

# Flintheath Yule Ball

**6 – 8 December, 2024**

Buckden Towers, High St, Buckden, St Neots, Cambridgeshire, PE19 5TA

## Travel on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> December

05:45	Tullamore	06:55	Dublin Heuston		Iarnród Éireann
08:05	Dublin Port Terminal 1	11:30	Holyhead	AW0041	Irish Ferries <i>Ulysses</i>
12:48	Holyhead	16:37	London Euston	VT4740	Avanti West Coast
17:12	London King's Cross	18:05	Huntingdon	GN0944	Great Northern

Take a taxi to the site, which opens at 16:30.

## Travel on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December

Take a taxi from the site, which closes at 11:00.

19:20	Huntingdon	19:39	Peterborough	TL2910	Thameslink
19:54	Peterborough	21:08	Nuneaton	XC6810	CrossCountry
21:23	Nuneaton	22:06	Crewe	VT7225	Avanti West Coast
22:21	Crewe	22:44	Chester	AW4315	Transport for Wales
22:56	Chester	00:51	Holyhead	AW2018	Transport for Wales
02:40	Holyhead	05:55	Dublin Port Terminal 1	AW0040	Irish Ferries <i>Ulysses</i>

## Onward travel options from Dublin, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> December

	IÉ	IÉ	IÉ	IÉ	IÉ	IÉ	IÉ	Kearns	IÉ	Kearns
Cathal Brugha St										
George's Quay										
Ha'penny Bridge								16:10		16:30
Heuston Station	07:35	09:25	11:30	12:45	13:30	14:45	15:35	16:15	16:30	16:35
Tullamore	08:32	10:15	12:22	13:36	14:21	15:44	16:31	17:50	17:26	18:10*
	IÉ	Kearns	IÉ	Kearns	Kearns	IÉ	Kearns	IÉ	IÉ	
Cathal Brugha St		17:00					18:00			
George's Quay				17:15						
Ha'penny Bridge		17:15		17:30	17:45		18:15			
Heuston Station	17:10	17:20	17:30	17:35	17:50	18:15	18:20	19:35	20:30	
Tullamore	18:11	18:55	18:30	19:10*	19:25	19:14	19:50	20:28	21:34	

\* Terminates in Tullamore.

## Booking References

Iarnród Éireann	Train	Tullamore – Dublin Heuston	single	110 62521472
Irish Ferries	SailRail	Dublin Port – Huntingdon	return	32290908

Return travel from Dublin is not booked.

This is not a plan which survived contact with reality.

It's simple enough, isn't it? A single day out, and an overnight back. It's not marked on the schedule above, but I did have a cabin booked on the return ferry, which would give me a chance for a shower and a long enough nap to be up for spending the day in Dublin. That's not what happened.

## Travelling to Buckden

My planned route there was fairly straightforward, though I'd never before been to Buckden Towers. The early Friday morning train from Tullamore to Dublin Heuston, a taxi across the city to the port (the former bus connection no longer meets the train), the ship to Holyhead, and on by train via London. Holyhead Port is the same building as the railway station, so the transfer is easy. I've done the route as far as London many times before. And in London it would be a short stroll down Euston Road from Euston Station to King's Cross Station, for my first time travelling on the East Coast Main Line.

I must admit that I did not check my emails in the early hours of the morning, so my first indication that something was wrong was when the taxi pulled into Dublin Port Terminal 1

All the signs in the port mention "Terminal 1 (Irish Ferries)" and "Terminal 2 (Stena Line)" (and many other terminals besides), but if you're looking up ferries in rail booking systems, because you're buying a SailRail ticket, they're called "Dublin Ferryport" and "Dublin Port — Stena". I don't know why there's this mismatch of names. It can be confusing if you don't know.

and the bulk of a ship was not towering over the terminal building. Welsh farmers protesting had blocked lorries leaving the ship in Holyhead, so the *Ulysses* was late leaving. (So too was the *Stena Adventurer*, next door in Terminal 2.)

I would miss my planned train, so I was trying to work out alternative options, and also griping in an SCA Discord server, when Princess Agnes said that she was outside in her car queuing for the same ferry. So she popped into the terminal building and picked up my bag (luckily I had not yet checked in).

