



August 1996

# BOGIEMAN'S GAZETTE

## FIRE DESTROYS COACHES AT WHITEHEAD

(Taken from a press release issued by the Society)

On the evening of Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1996 at about 8.30 pm a fire started in at least one of the Society's coaches stored at the rear of the Whitehead depot behind the locomotive and carriage sheds. A permanent way squad, under the direction of the Society's Site Officer, was working along the platform road re-sleepering with concrete sleepers when they noticed smoke rising behind the sheds. They immediately proceeded to the rear of the site, stopping only to collect fire extinguishers, but on arriving at the scene realised that the fire was so intense that they could not control it. The Fire Brigade was summoned immediately, and the Whitehead unit arrived within a very few minutes. They immediately attempted to control the spread of the fire, and called in reinforcements in the shape of appliances from Carrickfergus and Larne. The supporting engines attended very rapidly, and the tackled the fire, extinguishing it a little before 10 pm.

Unfortunately, during the blaze there were a number of explosions from one of the coaches, which appeared to be steam heating cylinders bursting; presumably water had been trapped in these in some way and the extreme heat of the fire had built up excessive pressure. Two firemen were injured by flying shrapnel from these explosions, but it is not thought at this stage that either is seriously injured; a new pattern of helmet issued only a week before saved them from more serious and possibly even fatal injury.

During the early stages of the fire a passing train on Northern Ireland Railways observed the blaze and reported it to their control by radio, who in turn advised the Fire Brigade and asked if they would like services on the Larne line withdrawn while the fire was extinguished. This, however, was not necessary.

The police attended the incident, and as a breach was found in the perimeter fence, detectives were also called in to examine the scene. During the Wednesday evening the area was cordoned off so that forensic investigators could examine the debris in daylight the following morning. There was also a media presence, with radio and television crews and newspaper reporters arriving at the site. Initial statements were issued verbally by the Society, and were based on an initial assessment from a safe distance! The Fire Brigade finally left the scene at about 4 am, having satisfied themselves that there was no possibility of re-ignition of the fire.

On Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> May the police, fire service and forensic personnel carried out a detailed examination of the wreckage and the surrounding site, and provided further information for the media. Interviews were also given to the press and the story appeared on local television news programmes, both pre-recorded and live from the site of the fire. The police confirmed that evidence suggested that the fire had been started maliciously and that there had been an unauthorised entry to the site by persons unknown, who had cut their way through the security fence at the rear of the premises.

On Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May the police stated that several youths were being questioned and were

helping them with their enquiries.

A fuller assessment of the damage was possible by Society personnel over the weekend, and more exact losses can now be established. At this stage the extent of the damage would appear to be as follows:

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1328 | A Great Southern Railways side corridor third class coach of 1935 vintage, designed by E.C. Bredin for the improved services between Dublin and Cork. One of the first of the "modern" designs to emerge from Inchicore, a flush-sided steel panelled vehicle. Totally destroyed, with only the frame surviving.  |
| 1333 | A Great Southern Railways coach contemporary to 1328, but designed originally as a suburban open third with no toilets seating 72 passengers in extremely comfortable 2 + 2 seating. It was later rebuilt with corridor gangways at the ends. Of 1936 vintage, the principal difference from 1328 was a pronounced tumble-home on the lower side panels, giving the smooth steel sheeted body a "bellied out" appearance. Totally destroyed, with only the frame surviving.   |
| 231  | Still carrying its final running number of 562, when it was a BUT railcar trailer, this Great Northern Railway (Ireland) side corridor first class brake coach was used for a time as the service support coach. Planned for restoration to its original condition for luxury train use, this coach, which was also flush sheeted, has been almost completely destroyed. Some sections of the passenger compartments remain, but are so badly damaged that the coach is a total write-off.  |
| 227  | A Great Northern Railway (Ireland) side corridor all first class coach with a flush panelled exterior, this vehicle had been completely rebuilt by the youth training scheme "Whitehead Railway Project" for the Society; it was the last rebuild before the scheme ended. The coach was awaiting glazing, upholstery, painting and some minor mechanical and electrical works before being returned to traffic. Although apparently only severely damaged at one end, the interior damage at the other end, particularly above cantrail level, is so extensive that the vehicle is effectively a write-off, and would need the entire body rebuilt from scratch yet again.                                       |
| 255  | Still carrying her last running number of 526, from her career as an intermediate coach in a multi-engined railcar (MED) set, this former LMS(NCC) third class centre corridor open was hoped for by the Operating Department, as she seated no less than 80 passengers and also had 2 toilets! Although not one of the coaches which appeared to be directly damaged, subsequent investigation has revealed that one side of the vehicle has in fact been burned, the aluminium sheeting having melted. There has been considerable structural damage, and the vehicle will probably have to be written off, and a complete new body shell constructed if she is ever to run again. This could well be unlikely. |
| 306  | In her Ulster Transport Authority guise as a driving trailer for a multi-purpose railcar (MPD) set, and carrying the number 532, this vehicle still has a "Festival Express" interior, having been one of the coaches rebuilt for the 1951 prestige express from Belfast to Londonderry. Severe damage to a vestibule end has been caused, although it is possible that the coach could be rebuilt. However, the full   |

