



Close Ties: The Railway Station as a Hub of photo- graphic Exchange

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These cathedrals of the new humanities are the meeting points of nations, the centre where all converges, the nucleus of the huge stars whose iron rays stretch out to the ends of the earth.

Pierre Jules Théophile Gautier¹

'Stations are the cathedrals of our century', proposed an anonymous contributor to *The Building News* in 1875. As monasteries and cathedrals were to the 13th century, so railway terminals and hotels were to the 19th. The essay went on to propose that cathedrals and stations were the only truly representative buildings that those centuries possessed.²

Railway stations invited comparison with cathedrals because both the station and the cathedral symbolised important cultural preoccupations and moral values of their age. As a point of transit, both formed the central node in a network of mobility and institutional power, providing a massive physical structure that also carried great symbolic significance. The Gothic cathedral and the Victorian railway terminus were similar to each other in another way: as primary focal points of artistic and engineering activity, both served as cultural meeting points for the intellectual and cultural networks that helped formulate the visual processes, techniques and values of their periods.

Photography's history in the first century after its invention in 1839 offers a record of the railway station's importance as a new source of photographic collaboration, and a window through which to glimpse, at least for a moment, the connections, relationships and ordinary friendships that structured early photographic interests, too often overlooked by dominant photographic studies, which emphasise individual photographers working in isolation. Even the physical construction of the railway lines provided artists and engineers with new modes of visual representation. Praising the contribution of photography to the building of the rail infrastructure of the British Empire in a speech delivered to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1858, the British palaeontologist Richard Owen boasted that 'The engineer at home can ascertain, by photographs transmitted by successive mails, the weekly progress, brick by brick, board by board, nail by nail, of the most complex works on the Indian or other remote railroads.'³

Albumen photograph, c. 1868, showing the construction of the roof of St Pancras station, in *Photographs of the Works in Progress of the Midland Railway-Extension to London* (two volumes), c. 1867–68. (Photograph album (1988–8759), vol. 2, image reference 1086/80, National Railway Museum, York)

An album of photographs commissioned by the Midland Railway to document the construction of London's St Pancras station, 1867–68, is a record of both engineering virtuosity and social achievement.⁴ A photograph of the construction of the roof of St Pancras station records a stage in the progress of the building of the Midland Railway extension in London.⁵ Completed by the engineer William Henry Barlow in 1868, the train shed was the largest single-span structure built up to that time. The way in which the St Pancras station architecture borrowed explicitly from the architecture of a Gothic cathedral may be seen in the vaulted roof, which not only unified the space and protected travellers from the elements but also permitted the dispersal of smoke from trains.

An albumen photograph of a geological cutting from a railroad construction near Leeds in 1890 shows the way in which the Victorian excavation of geological beds for modern railway construction provided unique opportunities for digging beneath the surface in order to visualise the traces of a deep past. Scientists in the Geological Photography Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science requested help in the 1880s from amateur photographers to compile a documentary record of England's sedimentary traces, instructing them in how to take photographs that would contribute to scientific geological knowledge. Armed with cameras and standard observation forms, many members of camera clubs headed for their nearest railway building site. >



W. H. Fox, dry-plate gelatine photograph of a rail cutting near Leeds, taken 1 January 1890. (BAAS Geological Photographs, accession No. P231865, Royal Geological Survey, Nottingham)

One such photograph, by amateur geologist and photographer W. H. Fox of York on New Year's Day 1890 using the gelatine dry-plate process, shows a sharp cut in the land that was made by civil engineers in the process of excavating a railway bed in a small farming town in North Yorkshire. The photograph was taken for inclusion in an album compiled by the British Association for the Advancement of Science's Geological Photographs Section using pictures solicited from photographers across the British Isles. It juxtaposes two scenes of time: first, the horizontal layers of flint shown in chalk formations that the process of building the new railway made visible to the eye; second, the lines of the railway that powerfully direct the eye into the distance.⁶

Photographs facilitated a new, industrial notion of disciplined time and, in this specific example, also placed the viewer in a previously unseen ancient geological landscape. If medieval choirs filled European cathedrals with sound, 'the immense and distant sound of time' was traced 600 years later through rail travel. So wrote American writer Thomas Wolfe in his laudatory prose poem about the railway station published in 1940:

