

# Irish Railtour Report

*By D. Grimshaw*

(Courtesy Railway World, February 1966)

*Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> September 1965 marked the last run of GNRI Class VS 4-4-0 No. 207 "Boyne" and the first excursion sponsored by the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland.*



*The RPSI special, described in the accompanying article, stands at Moira Station on the Lisburn-Portadown section of the trip. Class S 4-4-0 No.171 and Class VS 4-4-0 No.207 are at the head of the train. (A. Donaldson)*

On Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> September the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland ran an inaugural steam-hauled railtour using GN motive power and running over the NCC main line between Belfast and Coleraine, the branch to Portrush and the GN line from Antrim to Lisburn via Crumlin.

We left Belfast York Road 1½ minutes later than the scheduled 9:05 a.m., only 20 minutes ahead of an express railcar with the same destination. The locomotive at the head of the train, officially designated the 9:05 a.m. Special Passenger, Belfast (York Road) to Portrush, was ex-GNR(I) class UG 0-6-0 No.149, latterly UTA No.49. We were scheduled to arrive at Ballymena only 2 minutes before the 9:25 diesel entered the Cookstown Junction-Ballymena block section. No one really knew how the UG would perform as this was the first time such a locomotive had ever worked a passenger train on the former NCC main line.

The engine was built in 1947 for the Great Northern Railway (Ireland) by Beyer Peacock of Manchester, perpetuating, with slight modifications, a GN design of 1937, a mixed traffic engine with two inside cylinders Min 18in x 24in, 5ft 1in driving wheels and a tractive effort of 21,600 lb at 200 lb/sq in pressure. The present working pressure, however, is 175 lb/sq in.

No.49 reached a speed of 37 m.p.h. at Milepost 3, at the foot of the bank, which extends a further six miles, with a gradient often as steep as 1 in 75. The UG, with a five-coach train did not drop below 20 m.p.h. to the summit at Kingsbog Junction. On the long down-grade towards and through Antrim, speed remained above 50, with a maximum of 57 near Dunadry. Consequently, our arrival at Cookstown Junction was nearly 1 minute early. After a photographic stop here, we proceeded to

Ballymena, again arriving slightly early. Our net time from Belfast was about 47 minutes which compares very favourably with the 45 minutes allowed to the UTA's 2-6-4Ts.

At Ballymena, the train was shunted to allow the Portrush railcar to pass. This operation gave the first opportunity for photographing the train in motion. The engine had been thoroughly cleaned for the occasion, and the first coach was in the new UTA unlined maroon livery for A-class stock. The other four coaches, also ex-GN vehicles were, with the exception of the dining car, in standard dark green livery.



On the run to the next stop, Ballymoney, No.49 again put up an excellent performance, although reductions to about 20 m.p.h. were necessary at the crossing places at Cullybackey, Glarryford, Dunloy and Ballyboyland, as GN engines were not normally fitted with automatic staff-exchange apparatus. Thus the UG's running could not be fairly compared with that of the 2-6-4Ts over this single-line section.

A photographic stop was made at Macfin, a station closed to passenger traffic, but still a crossing point. At Coleraine, we joined the Portrush branch, which diverges there from the Northern Counties main line to Londonderry. The special made a crossing stop at Portstewart to allow the 11:30 Portrush-Belfast diesel to pass.

The engine ran round the train at Portrush, and we returned to Coleraine, where 49 was turned, watered, coaled and serviced.

At 1:00 p.m. we left Coleraine, on the return journey, on which stops were made at Ballymoney, Dunloy, Glarryford and Cullybackey; we crossed the 12:50 and 1:10 diesel trains from Belfast. We reached Ballymena at 2.12 p.m. where again water was taken and continued over the double-track

section to Antrim. After arrival at the Up platform, the train then ran forward some distance and set back over the crossover to the Down platform, a manoeuvre necessary for trains proceeding to Lisburn via the ex-GN branch.

The 18½ mile branch, closed to passenger traffic, is single throughout and worked as one long block section with an overall speed restriction of 25 m.p.h. Five stops were made, the first at Aldergrove, adjacent to the civil and RAF airport, and the next at Crumlin. At Glenavy, which is situated on a sharp right-hand curve, the first “run-past” ever staged in Ireland was held. Whilst almost all the passengers occupied strategic positions in the station, cameras at the ready, the train set back about ¼ mile and came charging through the station, with the UG 0-6-0 on full regulator and 75 per cent cut-off. The noise was almost deafening and one could almost feel the hammer-blow on the rails. The sharp curve added to the effect, and the atmosphere cannot be described in words. The performance was repeated at Ballinderry and Brookmount; at the former, a road overbridge offered an ideal vantage point, and at the latter a shallow cutting, hemmed by trees, trapped the noise. Much film and tape was expended at these three stations.



*Part of the RPSI excursion on 11<sup>th</sup> September was worked by GNRI Class UG 0-6-0 No.49, which is depicted here on the Belfast Central line earlier in the year with an Easter Monday excursion from Portadown to Bangor.*

The special joined the Dublin-Belfast main line at Knockmore Junction, about 1½ miles before Lisburn, where the biggest surprise of the day awaited our passengers. The motive power for the remainder of the tour had been advertised as ex-GN Class S 4-4-0 No.171 “Slieve Gullion”, but to the astonishment of all on board, except to the few people who had sponsored the tour, waiting in the headshunt at Lisburn were two 4-4-0s. No.171 and ex-GN Class VS 4-4-0 No.207 “Boyne”. Thus for the remainder of the outing, the train was taken by 207, with 171 as pilot. Unfortunately, by a sad coincidence, which we did not realise at the time, this was to be 207’s last run; No.207, the last

remaining Great Northern three-cylinder express engine, has now been withdrawn, and indeed did not run again after this outing.

After serving us well for most of the day, the UG 0-6-0 left us at Lisburn, and returned light to Adelaide shed, while the train left in the opposite direction behind the two 4-4-0s for Portadown, where the locomotives were detached and made their way to the deserted sheds, turned and ran round each other, so that No.171 would again be the leading engine. They were the last locomotives to use the turntable at the shed, for not long after, the connection to the main line was removed and the shed became accessible only by a series of shunts from nearby sidings.

We left Portadown, on the last leg of the journey, sharp on time at 5:55 p.m., and made our next stop at Lurgan. From here we ran non-stop for the last 20 miles into Belfast (Great Victoria Street), reached 2 minutes early at 6:36. On the descent of Moira bank, the combination of the S and VS engines attained a top speed of 64 m.p.h.

It was the first time for many months that No.171, the only S class still in working order, had hauled a passenger train, and possibly the first time for ten years or more since an S had piloted a VS. As a last defiant gesture, No.171's whistle stuck on entering Great Victoria Street station and there at the end of the outing sat Slieve Gullion whistling for several minutes until the driver attacked the whistle with a spanner. Thus ended an unforgettable day which could never be repeated. Fortunately our efforts to preserve No.171 have been successful, and this fine class of locomotive will not now pass into oblivion.