The ferry was in the end only an hour and a half delayed. The 8.05 sailing was originally estimated at 10.30, but left port at 9.30. This was good: the crossing was smooth, and we made landfall in Holyhead before Storm Darragh hit. While on the ferry, I saw a news headline

on a TV screen: there was severe rail disruption in Britain caused by signalling failures due to a faulty network card. But that no longer concerned me.

I entered the ferry as a foot passenger but left by car. It was good: we could give each other company *en route*. And when conversation lagged because of my lack of sleep the night before, I introduced Her Highness to a podcast I enjoy and which she also found fun — “Let’s Learn Everything”. (I’d mentioned the podcast, because I’d been listening to an episode on leaves while I was on the ferry. Leaves are interesting. Agnes suggested listening to an episode as we drove. “Where are We? & Carrot Propaganda” has to be the best episode title ever.)

And so we got to Buckden Towers for Yule Ball with a minimum of incident. And I didn’t even need to get a taxi for the last leg from Huntingdon Station to Buckden.

## Yule Ball

I’m mostly writing here about my travel misadventures, but it seems wrong to entirely skip over the event itself. It was my first time at Yule Ball, and it turned out to be a most excellent event. Buckden Towers is a beautiful site.

We were fairly far east in the country, and so Storm Darragh didn’t really hit us, but it was definitely windy and at times rather wet. The covered walkway connecting the two buildings we were using (the tower and the house) came in handy.

The event includes some form of tournament — this year, fencing — to award the title of Holly Monarch. There was quite a bit of business in SCA Court, as there was a knighting, and many other awards were handed out besides. The feast was street food, with “stalls” set up in the house (it was getting too windy for the original plan of outdoor stalls to be viable). And Yule Ball is indeed a ball. Saturday evening was devoted to dancing, and while I sat out the first few dances, I did eventually join in. We had live musicians and spirited and encouraging dance instructors. The Maltese Brawl is a fun dance, I discovered. And when the energy wound down and the crowd size diminished, the musicians kept going, and we had singing and the telling of tales, before someone sang a song that could be danced to, and the dancing started up again for a spell.

After the activity of Saturday night I got to bed at twenty past one in the morning. I was sleeping in the top room of the

## *Yule Ball is indeed a ball, with dancing and merriment*

tower, set up as a dorm with eleven people in twenty beds. I got out of bed at half past five, because it was far too warm to be comfortable. I did consider opening a window, but there was no way to latch a window slightly open, and letting a howling gale into the dorm seemed perhaps unwarranted, especially as one of the people in that dorm was ill, and had spent almost the entire event in his bed.

So I wandered downstairs, thinking to find a quiet corner to sit and read, but found that the kitchen was already alive at that hour, so I joined in, and soon found myself grating vast amounts of cheese, and then (of course) washing dishes. It was good company. And, once again, good food.

## Going Home

This time, I did check the ferry sailing info. All the day's ferries from Holyhead were cancelled due to storm damage to port infrastructure, including Agnes's that afternoon. But my planned route was to leave Huntingdon on a late train and, after several transfers, arrive in Holyhead to take a sailing at 2.40 Monday morning, and that one was still good to go.

So I said goodbye to Agnes, rerouting via Pembroke, and stayed late at the event to help with cleanup. And occasionally glanced at the sailing info, observing as my crossing's status was updated to "in doubt" before being cancelled. I too was rerouted via Pembroke, with my new crossing being on Monday afternoon.

So plans were laid. I was offered more than one choice of bed for the night. I stayed with Kenneth & Stacy, as they were close to the main station. Since I would now be travelling from Cambridge, I bought a new ticket to Paddington. From there, I judged that I could travel on my original SailRail ticket, even though it said *via Holyhead* on it.

Rosslare is a hard place to get out of. The last train leaves at 17.55, well before the ferry gets in. Transport for Ireland, which is a handy website, gave me onward options to Tullamore via a bus to the airport. I thought I might travel to the airport and stop there for a

rest and some food, and work out onward journeys at that point. The airport is a warm place to be in the middle of the night, and is also a transport hub, so many options are available.

The bus from Wexford to the airport does not go through Dublin City at all, or at least there are no stops there. Even if it did, I probably wouldn't want to be wandering the streets of Dublin at four o'clock of a December morning. The airport seemed safer.

