

Steam Photography

A guide to photographing heritage railways



There is nothing quite like the sight and sound of a steam locomotive, particularly one that is working hard or recreating the atmosphere of a long lost age of quite branch lines and idyllic stations. Thousands of photographs are taken every year at heritage railways in Britain and abroad and while even a technically poor picture can evoke happy memories of a visit the power of modern cameras should make it relatively easy to obtain sharp, well

exposed images, at least of stationary trains and engines. Why then are so many poor images taken? Often a 'better camera' would have made no difference whereas a basic understanding of light, composition, technique and how to get the best from a location will. Capturing good pictures is relatively straightforward if the right techniques are used and in this short article we show you how.

Equipment

Almost any camera can be used, even smart phones but for the best results some level of user control is required. While the fully auto or Programme modes or higher-end compacts, bridge cameras, compact system cameras and DSLRs can give reasonable results there are better ways. For best results a camera with good CAF (continuous autofocus) is preferred which means a DSLR or recent compact system camera. If using amore basic unit try setting the camera to Sport mode (the runner symbol)

Basic Technique

My basic settings for photography on heritage lines where the trains are slow moving (maximum speed is 25 mph) are shutter priority with a minimum shutter speed of 1/320s and continuous shooting set – normally the Low option is fine, CAF with single focus point and an ISO between 200 and 800 normally to obtain an aperture of between f5.6 and f8. These settings seem to work most of the time with a Nikon D7000 but I do use the central block of 9 focus points on an Oly E-M1. As the train approaches half press the shutter (or use back button focusing if that's your preference) to pre-focus on point just in front of the point where the front of the loco will be in your composition. This prevents the lens from hunting too much.

Location

For many people the only locations accessible will be stations which provide not only opportunities to photograph the locos and trains but also the buildings and people such as guards and porters. On many lines the stations are give a period setting.





Photographs along the line are more problematic unless publicly accessible locations such as bridges, footpaths etc have been identified in advance. Some railways publish such locations on their web site but for others the OS map is your best friend. Never place yourself on the railway side of the fence – it's a criminal offence to trespass on a statutory railway. However, some lines will allow lineside access for approved photographers subject to that photographer gaining a Personal Track

Safety (PTS) for the line and wearing railway standard hi-viz clothing. Contact the railway well in advance of a visit and don't be surprised if they don't allow non-staff access.

Where there is access to a yard or loco shed enabling you to get close to the engines look for details on the engines themselves. Also look for aspects of the working of the railway – the signalman exchanging single line tokens with a train crew for example.

Getting the Shot

All the usual rules of lighting and composition apply of course so do keep the following in mind.

Rule of Thirds

For shots where the loco is the main subject try to put the front of the engine on either the left or right hand third with the buffer beam on the lower third. Allow space above the engine for smoke and steam.



Perspective and Lead in Lines

The line of rails form the obvious lead-in line but there can be others such as platform edges, hedge or fence lines, maybe a road leading to a bridge or viaduct. Always consider your composition carefully – what are you trying to achieve?

Shape and Form

Space, shape and form are intricately related and each contributes discrete visual elements to the complete photograph. When setting up your composition consider the following:

Space

All photographs are composed of positive and negative space. Positive space includes the objects in the image and negative space is the emptiness surrounding the objects. So in a scene of a black loco against a green cutting the positive space is the loco and the negative space the cutting.



Shape

Shapes are formed at the intersection of three lines and are distinguishable in and out of the natural world. The ways shapes interact in a photograph draw the eye in and create interest in the composition. The positive space in a photograph may be composed of multiple shapes.

Form

The form of an object comes from light and darkness. The form is the three-dimensionality of the object and in the two-dimensional photograph is represented in light and shadow. Form includes three elements: length, width and depth. The direction and intensity of the light in the photograph will dictate the form - without any light, there would be no form. Black and white photographs bring our attention directly to the form of the objects in the photography reducing everything to a combination of light and shadow



The Triangle

This also exploits perspective in that we often use a vanishing point as one point of the triangle. It is often found on railways because of the parallel lines of rails and rolling stock. It can also be exploited in vertical format using the height of the train as the vanishing point.

Dynamic Diagonals

Often sloping lines give a picture a feeling of movement and drama. For example a shot of an engine head on banked over on a curve can really show off the raw energy of steam. The same trick can be used for a static shot from a platform with the engine in a tilted position. Again use lines to draw the eye into the picture.



Frames

Look for locations where a train bursts through a bridge or a loco is framed by a shed door. Lineside trees can also form a useful frame. Dark smoke and steam forms a frame by itself.

Background

When we have a camera to our eye it is easy to focus so closely on the main subject that the background can be forgotten. We may not see the person apparently emerging from the top of the boiler or the tree right over the chimney, the scruffy buildings or simply a crowd of other visitors. It is all too easy not to see something that ultimately spoils the picture – it happens to all of us. The trick is to stop and think, looking all over the viewfinder area and being ready to change your viewpoint as necessary.

Post Production Processing

All images benefit from some post processing, even if this is simply a tweak of exposure and contrast. However, post processing allows a second go at getting the picture you really want, particularly if the image was shot in RAW format. Some basic requirements with most railway photos include:

- * Lightening shadow areas to bring out detail of wheels and motion.
- * Darkening highlights to bring more detail into the loco exhaust
- * Adjustments to tonal range.

Cropping

Many pictures can be improved with a little judicious cropping to adjust framing and composition. With a little care an OK shot can become an outstanding shot so give it a try and don't be constrained by the 3:2, 4:3 or whatever the aspect ratio of the original was.



Uncropped image



Cropped image



Black and White

Now is the chance to really get creative and re-create scenes from the past. The usual post processing tools can be used or try a program such as Nik SilverEfex (the best available and it's free) or Perfect Effects to recreate that old faded look, the grain and contrasty Tri_X look, sepia toning, split toning or whatever takes your fancy. There are

several examples in the galleries on my website.

My e-book *Photographing Heritage Railways: A Guide for the Average Visitor* *can be purchased on Amazon for £2.99.*

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