



April 2023

# NEWS LETTER

## NOEL PLAYFAIR

**A Sad Loss:** It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of our great friend and colleague, Noel Playfair on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> January.

Noel, 62, was taken suddenly ill at work and passed away in hospital a very short time later.

It was typical of the man that his last turn was to work a light engine to Portadown to collect a failed one from the old Platform 4 there, take it to Dublin and exchange for another. Noel was not top of the list for the turn, but others turned it down. Not Noel of course, who said he'd sort it. Unfortunately, he never made it beyond Portadown.

For the last couple of decades Noel really was Mr Steam NI, always willing to help the Society fill its annual programme of steam trains - often at personal cost. He was always willing to step in - for example, firing on trains to Rosslare and Maynooth when there was difficulty rostering a full crew in Dublin.

A great engineman, he will be greatly missed.

**A Personal Tribute:** Joe Cassells writes: It seems like yesterday, but it was nearly four decades ago at Portrush on a "Flyer" day. In the adjacent platform was a

service train from Belfast, powered by a Hunslet diesel loco. Ex Great Northern driver Harry Laughlin - always a civil soul - invited me into the cab for a chat, and introduced me to a fair haired young man who was riding with him. "This is young Noel Playfair," said Harry. "He's a trainee driver, and he tells me he's very keen on the steam."

A friendship was struck up that day, and over the intervening years it was my privilege to know a fine engineman who became one of the most experienced steam drivers in the British Isles. And it wasn't just my privilege either, for Noel continued a tradition of mutual respect between enginemen and serious lay enthusiasts which has characterised steam railways in Ireland over many generations. And not just in these island either: during this summer past he spent much time helping a German film crew who were making a film about RPSI steam.

Noel belonged to the first "post-steam" generation, beginning as a conductor guard, then passing out as a diesel driver and finally graduating to steam. He learned his trade from the likes of Frank Dunlop, Bobby Quail and Willie McCaughley. From men of this calibre he learned how to get the best out of any engine, and when the circumstances permitted, how to make them run.

Unlike some formidable old drivers of a past generation, Noel's footplate was always a place of companionship, courtesy and teamwork. The drivers, firemen and inspectors with whom he worked over the years found him a helpful and stimulating colleague - even though the fireman sometimes had his shirt dampened as Noel produced a stimulating climb to Kingsbog or the Wellington Summit! He used to joke that Stephen Glass was one of the few men who could fire to his driving, but in truth he was no 'engine butcher'.

For a less experienced man a run firing to Noel would be an exercise in confidence building; for a more experienced man there would be the challenge of a team effort to produce a fine run. He was a real engineman in every sense, and every run showed that consummate professionalism which was always his hallmark.

Noel's first steam experience was, I think as a trainee, with Bobby Quail and Willie McCaughley on a Bangor special in August 1987, and his first full firing turn was a year later - firing to Willie Graham on a locomotive transfer involving No.85 and No.171.

His first of many runs to Dublin was as a fireman to Bobby Quail on a Steam Enterprise on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1989, and he passed out as a steam driver on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1996.

The crowning event of his footplate career was our most recent Royal Train (June 2016) from Coleraine to Bellarena and then empty carriages on to Londonderry. When Ian Wilson and I arrived at Waterside station late in the afternoon, he was sitting in No.85's cab, still in a daze. "Today has been the highlight of my entire railway career," he told us. He confided to us that the previous night he had hardly slept as he contemplated the day that lay ahead. But

neither he nor Her Majesty the Queen need have worried. The job was done to the highest standard.

For many years he and Gary Moore - who will mourn his passing as much as any of us - were the classic pairing on many outstanding runs on the Great Northern and the NCC main lines. Noel was always in command of his footplate, watching the road ahead as closely as the steam, the water - and the fireman. Always totally in control, and keeping up a constant flow of advice, and encouragement.

He was just as good with the shovel as with a hand on the regulator, more than once delighted to be able to show that he was capable of providing plenty of steam and water while giving his fireman the opportunity to develop some steam driving skills!

Latterly he had been looking forward to playing his part officially in the training of the next generation of steam drivers and firemen. He'd planned to see out his full fifty years of railway service - and even hoped that he would be able to take our NCC Mogul out on its native main line. Sadly, this was not to be.

