



MEMORIES OF THE PORTRUSH FLYER

By John Friel

With this being the 30th year of operation of the Portrush Flyer, it was felt that younger members (and older members with diminishing memories!) might be interested in a recollection of the negotiations with the management of NIR, and the trials and tribulations of initiating what was for the time a very innovative, and now historic, service.

What follows are memories - which may be wrong! Any reader is invited to correct or amend these as he/she sees fit. So, here goes ...

I first became a Committee member in late 1971 as Publicity Officer (strangely, I was unopposed - no change there!). I think the beginning of the events which led to the Flyer was a letter from NIR which was read at one of my first Committee meetings.

This was a reply to a tentative enquiry about the possibility of the Society acquiring its first coaches, as it was obvious that the days of vacuum braked stock on NIR were numbered. (Ironically, when coaches did become available, you could buy one for the same money that it cost to hire one for a day.)

Anyway, the NIR letter was from the then Managing Director, Hugh Waring, and it

was most negative in tone. It drew attention to the difficulties which the Society might face in the future - getting spare parts for locomotives, finding paths for trains, and crewing.

Enter Society Treasurer, John Richardson, who decided that some buttering up was called for. In those days, the annual Whitehead Open Day was a big event in the Society's calendar, both for publicity and for income. John invited Hugh Waring to declare the Open Day open! Hugh was treated to a meal at Whitehead's Dolphin Hotel (yes, there was an hotel in Whitehead!) and Lord O'Neill drove him around in a vintage car.

By the end of the day, Hugh had decided that he was a very important person and that the RPSI was not so bad after all. Before going home, he suggested that we meet up with NIR's recently appointed marketing man called Danny Young to discuss matters of mutual interest.

I am sure that the name Danny Young means nothing to most enthusiasts as he was only with NIR for about a year. However, he played a pivotal role in the story of the Flyer.

I recall that Danny met myself, John Richardson and Operations Officer Tony Ragg (there may have been others). We were discussing nothing more radical than the promotion of the Sunday Train

Rides at Whitehead in terms of a combined ticket for travel from York Road to Whitehead by NIR plus a steam train ride. There was also a proposal which was to run regularly between Whitehead and Carrickfergus (the "Carrick Castle Express" was the idea, if memory serves).

I believe (and I am definitely open to correction here) that it was Danny who suggested running a steam train for the public from Whitehead to somewhere like Portrush. We outlined the various difficulties that NIR management might throw up, and he undertook to smooth them out - in this, he succeeded. The negotiations were then taken on by Noel Craig of NIR - a very helpful person and a real gentleman.

At about the same time, Peter Scott was employed by the Sirocco Works and seconded to the plant maintenance department. The plant maintenance fitters used to sit all day on their round soft parts, drinking tea, and they justified this state of affairs by stating that if they were sitting there, quite clearly the rest of the factory was well maintained and working properly! Anyway, Peter had a number of conversations with one of the guys who bemoaned the absence of steam trains to Portrush, and how he and many others would travel if such things ran. Peter says, "So it got me thinking - and talking. I don't claim to have sown the seeds of the Portrush Flyer, but I do claim to have watered them."

I am sure that many Society members at the time saw a Flyer type operation as an eventual aim, but nobody in early 1973 could have foreseen things happening so quickly.

Of course, we were really going out on a limb and taking quite a risk in operating four mainline steam trains for the public in a period of five weeks. As far as I know, this type of operation had not been tried anywhere in the world.

The backbone of the train was the four Bredin coaches - 1327, 1328, 1333 and 1335 - which we bought from CIÉ in May 1973 in ready to go condition. These

became available as a result of the McKinsey report of 1971 into CIÉ operations.

Traffic that year was low due to the knock-on effects of the "situation" up north and CIÉ were told that they had too many coaches. I believe that shortly after the sale of the coaches, CIÉ realised that they had made a mistake.

Who negotiated with CIÉ and carried out coach inspections? I think that Society Chairman Bob Edwards was involved, as was our Dublin Agent, the late Sam Carse (father of Barry and David).

I recall attending a meeting with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board at which we were trying to get a grant towards the purchase of the Bredins. Various Society Committee members were trying to explain why such a purchase was necessary and as they got deeper into their descriptions of vacuum brakes and air brakes, the Tourist Board people were looking more and more confused. Eventually, Bob Edwards brought the session to a sudden end by saying: "Look, one system works with a suck and the other one works with a blow". Simple, yet highly effective!

These are some of the meetings which I recall, but I am sure that there were many more and that Society Secretary John Lockett was involved. He was certainly instrumental in the move whereby the Ulster Tourist Development Association purchased the Directors' Saloon and then presented it to the Society.

Regarding the Portrush Flyer headboard, at the time there were those who were totally against headboards. But Railtour Officer Tony Ragg said that it was a train for the general public and we wanted to create an image, so a headboard was required. Peter Scott decided that if we were going to have a headboard at all, it was going to be something in the traditional style, as unobtrusive as possible yet clearly stating what the train was. He designed a headboard that would fit the tank engine lamp bracket. It consisted of a piece of steel plate with a hardboard facing and painted letters

screwed onto it. It took about 4 hours to make, and was to do "until we got something better". Well, 30 years later ...

The Flyer had to be publicised, with a limited budget of course. Robin Morton was not yet a Committee member, but being a journalist his help was invaluable, e.g. in press releases, always quote someone, use first names, keep your message simple, etc.

Someone (we will blame Robin) had the idea of using the current Miss Portrush to pose on an engine at a press photo call. Would this be PC nowadays?

Many Society members contributed towards the success of the Flyer - sadly, the late Robin Convery springs to mind. He is no longer with us, and yet he was just about the youngest of us.