06:23	Cambridge	07:29	London St Pancras	Thameslink
07:29	London St Pancras	07:59	London Paddington	Thameslink
08:48	London Paddington	11:30	Swansea	Great Western Railway
12:01	Swansea	14:05	Pembroke	Transport for Wales
14:45	Pembroke	18:46	Rosslare	Irish Ferries <i>Isle of Innisfree</i>
00:17	Rosslare Harbour	01:00	Wexford Station	TFI Local Link Wexford
01:30	Redmond Sq., Wexford	04:00	Dublin Airport	Wexford Bus
04:30	Dublin Airport	05:45	Kildare	Dublin Coach
06:14	Kildare	06:44	Tullamore	Iarnród Éireann

However, Pembroke station is far from the ferry terminal, so this is far too tight for time with a half-hour check-in. This train does also serve Pembroke Dock station, but doesn't get there till 14.17, after check-in has closed. And while Pembroke Dock station is closer to the terminal, it is still a bit of a walk. Also, I'm not sure what this Thameslink train from St Pancras to Waterloo, leaving St Pancras at the same time as I arrived, is supposed to be. Perhaps the National Rail website intended me to take a London Underground train from King's Cross St Pancras to Paddington, on the Circle or Hammersmith & City lines, and showed it incorrectly as a Thameslink train? I'm not sure.

Anyway, I'd bought an anytime ticket from Cambridge to London Paddington, so I decided to switch to an earlier train to be on the safe side. Also, I'd get to experience the Lizzy Line for the first time, which is always a bonus!

04:53	Cambridge	06:04	Farringdon	Thameslink
06:15	Farringdon	06:23	London Paddington	Elizabeth Line
06:48	London Paddington	10:38	Carmarthen	Great Western Railway
10:55	Carmarthen	12:15	Pembroke Dock	Transport for Wales
14:45	Pembroke	18:46	Rosslare	Irish Ferries <i>Isle of Innisfree</i>
00:17	Rosslare Harbour	01:00	Wexford Station	TFI Local Link Wexford
01:30	Redmond Sq., Wexford	04:00	Dublin Airport	Wexford Bus

Kenneth dropped me to the train station (thank you!), and I found the train sitting and waiting. I got to Paddington without incident. The Lizzy Line was indeed very nice.

However, at Paddington I found that the train would not after all run to Carmarthen with a connection to Pembroke

*“I’m approaching this as an adventure, not a disaster”*

Dock. Instead, it would terminate early at Swansea with no onward connections, as the line was closed due to storm damage. A ticket inspector on the train accepted my Holyhead ticket without demur, but told me that rail replacement buses are not yet running, because the roads too are damaged. It was indeed a big storm.

It occurred to me that if I missed the 14.45 sailing I was aiming for, and ended up on the 2.40 that night, my onward connections from Rosslare would be a lot better. But at this point, on the train, I wasn’t at all sure how or when I’d get to Pembroke, or indeed if I’d end up having to spend the night somewhere in Wales. I was kind of hoping that I’d miss the 14.45 — which looked likely — and get the night sailing. The ticket inspector passed by again and said that I’d very probably miss my ferry, but get to Pembroke by night. Also, I was informed, both personally by the inspector and by announcement, that there were some few buses running with limited capacity.

At Swansea, where we were only six minutes late, I talked to station staff about onward travel, and they directed me out to the street. After all the dire warnings about limited capacity on the very few buses, it was odd to find myself one of six passengers on a sixty-seat bus to Carmarthen. The driver did make a phone call to his base to say that something was wrong with the bus, and it would not go above ten miles an hour, but he managed to fix it while he was talking, and things went pretty smoothly thereafter.

We dropped off one passenger at Llanelli, where somehow the roadworks outside the station were still ongoing. I’d been there in March for a Discworld event — Llamados Holiday Camp. Half the road was torn up then, and is still torn up in December. I think they’ve added a new footbridge in the station, though. We arrived in Carmarthen about forty minutes behind schedule, partly due to getting stuck behind a very slow car on a narrow road.

An update had come in while I was on the bus, pushing back the 14.45 sailing by three hours, with check-in closing at 17.30. The staff at Carmarthen station said that they'd call a taxi for me, and suggested that I'd be better off staying in Carmarthen for a bit, and getting the taxi later, maybe at around three o'clock. So I found a café called Cegin Myrddin.

