

Rescue for the “Royal Meath” Tour

By A. Donaldson

(Courtesy Railway World, August 1970)



Preserved GSW Class J15 0-6-0 No.186 crosses the Boyne Viaduct with the “Royal Meath” railtour on 23rd May 1970. (W.T. Scott)

Those who cosily looked forward to a reinvigorating day of steam in “Royal Meath” on May 23, and were surprised to be carried behind a diesel-electric locomotive to a new starting point, probably have little conception of the desperate battle that was fought to ensure that they had any tour at all.

First, the absence 4-4-0 No.171 was simply due to the lack of support which caused the postponement of the “Decies” tour from April to September 19/20. And instead of stabling in Dublin since April, No.186 was at Whitehead. The extra light engine mileage which this involved would have made the cost of the original two-engine “Royal Meath” quite prohibitive.

Making a virtue of necessity, the RPSI took the opportunity of No.186’s continued presence at Whitehead to put in some extra work on her. All the repairs required by NIR Inspector Frank Dunlop after the “Inbhear nOllarbha” tour of March 21 were, of course, executed before April 25. Thereafter, new buffers and couplings were fitted to obviate the snatching of couplings experienced during tender-first running (which would be needed on the Kingscourt branch); all discoverable leaks in the tender were repaired and a new brick arch of modern design and materials was fitted.

No.186 had acquitted herself well on the previous tour after a winter’s work on her, and it looked as if the Society had at last got over the top of the bank so far as locomotive maintenance was concerned. Then, during the last week before the tour, things began to happen.

The first was that the engine could not stay on in Dublin after the “Royal Meath” tour, as had been planned. Coras Iompair Éireann were not unwilling to keep her, but had been unable to find a stable which could be made absolutely vandal-proof in time. Both CIE and NIR did facilitate the return of the engine after the tour and this merely affected the finances; so far the itinerary was intact.

No sooner was this problem solved than another, more serious, appeared. Because of developments in the 16-weeks old cement strike, we were told on the Thursday before the tour that it was not possible to enter the cement siding. One of our chief amenities was gone. We immediately produced an alternative - a visit to North Wall via Newcomen and East Wall Junctions, which was put to CIE early on Friday, but found impracticable owing to the congestion in the goods yards on a Saturday morning. But the disappointment was forgotten in the catastrophe that followed.

On Thursday, an exceptionally large lump of coal, falling from York Road coaling plant on to the nearly empty tender, had broken a joint at the base of the shovel plate. Repairs were promised on Friday morning and the engine's path to Dublin put back in consequence. But the course of main line steam preservation is not even as smooth as that. On Friday afternoon it was learnt that the repair had not been completed by the end of the working day, so that the engine could not go. What is more, she was not in steam and the crew who were to take her could no longer do so if they were to take up their rostered duty next day - a very busy one.

It must be recognised in fairness that a railway company is not bound to carry out last-minute repairs to engines which are not its own, although NIR had done such jobs for us many times in the past; but even on this occasion we received much ready help and sympathy. Apparently the Law of Perversity, or whatever malignancy clogs steam enterprises, decided we had had enough for a time, and an urgent conference produced a plan. Inspector P. Gannon of CIE, who had helped us in previous crises, was telephoned and arranged on the spot for the CIE crew to book on earlier and travel north by the 08:30 "Enterprise". Shed Foreman W. Steenson of York Road, another good friend, found a crew, D. McDonald and G. Robinson, and arranged lighting up, coaling and watering. The one missing link in the chain was that, so far, the engine could only get to Lisburn, and if the CIE crew had to travel that far, she would reach Drogheda too late to run the full tour of the Meath branches. So Driver C. Mulgrave of the GN section of NIR was approached and earned our abiding gratitude by agreeing to give up some of his rest day to conduct the engine to Portadown.

A stop-gap repair using modern synthetic materials had been effected to the tender. But it still leaked, albeit less torrentially and Macha Film Studios - a group of RPSI members who also organised the portable pump which was (and is) to be used on the "Decies" tour - were contacted near midnight. There and then they designed a special length of piping to enable more expeditious filling and brought their apparatus on the tour, just in case!

On Saturday morning, a couple of us reached Dublin early and arranged that a diesel special which had been laid on to take participants to Drogheda would go on to Dundalk, thereby providing an additional 22½ miles of route over which No.186 had not previously worked a passenger train.

