

Michael Portillo solves two mysteries without knowing it – Ray Pearce

I am a regular visitor to Scotland and I take many pictures transferring them to my computer. When my sister's daughter bought and renovated a property on North Uist in the Outer Hebrides I told her about the photo of the isolated white Kirk on a hillside and asked her if she knew where it was. She did not. I would add that the property they have bought is 6 miles from the nearest shop, the Co-Op in Sollars. A mystery until Michael Portillo came along with his programme about railways in Scotland. It was the famous journey from Fort William to Mallaig on what I know as the Jacobite Express but which appeared to be renamed The Hogwarts Express. I have travelled on it several times and once asked fellow travellers if they were Watford football club supporters with their gold and black scarves. Oh No they said we support Hogwarts.



I travelled on this train when going to the Isle of Skye. Before that I had travelled from Inverness to the Kyle of Lochalsh giving me my first ever view of Skye. I had also been to Aviemore for the Strathspey steam railway to Broomhill. This featured in a TV series as Glenbogle station.

Whilst travelling towards Mallaig there suddenly on the left side of the train appeared the white Kirk on the hill so we now all know where it is.

The second Michael Portillo story takes us to North Wales near Wrexham. Gresford to be precise. It was here in September 1934 when a dreadful disaster took place underground at Gresford

colliery. 266 miners lost their lives and Mr Portillo attended a memorial service many years later to commemorate the tragedy.



The music was provided by the Ifton colliery band which immediately jolted my memory. In 1957 when working as a clerk in Lloyds Bank, Shrewsbury the local Institute of Bankers organised a trip to Ifton colliery, near Oswestry. We all went down the colliery to the pit face and I remember thinking how hot it was underground and quite unpleasant. The pit was opened in 1913 and closed in 1968 but the band plays on. Memories of a by-gone era.

By Ray Pearce 25.4.2022