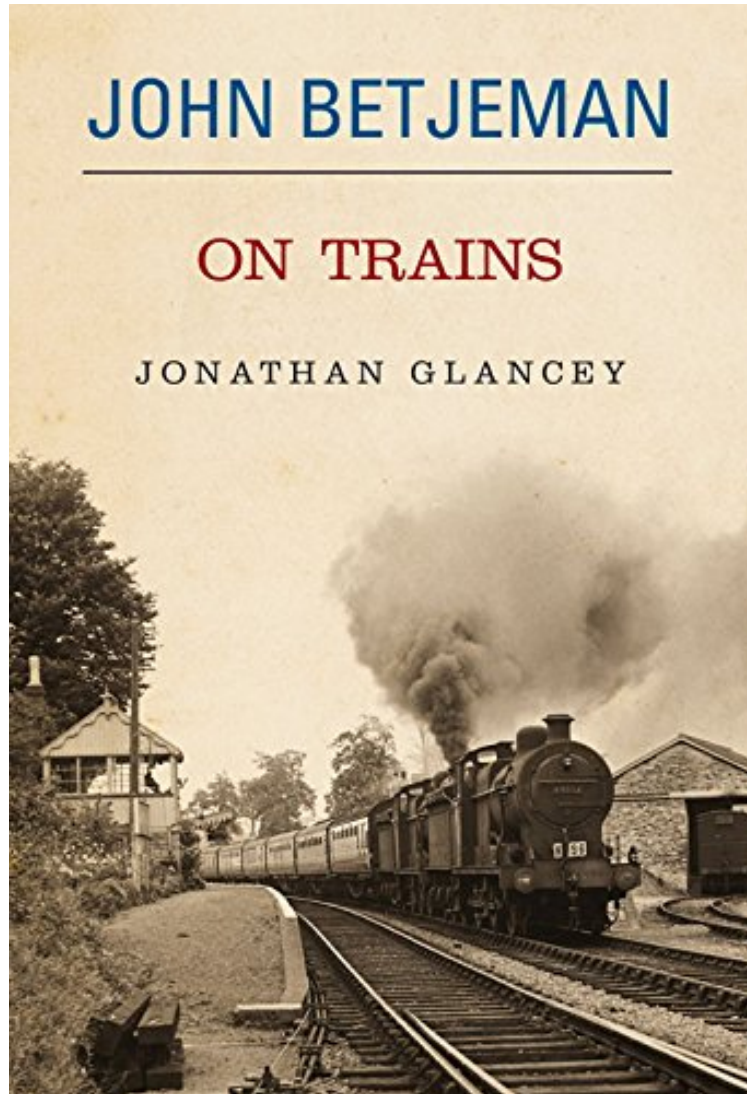


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## John Betjeman on Trains

*John Betjeman*

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#4137935 in Books 2007-05-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 7.50 x .60 x 4.50l, .45 #File Name: 041377612386 pages | File size: 70.Mb

**John Betjeman : John Betjeman on Trains** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised John Betjeman on Trains:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A tasty snack  
By John the Reader  
Edited and then extensively commented on by Jonathan Glancey this little volume is based on " ten letters selected by his daughter each describing a journey that Betjeman made or that he planned to make or that he planned for a friend or relative." Indeed, some of these letters that form the "chapter headings" of each of the pieces are no more than a few quick lines that Betjeman jotted down for intending visitors in order to ensure they chose the right train, or alighted at the right station. From these few scraps Glancey assembles us a delicious and satisfying repast that fills.  
Glancey's elaborations on Betjeman's

