

Aberdovey by Train



Riding the railways across Wales to Bernard Darwin's favorite, one finds that less has changed than might be expected since the great man's day
by ADAM LAWRENCE

ABSENT A HELICOPTER, or perhaps a seaplane, there is no easy way to get from London to Aberdovey (or Aberdyfi, as its Welsh-speaking inhabitants spell the town). No three-lane highway traverses the hills and valleys of central Wales; no airport serves these rural fastnesses.

You can drive, but it will be a near five-hour journey, the first couple a slog up the motorway to Birmingham, then off into the hinterland between England and Wales. This is the Marches, held in medieval times by some independently minded barons, granted land by the English rulers on condition they protected the kingdom against Welsh raiders. The Romans were here, too: Forts in the small town of Caerswys and elsewhere testify that the Celtic population of these remote hills has never taken kindly to foreign domination.

On a good day, it's a beautiful drive. But often the hills are shrouded in mizzling rain, blocking the views and making the two-lane roads even harder work. Better to follow the example of golf's greatest chronicler, and go by train.

For better or worse, Aberdovey owes its fame to Bernard Darwin. It was, as he wrote in *The Golf Courses of the British Isles*, "the course my soul loves best." It was first created by his uncle, Colonel Arthur Ruck,

while on leave from his regiment in the 1880s, using flower pots for holes. And throughout his life, Darwin would return there, always by train, counting "the diminishing number of stations that divide him from it." For any golfer who has lost himself in Darwin's lyrical prose, a pilgrimage to Aberdovey is, at some point, a necessity.

The train trip really begins in Birmingham. Darwin would have used Snow Hill station, but now the subterranean wastes of New Street are our jumping-off point. It isn't the most appealing place to begin a pilgrimage, but then, late 19th- and early 20th-century Birmingham, the heart of Britain's manufacturing industry, would hardly have been beautiful, either.

Once the train has passed through the industrial West Midlands, though, the landscape opens up and the scenery is more alluring. This is some of the most isolated countryside in Britain, sheep and cows more common than humans. It's remarkable, actually, that the line survived the cuts of the early 1960s, when much of the rural rail network was removed. Luckily for us, a direct train still runs, several times daily, from New Street to the coast of mid-Wales. It isn't the romantic steam train of Darwin's day, but at least we can follow in his tracks. About three hours later, then, the train pulls into Aberdovey station.

KEVIN MURRAY, INSET, ALAMY

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