And then I hung around town for a bit. It's not a bad town, Carmarthen. Bustling shopping areas. An impressively large river, called Towy. There's a nice footbridge over the river, connecting the railway station to the town

#### A CONVERSATION

The barber had met an Irish girl in Swansea and followed her home to Cork, only to later split up with her. He now visits Cork frequently to spend time with his young son, so he's familiar with the ferries. He told me that his son had once asked why he speaks English even though he's Kurdish. I asked about his Welsh, and he said that he knew only a few words. It's not much spoken in this part of Wales.

itself. I had only the one t-shirt with me, so I bought a couple more in a charity shop (Tŷ Hafan, supporting a children's hospice), hoping I'd get that cabin and a chance to shower on the boat. I decided that one productive way to spend some time was to go to a barber and get myself a trim and a hot towel shave. I do like hot towel shaves. They're one of my occasional luxuries. And I had a lot of beard I wanted to get rid of.

I then decided that it was silly to *hope* I missed the afternoon sailing. Instead, I phoned Irish Ferries and asked whether my ticket would also be accepted on the night ferry. They said that it would. So I returned to the railway station, where the staff confirmed that they would organise a taxi for whatever time suited me, and after some discussion, booked one to leave the station at midnight. Clearly, I was the only person going to Pembroke, and there was no requirement to match the rail timetable.

So I went and explored the castle, or what was left of it, which was mostly the gatehouse. It was a sunny day, after the storm.

I really should have sought out my friends Jason & Rachel (also known as Rincewind & Rwby), as they live in the area. I know them from various Discworld events, and Llamados Holiday Camp is Rwby's baby. But somehow I didn't think of it. (Also, while I knew that they were based roughly in that area, I didn't realise how close they were.)

Instead, I went for a walk, visited an art gallery run by a collective of local artists, wandered around a small churchyard, and ended up in the library.

I read an entire short novel — *The Summer Without You*, by Petar Andonovski, translated by Christina E. Kramer, which I knew nothing about, but which happened to be a story mostly about gay men — and then found a collection of Welsh queer short short fiction. All the time I had a book in my bag from Tullamore Library which I could have read, but these are the ones which spoke to me at the time.

The library closed at seven, at which point it was, of course, cold and dark, this being a Welsh December. Remember, I'd spent most of the day in Carmarthen by this point. I'd got out of bed at 4.15, caught a series of trains and a rail replacement bus to arrive in Carmarthen not long after eleven in the morning, and it was now seven at night. I strolled back to a place I'd noticed earlier, Donuts & Dragons, a board game café. I charged my phone, ate a bowl of chips, had a brief chat with the sole employee present, and a much longer chat with her boyfriend who arrived toward closing time to pick her up.

Donuts & Dragons closed at ten, by which point I was the sole remaining customer, and it was time, I think, to go to the railway station and wait there. There were still some places open, but I wasn't exactly in the mood for a pub, and the only other obvious place to go was a filling station near the railway station. But even an Irish filling station forecourt isn't brilliant at that hour of the night, so I didn't have high

#### A CONVERSATION

I'd mentioned that I was on my way home from an SCA Event, and that's probably why he talked about his own research into travel and the spread of information around mediaeval monasteries across Europe. Did you know that Irish monks spoke glowingly about the hospitality of a Welsh monastery (I forget which one he mentioned), while the monks of that monastery complained about the visiting Irish drinking all their beer?

We also talked about partly about Celtic linguistics (he subscribed to the theory that a lot of modern Welsh is a fake reconstruction, which I must admit I doubt).

He was half Irish, half Welsh, and spoke a bit about his family background, and how a proper Irish wake works. He was, of course, also familiar with the ferries, including those at Holyhead. I told him that the *Swift*, which he complained made him feel ill, is no longer the same boat. (Irish Ferries sold it, bought a new one, and gave it the same name, just to confuse everyone. The new *Swift* is a second-hand American troop transport vessel.)

hopes of a British one. (Why is the food at Irish filling stations so much better? I don't know, but it's true.)

Carmarthen railway station is open around the clock, even when no trains are running. The waiting room is ... well, it's a waiting room. Reasonably spacious, sufficiently warm, and about as comfortable as one would expect a railway station waiting room to be. There was actually

#### A CONVERSATION

The only other person in the waiting room was a lady on her way home from the hospital. Her husband had gone in that morning; not unusual, as he's spent ten of the sixteen months since their marriage in hospital. And she herself had fainted a little later in the morning on the way into work, and been taken into hospital by her son, who fortuitously happened to be walking past on his own way into work. She talked a bit about the wedding, with her granddaughter as the flower girl, and her new husband being rushed to hospital and missing most of the reception. Lovely lady, probably quite stressed.

quite a bit of train movement going on that evening: just trains parked up at the station moving away into the depot. Station staff told me that only one train had come in that day: a service from Swansea carrying rail maintenance workers, stopping at each obstruction to clear the tracks. It had taken eight hours.

