

A PHOTO-ESSAY BY PAUL WILLIAMS

**OFF THE
RAILS**

**THE LITTLE RAILWAY THAT
BECAME A MOVIE STAR**

Text by Ian Marchant, from his Book 'Parallel Lines'

It was here at Tal-l-Llyn, thanks to the courage and campaigning ability of one man, that the preserved railway movement was born



The Tal-y-Llyn Railway had been opened in 1867. Built to a narrow gauge, it was six and a half miles long, running from slate quarries outside the village of Abergynotwen to a junction with the Cambrio Railways Line at Towyn. Built primarily to carry slate, it had obtained Parliamentary assent to carry a few passengers from Abergynolwen to Towyn and back. It had two locomotives, *Talylyn* and *Dolgoch*, and just one four-wheeled passenger carriage. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Railways sent an inspector. His recommendations stated that, as long as trains didn't exceed 10 mph, the thing was probably safe. *Talylyn* and *Dolgoch* started to beat up and down the line, carrying slate and occasional passengers – more in summer. Three more carriages were obtained. Then the world and, more important, the Railway Inspectorate forgot it was there; after their first visit, they didn't inspect the line again until 1951.

Traffic declined over the first decade of the twentieth century, and the original owners sold the line to the local MP, Sir Henry Haydn Jones, in 1911. Through the First World War, labour drifted away from the dangerous slate mines the line had been built to serve and the railway became increasingly reliant on the summer trade. *Talylyn* and *Dolgoch* pulled such summer traffic up and down the line every year through the First World War, through the 1920s and the 1930s. There were three staff who worked on the railway, including Edward Thomas, general manager, accountant, ticket seller and train guard. The other two staff members were a driver and a fireman, who also doubled as the track maintenance staff. Sir Haydn refused to invest the capital needed to maintain the railway, but Edward Thomas somehow kept the thing running right through the Second World War.

That was when Tom Rolt, author of *Narrow Boat*, the definitive book on the English canal system, first discovered the line, in 1943. He had been staying by Lake Talylyn (three miles above

Abergynolwen (the train never went there, and no one is really sure why the railway is named after it). He heard that two trains a day were still being run, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. So he caught a bus down to Towyn, hoping to catch a train most of the way back. He was disappointed; at Towyn Wharf station he found only a handwritten notice, 'No Trains Today'. He started to walk back up the line towards Abergynolwen and found someone trying, to mend *Dolgoch* with a hammer; that was why there were no trains. Then he walked back the length of the line. He described it as being more like a country lane than a railway. In places, the rails were almost overgrown with turf. Gorse and rhododendron crowded the line and obscured the platforms of the little halts. He didn't catch the train, but he remembered the line.

In 1948 Rolt was reading the draft of the Transport Bill which would nationalize all Britain's railways, canals and road hauliers. He took delight in spotting the most unlikely railway and canal companies that were to be nationalized. The Tal-y-Llyn wasn't on the list. Everyone had forgotten that it was there. Rolt began to take an increasing interest in the little line. He took some friends to visit, and managed at last to ride behind *Dolgoch*, six years after his walk up the line. They met the elderly Sir Haydn, who told them that although he was willing to see the railway continue during his lifetime, he was sure that at his death, his executors would wish to close the line, which was already marked as closed on the Ordnance Survey Map. Rolt and his friends began to lay some plans. He wrote a letter to the national press, calling for ideas. In 1950 the call came. Sir Haydn was dead, and the line

carrying the two elderly engines was bound to be closed.

Rolt called a public meeting in September 1950, in Birmingham. He knew how to drum up public support; he had done it with the canals, and he knew what might be achieved with courage and intelligence. He and two friends, supported by Edward Thomas, then almost 70, proposed the formation of the Tal-y-Llyn Railway Preservation Society. The meeting agreed, and negotiations were undertaken with Sir Haydn's executors. The Society agreed to take over the running of the railway from the summer of 1951. It was the world's first preserved steam railway. And Rolt, with his engineering and campaigning background, seemed the ideal person to run it. In the first season after the Society took over, Rolt gave up more of his precious writing time and moved to Towyn to take up the post of general manager on expenses of £30 per month. He found that *Talylyn* was useless, and *Dolgoch* in need of extensive repairs. He'd never run a railway before, but he got through that first summer. In 1952, he again took up his post, this time accompanied by his second wife, Sonia. The Society went from strength to strength, and the line is now safer and better run than in the whole of its existence. Rolt eventually became its chairman, and in 1991, seventeen years after his death, the Society named its seventh and newest locomotive *Tom Rolt*.