Few buildings are vast enough
To hold the sound of time
And now it seemed to him
That there was a superb fitness in the fact
That the one which held it better than all others
Should be a railroad station.
For here, as nowhere else on earth,
Men were brought together for a moment
At the beginning or end
Of their innumerable journeys.⁷

As official rail photography grew in importance and the railway's publicity machines became more sophisticated, amateur photographers continued to flock to rail stations to photograph moving trains and other phenomena expressive of the new age of movement. Members of Britain's prestigious Railway Photographic Society, formed in 1922, circulated their prints to others in the club. Galvanised (and sometimes stung) by the feedback they received about their photographs, they sought to elevate the standard of railway photography by sharing and improving its techniques. Composition, definition and impression of scale mattered for these rail photographers. 'I am afraid this doesn't appeal to me. I quite appreciate the conditions, and that it was a "special" train, but I would like to see a shot from this viewpoint on a clear day', wrote a member in a typical report in the 1940s. Another observed that a photograph had a 'very nice pictorial effort'—'*made by the steam effects*'. Above all, they strove

to capture photographically what they saw as railway travel's special 'atmosphere'.⁸

From the late 1930s, an Anglican deacon (and, later, a canon), Eric Treacy, sought to put rail photography on a new footing by making images that captured what he called the 'spirit' of the railways. A long-time member of the Railway Photographic Society, Treacy (or 'the footplate bishop', as he became widely known) published rail photographs in various magazines during the 1930s, and published his first book of images in 1946, after serving as a military chaplain during the Second World War. He came to question the value of an uncompromising documentary approach to photographic train portraiture, expressing his belief that 'it should be possible to place the train in relation to the landscape so that the result is a picture rather than a mere photographic record':

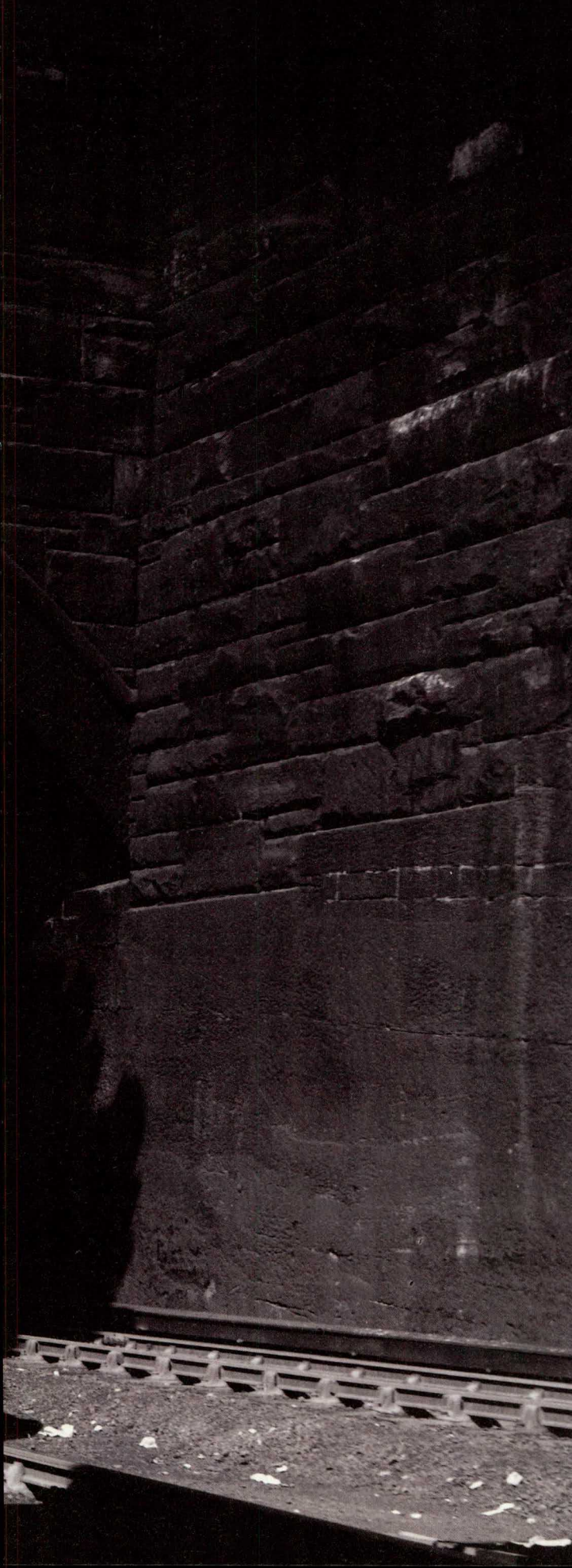
I am a loyal member of the Railway Photographic Society, but that does not prevent me from levelling a friendly criticism at the Society. I feel that they have done much to standardise our conception of railway photography. Most of the leading photographers belong to the R.P.S. [Royal Photographic Society], and have therefore made their pictures with an eye to the criticisms of their fellow members—with the result that the aim has too often been to produce a flawless portrait of a train.⁹