The taxi driver booked for midnight popped his head in the door of the waiting room at eleven, and said that he'd probably be half an hour late. I told him that this was fine, because my ferry had now been delayed to 4.00 instead of 2.40.

Let's review. I'd had a very early start in Cambridge so I could get to the 14.45 sailing from Pembroke. Then there were train cancellations, so I knew I'd miss it. Then it was delayed to 17.30, so I could get it. And then I phoned Irish Ferries, checked that my booking would also be viable on the 2.45 sailing, and spent a relaxed day in Carmarthen. I really could have had a lie-in in Cambridge, but I hadn't realised at that point that the later ferry was better.

The taxi driver reappeared at 25 minutes past midnight, and so got me into Pembroke at approximately 1.20. He was good and brought me to the ferry terminal building, even though he was officially contracted to bring me to Pembroke Dock train station, a short walk away.

The terminal building was dark and locked. After some confusion, I told the taxi driver that he'd best go. Pembroke Dock is a small part of the massive port of Milford Haven, and the Irish Ferries terminal

building is neither large nor impressive, but there are some grand stone buildings in the vicinity. I went for a stroll. The car park appeared to be full of empty cars. I didn't go peering in windows, but probably most of them actually contained sleeping passengers. The only vehicle showing obvious signs of life was a coach. I did try asking the driver whether I could wait inside, in the warmth, but he told me that foot passengers are not the same as coach passengers, and go away. Either that or he genuinely didn't understand what I was saying.

A little more wandering around the area found me the Irish Ferries administration building, with a phone number on the door for parcel deliveries. I tried it. The lady on the phone seemed surprised to hear that passengers might perhaps prefer to wait inside the terminal building instead of in the car park, but said that she'd try to find someone to open the building for me. (The official contact phone number for Irish Ferries was useless, as they keep standard office hours even though the ferries themselves don't. I may save the Pembroke Dock parcel delivery number as a handy way to contact them out of hours in future.)

I waited by the building. Another chap got out of his car to stretch his legs and joined me, so we were together when a security guard turned up forty minutes later, opened the doors, turned on the lights, and disappeared. Once she'd gone, I turned off the blaring television. Who wants that? There were actually two televisions, both loudly playing *different* shows, so the discord would have been infuriating even if I was wide awake, which I certainly wasn't at this point. A few other people got out of their cars and came inside for a bit, to walk, to get into the warmth, or to use the loos.

The 2.40 *Isle of Innisfree* was supposed to leave Pembroke Dock, if you recall, at 4.00. In fact, the previous sailing had had to wait outside Rosslare Harbour because that port was congested. The ship didn't dock there till

*Apologies, Due to port congestion in Rosslare the Isle of Innisfree has only been able to dock in Rosslare {03.25 hours} , your 02:45 Innisfree sailing from Pembroke on 10/12/2024 will now be subject a further delay , an update on the sailing time will be sent via SMS when the vessel has departed From Rosslare*

*We apologise for the inconvenience caused by this delayed departure.*

3.25. I could easily have been on that sailing, but instead I'd spent the day in Carmarthen. That sailing was longer than usual, because of the delay getting into Rosslare, so if I'd been on it, I'd have had

more time to catch up on sleep. I suppose I could have waited, then, in the terminal building in Rosslare, which does actually have more comfortable seats, and taken the first train to Dublin.

Instead, I was in a chilly and uncomfortable terminal building in Pembroke with no real idea when the ferry would turn up. My decision in Carmarthen to wait for the night crossing had seemed reasonable to me at the time, but in retrospect I was doubting it.

I was at least indoors, dry, and mostly warm, with access to a power socket to keep the phone charged. And at this point I was too tired to think about other options, so I stayed where I was. I was looking forward to sleep. In theory, I had a cabin booked on the ferry. Would I actually get it?