Right to the end, he had a wholehearted commitment to our trains - particularly in recent times when he was the only certified driver. On more than one freezing December morning, Noel would appear at Whitehead, obviously under the weather with a bad cold or even a dose of 'flu. "I feel dreadful," he told me on one such morning, "but if I rang in sick, this train couldn't run." The words 'loyalty' and 'commitment' are often loosely used these days. Noel's career exemplified them.

Noel had a fine sense of history - often asking me to turn up logs of record performances of the past so that he could try to emulate them, and always excited by the possibility of a new steam record.

In one of the last emails I received from him, he gave me the details of what was to be the last time he drove an RPSI train - the empty return to Whitehead from the final Santa train last December. He was all set for a good climb to Greenisland, and greatly disappointed to suffer a signal check at Jordanstown that robbed him of what might have been a record.

And I still remember a summer evening at Belfast Central after his first run from Portrush with the newly-restored No.131. When I got to the engine to congratulate him he was on the platform, beaming. "There... I thought you'd enjoy that!" And that really summed up his approach to steam: knowledgeable, totally professional and - yes - enjoyable.

One of the RPSI footplate reps told me about a sunny morning when all was going well with No.85, and the Wellington Bank was being stormed in style. Over the sound of the 'Compound roar' could be heard Noel's voice: "Ah - she's a great oul' girl!" Fortunately there is a substantial clip on YouTube of a run from Coleraine to Ballymoney on a return Portrush Flyer. A vintage footplate cameo, with Noel totally in command.

Noel was, of course, a thoughtful and painstaking railwayman in every sense, and could always coax the best performance out of any set or engine. He loved working the Sandite train in its last days of 80 class operation ("All these poor old cars need is a bit of TLC"), and he was very impressed by the recently introduced 6 car C4/K6 sets. "They're real trains, and they're lovely to drive", he told me before Christmas.

The last time I spoke to him he was telling me about a depot preparation turn involving the sets for the 06:50 and 08:00 Dublin trains, and I was mightily impressed by his attention to every single aspect of readying the engine and the coaches. Nothing escaped his attention,

and - typically - he concluded with: "I care about this railway, I really do."

The only things that ever annoyed him were the failure of others to keep up to the standards that he set for himself. Always thinking at least a section ahead, instinctively knowing what was possible, and always making his first priority the safe and punctual transport of a trainload of passengers to their destination. That was Noel Playfair.

As I thanked him and his good friend Gary Moore after one particularly fine effort, I remember his cheery smile and his comment: "We aim to please." I think that sums up his life and his railway career.

Two final memories of recent times are associated with the day the RPSI launched my book "Steam's Last Challenge" at Whitehead. Noel managed to get his turns changed so that he could come with us to Frank Dunlop's house to present him with a copy. Then he went off to collect Barney McCrory, who is now wheelchair-bound, staying with him throughout the morning and ensuring that he was well looked after.

Typical of the man, in every respect!!

**Statement:** The sudden and tragic death of Noel Playfair, the sole NIR steam driver, has disrupted the RPSI's plans for operations in 2023 in Northern Ireland.

Members have been asking what the current situation is in regard to the future of steam from Belfast and Whitehead. We are currently working closely with Translink to explore options and will, when the time is right, update members further in relation to northern operations.

At present there are no plans for any mainline steam operations this year. The situation, however, is being kept under review.

At Whitehead the Society continues to

operate steam train rides with No.3BG Guinness. Whitehead Railway Museum is open every week from Thursday to Saturday. The steam train rides season kicked off on 18<sup>th</sup> March with Saint Patrick's weekend steam train rides.

At the Society's works at Whitehead the priority project this Spring has been the re-tubing of the Society's ex GNR(I) Q Class 4-4-0 No. 131, which was due to come out of ticket.

The re-tubing was completed by the end of March whereupon No. 131 will be relocated from Whitehead to Dublin. There it will join No.85 "Merlin", which has been based at Dublin Connolly since 2018.

## TRAINS & EVENTS

**Victorian Street Fair:** On Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> November, after an absence of a couple of years, it was good to see visitors (including a traction engine) returning to the streets of Whitehead again, despite the dull day.