friends and visitor, supported by his observations of the trains, the geography, views - or as Betjeman called them "landskips" - are then fleshed out with the history of the locale or the subject of the intended meeting of these visits. Some form recollections recalled in greater detail by the poet laureate himself in his work *Trains and Buttered Toast*. All are charming to read and should be valued as vinaigrettes to this meal of a time that has now passed. It is true however; this work is far more by Glancey than Betjeman, the editor became its author, but drew directly and pleasingly on the master's own letters and was directed by the prose John Betjeman composed. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. **LEGENDS OF THE WEST** By DAVID BRYSON Nostalgia is all very well, but this kind of thing is not mainstream these days, even in England 'It would, presumably, be beyond the wit of the fast-buck, annual-bonus merchants who run trains in Britain today, to think of serving fresh food'. Or try this, part of the final peroration '...passengers busy eating, text messaging, eating, making vital calls on their mobiles, eating, spreading their legs out as far as possible into the aisles, and eating...' It's all going to the dogs, I tell you, to the dogs, d'you hear? I wonder what the offenders can have been eating to offend the author quite so grievously, but presumably it can't have been fresh food served by the types who run the trains. I'm not sure why not, because the sandwiches they serve me are always fresh on Virgin Trains between Manchester and London, pricey in standard class I admit but free in First, which can actually be a good bargain if you can pick your time of travel and book on-line in advance. What this little book consists of is letters from Sir John Betjeman on railway-related matters interspersed with little essays by Jonathan Glancey, and the old-fogey-style sentiments that I have just quoted are from Glancey. Betjeman was a railway sentimentalist, and so am I. I bewail the loss of the branch lines, but I am in two minds what I think about all that. On the one hand there was the economic case for their closure, often strong indeed but sometimes rigged by loading the entire cost of junctions with the main trunk lines on to the branches. On the other hand Britain's haphazard 19th century railway development is part of our national culture like canals and even like mouldering manor houses. It has enormous charm and aura about it, and I strongly suspect that even from the accountancy point of view a bit of imagination and vision might have preserved a lot that went under the axe. The promised 'bustitution' has not materialised and was never going to, the 'great car economy' so beloved of Margaret Thatcher is now choking on its own carbon emissions plus road congestion and the cost of road fuel. Railways are back, they are in private hands, they are eye-wateringly expensive for those who have to use them in peak hours, and they cost the taxpayer more to support the private operators than it cost us to subsidise them directly. Tell me again, what was the problem supposed to be with socialism? Betjeman got around, and not entirely by rail. The one occasion when I encountered him in person was in the departure lounge of Glasgow airport. However he was fixated throughout his life on the railway network in much the way I had been at age 10 or so. He rendered yeoman service in various ways, but I just wish he had not squandered so much of his enthusiasm on steam engines. I expect he did a lot to save the railways in his native West Country (Cornwall and Devon for non-Brits), and I can well understand his enthusiasm for the magnificent though quaintly designed Great Western Railway steam locos. I like them too, but let's face it steam had far too long an innings in Britain. I would have sadly scrapped them all (saving a few for museums and enthusiasts' outings) if I could have traded that for saving the line to Moretonhampstead and a few others, just looking at Betjeman's home turf let alone over the length and breadth of the nation. The photographs are good quality b/w, if you don't mind the A5 format of the pages, and as you would expect by now they are more focused on locomotives than on the rail scenes that I crave. I enjoyed the book thoroughly, and to say the least it's an easy read if one is interested. It rambles I suppose, but it's all about expressing an attitude or a couple of men's attitudes. Myself, I would put up with the ghastly flat-pack-assembly station architectures that they provide these days for new or replacement stations if they would just restore the rail service from Bury to Bacup in my own neck of the woods. Why in God's name was it ever stopped? I'm for nostalgia too, but presumably not everything new equates with decline. I'll improve on that: there is a sort of railway renaissance of a strange kind these days for reasons that I have sketched in above. Whether Betjeman could have adapted emotionally I don't know, but we greatly miss his PR genius.

John Betjeman was a great champion of British heritage and a devotee of the railways. This small, beautiful volume, edited and annotated by Jonathan Glancey, describes all that Betjeman found of value in the landscape and architecture of this country as he cut a nostalgic, personality-filled arc through a long-lost Britain. Jonathan Glancey is the architecture and design editor of the *Guardian*.