

THE

PLATELLA RAILWAY

The Railway Preservation Society of Ireland

MORE HANDS.

**SITE MANAGER JOHN RICHARDSON
OUTLINES THE BIG PLANS
FOR WHITEHEAD SITE**

ALSO

WILFRED AND PATRICIA

MANY HANDS...

-JOHN RICHARDSON

WE ARE HOPING TO GET A GREAT DEAL DONE AT THE SITE THIS ... but just how much we do achieve is going to depend largely on how much support we get.

Basically what we are setting out to do is this:

- 1 - provide a platform road,
- 2 - clear the platform of grass,
- 3 - start renovation work on two pieces of rolling stock.

To assist me in doing this I formed an informal site committee a few months ago, composed of a number of staunch enthusiasts who, by the work during 1967, had shown their keenness and responsibility.

Of course, it should be stressed that all the members of the committee are responsible to me and act on my instructions.

But back to our plans for the site and particularly the provision of a platform road.

First, sleepers were needed, and to get these site committee members and myself went to see Society patron Lord O'Neill and set out our proposals before him.

These were that an approach should be made to Courtaulds to see if they would be interested in donating a

length of track.

Lord O'Neill wrote to the firm and back came the reply that led to the company giving us 400 sleepers and chairs.

Actually, we were very lucky, not just in the fact that Courtaulds happened to be generous, but also contract the contract for lifting the firm's sidings had already gone out to tender, and a figure had been agreed with Eastwood's.

Courtaulds had to negotiate with Eastwood's for an amending contract figure omitting the equipment they were going to donate to us.

Getting the turnout on the site was another difficulty which the committee had to solve.

But, after some discussions, NIR said they would put the turnout in for a very reasonable figure.

By the way, this raises the question of money, and I should explain that when we decided to go ahead with the development of the site it was on the clear understanding that there would be no drain on Society funds.

To pay for the turnout - which at the time of writing is being pub in - the site committee members decided to make themselves personally responsible.

With plans for the platform road well forward, we tackled the question

of the platform surface.

Work on clearing this, using hand implements, had started. But it had ground to a halt, mainly because of difficulties encountered with large rocks and brambles.

A man from David Brown's kindly came down to look over the site, but told us sadly that though he would like to help, none of his tractors could cope with such a surface!

Then, we found a Whitehead contractor who has a bulldozer, and he says he will clear the platform for us without cost.

Ironically, the good weather is holding this back, for naturally he cannot take his machine off a job while the sun is shining.

And talking about weather, now that the horse box and the brake van have been brought down to the site, we are hoping that by renovating these we will be able to offer jobs even when it rains.

The horse box, even without renovation, could be used as a sales kiosk, ticket office and publicity centre if drawn up alongside the platform on our planned 'road' for there.

The brake van has good possibilities for transporting fare paying passengers on the site.

But, of course, the big project is the platform road. At present we are moving the sleepers and chairs from Courtaulds using lorries and a forklift truck which have been kindly (supplied through Lord O'Neill and Ron Grayson.

The lifting, transporting and then re-laying at Whitehead of this material takes people. And that means YOU.

Our plans will mean not just a more attractive looking site, but also better facilities for steaming, for storage, and also for open days.

I, and the other members of the 'happy band', will be very glad to see you any Saturday.

We are also hoping to arrange work during week nights and on Sundays.

If you would like further details I'll be glad to hear from you at the Northern Bank, Lisburn.

Or, contact site committee member David Trotter on Belfast 23805, during office hours, or Belfast 614679.

This magazine, by the way has been written and edited by David Trotter and George Hamilton.

JOHN
RICHARDSON

COURTAULDS SIDINGS

OR:

HOW WILFRED AND
PATRICIA BECAME
INVOLVED WITH TWO
BOTTLES OF STOUT

ONE OF the largest industrial railway systems in Ireland, which was christened with two bottles of stout, has come to an end.

For the 3½-miles of sidings at Courtaulds works at Carrickfergus have now been lifted by Eastwood's, the Belfast demolition firm.

Probably the only man who followed the workings of this system throughout its whole existence is Mr John ("Jock") Macrae, of Marine Parade, Whitehead.

Mr Macrae, a quiet, slow-spoken Scot, worked as engine driver-cum-fireman from the time the system opened in 1947 until it was last worked in 1966.

Mr Macrae came to Courtaulds after the war was over. Born in Dundee, he joined the LNER at the Dundee depot as a cleaner and was a passed fireman when the war broke out.

"I joined the Army and was put into the railway section of the transport corps, where there was a great need of drivers," he said.

He was put through a set of tests

and accepted as a qualified driver. After a period of depot work shunting on special Army-only sidings, he was posted to France to operate in similar depots there.

He was moved back shortly before the Germans broke through, and home again he worked US engines which he remembers with some affection.

In particular, the cushioned seats provided for both driver and fireman. "But because of the steel fireboxes it took about twice as long to get steam up as in a British locomotive of the same size."

For a period during the war he was posted to Northern Ireland, and was based in Whitehead, where he stayed at Devenny's hotel.

"We had a train of fully equipped workshops at the Society's siding, and the hospital train was also there."

One of the jobs was prolonged testing on all parts of the railway system of a number of armoured rail cars made from steel.

These would have been equipped with armament if there had been a German advance to the North through Éire.

