Book Review: “The Railway Experience”

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Author: Kim Henson

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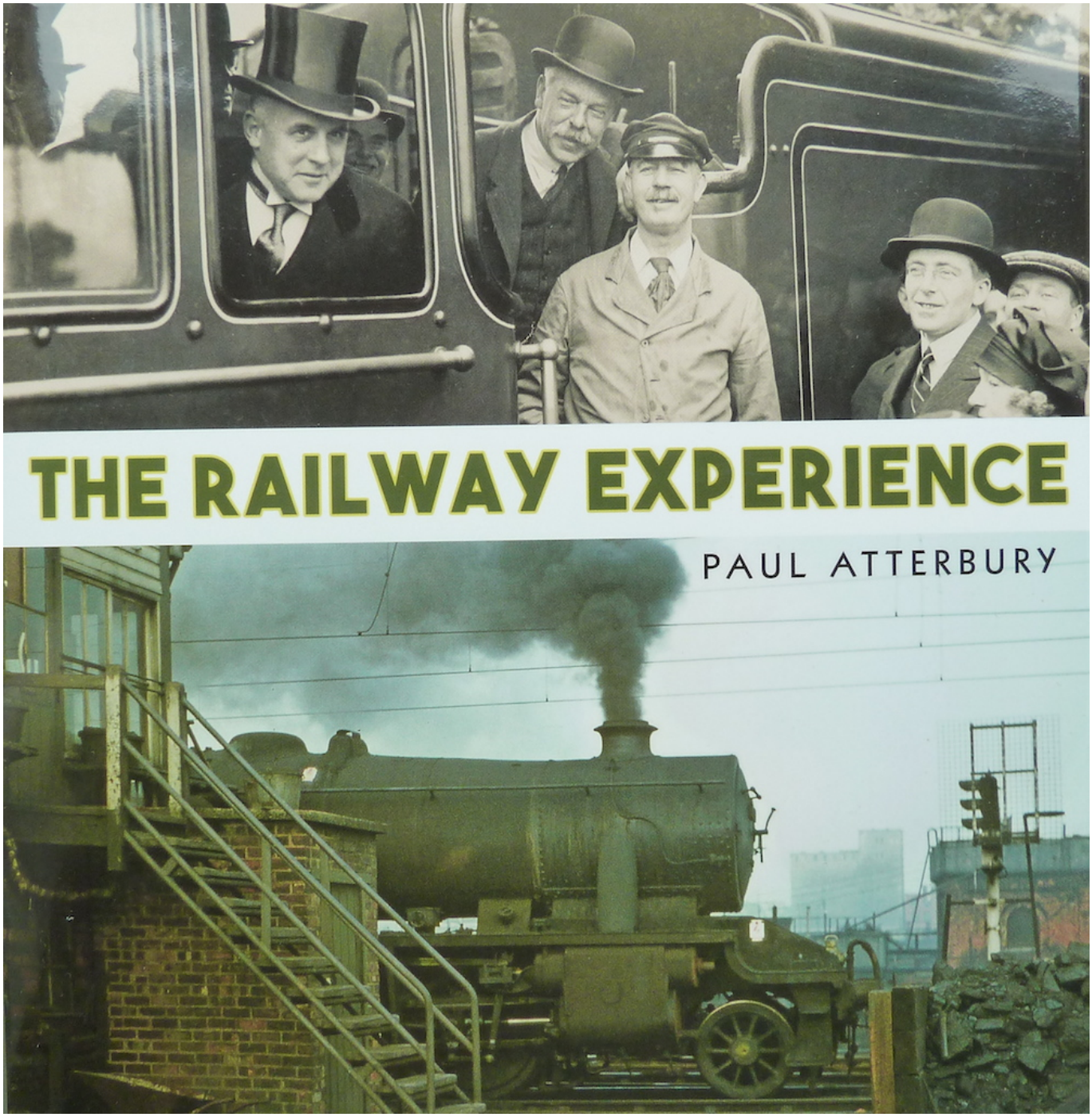

Wheels-Alive is happy to cover all sorts of transport, and in a change from motor cars Kim Henson has been studying a book covering 150 years of

Britain’s once revered railway system…

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I read this book with great interest, especially as it includes coverage of Britain’s railways from their inception, when steam power was the order of the day and seen as offering an exciting route to the future, to the last, poignant and (for many people) sad days of the mainline use of steam locomotives, in 1968. It even ventures a little into the days of diesel traction and beyond, but most of the photographs included record the railways during the period from the 1920s to the 1970s – and many of the great images also show cars, lorries and other road vehicles from the era. Needless to say, as an enthusiast I was thrilled to see these too!

Personally I have always loved steam engines and the way in which they go about their work, almost seeming ‘alive’ as they haul along their heavy loads, whether passenger or goods trains. As a boy, I was always excited when travelling on steam-hauled trains, and these days I enjoy any excuse to find a preserved line on which to once again savour the delights of the railways of the past. (While saying that, of course I also acknowledge that in so many ways the coming of diesel and electric locomotives made life somewhat easier and cleaner for everyone connected with railway travel, but particularly those who worked on the railways and had to operate, on a daily basis, these enormous and complex machines.

However, the book includes far more than just photographs and descriptions of locomotives, interesting though these are. Respected railway author Paul Atterbury (also very well-known as one of the enthusiastic specialists who appears on our screens in the 'Antiques Road Show') has cleverly incorporated a wealth of photographs, together with full and fascinating accompanying descriptions, showing a wide variety of little-seen other aspects of the railway systems of years gone by.

Not only are the buildings, infrastructure and operating machinery of the railways depicted, but also, and especially, the people involved in keeping the engines and trains operational and running to time.

As Paul himself mentions in his introduction, the photographs for this book were chosen for their quality and detail. I certainly agree with that, and as each page was turned I found myself closely studying the myriad of small details shown, for example the items of luggage on a platform, the spotless nature of the inside of a 1920s signal box, and the sad decline in the appearance of poorly-maintained steam locomotives as they were worked to death in the last years of steam, and so on.

Within its 112 pages this brilliant volume gives readers an insight into the importance of our railways in days gone by, and the pride shown by those who worked on them, including the engine drivers, firemen, signalmen and station staff of the time.

Of course, many/most of the subjects of these photographs, including the engines, branch lines, buildings and railway staff members, are sadly no longer still with us to tell the tale. However, a book like this helps show and tell exactly how it was, for younger people and future generations to relish and understand those days, as well as helping those who do remember the golden age of steam, to be transported back there for a while. I should add that in producing this book, 'rose-coloured spectacles' were not used by the author, who talks about and indeed points out the difficulties as well as the high points of railway system life in the past.

VERDICT

By choice it took me a long time to work my way through this superb book, engrossed as I was in the real-world stories that sprang to life from each wonderful page, via the excellent contemporary photographs and the well-written text. I recommend this is as a ‘must-read’ for any enthusiast of classic transport (and indeed anyone interested in the social history of Britain), and a great buy for £9.99.