

# The Railway children BBC 1968

For all the family to enjoy, this is a magical rendering of this classic tale. The settings in the Worth Valley in West Yorkshire are beautiful and this was filmed on an embryonic private enthusiast preserved railway just at the time when steam trains had disappeared from our everyday lives. All the main characters are cast very well and who can resist Jenny Agutter in one of her early roles. You would have to be very cold-hearted not to hold back a tear or a big lump in your throat at the climax to the story, and the ending scene over the closing titles says it all. The cast and producers really did enjoy making this one and it stands the test of time.

There are no shoot-outs, mass explosions or wild car chases, just honest loving relationships evolving around hard and troubled times. The recent ITV remake was good but doesn't capture the honest emotions and simple sincerity of life in less materialistic times. Go on get it for the family if you have never seen it and even better still, visit Haworth, Oakworth and the Worth Valley and you can still sample the set today!

don't remember, watching this in 1968, the children continually looking off set for their cues or the occasional clumsy improvisation but these things just add to the naive beauty of this (apparently) live production which for me was never upstaged by the slicker 1970 film version, though I feel I have to compare the two.

Gostelow brings a gentle grotesquerie to the character of Perks which I prefer to the wobble-like Cribbins. Gillian Bush Bailey's Phyllis was much sweeter and less toothy than Sally Thomsett's and in this version was looked after by the barely pubescent yet excellent Jenny Agutter's Bobby. With monoaural sound and in black and white from often scratched film stock, not slick, not faultless but in my opinion THIS is the stuff children's TV is made on.

In 1951, Edith Nesbit's story became one of the first children's novels to be adapted by the BBC. The broadcast was not recorded but its popularity meant the serial was remounted in the studio a few months later, in hour-long episodes. It would be impossible to depict trains and the great outdoors without location filming, and some outdoor work took place for the original version - these film inserts were reused for the later remount. In 1957 *The Railway Children* was remade from scratch, but stuck closely to Dorothea Brooking's 1951 script, possibly with a little more location filming. The 1957 version was the first shown nationwide and earned a *Radio Times* cover.

The next BBC version, from 1968, survives - viewed today it's apparent that the episodic serial adaptation helps to disguise the lack of real narrative development in Nesbit's original magazine serial tale. For its time, this is an excellent production, with an abundance of location filming on Yorkshire's Keighley and Worth Valley Preservation Railway. Given Jenny Agutter's involvement in both the 1968 TV serial and

subsequent 1970 film version, comparison is inevitable. Unfairly, the film's more sentimental telling makes the more realistic 1968 serial retrospectively disappointing. Particularly galling on backward viewing is the flat presentation of the final, tear-jerking "My Daddy" reunion scene.

A reasonably lavish television movie for 2000 featured Agutter once more, this time playing Mother. An excellent adaptation, it largely concentrated on the themes of Nesbit's novel in the more literal style of the 1968 serial, underlining the class discourse with the expansion of a scene in which working-class bargees throw coal at the three children, calling them "posh bloody kids". Nonetheless it was still in the thrall of the 1970 film - Bobbie and her Daddy were reunited in slow motion amid clouds of train steam.

Note: this is a synopsis for the 1970 film and differs in small instances from E. Nesbit's source novel and various television versions.

London, Christmas Day 1904. Two men call on Charles Waterbury (who works for the Foreign Office) and lead him away after a terse discussion. When he fails to return in the next few weeks, his wife announces that she and the children - Roberta (Bobbie), Phyllis and Peter - will be moving to Oakworth Yorkshire "to play at being poor for a while". They move into a cottage called Three Chimneys.

The next morning, the children discover that a nearby field backs onto the railway line. They wave at a passing steam train with their handkerchiefs. A distinguished-looking gentleman waves back. Following the line, the children arrive at Oakworth station where they meet porter Albert Perks.

As winter continues, Mother takes ill in their chilly cottage. Peter steals coal from the station sheds but is caught by Bobbie. Peter protests that trying to keep Mother warm can't be wrong. Bobbie resolves to do something constructive to help. The children paint a large sign on an old bedsheet "LOOK OUT AT THE STATION" and wave it at the 9.15 the next day. When the train stops at Oakworth, Phyllis passes a note to the Old Gentleman.

A hamper of supplies is duly delivered to Three Chimneys and the children thank the Old Gentleman with a similar sign. But when Mother recovers and discovers the provisions were acquired by charity she is furious. The family are nonetheless reconciled for Bobbie's birthday.

One day a ragged man staggers off the train at Oakworth, babbling in French. Mother is called to interpret. He is Russian dissident Szczepansky, , who has escaped the Siberian mines for England to find his family. Mrs Waterbury has Szczepansky convalesce at their home and suggests the children say a prayer "for all prisoners and captives".

One day, the children witness a landslide. Knowing they cannot possibly clear the line before the 11.29 passes through, the girls create warning flags out of their red bloomers. Bobbie stands firm between the rails, waving the red rags as the brakes are slammed on. The train comes to rest just in time.

A ceremony is held at the station to commemorate the children's bravery. The railway Director is the Old Gentleman. Bobbie asks him if he might be able to help Szczepansky. The Director eventually succeeds and Szczepansky leaves for London to be reunited with his family.

The children ask around the town for birthday presents for Perks. He is initially furious, but is touched when the children convince him the gifts are a mark of respect from his fellow townspeople. To say thank you, Perks hands Bobbie some old magazines, but she is later horrified to notice a newspaper headline: announcing her father's conviction and sentence to penal servitude. Knowing he is innocent, Bobbie resolves to rescue him. The next day, she hands a letter to Perks to pass on.

A while later, the children watch grammar school boys hold a 'fox and hounds' paper chase. One of the hounds fails to emerge from the railway tunnel. Investigating, they find their 'hound in a red jersey' with a broken leg. The boy, Jim, is taken to Three Chimneys. When Jim's grandfather comes to visit - it is their Old Gentleman! Bobbie has a private chat with him about her father. He says he had received her letter and has been looking into the case.

Some time later, when the children wave at the passing 9.15, the whole train waves back as if in celebration. At the station, Bobbie is greeted by an overjoyed Perks. A train from London halts and, as the steam clears, Bobbie sees a tall figure on the platform.

Arm in arm, father and daughter walk back to the cottage. Father enters and closes the door as the children leave their parents alone to be reunited.