No.3BG "Guinness" did the honours on train rides at the Excursion Station.

**Santa Special (Belfast & Whitehead):** The season this year comprised train rides at Whitehead on Sundays 27<sup>th</sup> November and 4<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> December, with the familiar mainline trips on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> December.

For the latter, the format was slightly different in that Santa greeted children on the train but did not hand out presents; that happened on the platform at Whitehead while Santa and children got photos taken in a sleigh in front of the station. The procedure worked fairly well, but may need tweaked to make it even better next year.

In what is becoming something of a tradition, the RPSI again linked up with St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army to

operate the Charity Santa train. The initiative enabled more than 120 passengers from needy families to enjoy the delights of the Santa Special train from Belfast to Whitehead on the morning of Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> December.

**Santa Special (Dublin):** Unfortunately, No.85 experienced an issue with a big end at Maynooth on the first run; this led to the locomotive being removed from the train and diesel substituted for the rest of the season's trains.

However, this did not detract from what was otherwise a very successful series of trains which, once again, sold out within minutes of going on sale!

Our thanks to Stationmaster Collins of Maynooth who was a great help - on the train's arrival at his station he had arrangements made for photographs to be taken in a safe manner with Santa on the platform.

**Test Runs:** Following No.85's big-end repairs, there was a series of running-in trips on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> March - first light engine to M3 Parkway to Clonsilla then back to M3 Parkway and return to Dublin. That was followed by a return trip to Maynooth with a short train of four Cravens and a van. No major issues arose.

**Saint Patrick's Weekend:** There was a steady stream of visitors for the first public operations of the year, train rides at Whitehead on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> March.

No.3BG "Guinness" hauled a regular programme of trains which were all well-filled. This was a first in that the event was marketed on a joint train/museum ticket and it was great to see the galleries very busy.

**The Midlander:** The year's first public steam out of Dublin was on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> March, with No.85 and two booked out trains to Maynooth.

**The Phoenix:** Following its mid-life

retubing at Whitehead, No.131 is required in Dublin to assist with the Steam Dreams charter in May.

The southern half of its transfer trip from Whitehead to Dublin on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> April was marketed to the public as the first visit to Irish Rail metals since 1963. It sold out within hours!!

A diesel will haul the train to Dundalk to meet No.131.

**Easter Bunny:** The events at Whitehead will be on 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> April.

**Sligo Leitrim:** Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> April will be the first 201 locomotive-hauled train to Sligo, and the first to M3 Parkway!

The tour will depart from Dublin Connolly and proceed to M3 Parkway where the 201 locomotive will unhook. An 071 class locomotive will then return the train to Docklands.

A 201 locomotive will haul the train to Sligo - beyond Longford it will be the first ever 201 class hauling a passenger train. At Sligo there will be 90 minutes to enjoy the capital of the North West.

On the return leg there will be photo stops on the way up to Dublin.

But, It doesn't end there! On the approach to Dublin, the train will take the MGWR route from Glasnevin, followed by the Newcomen curve (another first) and Platform 7 in Connolly. The train will proceed across the Liffey and into Grand Canal Dock Platform 2, the first locomotive-hauled train into this platform. An 071 will return the train to Connolly.

**Dinosaur Express:** On Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May we will be trying out a completely new venture - trains and dinosaurs. Passengers will be transferred from Belfast by a chartered Translink railcar. At Whitehead there will be a dinosaur-themed event.

**Steam Whitehead:** It is hoped to run a

series of themed train rides days over the summer.

**Operating Licence:** Following a lot of effort before and during visits and communications with the Railway Safety Authority, we have had our licence to operate a light railway at Whitehead issued for a further 5 years.

## CARRIAGE & WAGON

**State Coach 5408:** On Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February, using No.3BG, "Guinness" to shunt, the coach was re-bogied with spare B4 bogies.

The B5 bogies the carriage came north from Dublin with are required to provide accessible back-up for those currently under the Mk1 van on the Dublin set.

5408 sat slightly higher than the other Mk2s due to its B5 bogies, apparently put under it in Inchicore to release her own B4s to go to an in-service Mk2 in the last days of mainline Mk2 services. 5408's B4 bogies then went with that coach to scrap and she was left with the misfits.

