might".

Recently he could have looked down from his celestial abode at would-be travellers buying sleeping-bags at a British airport, because industrial action had decided they would

By Frank Roberts

not be going anywhere "before the night". And he might well have mused that things were never that bad on the old West Clare.

It was quite early in the day when the great adventure began for the Limerick folk. The asses and donkeys brought the big tin trunks and bulging suitcases to the railway station, escorted by boys in sailor suits - the fashion of the time - yet each cherishing a fantasy of becoming an engine driver one day. Many hours later, on arrival at the Clare seaside resorts, the holiday-makers would engage more cart owners to deliver their belongings to lodges, boarding-houses and hotels.

Armed with buckets and shovels, shrimp nets and fishing rods, and with the girls clutching their dolls, the whooping escort was spot on, and showing little sign of weariness. After all, it was a big day - a very big day.

Oh! those glamorous times packed with action at the twelve stops along the West Clare, with horse-drawn carts now pressed into service to handle heavy merchandise from Ennis and Limerick.

And all the time to-ing and fro-ing of braying asses and donkeys, with neighing horses emphasising this

cacophony of riotous discord.

Here's Percy French again, this time anxious about a particular delivery:

"Are ye right there, Michael, are ye right?

Have ye got the parcel there for Mrs. White?

Ye haven't, oh begorra, say it's coming down to-morrow,

And it might now, Michael, so it might".

How those gradients could take it out of the old puff-puff if there were too many passengers or parcels aboard. To the delight of the holiday kids, some men would have to get out to lighten the load, and according to the song:

"Uphill the old engine is toiling,

The passengers push with a will,

You're in luck when you reach Ennistymon,

For all the way home is downhill".

By the time we made it to Moyasta Junction, much in evidence was the sticky mess of toffee-apple, squashed bun and broken biscuits; perhaps it was just as well the West Clare had wooden seats. You travelled well prepared for that leisurely journey over many hours, bringing almost a day's rations with flasks of tea and bottles of milk.

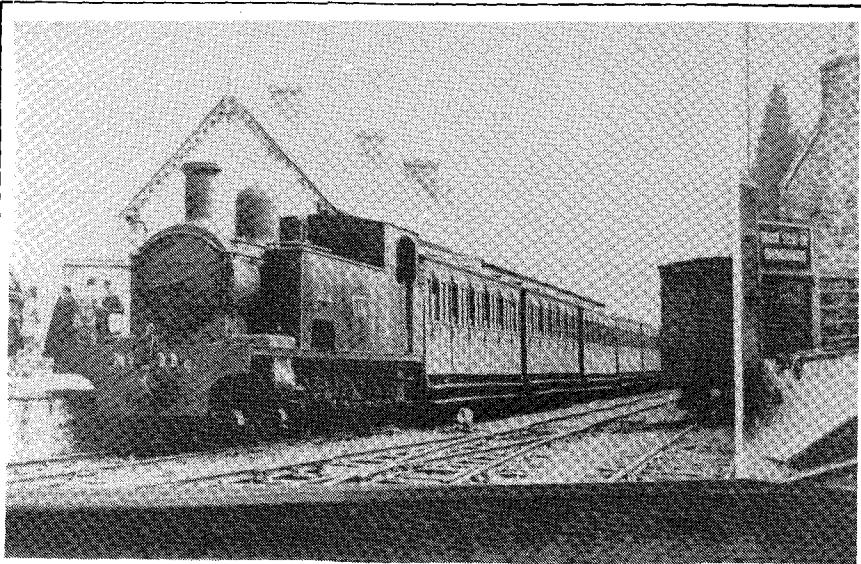
Percy French had some qualms about ever reaching Kilkee:

"Kilkee! Oh, you never get near it!

You're in luck if the train brings you back,

For the permanent way is so queer, it spends most of the time off the track".

But we looked forward eagerly to getting near it, as we waited breathlessly for the last marker to come into view. Suddenly, there it was: the shell of the old coastguard station silhouetted against the golden glory of the western sky. Tomorrow it would be the venue for a cowboys and injuns death or glory struggle. Ah, yes, we did make it before the night ... a night which would bring dreams of sand castles and pollock holes, before awaking refreshed to go haring off on a wonderful voyage of discovery.



The West Clare railway, Kilkee, 1934.