I got up at 4.15 for a 4.53 train. At 6.16 I was still sitting in Pembroke ferry

terminal. That's twenty-six hours awake. And I was already short on sleep before this trip started. My mother wakes up early, and sent some texts to convince me to try to sleep. One small section of the terminal floor was carpeted. At 7.20, I pulled some of my SCA garb out of my rucksack, wrapped it around myself, and tried to sleep. Of course, not long after that, a bunch of people came in from the waiting cars outside, and had a loud conversation right beside me. (I was hidden behind a table.) I was up and moving again at 8.29.

The wording of the announcement on the Irish Ferries website had now changed. Instead of an unspecified "delay", it said that the 2.40 sailing would depart at 13.30, and that the 14.45 sailing would *also* depart at 13.30. I had been wondering whether they'd

just cancel a sailing to get the schedule back on track, and it looked like they were essentially doing that, but consolidating two sailings into one. I'm surprised that they had the capacity on the ship to take

## *Twenty-seven hours awake*

*Apologies, Due to port congestion in Rosslare the Isle of Innisfree has only been delayed. The Isle of Innisfree departed Rosslare at 06.58 hours. Expected arrival in Pembroke 11.00 hours. The Innisfree is expected to depart from Pembroke at approximately 13.30hours. Check in will commence at 11.00hrs. Latest check in time is 12.30*

*We apologise for the inconvenience caused by this delayed departure.*

*Due to operational reasons the Isle of Innisfree sailing at 14.45 will depart at the earlier time of 13.30 hours.*

two sailings together, and also to take in people booked on the busier, larger capacity Holyhead–Dublin crossing, but it seems they did.

Since this announcement actually made sense, I decided to believe it. I'd spent an uncomfortable night in the terminal, and had had vanishingly little sleep, but it was actually morning and the sun was shining. I decided to walk into town and find breakfast. It's a short and not unpleasant walk, and I popped my head into the first shop I saw open, a mini supermarket, and asked the staff for café recommendations. They told me to go to the Swan. I did. It appeared to be closed, but a friendly woman on the street saw me looking lost, and told me that the front part is a pub which opens later, and I should go to the side door to find the café. I was, again, the only customer. (And they let me into the kitchen to wash my hands, as the only toilets were in the pub.) Friendly people. I had a mini breakfast with tea, because I didn't want to think about what coffee might do to me. I lingered. I had nowhere better to be.

Even so, I was back at the ferry terminal by eleven, and saw the *Isle of Innis-free* arriving. I was alone in the terminal building. I

*“For some reason, I feel quite alert”*

think I was the only foot passenger who'd been aiming for the 2.40 sailing. The others, who arrived later, had been planning on taking the 14.45, which had been brought forward with very little notice. No staff were seen inside until noon, and the door for foot passengers was not opened until the very end of the check-in process. I should have foreseen that. There is no passenger gangway onto the ship: foot passengers are brought onto the car deck by bus. In fact, I'd read the posters in the terminal explaining that (and saying that you could, if you wished, leave your larger bags on the bus instead of lugging them onto the passenger decks). So of course there's only one bus, and it must go at the end of the check-in window. Only vehicles were checking in at 11, not foot passengers. I should probably have spent longer in the Swan.

As a text I wrote at the time said, “For some reason, I feel quite alert. I'm alone in the terminal building. The ferry is disorging lorries. Staff directing traffic outside told me that foot passenger check-in would open later.”

I think the food and tea had had a reviving affect, but it didn't last long.

The part of my brain that's telling me to treat this as a fun adventure was still functioning. It might have done better if I'd had more sleep!

The ticket office opened at noon. I showed the lady there my SailRail ticket, and she printed me up a new ticket, saying that they don't normally take SailRail tickets on that crossing, because Pembroke Dock train station is too far away. That logic doesn't make sense to me: I've frequently bought SailRail tickets which include Irish trains, and require transit across Dublin, where the port is very far from the centre and the train stations.

I asked, and no, I did not get a cabin. They were sold out. I was told to apply for a refund.

In fact, the bus had a trailer into which we loaded our bags. If I'd had a cabin, I'd have kept mine with me, looking forward to putting on some of the clean clothes I'd bought in Carmarthen after a shower. Since I had no hope of that, I left it on the trailer so I wouldn't have to cart it around the ship. I did have a quick look around, as the *Isle of Innisfree* is new to me, and strolled briefly around some of the outside decks, but then found some reclining seats where I could try to sleep. I did keep half an eye open looking out the window at the massive port of Milford Haven until we were out at sea, which does take a while. About half way through the voyage, I woke up stiff and went downstairs where I found a flat bench to spread out on. The ferry did not seem at all crowded. In early December, I think the majority of the traffic is lorries, so the capacity constraints are on the vehicle deck, not with passenger numbers. And lorry drivers have their own lounge on board anyway.