So off we went with four bogies and van - behind a GM diesel. At Dundalk all necks were craned for a glimpse of No.186 - she wasn't there! But reassurance soon came. She was "on" and ran in smartly after five minutes or so, watered and hooked on. We eventually got away about 11:45 with a fighting chance of completing our itinerary. The 10:40 Up goods from Dundalk had been held to give us a clear road. The load had been reduced to three bogies and van, partly to economise on coal and water (it had originally been intended that No.186 should take on two tons at Connolly), partly to expedite running round at Kingscourt, where an extra bogie coach would have entailed splitting the train.

The running was not all that lively to Dunleer, though No.186 climbed better than usual and wasn't far short of 50 mph on the descent into the Boyne Valley. As turning was not now required at

Drogheda (or anywhere en route) some time was saved and the crew utilised part of it to clean the fire, thereby explaining the relatively unexciting running hitherto.

No.186 had now done 112½ miles, with 107 still to go - a substantial daily mileage for such a small engine. She has a partial rocking grate of a type fitted to many GSR engines during the war years to cope with the impossible fuels sometimes used, and it stands her in good stead on railtours. The turntable at Kingscourt was not in working order, so No.186 left Drogheda tender first. The effect of the fire-cleaning soon showed through and by now the locomotive crew - Driver Maguire, Fireman Jennings and Inspector Mulveen had taken the measure of the engine. Time was kept comfortably to Navan with speed rising frequently to the permitted 40. The driver judged the water stop neatly and we encouraged photographers to run ahead and await No.186 at Navan Junction, thereby shortening the photographic stop there. The driver had been asked both verbally and by a printed circular to stop short at platforms so that stations would show in photographs and in general this worked very well.

The tour had been publicised in local papers, and all along the route enthusiastic groups waved and cheered; a considerable number even travelled over parts of the route for an appropriate fare. Less pleasing was the sight of a host of car-chasers. We knew some had paid full fare and others had made a substantial contribution, and all these enthusiasts had been kept informed of developments. We were naturally not really interested in helping the others. If each chaser had offered even half-fare the tour would have paid its way, instead of losing nearly £100. One would have thought that the ethics, or etiquette, of tour-chasing would have sunk into even the most obtuse minds by now.

The permanent way was exceptionally good, belying its appearance, and we approximated to the schedules of regular passenger trains in the last days, thereby coming very close to perfection in steam preservation. Though we were still nearly an hour out of path, delays at level crossings were trivial, so much interest was there among railway folk in our passage. Thus a hefty slice was cut off the schedule between Navan and Kingscourt, making it possible to retain, after all, the most important facilities of the tour.

Paddy Gannon kept in close touch with the Railtour organisers throughout so that, instead of sticking mechanically to our original schedule, the lesser stops were excised, but the more elaborately-planned and photogenic ones retained bearing in mind that stops omitted on the "Royal Meath" had been made on a similar tour in 1966 (in particular Proudstown and Beauparc). This, added to the sparkling running which the crew continued to coax out of No.186, brought us back into Drogheda, after a slick reversal of the old Limerick Junction type, at 17:35, only 17 minutes late. The 17:25 to Dundalk had gone, leaving the Down platform clear for taking water, while a message from Navan had arranged for the 17:45 Up to depart from the bay, leaving the main Up platform clear also for access to the viaduct. At first we thought our train could not get on to the viaduct (which has gauntleted tracks) until after the passage of the Down "Enterprise" at 18:03, but when the special photographer's bus reached the North Quays, we realised Paddy Gannon had had another brainwave. No.186 appeared immediately (about 17:50), propelled right across onto the double track on the north side of the Boyne and waited there until the "Enterprise" had gone through. This gave photographers ample time to choose a new vantage point for her return journey, and the buses had us back at MacBride station about 18:15. So we managed to get away at 18:20, actually before time.

A smart photographic stop at Mosney made it possible to fit in an extra one at Kilbarrack - the first time a steam train had ever stopped there. Much of the credit for this again goes to No.186's crew; she covered the 17½ miles from Balbriggan, where Belfast passengers made their connections easily,

to Kilbarrack in 27½ minutes, speed rising to 53 down Rush and being maintained at a steady 45 on the level - not bad for an 1879 goods engine. So we ran into the "Howth Bay" at Connolly only a couple of minutes late, to the obvious delight of Mr J.B. Mooney, CIE Rail Control Officer, who was there to greet us.

We were very glad to have with us throughout the tour Mr C. Pemberton, Maintenance Planning Officer CIE, who looks after the mechanical side of our operations over his system. Mr Pemberton, who clearly enjoyed the trip, was pleased with the modifications to No.186 and the precautions taken against shortage of water, and had high praise for the general condition of the engine.

We had given our participants all the worthwhile amenities that were still open to us; we had maintained all connections; we had not blocked any service trains - a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.