- extent of the damage has not yet been assessed, and it is possible that even this body may be beyond repair.
- 504 A Great Northern Railway (Ireland) bogie goods van built to carry the products of the Guinness Brewery over the system, and later converted to a bulk grain wagon, it had been partially restored by the Society, and was used as a stores van for some equipment. Very badly incinerated on one side, the body is probably a total loss.
- 788 A Great Northern Railway (Ireland) “P” van, which was a fully braked bogie van for running on passenger trains, this example had been used by Northern Ireland Railways and was still carrying their running number of 618. Used by the Society as a stores van it has suffered some scorch damage.
- C69 A standard 10 ton open wagon, based on an old LMS(NCC) underframe, and rebuilt by the Ulster Transport Authority for coal traffic into Courtaulds factory in Carrickfergus in the early 1960s. This vehicle has suffered quite significant scorch damage on one side.
- Brake Van A Great Northern Railway (Ireland) four wheel goods brake van rated at 25 tons, this is a fairly late build, and was obtained to replace a six wheeled 25 ton van of Belgian construction, also for the Great Northern Railway (Ireland), built in 1919 and lost to vandalism by fire nearly 20 years ago. It has been severely burnt along one side and at one end, and may well be a total write-off.

It has so far been impossible to place any accurate valuation upon the loss of these historic vehicles, because how can a value be placed upon the irreplaceable? In terms of man hours alone there must have been many thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, expended to preserve these examples of Irish railway history.

While the goods vehicles were almost certainly never going to see main line use again, all of the carriages were planned for refurbishment and return to main line traffic. 227 and 231 were part of a longer term plan to have available a luxury or first class train set, which would be available primarily for charter work. 1328 and 1333 were planned to return to traffic as soon as convenient as spare vehicles for the present running set, while 255 and 306 were longer term replacements.

The cost of materials alone to restore the 5 destroyed coaches would be approaching £250,000, as many castings and specialist parts normally re-usable have been lost or damaged beyond repair; even some luggage rack brackets melted in the heat. If labour charges were to be added on to allow for a proper commercial replacement, it is probable that each coach would cost around £250,000, which would amount to a total loss of about £1.5 million.

At this stage the Society’s Council of Management has not met to discuss its plans for the future of these vehicles; much will no doubt depend on possible compensation and the availability of any other funding.

The operation of the Society’s “Summer Steam” programme out of Belfast is unaffected at present by the losses, and the Dublin based programme uses totally separate rolling stock which is already stabled in Dublin. However, in the event of any failures within the Whitehead based coaching set, no spare vehicles will presently be available for traffic, and this could potentially

give rise to problems and reduce the Society’s income from its operations. Times are hard, and the pressure is now on for several departments to get their plans revised and their tasks prioritised.

---

**Thank You:** There were quite a number of letters, phone calls and (a few) donations received following the fire at Whitehead in May, in fact too many to acknowledge individually. It is hoped that those who took the trouble to get in touch will accept this mention as a note of gratitude from the Council.

**State Coach 351:** The news from Cabra is that our FÁS scheme commenced operation on 13<sup>th</sup> May under the supervision of George Dempsey. The team have completed the exterior stripping, and have partly stripped the interior. A replacement section for a damaged cantrail has been made (from oak) and awaits fitting. The dismantling process has revealed a number of re-buildings - not all of which appear on the drawings. Our appeal for photographs of this vehicle still stands.

Given the years spent in the open and the narrow escape in the 1992 fire at Inchicore, the state of the coach is surprisingly good.

**Northern Set:** NCC 238 came north to Whitehead with the train returning from the open day at Inchicore. It was immediately taken out of traffic for urgent repairs to its bogies which were badly corroded in places. GS&WR 1142 remains in Dublin as a replacement.

NCC 241 was also out of traffic for repainting and the fitting of new guttering. Both 241 and 238 missed the first operations to Portrush but 241 was able to travel on 3<sup>rd</sup> August.

Structural work on NCC 91 is complete, but new lino is required.

**Southern Set:** Meanwhile at Heuston work is continuing on the maintenance of our set of 8 coaches for the season.

Park Royal 2423 is the last to have its electrical work overhauled, thus completing work on the ex-CIÉ coaches which had been fitted out for 220v lighting in the latter years of the company service. 1416 has been successfully fitted with a photo-electric cell which is of considerable utility in daylight on the Rosslare run, there being seven tunnels on the route. On the decorating front, 1335 has been completed, while one half of Park Royal 1383 has received a full repaint. Diner 2421 is undergoing continuing improvement to its services and facilities.

1142 has had its slam door locks modified to a safer standard. It is also hoped to have new carpet fitted. The vehicle made its southern debut on “Mid-Summer Night’s Steam”.

**Mullingar:** Work continues on 1463 by a small team as time permits. Following a recent review of the vehicles remaining there, it is intended to deal with them thus: (1) Demolish bodywork of both Waterford & Limerick coaches (934 & 935), having first removed for storage the ventilator cowls, handbrake gear, and sufficient seating and doors for use as templates. One set of bogies and underframes to be retained. (2) Scrap the laminate bogie. (3) Demolish the holiday coach whilst retaining bogies and frame. (4) Scrap the derelict MGWR 6 wheel coach.

Work will continue on minor items throughout the summer.