

Cathedrals Express – Exeter to Edinburgh

Exeter Cathedral's twin Norman towers are glimpsed by those arriving from Plymouth,
But it's Pycchester's St Pythagoras & All Angles, prominent on Mount Dinham,
Which you know as St Michael & All Angels Church, which draws their attention.
From Exeter St David's, Taunton is about as close as we get to Bath & Wells
Or ancient New Age Glastonbury across the Somerset Levels.

Bristol Cathedral's strong tower is well seen from the line if you know where to look,
Though others will admire St Mary Redcliffe or Temple Meads itself.
Historic Gloucester, Roman camp and wealthy medieval port, proud Cathedral city,
Indeed my first Cathedral and home of my burgeoning teenage faith,
As I wandered lonely around the Hogwarts' Cloisters, reading stories in stained glass.
Its glorious tower is clear to see, but by-passed these days, slightly down at heel,
Since Georgian aches and pains pumped their money into Cheltenham Spa.
Elgar's Malvern Hills attract my gaze as Worcester's ancient diocese is traversed,
But Magna Carta King John's resting place is not seen.

Birmingham's Cathedrals are out of sight but I know they are there.
Its old churches, temples and columns stand forlorn
Amid a hotch-potch of coloured Lego tower blocks.
Old St Jude's is gone, but 50 years on HTB has planted a new vine
Where the young of all ages pogo to their loud penitential worship songs.
From Grand Junction we descend through our own fumes to the Hades
Of Birmingham New Street station; Grand Central shopping above but still grim below.

Back out the way we came, to Tamworth, its four spirettes about as close as we get to
Three-spired Lichfield, inspirer of naughty but niche Lindchester.
Nor is famous Leicester City, of Richard III and failed Elizabethan love, on our route.
So it's on to Derby, its elegant cathedral with peregrine falcons, not quite visible from the line.
Chesterfield has no cathedra but its landmark twisted spire is a fine view from the train.

At Sheffield we cut through a valley of greening trees; the cathedral again out of sight.
Wakefield Westgate's still got its Cathedral though the Diocese was reluctantly joined
With Ripon and Bradford into the super-Diocese of West Yorkshire and t'Dales.
Centred on Leeds, which is our next station, it's about to be renamed

Diocese of Leeds (Anglican) with a new Bishop but no Cathedral, whereas Roman Catholic Leeds already has a Bishop & Cathedral; confused, they will be.

We're well into the Northern Province now, and three-towered York blesses us,
With two millennia of history from Roman fort to National Railway Museum.
Darlington's station itself is as elegant as a cathedral with its fine columns and many aisles.
But Durham is everyone's favourite, picturesque in its strength and weight of learning.
Is this where wisdom is to be found? Though now wearing a crown of scaffolding atop its tower.
The Angel of the North seems to mark another boundary, more in time than in space,
Between the ancient knowledge and the industrial technology of the north.

Newcastle Cathedral above the Tyne, St Nicholas with its crowned tower,
Is a modest but elegant sight, and as we depart northwards a special alignment
Of a roof-line 3-4-5 triangle with the tower creates a true Pythagorean moment.
If the weather were kinder we may catch a glimpse of the Holy Island Lindisfarne,
Then awa' to Berwick-upon-Tweed with a prayer of apology to the Piscies
For the Columba Declaration authorising cross-Border poaching.
(N.B. Columba Declaration - The Church of England and Church of Scotland,
as bigger fishes in the ecumenical sea, ignoring the historic rights and wishes
Of our more spiky and liberal siblings in the Scottish Episcopal Church.
As if it really matters when declining numbers have seen the proud land of Ninian,
Columba, Mungo, Mary Queen of Scots, John Knox, Presbyterians, Covenanters,
Jacobites, Wee Frees, Iona, St Giles Cathedral, Old St Paul's,
become a majority non-Christian nation.)

And so we arrive 7 hours 42 minutes and 14 dioceses later, into Edinburgh Waverley,
Bustling Areopagus of this Athens of the North with its three Cathedrals;
St Giles CofS, St Marys' RC, and George Gilbert Scott's three-spired St Mary's Episcopal
Dominating the West End of Edinburgh's New Town,
Built on the faith and funds of two wealthy little old ladies, the Misses Walker,
And proclaiming Christian welcome to all, establishment or fringe.

Richard Barnes – Mon 4 April 2016 – 0924 Cross-Country Exeter to 1706 Edinburgh.

Celts

Celts Exhibition at Museum of Scotland.

Celtic connections across northern Europe, from Hibernia to Thracia.

Contrast with Mediterranean Greeks, Etruscan & Romans.

Celtic art, thought & religion were symbolic, whereas Classical world was naturalistic.

Our written view of their Celtic world is only from that classical viewpoint.

Artefacts and archaeology are giving a more complex picture.

Three Highlights, like the iconic triskeles.

Chariot – whose performance depends on the amount of torcs)<;-)>>

Gunderstrup Cauldron – multi-cultural pan-tribal silverwork of gods & men

Carnyx, carnyces – could these be Celtic organ pipes long before Cecilia?

Insular fusion of Celtic and Christian in 7th & 8th centuries led to Mission,

Illuminated Gospel manuscripts, high Celtic crosses, travelling reliquaries.

And a millennium later, the Celtic revival – romantic and/or narrowly nationalistic,

Mixing and misunderstanding, researching and reinventing, druids and bards.

Blind Ossian, the Celtic Homer, fictionalised for willing eyes & ears.

But within all, deeply swirling decoration and symbolism, from bright expansive minds.

Richard Barnes – Wed 6 April 2016 – Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.