

KEEPING UP STEAM

February
2000

A REVIEW BY JOHN BEAUMONT

Members who can receive BBC Northern Ireland will be aware of the recent documentary programme “Keeping Up Steam” which was broadcast on 24th November at 10.20 pm. The subject matter was 35 years of railway and steam preservation in Ireland, featuring the RPSI. The programme was made and produced by BBC producer and RPSI member David Dillon, of Lisburn.

This reviewer happens to know that the project started life as a collection of video clips, one idea being to make a video (following in the footsteps of Alan McRobert, who made the Society’s own three part series of videos a few years ago). But there was much more than a short video could do justice to, and the idea blossomed. And what a programme it was!

The programme opened with a beautifully shot scene of No.461 leaving Mullingar on the 1999 Good Friday train. Then we were treated to a background description of the Society’s origins and history back in the 1960s showing scenes at a very different Whitehead, and an early train to Ardee with a hired ex-GNR 0-6-0. Locomotives No.27 “Lough Erne” and No.3 “Guinness” were seen in steam at a Whitehead Open Day, along with some very youthful looking RPSI personnel - who can forget Robin Morton’s bush hat! (Sorry, Robin!)

Next, a series of interviews with active RPSI personnel showed Irwin Pryce preparing a locomotive at Whitehead. “Someone has to do it,” Irwin told us, and never a truer word was spoken. Interviews with the Society’s President and two Vice-Presidents were intermingled with scenes showing Brian Hill in the cab of No.171, and Peter Scott’s commentary on the general state of Locomotive maintenance. The site looked very active and industrious - perhaps more so than on many a Saturday in real life, when the acute shortage of volunteer manpower results in a much slower pace of life there. This was in contrast to the next view which was of our site at Mullingar. The site itself didn’t look the best, but as Peter Emmett explained as he showed us round, there is an even greater dearth of regular volunteers there. Partly this is because of the fact that most maintenance on Dublin based carriages now takes place in Dublin rather than Mullingar, as does all southern-based locomotive work. Dublin activities were shown off admirably by Peter Rigney, who guided us around No.461 inside Inchicore Works - interesting in itself, as few RPSI members, let alone members of the public, would ever have been inside the works.

The programme went on to show the preparation necessary for a day trip, and the shadowy forms of Phil Lockett and Irwin Pryce were seen oiling and cleaning a locomotive at Whitehead in the gloomy darkness of the night. An amazing time lapse sequence of photography followed, in which No.85 was lit up from cold in a few minutes - as the Whitehead sky lightened along with it. Daylight - and we’re ready to go.

The carriage shed was the setting for scenes of No.171 taking the carriages out for the day, and our NIR driver Noel Playfair enthused about driving steam - keep it up, Noel!

On board the train the bar and dining car staff were busy, and our “travelling, salesmen” Arthur Wickham and Nevin Hamilton were selling souvenirs up and down the train. No scene on board a Whitehead based train would be complete without a shot of Norman Foster and Derek Henderson complete with stopwatches. The interviewer asked Derek what speeds we would be doing. “35 if we’re lucky,” he replied, with a smile!

Scenes showing passengers up and down the train, both on the Mullingar trip and the Whitehead trips showed a very differing array of passengers but with one thing in common - they were all enjoying themselves thoroughly. But passengers are just one side of the coin: when they have all gone home, the work must continue. Locomotives and coaches have to be repaired, maintained, inspected and cleaned. Mark Kennedy, our Whitehead Carriage Officer was interviewed in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (where he works) and he explained very clearly that we needed more volunteers.

The scene shifted back to Whitehead to show work in progress. Our three locomotive sub-contractors were introduced, with John Ferguson guiding us through various work that was in progress. Watching John climbing into a locomotive firebox made it look easy - but believe me, it isn’t as easy as it looks! Poetry in motion, John. “Using traditional Belfast skills,” was how our interviewer described it, as she showed Jim Rainey hard at work.