We arrived in Rosslare on time. Here, the immigration check for foot passengers was done on the bus, on our trip between the ferry and the terminal building. I've not seen it done that way before.

Some of my SCA friends had offered to help pay for a B&B in Rosslare if I needed it, but because this was earlier than the scheduled afternoon

The train times don't match the scheduled ferry times at all. And it's an annoying walk from the ferry terminal to the minimalistic (single-platform, no building) train station. You'd never guess that this port is owned and operated by Iarnród Éireann, the state railway operator.

sailing, I could in fact get the last train, at 17.55, out of Rosslare

Europort. But I had no time to dawdle. The tracks used to be right beside the terminal building, but are now a bit of a walk across the car park. I found my train waiting, and collapsed onto it.

I don't know what mental state I was in at this point. I had slept on the boat, but not at all well. And the crossing wasn't

*At some point, the joy went out of it*

really long enough for a proper sleep anyway. I could easily sleep on this train, but I don't think I did. I felt somehow unable. I think I was perhaps too stressed. Too close to home and my own bed, even though it would be a few hours yet. It wasn't a fun adventure any longer.

My ticket was from Huntingdon to Dublin, and did not include any travel on Irish trains. Nonetheless, the ticket inspector on this route accepted it as valid. The ticket was purchased from Irish Ferries, so it looked like a little booklet, not a normal train ticket. Even though Irish Ferries do not normally take SailRail tickets on their Rosslare–Pembroke services, Stena Line do take them on their Rosslare–Fishguard services, so ticket inspectors on the Rosslare line are presumably familiar with them.

The train from Rosslare to Dublin goes right along the coast, with some stunning scenery. I'd recommend doing it in daylight. I saw very little this time. I was awake for the section through Wexford Town, where the train creeps along the waterfront, going at 5 m.p.h. because there are no fences. There was an ice skating rink set up in a big marquee. It seems that no one in Wexford knows how to skate. It was busy, and not a single person in there looked comfortable on the ice.

The quickest route to Heuston Station is to disembark at the penultimate stop, Tara Street Station, and walk across the Liffey to the tram stop at Abbey Street. But I had plenty of time, so I stayed aboard till Connolly Station and took the tram from Busáras, just across the road.

In Heuston, I felt, if not exactly hungry, in need of sustenance. The station concourse was cold, and I wanted hot food, but none was available. A shop in the station sold basic groceries, and I bought myself, of all things, sushi. It was too cold to eat in the station, so I waited till I was on the train. The last train to Tullamore leaves at 20.30, and was long gone. The train I caught was the 22.10 to Portar-

lington, from where my parents had agreed to pick me up. This train is scheduled to take 59 minutes. Again, I didn't sleep. I ate the sushi as we were leaving the station and felt somewhat more alive, but still unable to sleep. Perhaps I was a bit too stressed, or perhaps it was the prospect of soon being home and in my own bed.

At seven o'clock that morning, I'd been awake for over twenty-six hours. Since then I'd slept briefly on the carpeted floor of the terminal, a little more on the ferry, and perhaps dozed a little on the train to Dublin. But mostly I'd been awake. I was not feeling good.

My dad collected me from Portarlinton, and we chatted a bit on the way home — so apparently I was awake enough for that. Mostly we talked about the trip itself. He, like me, enjoys travel planning, so he was interested in the details, such as where my train to Farringdon was going (Brighton), and what was actually said on my train ticket to Paddington. (I forget: it wasn't "London Paddington" specifically, and nor was it the generic "London terminals" as I went beyond the terminal station. I can't check, as it was swallowed by the ticket barrier as I exited from the Elizabeth Line at Paddington.)

I was home just after midnight, but it was nearly one o'clock

*Sleep!*

before I was in bed. That's partly because I had to make the bed, having stripped it before leaving, but mostly because first I had a *very* long shower. I felt the need of one.

I actually woke up at a reasonable time the following morning, but then rolled over and went back to sleep. Somehow, though, my usually messy sleep schedule has been pretty good since then.

I've contacted Irish Ferries about a refund for the cabin I didn't get, but have yet to see a response.