

Lord and Lady O'Neill's 80th Birthday and 50th Wedding Anniversary

Special Steam Excursion Train

1st September 2013

Your trip begins at **Whitehead Excursion Station**, now the headquarters of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland. This station was opened by the Midland Railway (Northern Counties Committee) in 1907 to relieve pressure the main line station which was being swamped by excursionists. The railway did much to encourage housing and tourism in Whitehead and built the famous Gobbins Cliff Path. The station fell into disuse and was sold to the local council.

The RPSI leased the station in 1967 and is in the process of purchasing it. The RPSI has extended the loco shed, built the long carriage shed and the large workshops which are named after the late Lord Henry Dunleath who did much to support the Society. The station building is a recent addition, funded by GROW South Antrim. There are plans for much development but finding the funds is proving to be elusive.

Your train joins the Northern Ireland Railways network at **Whitehead** and skirts Belfast Lough. We pass the **White Harbour**, the oil storage farm for NI Electricity at **Cloghan Point** and the piers for the **Salt Works** and for **Kilroot** power station. We leave the Lough at **Downshire Park**, the station before **Carrickfergus**. After passing **Clipperstown**, the line climbs past the site of the former Courtaulds factory (on your left) which once had its own railway system. The top of the climb is at **Greenisland** where the main line once forked to your right towards Monkstown and Antrim. At first, main line trains between Belfast and Antrim used this line to avoid the steep climb. The direct line, including the viaducts at Bleach Green, came into use in 1933. The former line became a useful loop and was known as the "Back Line". The viaducts and the main line from Antrim are on your right as we approach **Bleach Green Junction**.

We rejoin Belfast Lough at Greencastle, with the M5 and M2 motorways between us and the sea. On your left is a new service area for NIR's fleet of C3K railcars. On your right is the refuelling point and the main works of NIR, built on the site of **York Road** station. The line climbs past the almost derelict Midland Hotel (on your right) and passes **Yorkgate** station onto the elevated track towards the **River Lagan**. This line opened in 1994. On your right, you might catch a reflection of the train in the Post Office's **Tomb Street** offices. Past the new **Obel Tower** on your right, we cross the Lagan on the **Dargan Bridge**, named in memory of William Dargan who built almost half of Ireland's railways. On your right is the **Lagan Weir** which controls the lower reaches of the river.

Once on the County Down side, we are back on double track and soon the line from Bangor joins from your left at **Lagan Junction**. As we cross **Middlepath Street**, Parliament Buildings may be visible beyond the city on your left. We cross the river again on the **Lagan Viaduct** with the barge **Confiance** visible on your right. Passing under East Bridge Street through two tunnels, we approach **Belfast Central** which was opened in April 1976. The station gets its name from the former Belfast Central Railway which once operated trains passenger trains between Great Victoria Street and a station near the Queen's Bridge. The station is built on the site of Maysfields yards which once handled many thousands of livestock en route to cross-channel boats for live export.

We now skirt the river briefly and the site of Belfast's gasworks on your right before passing under the Ormeau Road and through **Botanic** station. We immediately enter a tunnel under University Road and the Lisburn Road. We pass **City Hospital** and dive under the Donegall Road. On your right, a new line to Great Victoria Street diverges at **City Junction**. The main line from Great Victoria Street joins on your right at **Central Junction**, under the Donegall Road.

We pass the new **Adelaide Railcar Depot** on your right. It was opened in December 2012 and services Translink's 4000 class railcars in modern facilities. The area had been part of a huge goods yard, wagons works and locomotive shed complex which first opened in March 1911.

The **King's Hall** is on your left, just before **Balmoral**. Your train then passes **Finaghy** (which opened in 1907 to combat the trams), and **Dunmurry** (which was once the Ulster Railway's only station between Belfast and Lisburn but with no reduction in fare!). Look out on your right for the former De Lorean car plant (famous for its gull-wing doored cars).

We then pass through **Derriaghy**, **Lambeg** and **Hilden** before reaching **Lisburn**. The main station building, on your left, was designed by W.H. Mills who was Chief Civil Engineer between 1877 and 1909. This station building, which is listed, dates from 1878 and still wins awards for architectural merit! The stations at Dundalk and Malahide are two of his most notable survivors.

Leaving Lisburn, we take the right-most of the three lines with the main line to Dublin now on your left. We are on a new line which was opened in 1974 when the junction for the line to Antrim was moved to Lisburn. The line climbs to a three-arch bridge at Causeway End Road and then falls towards another three-arch overbridge at the Ballinderry Road. **Knockmore Junction** was once the physical junction for the lines diverging south to Banbridge and north to Antrim. The Banbridge line opened in 1863 and reached Newcastle in 1906. It closed in April 1956 and there is no sign now of its divergence. We are on the line to Antrim which opened in 1871 and lasted until 1960. It was reopened in 1974 and was used for some time by trains to and from Londonderry. It is currently out of regular use.

There were halts at **Brookmount**, **Brookhill**, and **Meeting House** and a station at **Ballinderry**. There was another halt at **Legatirrif** and stations at **Glenavy** and **Crumlin**. After Crumlin, we cross a girder viaduct built by Alex Findlay & Co of Motherwell in 1915.

Aldergrove is quite close to **Belfast International Airport** (on your right) and is in the news occasionally when a rail link is advocated either by way of a branch or by diverting this line. So far, the money earned from car parking seems to be winning the argument. There was a branch into the airport in the latter years of World War I to facilitate Short Brothers and Harland who built planes near Sydenham but did not then have an airfield of their own. There was a junction for a branch (on your left) to **Gortnagallon** during World War II to for an important aircraft assembly plant for Shorts. It was also a very important aircraft commissioning and repair base for the VIII USA Air Force.