I stood in for Tony Ragg as Operations Officer for the first ever Portrush Flyer. Tony was on holiday, but this was not dereliction of duty on Tony's part. Our holidays were phased so that there would be enough people available to keep the show on the road all through the Summer. During the two weeks before the first Flyer, I visited Tony's house each day to collect postal bookings. I remember the sense of relief when we calculated the total fare income for the four trains equalled the total running costs, i.e. NIR charge, coal and publicity.

Our first Portrush Flyer driver was Percy Mitchell, who had been fireman on the 1953 Royal Train from Lisburn to Lisahally. On arrival at Portrush, I walked up to No.4 and saw NIR Locomotive Inspector Frank Dunlop climbing on to the boiler to draw Society Locomotive Officer, Peter Scott's attention to some defect. It turned out that the dome cover, although secure, had been vibrating all the way from York Road. "If that's all that's wrong," I thought, "we've made it!"

An aspect of operating the Flyer, which I am sure that few members ever think of, was the track layout at Whitehead. In 1973, this consisted of two tracks parallel to the platform, spreading out into five tracks to enter the old and new sheds.

There were no other sidings. The coaches had to be stored in front of the sheds in groups of two, with the engine on the wrong side. Thus, an immense shunt had to take place before and after each operation. There was a rake of wagons, which was quickly nicknamed the "rubbish rake", as all they did was to get in the way - the original "troublesome trucks"? (For those without children, this is a Thomas The Tank Engine reference.)

The first Flyers of course employed tank engine No.4, which was hot off the spoil contract, and consequently clapped out. It was quite a risk to put so much faith in it, but during the next year or so we kitted out a "workshop coach" which had all manner of tools, welding equipment, spares, you name it. It is a sign of the times and hopefully of our more professional way of doing things that the workshop coach has been completely done away with.

The third Portrush Flyer was scheduled to be hauled by No.171. During steam raising, No.171 blew a tube and No.4 was lit up instead. Things were not too far behind schedule, when the inevitable shunt began. Between the bridge and the NIR connection, the GNR tender (which had been saved for possible future use with No.85) in the middle of the rubbish rake derailed, blocking the entire Flyer train. The tender was rerailed using bottle jacks, and the Flyer eventually got away. During the re-railing operation, NIR driver Rab Graham was looking at the Bredin coaches and he enquired of Derek Henderson as to their condition. Quick as a flash came the reply: "These coaches are cleared for 90mph running on the Dublin - Cork line!"

Mention of No.171 blowing a tube reminds me of the fact that she was once a troublesome engine. Things kept going wrong, but there was nothing basically wrong with the engine. Enthusiasts who should have known better started saying that she had always been a dud and had been kept in reserve most of the time. You only have to watch a John Laird video to see that this was rubbish (if you don't have one, I can sell you one!). A

more faint-hearted person than Peter Scott may well have given up, but he persisted. Eventually, the original doubters could not praise No.171 enough. There have been several years when No.171 was the only available mainline loco and she hauled everything with no bother.

In the early years of the Flyer, members used to sleep on the seats of the workshop coach (the dormitory coach had not arrived). On one Flyer, these seats were allocated by mistake to the public. A respectable family boarded at Whitehead to be greeted by sleeping bags, shaving kit, pyjamas and dirty underwear strewn everywhere!

The Flyer would never have survived without the members and officers of the Society who were responsible in this first season for bringing along the Sunday School parties and social clubs.

Such groups saw the potential in the operation and went home and told their friends and colleagues, and that sort of advertising is priceless.

As this is turning into a ramble, I had better finish - but I would like to express my thanks to all the members who have kept the Society running during my less active years and for coping with problems (safety legislation, etc.) which were unheard of in the 1970s. Despite so many difficulties, we are still steaming.

There are too many to mention, but here's thanks to the past officers and members of the Society who had the vision and worked so hard to make the dream a reality!!

MISS PORTRUSH

By Robin Morton

Ah yes, Miss Portrush. Those were the days!

In 1973-4 I was working as a reporter in the Carrickfergus office of the East Antrim Times. Inveigled by the ever persuasive John Friel to help out with publicity, I suggested we should see if Miss Portrush

would help us do a publicity shoot at Whitehead for the Flyer. We contacted Coleraine Council who endorsed the idea and invited me to make the arrangements. Turned out, I think, that the girl in question lived somewhere in the Newtownabbey area, and I agreed to collect her from home and drive her to Whitehead for the photo call (the trials and tribulations of being involved with the RPSI).

The date was set for a Saturday afternoon but one slight problem was that I was covering Carrickfergus office that day, ever fearful that the Telegraph would be ringing up get me to chase up some story. But as things were quiet, I pressed ahead and was just about to leave the office when the boss, Hugh Vance, happened to drop in on his way to do some shopping in Carrickfergus. The brief visit became extended and as I anxiously checked my watch I realised I was late for my date. Hugh showed no signs of budging so in the end I had to confess all and explain how I was proposing to spend the rest of the afternoon.

Hugh was astounded and his parting words, as I fled the office, were, "There'll be more about this." I spent a fretful weekend and returned to work in some trepidation on the following Monday. Thankfully, my early departure was never mentioned again and the photo of Miss Portrush, posing in a pretty dress and clad in her Miss Portrush sash, beside the smokebox of No.4, which was in turn adorned with the Flyer headboard, was successfully taken, the only problem being some grime which attached itself to the Miss Portrush sash. The picture was used in the papers and on RPSI publicity material of that era.

And that, despite all my charm, was that. Not sure if Miss Portrush ever moved onto greater heights in the beauty queen business, but she certainly helped the Flyer take wing! Does anyone have a record of her name?

Happy days, and happy 30th anniversary!