There is one more episode in the story of the railway to tell. In 1952 Rolt was approached by Ealing Film Studios. They had heard of the Tal-y-Llyn's struggle for survival, and had decided that it would be a good subject for a comedy. Rolt was happy to help, and the result is *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, one of

Ealing Studio's minor gems, which deserves rewatching.

The plot: A local railway is under threat. A group of locals, led by an excellent railway-loving clergyman, struggle to take the railway under their control in the teeth of opposition from the local bus company, aided by a young steamroller-driving Sid James, in the days before he got to play funny roles. Stanley Holloway plays Mr Valentine, the local businessman who helps keep the line open, once he has been assured that there will be a refreshment car where he will be able to drink out of hours. However folksy it seems now, in 1952 *The Titfield Thunderbolt* was pungent social comedy, another clarion call from Ealing on behalf of the little guy who does things for himself.

The interest generated by the saving of the Tal-y-Llyn, and the widespread publicity generated by the film, meant that other groups trying to save other railways came into existence; first, just up the coast at the Ffestiniog Railway, and then in Sussex, at the Bluebell, which had been ignored for the first ninety years of its existence.

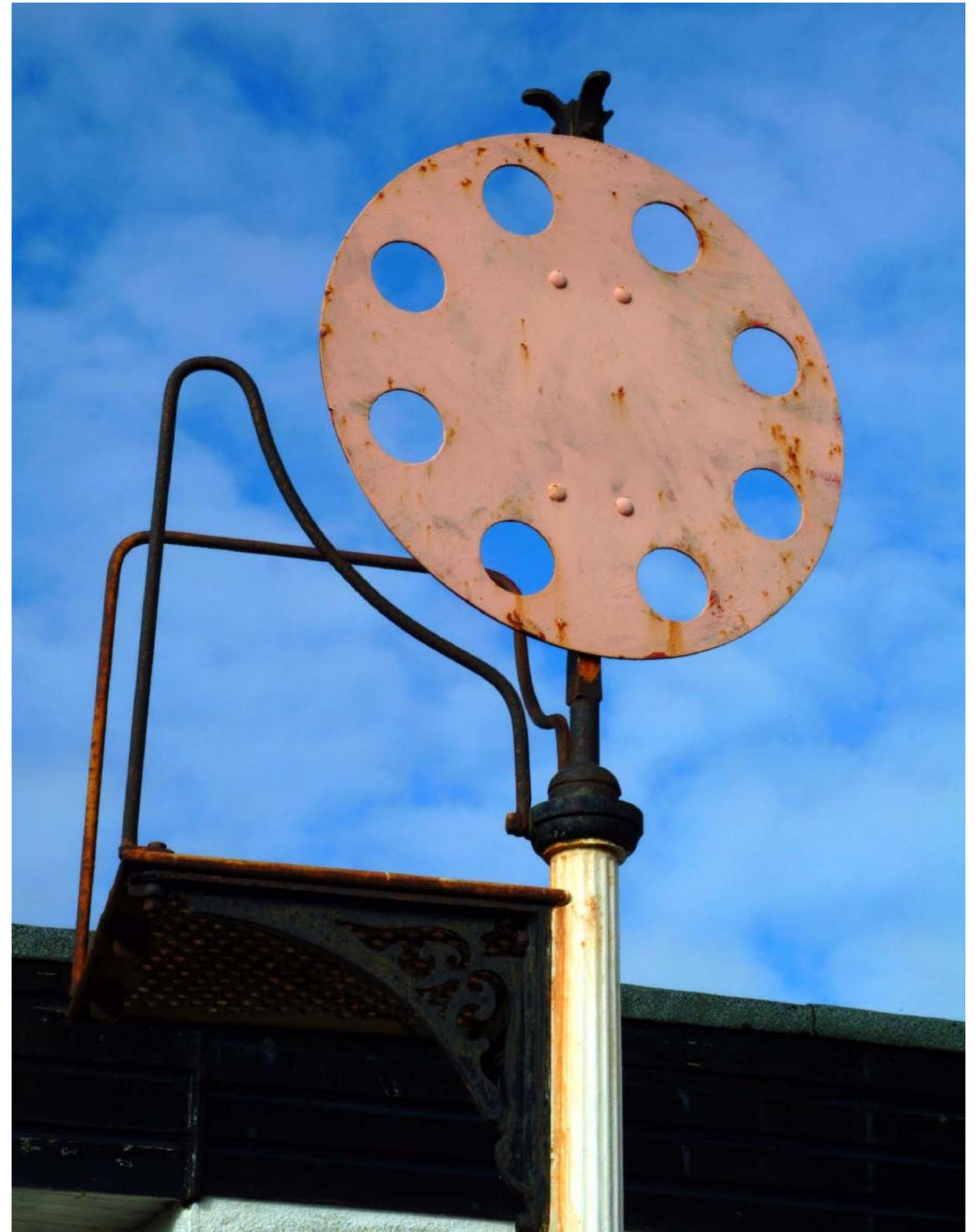
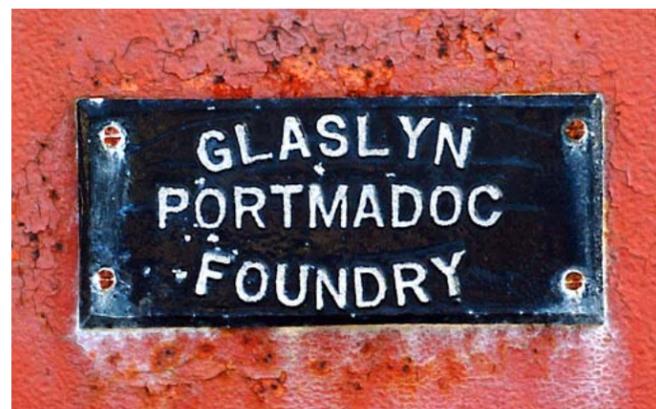
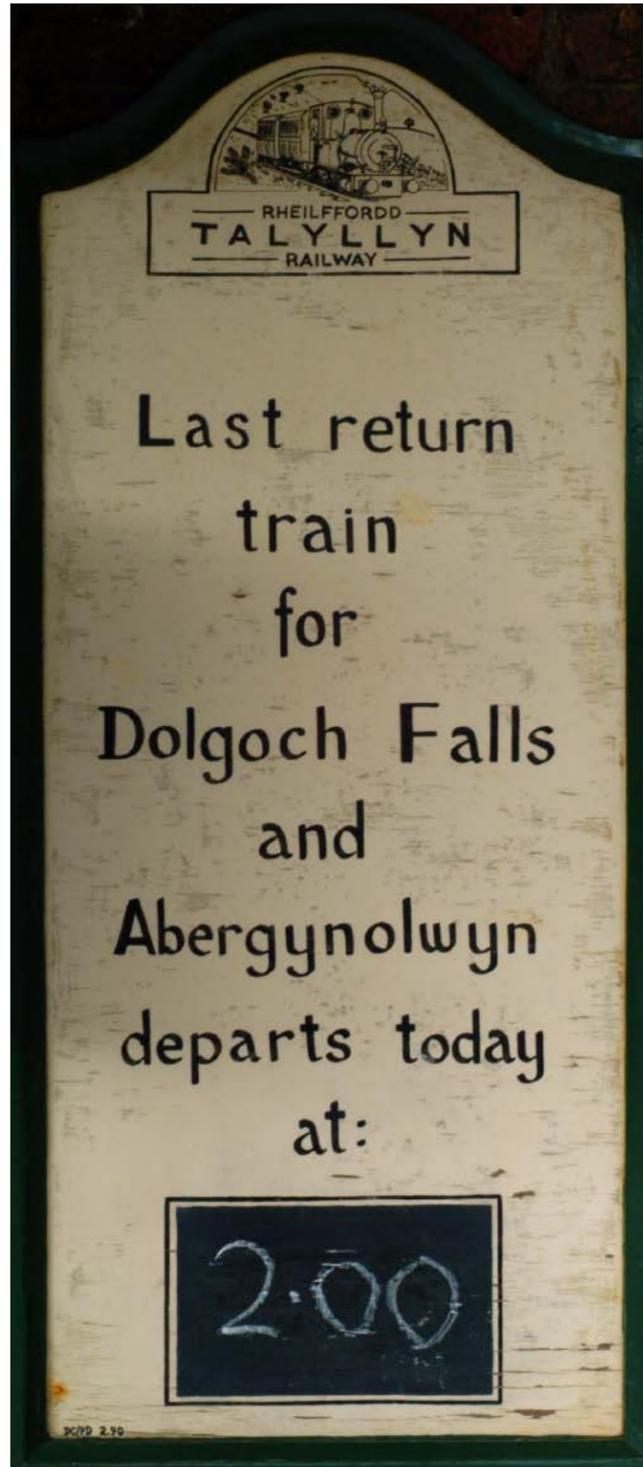
A spark was lit at the Tal-y-Llyn, a spark which has ignited a hundred thousand days out with the kids on wet Bank Holiday weekends. It was here, thanks to the courage and campaigning ability of one man, that the preserved railway movement was born.

Something of the *volksisch* spirit of Rolt lives on in the Tal-y-Llyn. It still goes to exactly the same place it has always gone. *Dolgoch* and *Talylyn* still occasionally pull the original carriages. The canal preservation movement, real ale, folk-song and custom, all seemed like symbols of a vital but threatened culture to the English ruralists like Rolt and Massingham; out of their ideas came moves towards self-sufficiency and the hippy rural idealism of the 1960s and 1970s. Rolt was a folk romantic, and it is in this atmosphere that the story of the saving of the Tal-y-Llyn needs to be understood. — Ian Marchant, *Parallel Lines*.