As a result, the little freight train of Harvey, oil tank, ballast wagon and brown van, had a nice day out of the Museum in the sun.

## LOCOMOTIVES

**No.3BG "Guinness":** The engine continues to shunt around the yard and most recently was used to split No.131 from her tender and move the former to the Dunleath Workshop. Her next job will be to split the operational train of Mk2s so that the annual examinations of buffing and drawgear can be carried out.

**No.4:** The most versatile of our steam locomotives has lain silent at Whitehead since the end of 2019, when a 'mid-term' retube was cancelled as COVID struck and staff were furloughed.

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It is planned to begin stripping No.4 for major overhaul towards the middle of 2023, with the first task being to lift the boiler and carry out a thorough examination of same.

It is hoped to have it back on form towards the latter end of 2024 or early 2025.

**No.131:** It hauled the Whitehead based Santa trains reliably in December. It had a rush job in February and March to have new boiler tubes fitted. Due to spend the season in Dublin.

**No.85 "Merlin":** The middle big end was disassembled after running hot on the first Santa train in Dublin.

There had been tentative plans to move the engine to Whitehead to carry out this work, but the steam driver situation put paid to that idea.

2023 is No.85's last year in traffic before being withdrawn for overhaul. As the lease of the locomotive from her owners, National Museums Northern Ireland, was renewed last year, the plan is to begin overhauling No.85 for another period in traffic in 2024.

**No.171 "Sieve Gullion":** On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> January, the boiler had a warming fire lit in it as part of the ongoing overhaul of the locomotive. Over the following week or so the boiler was brought into steam and had safety valves set, injector tested. The boiler has been inspected and this is one step closer to placing it back in the frames.

No.171's last main line trip was 1<sup>st</sup> July 2002, so this was her first fire in over 20 years.

We are running an appeal to raise enough funds to get No.171 completed in 2023 - thanks to all who have donated so far. Also, thanks to Phil Lockett for a fifth video posted on Facebook outlining the appeal.

Work continues on the frames, with the brake rigging getting attention to correct worn threads, oval holes and pins that have seen better days.

The electrical installation is getting a lot of hardware made up too - unlike the rest of the locomotive, there are no "worn" electrical parts to recondition, which means that everything must be manufactured new.

Recently the driver's control panel box in the cab that contains the AWS sunflower and TPWS indicators was started at the Tech Class in Lisburn, with the bracket that holds the tender TPWS aerial under the tender and the bracket to hold the previously mentioned control panel already completed.

Some of the younger engineers, who have received Computer Aided Design training as part of their day jobs, have been assisting the efforts by producing drawings of the various enclosures and parts to feed into the Tech Class's computer controlled plasma cutter. This machine can cut parts from sheet steel much more quickly than even the most skilled sheet metal worker.

The locomotive's valve gear is being reassembled - a lot easier when the boiler has still to be replaced.

Labour is currently diverted to focus on getting No.131 and No.85 ready for their roles in the "Steam Dreams" tour in May, and as a result No.171 is not progressing as quickly as we would like.

**No.184:** Work on the cosmetic overhaul of No.184 continues with the front of the locomotive now looking much more like itself.

The missing cylinder cover - 'borrowed' to replace a defective item on No.186 some time ago - has been replaced. The vacuum pipe and smokebox door dart have been returned to their positions.

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Work is ongoing on boiler fittings which are being cleaned up in preparation for reassembly to the boiler.

The scrutiny that No.184 is receiving from the small team working on her has highlighted the very poor condition that she is in, if a return to service was ever to be considered.

**No.461:** The current - static - role is as the locomotive that museum visitors can step into the cab.

The site electrical squad have installed an LED strip light across the cab roof so that the cab and its various fittings can be more easily seen.

## WINTER MEETINGS

**14<sup>th</sup> December:** The First Great Train Robbery

Charles Friel presented an updated version of his fascinating look at the RPSI's contribution to the success of this 1970s film.

Blessed with a long period of good weather, filming took place mainly in May and June 1978 after No.184 had been brought back to life in Mullingar shed by Society volunteers over the winter and spring of that year.

Filming locations mainly centred around the less-than-busy Mullingar to Athlone line, but also included Cork and Dublin Heuston.

