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West Midlands Railway unveils 18 poems for Shakespeare Line stations

Rail passengers in the West Midlands will have a little extra inspiration and entertainment when travelling on the Shakespeare Line from today (Fri 28 May) with the release of 18 specially-written poems.

The poems have been penned by 18 West Midlands writers and have been specially commissioned for each of the 18 stations along the line, which runs from Birmingham Moor Street to Stratford-upon-Avon. Authors include five former Birmingham poet laureates and award-winning poets and writers.

Passengers can download the poems using the Overhear app on their mobile

phones to listen to while on board the train, at the station or when they get home.

The project is called 'Poetry on the Shakespeare Line' and is the brainchild of the Black Country performance poetry group 'Poets, Prattlers and Pandemonialists'

Steve Pottinger, from the group, said:

"These are poems of wit and humour, history and hope. Whatever your taste there will be something for you and we hope passengers will see the Shakespeare Line through fresh eyes once they have heard them.

"Some poems highlight the role of industry, the pleasure of travel, the spirit-lifting green spaces along the route and above all the importance of the Shakespeare Line in connecting people and communities."

The project has been funded as part of the Your Community, Your Fund scheme, financed by the Department for Transport. Under the scheme, West Midlands Railway and sister company London Northwestern Railway will invest in dozens of community projects across the network over the coming months.

The poems represent the range of voices and the diversity and vibrancy of the West Midlands, and the poets have worked closely with 'Friends' of the stations, the volunteers who give their time freely to work on the landscaping and upgrade of their local stations.

The poets have created pieces which reflect the unique character of each of the locations, some focus on the history of a station while others respond to the environment around it.

Fay Easton, head of community and stakeholder for West Midlands Railway, said:

"This project has been a joy to watch unfold. The commitment of the poets to really understand the locality and people has been inspiring. I am delighted the timing for the release of the poems is happening just as more passengers are beginning to return to rail.

"Poetry can magically bring people together and we are so pleased to have been able to support this project as we continue to celebrate and connect more closely with our local communities."

The poems will be installed on station noticeboards later this year, together with the 'Pride of Place' poem which thanks all of the volunteers and communities for their ongoing support for the railways.

"Betty Castle, Queen of the Flower Beds" by Matt Black (Henley-in-Arden)

Kneels with spade, ready to plant, reserved face,

plain suit, looks like wool, warm and practical but not

the height of fashion, the photo shows a woman

busy gardening, with get-on-with-it post-war determination,

the station mistress, doing sterling work for this proud station.

But the mystery remains, why our Betty Castle came

to spend her days creating lovely Edens, painting

rocks, like seaside scenes, her prize-winning garden,

where dozing eyes will wander, rest and wonder

as the Shakespeare Express puff-puff-puffs in to Henley-in-Arden.

Maybe Betty paced Platform 2b or not 2b,

jittery with joy, feverish for her young RSC Valentino

on the clouds-of-steam 12.03 to Stratford-upon-Avon.

Maybe his lean face never showed. Betty never recovered.

From that day on smiling flowerbeds were her lovers.

Maybe Betty was always shy, at school, at home,
always the mysterious loner, for no discernible reason.

Maybe her Dad never took her to Weston-Super-Mare,
or Mother was unkind, so she shut down, spent a life
building yearned-for seashores in her mind.

“How do we get here?” The station asks.

“To being us.” But no one knows. Maybe Betty did
kick her heels, let her hair down at the Black Swan.

But Betty’s pride guards the soft stuff inside,
hides the story behind her serious expression.

These rocks, this wild garden, such profusion.

Daffodils, pansies, geraniums, reds, yellows, greens.

You look up at us, Betty, and your quiet eyes sing,

Here is love, here is spring, and for you, and you, and you

I spend my days on platforms planting dreams.

Ends

About West Midlands Trains

For further information on this release, call our press office on 03300 955150 or email press.office@wmtrains.co.uk

West Midlands Trains operates both West Midlands Railway and London Northwestern Railway services.

- **London Northwestern Railway** services operate between Liverpool and Birmingham, and on the West Coast Main Line to and from London Euston.
- **West Midlands Railway** services operate to destinations across the West Midlands via Birmingham New Street and Birmingham Snow Hill.

For more information on these services visit westmidlandsrailway.co.uk or londonnorthwesternrailway.co.uk

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