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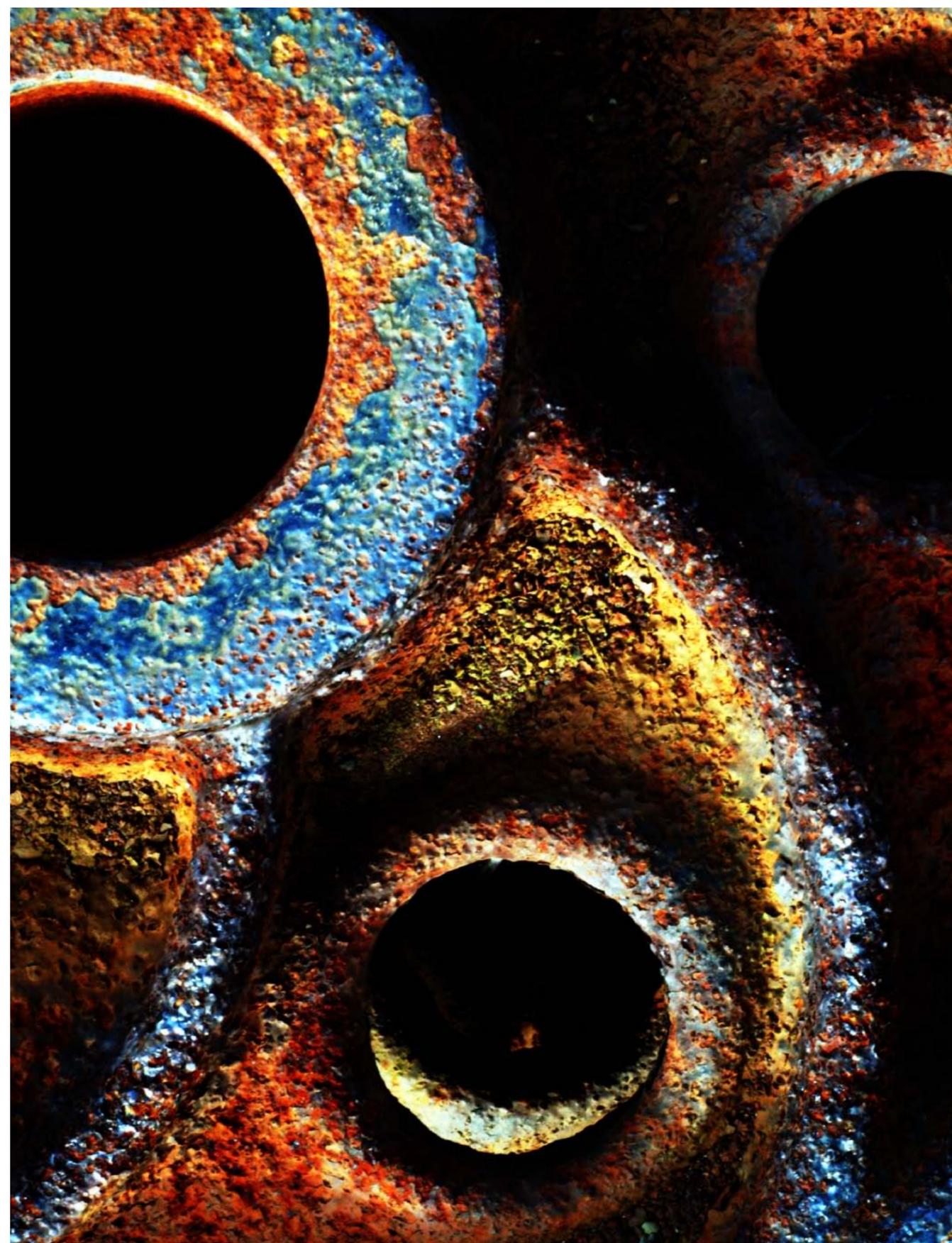
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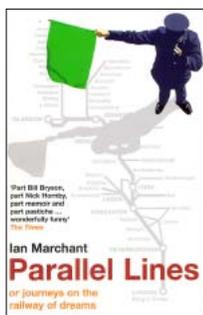


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Wales-based photographer *Paul Williams* was born in 1958 in Wiltshire, England. His recent work is at www.ceinewydd.com. The photographs in this essay were taken for the book *Parallel Lines* (Ian Marchant). Williams's photographs will feature in Marchant's next book, *Longest Crawl*. The text, by Ian Marchant, was taken from Titfield Thunderbold, Chapter 5 of *Parallel Lines*