Following the building of the sidings at Courtaulds by the construction firm of Sir Alfred McAlpine, Mr Macrae began work. Two engines were used - Patricia, which was

brought into service in 1947, and Wilfred, which came into use a year later.

"Both engines arrived in a partly assembled condition. The cab came separately and the motion was stripped down. The assembly was done by Courtaulds' fitters.

"Patricia was named after the wife of a relief driver, and Wilfred was the Christian name of one of the firm's directors.

"Both engines were named at special ceremonies at which bottles of Guinness were broken against the smokebox", he said.

Mr Macrae described what it was like to work on the system:

"I began at 8am, by filling the tanks from the water hydrant, and oiled round and built the fire up.

One engine was in steam all the time while the other was either being washed out or having maintenance work done.

Overnight, normal practice was to maintain the pressure guage at about 40 lbs per sq. inch, and this was done by occasional checks by men on the nightshift from the nearby power house.

I topped up with steam coal from the stack beside the tipping plant which is close to the engine shed.

I used the small bunker in the engine as an 'emergency supply' as the

bunker was difficult to fill, and for convenience carried some coal on the footplate.

About 9am I set off up the fairly steep gradient out of the engine shed leading up to the weighbridge office.

This weighbridge, by the way, was provided with two tracks. One was over the weighbridge and the other skirted it. And during my time track over the weighbridge was always used!

Freight movements were made up of four main items - sulphur, coal, pulp and charcoal. Full trains were brought in by UTA engines into the three storage sidings known as the 'top siding'.

Operation of the top siding required that one siding should always remain free to allow the main line engine to get out.

On one occasion the UTA sent in a full train at a time when the top siding was completely filled, and this meant the 'escape road' was then occupied.

The solution to this was for the Courtaulds engine to couple up to 40 loaded waggons on one of the remaining two roads and draw them forward past the weighbridge and up to the stopblock.

I, of course, first of all took the precaution of arranging with main line

engine that he would assist me in drawing these waggons back up into the top siding which was uphill.

Sulphur workings were a particularly unpleasant job for the stuff used to blow all around the place and for this reason you had to wear goggles.

The loaded waggons were propelled to the sulphuric acid works, which are about a mile from the top siding round a fairly steeply graded curve at the rear of 'The Mount' station. When large amounts of sulphur were being handled the second engine would be steamed and would operate at the far end of a loop at the acid works siding, lifting the empty waggons from one road and placing them on the other.

Charcoal was also moved the same way to the acid works.

The sulphur arrived in 2,000-ton shipments at Belfast docks. In order to get the ship unloaded quickly all-round-the-clock working was needed at Carrickfergus.

In the case of pulp, the loaded waggons were propelled from the top siding through the bottom siding to the pulp store.

Loaded coal waggons were propelled from the top siding and over the weighbridge, and after weighing were drawn down the steep gradient to the coal tipping plant.

Shortly before the track levelled off at the tipping plant five waggons were left standing, held by their brakes. The sixth wagon was drawn forward and left sitting on the tipping platform.

The engine then escaped by the loop road.

When the first wagon was emptied the tipping plant operator released the next wagon which rolled forward to the platform, 'dunted' the empty wagon sitting there, and this moved it into the storage neck.

One time, repairs were being carried out to the track between the tipping plant and the steep gradient. I was coming down with the usual 100 ton load for the plant and arrived at the bottom of the incline to discover that repair work prevented me from going onto the tip.

This meant I had to propel the load of coal up the hill which is about 1 in 21. I'll leave it to your imagination how hard the engine had to work to do that!

In the earlier days waggons were often in very poor condition, particularly the brakes. On another memorable occasion, I arrived on the incline with the usual six waggons of coal to find that the brakes on the waggons were mostly useless.

It so happened it was a wet day, and the combination of poor brakes and wet rails meant a rather hair-raising experience for me when the waggons took control and we skidded at an ever-increasing speed down the hill.

Fortunately, the road was set for the tipping plant, and the platform of the plant was at ground level, otherwise there could have been a nasty accident.

Towards the end incidents became more common due partly to the increasing age of the track.

One time a half-moved point caused an engine to leave the rails completely, and another time the track 'spread' and the engine settled between the rails.

Normally, the UTA engines were not allowed to come down the steep gradient to the tipping plant.

But, one time to help us out when both Courtaulds engines could not be used, a six-coupled engine propelled loaded waggons to the plant.

Another movement on the sidings was the removal of ash from a hopper outside the power house. This was occasionally needed for ballast.

Courtaulds bought two old waggons from the UTA to cope with the small amount of refuse movement. This refuse was taken to a tip close to the engine

shed.

Looking back I'm sorry to see the siding has gone, but I can't really say I'm sentimental about it.

Basically to me it was a job I rather liked. I enjoyed the outdoor life and also working with steam engines."

Mr Macrae is still with Courtaulds. He now works in the power house.

WHITEHEAD SITE
MAY GET
ANNAGHMORE CABIN

The Whitehead site may get a signalbox which originally was situated at Annaghmore on the Derry Road.

At present this Willis-designed standard GNR 12-lever cabin is housed in three sheds at the farmhouse of member Johnny Glendinning at Glenane, Portadown.

Said Johnny: "The box was taken down by members of the Portadown area. It took us about a year to dismantle it and bring it to my home.

"A large number of the metal and wooden pieces of the box are numbered for easy identification when the cabin is re-assembled."

THE

'GUINNESS'

IN

WHITEHEAD