We pass a halt at **Millar's Bridge** before joining the Belfast to Londonderry main line at **Antrim**. The main line was opened by the Belfast and Ballymena Railway in 1848. It

changed its name to the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway in May 1860. The main station building (on your left) is being modernised and refurbished. The shelter on the other platform, on your right, is one of the last echoes of Berkeley Deane Wise's Swiss Chalet style.

The line north of here to Ballymena was double track until August 1990. **Cookstown Junction** has all but disappeared. The branch to Randalstown was opened by the Belfast and Ballymena Railway at the same time as the line to Ballymena. There is a passing loop (but no platform) at **Magherabeg**. The station at **Kellswater** closed in March 1971.

Ballymena is approached past the former goods yard on your left and the site of the narrow gauge line from Larne Harbour on your right. The balloon water tank at the south end of the station used to serve both broad and narrow gauge locos and still has arms on both sides.

At the northern end of the passenger station, a narrow gauge line diverged to the north. That line eventually reached Retreat though the line was goods-only beyond Parkmore. The line to Retreat was closed in stages and the last bit (to Rathkenny creamery) was closed in June 1940. At the same time, the line to Larne Harbour was closed between here and Ballyboley Junction. The signal cabin at the north end of the station closed in August 1990. Also on that side was the engine shed and its yard; the area is now a permanent way depot.

After your loco has taken water, we retrace our steps as far as Antrim and take the NCC main line back to Belfast Central. We pass the closed stations of **Muckamore**, **Dunadry**, and **Templepatrick** before **Templepatrick Loop** (again, no platform). We climb past the closed station at **Doagh** towards the summit at **Kingsbog Junction**. The signal cabin from here is now rebuilt at Downpatrick. A branch line from Ballyclare used to join the main line, on your left. **Ballyclare Junction** was where the A8 Larne road crosses the line.

Mossley West dates from 2001 and has one platform on your right. **Mossley** has all but disappeared.

This part of the line was lowered considerably in connection with the building of the Loop Line north of Bleach Green Junction and you can see some of the older formation on your left as we approach the site of **Monkstown**. Immediately after the road overbridge, the Back Line to Greenisland diverged on your left. There had been proposals to make a direct line as far back as 1872. The idea was investigated again in 1927 when the holes of some of the surveying pegs from the 1872 scheme were still to be found. The 1927 survey was done by **Freeman Wills Crofts** who later left the NCC and went on to become one of the most successful detective writers of the 1930s. In their day, his Inspector French novels were as popular as Agatha Christie's in more recent times. As a boy in Greenisland, in about 1910, Crofts built a 200-yard, 4-inch gauge, line which included a huge model of the Forth Bridge - does anybody know where that model was?

As we approach the viaduct, look to your left to see the round tower at St Patrick's Church of Ireland at Jordanstown where Crofts was once the organist and choirmaster. In the field below us, the new housing development seems to include houses right up to

the viaduct - and the new residents have even complained about the noise of passing trains!

We join the line from Larne at Bleach Green Junction and retrace our steps to Belfast Central and, after changing direction, onwards to Whitehead.

Your train today has been provided by the **Railway Preservation Society of Ireland**. The Society is an all-Ireland volunteer body which was formed in September 1964 with the aim of keeping main line steam trains operating all over the island of Ireland. Lord O'Neill has been the Society's President since its foundation. He is supported by three Vice-Presidents - Dr Joan Smyth CBE, Nora Owen and Robert Guinness. The management of the Society is in the hands of a Board. The Society has about 1,200 members from all over the world and about 160 of them do the physical work of restoring and maintaining the locos and carriages to main line standards and all the ancillary work involved in running the Society's many activities. You will find full details of the Society on the website www.steamtrainsireland.com.

Your train today is staffed by four **professional railwaymen** from Northern Ireland Railways as well as many Society volunteers. The driver, fireman and inspector on the engine and the train guard are all NIR professionals. The coach stewards and the all-important staff in the Dining Car are volunteers. Some Society volunteers lit up the loco about 3am today and prepared the train. Other volunteers are looking after the loco during the day and will be on hand to put everything safely to bed at Whitehead when the run is over.

Your **locomotive** today is No.186, a mixed traffic 0-6-0 built for the Great Southern and Western Railway (GS&WR) in 1879. The loco was built in Manchester by Sharp Stewart at a time when the GS&WR Works in Inchicore were too busy to cope. The loco was rebuilt in the early 1930s with a superheated boiler and new frames. It survived in traffic until 1964 and was given to the RPSI by Córas Iompair Éireann in July 1965 - our first main line loco. The loco has travelled all of Ireland in our care. From Sligo Quay to Foynes and from Rosslare to Londonderry, No.186 has worked RPSI trains on every line that is open to traffic - and, sadly, a few that are now closed.

The **carriages** in your train are Mark II carriages which have an integral steel body that will not collapse or go on fire as easily as their wooden-bodied predecessors. The carriages were built in the late 1960s and 1970s and saw traffic on Northern Ireland Railways, Córas Iompair Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, and on every region of the old British Railways. The former BR carriages have had to have their wheels and bogies changed from 4 foot 8½ inch gauge to the Irish standard of 5 foot 3 inches. All have been overhauled at Whitehead and are maintained there by the Society's volunteers. They are painted in the RPSI livery of green lined in yellow.

The RPSI hopes that you have enjoyed your journey today and look forward to seeing you on board again or visiting our Whitehead station and workshops.