Carriages need maintenance as well, and our next scene switched to Heuston Yard in Dublin where Joe Darling started work on a quarter-light in a carriage. Later in the programme, we were also to see Peter Emmett showing us the work that he and his gang are carrying out on one of the Dublin based coaches, which has been sent down to Mullingar for restoration.

And now we were ready for scenes aboard more trains. Or were we? Chas Meredith and colleagues wrestled with No.461’s springs in Inchicore at the eleventh hour, just before a trip. Would we have to abandon her and try to obtain the use of the preserved “A” class diesel owned by the Irish Traction Group instead?

Thankfully all was well, and we set off. Again, the dining car was in full swing. Mary Murphy dispensed tea and coffee while Laura Gillen pointed out how good value it all was - in the meantime the bar crew served the only drink available in the Republic on Good Friday.

Some people bring their own, however, and we were shown one group with all manner of salads and picnic trimmings arrayed on their table - it looked delicious, but I hope they bought lots of drink! Once at Mullingar, we were shown around the shed by Peter again. No.184, as he told us, needs major work before she will operate again - estimated cost, the profit on 170,000 pints of Guinness, at a conservative estimate.

Dermot Mackie must be one of our longest standing regular volunteers - he explained that he had been involved with keeping Whitehead Site ticking over (with minimal resources) for 23 years, and the scenes around him were a credit to his untiring skills at organising

volunteers to carry out the necessary work. Some more views on board trains showed happy passengers on the 1999 Three Day Tour, and the Steam & Jazz train to Carrickfergus and Bangor. Among these, the memorable sight of Sullivan and Heather Boomer on the platform, dancing the night away as the Apex Jazz Band played, to the various amusement, interest, bemusement, or disinterest of passengers getting on and of the NIR trains passing by. We saw No.85 pull into Dundalk on the “Dundalk 150” trip.

Other on-board scenes included an interview with NIR’s Seamus Scallion, and a commentary on ex-GSR coach 1097, converted to carry wheelchair-bound passengers.

Whitehead Site was on again now, with a mouth-watering display of scones greeting the viewer in the dining car. This connected into a series on our fledgling web site, and Charlie Friel’s excellent winter meetings. Santa Claus made an appearance, as Nicola Walsh’s souvenir shop at Whitehead did a roaring trade. Many very satisfied passengers and Santa’s Little Visitors showed the Santa trains up in a very good light - and both Dublin and Belfast’s Santa operations have been packing them in during the weeks following the programme. Some beautiful shots showed No.171 pulling over the Dargan Bridge and speeding along the Larne line near the M2 motorway in the winter sunshine.

An interesting issue was raised next. Our GSWR coach No.813, a little known 3rd class coach built in 1915 or thereabouts, was seen in its guise as the Mullingar “tarry”. This coach, it was suggested, would be an ideal companion for the likes of 1142 and 861, as part of a high quality vintage carriage set. It again raises the possibility that if the Society can ultimately secure some sort of secure future for wooden bodied stock operating on the national railway system, and if sufficient funds were available, the Society has indeed got the makings of a very attractive vintage set.

But all good things come to an end, and after some summarising views from our Northern Operations Officer, Evan Pamely, the programme closed with another view of No.461 on the Good Friday train.

It’s all very well asking RPSI people what they thought of a programme like this: of course we’re biased! But your reviewer was approached by all manner of “non-enthusiast” people over the following days, and weeks - and with unanimously glowing opinions about the programme, and about the Society and its members. I understand that BBC Northern Ireland recorded one of the highest ever figures for a local programme screened at that time of the evening. And this was no idle statistic: the Belfast Santa trains a few weeks after the programme have been crammed!

For me, what the programme did best was what a (non-RPSI) friend of mine said: an excellent public relations exercise for the Society. And why not! We have every reason to be very proud of what we, the members, have achieved over 35 years. We have been a lone voice in seeking to preserve main line steam in Ireland a sole operator. And we have done it ourselves, with a minimum of outside help. It hasn’t been easy, and it won’t become easy. Here’s to the next 35 years, and congratulations to David Dillon and the BBC for making the programme possible!