To introduce a note of variety ('to capture more side than one of the railway scene'), he enlisted the help of others:

Recently I took a friend of mine who is an F.R.P.S.¹⁰ photographing on the railway and he was ecstatic at the artistic possibilities of the railway setting. Immediately, he saw possibilities that I had never dreamt of: simply because I was in a rut and he came to it with the eye of an artist.

Because his parish in Edge Hill, near Liverpool Lime Street Station, encompassed a large locomotive depot, Treacy came to know many of the men who worked on the railroad. His appreciation of this wider aspect of the railway and its workers may be seen clearly in several of his photographs in which signalmen, engineers or track repairers helped him achieve balance and composition in his picture, in marked contrast to the work of most other railway photographers, many of whom tended to see such incursions as distracting.¹¹ On some occasions, especially hot summer days when steam was often harder to generate, help would take the form of 'smoke by arrangement'—a shovelful of coal tossed by the fireman into the firebox at just the right time could make all the difference to a picture. >





Eric Treacy, photograph of a steam locomotive bound for London, c. early 1950, capturing the movement of a train exiting Liverpool Lime Street Station with a puff of smoke. (The Treacy Collection (#10323101), National Railway Museum, York)

- 1 Cited in Jeffrey Richards and John M. Mackenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 3.
- 2 *The Building News* (1875). See esp. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: Frank William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 72.
- 3 'The British Association for the Advancement of Science', *Photographic News* (1858), Oct. 8, p. 49.
- 4 According to architectural historian Neil Levine, a photograph taken in 1852 of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève by the Bisson Frères is very likely the first commissioned photograph of a contemporary building. See Neil Levine, 'The template of photography in 19th century architectural representation', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (2012), vol. 71, No. 3, pp. 306–331.
- 5 Photograph album, *Photographs of the Works in Progress of the Midland Railway-Extension to London* (two volumes), c. 1867–68, National Railway Museum, York (1998–8759). Two photographers associated with the album have been identified as John Baker Pyne Junior, whose embossed stamp records that he was a photographer based at 167 Prince of Wales' Road in Haverstock Hill, London NW. According to Michael Pritchard's online 'Directory of London Photographers, 1841–1908', he was active from 1858 to 1878. His father, who had the same name, was vice-president of the Society of British Artists. Another was J. Ward, Photographer, of 78 Euston Road, London, who according to Pritchard was active between 1866 and 1871.
- 6 The photograph was used at the time by the British Association to characterise the geological 'Middle Chalk' formation (later described as the 'Welton Chalk Formation.') In Yorkshire, as shown here, the underlying stratum has the highest concentration of flints.
- 7 Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York: Harper, 1940), p. 48. The train was the most pervasive symbol in Thomas Wolfe's works. See Richard Walser, 'Thomas Wolfe's train as symbol', *Southern Literary Journal* (1988), vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 3–14.
- 8 Railway Photographic Society Folios (ALS5/14/D/1 CCB Herbert), National Railway Museum, York. The Railway Photographic Society lasted into the early 1970s, although the circulation of prints for criticism was in decline by then.
- 9 Eric Treacy, *Still More of My Best Railway Photographs* (London: Ian Allan, 1948), vol. 13, p. 4.
- 10 Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.
- 11 A memorial to Treacy's life in railway photography is commemorated with a plaque at Appleby station, where he died from a heart attack in 1978 while waiting to photograph the *Evening Star* on a steam special. The Treacy Collection of 12,000 photographs forms part of the National Railway Museum's archive of over 1.5 million images. With kind thanks to Ed Bartholomew, Curator of Image and Sound Collections, National Railway Museum, York, for his assistance with this research.

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