

OBITUARY – DR BEN FISHER



Ben Fisher's death at the age of 45 has not only bereft the Welsh Highland and Ffestiniog railways of one of their greatest supporters, but also Bangor University of a distinguished scholar and a wide circle of people of a good friend and valued colleague. He was a shy and reserved man, naturally courteous and considerate of others. Never one for the limelight, he was always behind a camera but very rarely, it seems, in front of one.



Everyone on the WHR knows of Ben's website, surely one of the most visited of all the many that deal with railways. It has had literally millions of hits, from all over the world and from a remarkable variety of people. Ben's own university web-page made it clear that narrow-gauge railways fascinated him – no unnecessary embarrassment here about an admitting to an interest that can indeed cause professors' eyes to glaze over and their lips to mutter about the next Research Assessment Exercise. This made him an excellent internal examiner for Dr Megan Williams' PhD thesis in January 2009 – scrupulously fair but also supportive and helpful.

He was, of course, an acknowledged authority in the field of modern French culture. My favourite memory of him will always be participating in his university seminar on *lieux de memoire*, 'places of memory', which sounds heavy but wasn't, when we spent a day exploring the various ways in which memory is both enabled and distorted through different forms of expression. Ben enthusiastically discussed the film-maker Jacques Demy, in particular *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967). His doctoral thesis had been on the work of Alfred Jarry, a late nineteenth century French playwright whose most enduring creations are a grotesque slob called Ubu, who becomes king of Poland, and a pseudo-philosophy called 'pataphysics', which is based 'on the truth of contradictions and exceptions.' Ubu and 'pataphysics' prefigure both the Czech underground (this is not a railway) and Monty Python and Father Ted – so no surprise to learn that he was a devotee of both programmes.

Eadem mutata resurgo, 'I rise again though changed' is the 'pataphysicians' motto but could have been coined for the rebuilding of the Welsh Highland Railway. In Ben Fisher, the rebuilding found its chronicler. His ashes will be carried from one end of the line to the other, before being scattered into the sea at Fairbourne, where his love of the narrow gauge began.

Dr David Gwyn