There were plenty of views, too, of the mechanics of film-making with behind-the-scenes photos.

**11<sup>th</sup> January:** The Greenisland Loop Line At 90

The loop line from Bleach Green to Mossley, and its associated 'back line' from Greenisland to the latter halt, was the topic - 90 years after its construction was in full flow. Its opening in 1934

allowed the introduction of the fastest trains in Ireland with a 30 minute schedule for the 30 miles into Belfast from Ballymena.

The presentation by Charles Friel was greatly aided by photographs of the construction by one of the engineers on the project, A.H. Glendinning, the father of two of our members, and to them we are grateful for access.

The construction methods were well illustrated, from the early mechanical excavators digging the cuttings and loading the spoil into 2ft gauge tipper wagons, to the massive wooden trellis over Valentine's Glen which gradually disappeared as the spoil was dumped from wagons on a precarious line along its top to create an embankment, to the impressive shuttering constructions which allowed the reinforced concrete structure to be built.

Further photos showed the line's opening and its subsequent history right up to present day, including the RPSI's own involvement with relaying the line in 2000 (ballast trains hauled by No.3 "R.H. Smyth") and its reopening in 2001.

**8<sup>th</sup> February:** BCDR To Great Victoria Street

The presentation by Ian Sinclair was based on proposals, in the early 1950s, by the Ulster Transport Authority to establish a new terminal facility in Belfast for its Bangor line trains which would be more convenient to the city centre than its present Queen's Quay station.

Two locations were identified: the one-time Oxford Street station on the East Bridge Street to Donegall Quay goods line, and a new station alongside and to the north of the GNR's Great Victoria Street station, which would face on to Durham Street.

Both options would use all or part of the GNR's Belfast Central goods-only route,

the former requiring turn-back sidings at Maysfields to allow trains to reverse into and out of Oxford Street, and the latter proposing a line which would follow today's Blythefield Curve, but with a climb to a flyover bridge across the GNR main line, and then run parallel to it and to the south of Grosvenor Road goods yard to its destination at Durham Street.

A number of new stations along the Central line were proposed (some eventually opened in the mid-1970s) and the Lagan 'shaky' bridge to be doubled.

A fascinating aspect of the forward thinking was to include the reopening of the BCDR line to Comber, then closed but still in existence.

Ultimately, the proposals would rely on the goodwill of the GNR, then still a separate concern, and its willingness to sacrifice its heavy goods traffic over the routes: Central Junction to Maysfields; Maysfields to Donegall Quay; Maysfields to the coal quays and oil terminals on the south side of the Lagan. The proposals were individually costed, and included the transfer of GNR goods facilities to the north docks via the NCC at Antrim or to operate only in night hours. The numbers just didn't add up, and it would be another 20 years, when goods traffic was gone, that the opening of the Central line was again considered - and followed through!

**8<sup>th</sup> March:** Around Ireland With Mac

The season of winter meetings finished in fine style with a presentation by Michael McMahon of views from the albums of R.M. (Mac) Arnold. The vast majority were from the 1950s, and only one was in colour.

Following a few views of Mac on location, a rough circle of Ireland was described, starting at Randalstown of all places. After a few more on the Derry Central, it was over to the Great Northern - the branches

to Banbridge, Armagh, Cavan, Belturbet, Stewartstown, and the Derry Road as far as Porthall, then Warrenpoint and the Irish North and its branches, ending with the main line to Dublin.

Heading south, we visited, Athy, Ballylinan and as far as Bennettsbridge before returning to the Cork line, reaching Little Island. This was followed by all the routes out of Limerick, ending on the Tralee line.

The slides were for the most part superb, with many of unusual views of familiar locations, but many of places rarely photographed, e.g. Stewartstown.

## GENERAL

**Rising Star:** Congratulations to Whitehead volunteer Gill Lewis, who was named as runner-up in the Rising Star category of the Heritage Railway Association awards which were held in Birmingham on 11<sup>th</sup> March.

Gill, who joined the Society last July, was nominated for her role in single-handedly transforming the footplate of DSER 2-6-0 No.461. She painstakingly removed decades of grime and grease from the faceplate and removed all the cab fittings, taking some of them home to be cleaned on her kitchen table.

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