



March 2024

NEWS LETTER

TRAINS

Santa Special: A successful season saw 7,413 passengers carried over 18 trains from Dublin. They were worked by No.85 with the exception of 9th and 10th December when the afternoon trains were hauled by No.131. As two volunteers were being assessed as Steam Raisers, it was necessary to have two locomotives in steam. Also, it was to assess the capabilities of the locomotive with 9 bogies.

Victorian Santa: These Whitehead only events were very successful and gave a lot of experience in how such trains could be run in the future - should the need arise.

Steam Whitehead: The steam season starts on Saturday 16th March with the usual format of trains and museum entry, with a Saint Patrick's twist.

The Midlander: Dublin's first trains will be to Maynooth on Sunday 24th March.

Easter: It is planned to operate the usual pattern of trains over the holiday weekend.

CARRIAGE & WAGON

Overhaul: two Cravens bogies, which

were overhauled in Whitehead, have been delivered to Inchicore.

LOCOMOTIVES

No.3BG "Guinness": We decided to treat the little Guinness engine to a new set of boiler tubes in 2023, placing an order on St Patrick's Day, with a projected lead time of 6 weeks. The tubes finally arrived in mid-October, which put paid to any idea of fitting them before the Santa train rides operation. Apparently, any non-standard boiler tube now has a very long lead time - and our locomotives don't take 'standard' boiler tubes. The Guinness engine passed its annual boiler examination in time for Christmas and has received the usual routine maintenance, including work to adjust a leaking injector steam valve.

As soon as the new year began, work commenced on retubing. The smokebox and firebox were cleaned out, including the removal of the blower and blastpipe in the smokebox, and the firebars and the ashpan.

No.3BG may be unique among our engines in that the ashpan can be removed completely while the boiler remains in the frames. LP&HC No.3 "R.H. Smyth" has the rear axle running

through the middle of the ashpan, the GNR engines have spring hangers in the way, and No.4's ashpan is constrained by several factors including the trailing coupled axle.

The bad news was that No.3BG's ashpan was too corroded to go back on the locomotive again. The good news is that the construction of a new ashpan is at an advanced stage, with new damper doors cut from plate, new pivot bars made, and quotes received to form the main body of the ashpan from some local suppliers.

The old boiler tubes (just over 130 in total) were removed and the tubeplates cleaned up in preparation for fitting the new tubes. The new tubes were annealed, cleaned and polished, and inserted into the boiler. The tubes are fitted by a process called tube expanding - the tube end is stretched into place using a set of rollers, and is increased in diameter, which pushes the tube end so firmly against the tubeplate that a steam tight joint is the result. No welding, screwing or gluing required. Expanding the tubes is now well underway, complete at the firebox end, and approaching halfway in the smokebox end, and will be followed by beading over the tube ends in the firebox.

The retubing crew have commented on how simple the work on the little Guinness engine is - with easy access into the firebox, no superheater or superheater flues, and only about 130 tubes in total, it compares favourably to working on one of the main line locomotives.

Incidentally, No.3BG has the youngest boiler across our fleet - it was built in 1950, according to our records - and it

shows, its overall condition is still very good.

By late February the new tubes were in and hydraulically tested, and it's now being reassembled for steam testing. The first planned use of the locomotive is on 16th March Train rides operation.

No.85 "Merlin": The new big end brasses seemed to finally sort out the recurring hot big end problem, and she co-starred with No.131 on the May "Steam Dreams" charter, which brought her as far afield as Tralee and Cork. Since then she has worked to Dundalk in July, Kilkenny in August and then worked the majority of the Dublin-based "Santa Special" trains from Connolly to Maynooth. The Irish Rail crew have commented that she is running very well at the moment and it seems a shame to withdraw her - similar comments were made when No.171 last ran back in 2002. But its boiler certificate has now expired and the locomotive is withdrawn pending overhaul.

No.131: The locomotive's "Steam Dreams" run from Athlone to Galway during "Steam Dreams", with a train of 7 Cravens with the BR van, was superb, and was one of the few times No.131 had had until now to show us her paces after she was returned to traffic. No.131's real moment to shine came on the last day of the "Steam Dreams", when No.85, having retired with some leaking rivets, remained at Connolly Shed, and No.131 substituted for the Wexford - Connolly leg, and tackled the climb of the Rathdrum bank well.

Unfortunately, problems with air leaking at the injectors meant that No.131 was failed at Greystones on the August "Sea Breeze" train.

On the middle weekend of the Dublin Santa trains No.131 worked the second train each day - not because of any problem with No.85, but to try her out on the heavy rake of carriages, this time 8 bogies and van. She most definitely did take the load and took the climb to Maynooth in a confident manner, with the boiler pressure and water levels holding steady. Maybe the old GNR enginemen who used to say a Qs could be better than an S class were right after all!

No.171 "Sieve Gullion": The frames went back on the wheels shortly after "Steam Dreams" in May, and since then work has concentrated on reassembling the springs, brakes, and motion.

As an example of a small part that takes time to repair - the snifting valve was found to have a worn valve disc so a new one was cast to a pattern made at Whitehead. We are finding that getting brass, cast iron and steel components cast more and more difficult, as foundries across the UK close down for various reasons, usually because of an ageing workforce, or requirements to invest in safety equipment that their businesses can't justify. In any case, the foundry that made No.85's new big end brasses also made a part for No.171's snifting valve, before closing for good. The new disc was machined at the RPSI's "Tech Class". This valve is just one example of the various parts that have received attention, either by replacement, or remetalling, and machining by staff or volunteers, before being replaced in its proper position on the locomotive.

When the locomotive was under overhaul at a contractor's premises in Shildon, north east England, in 2014,

that contractor declared bankruptcy and volunteers from the locomotive department swung into action to recover the locomotive - at that time dismantled to its component parts - back to Whitehead. Fortunately, we got pretty much everything back, apart from the works plates, which had disappeared. The boiler has had further repair work carried out, which is now complete, and just this week passed its official 'out of frames' steam test in the presence of the boiler inspector. The boiler is now back in the engine shed being stripped of its temporary smokebox floor, and being fitted with lifting eyes so it can be placed back in the frames early in the New Year.

Mogul: The team rebuilding an NCC 2-6-0 W Class locomotive at Whitehead are making progress with the frames and stretchers. They have the original drawings, which tell most of the story, but a photo tells a thousand words. Do you have any photos of a mogul with the boiler removed from the frames?

We know No.97 sat boilerless for a while in the late 1960s. There was even a photo in the press which showed a young RPSI member standing on the footplate of the boilerless, cabless locomotive.

If you can help with any photos which would help the team, please get in touch.

SITE NEWS

New Year Track Work: Just before the start of the Santa season it became apparent that the track at the start of Number 2 shed road, where No.3BG is stored, was spreading. As a temporary fix we put in a tie bar to ensure that

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the gauge was maintained throughout the subsequent train rides.

In the second week of January we examined the track and found six old, very rotten, NCC chair type sleepers. Once removed these were to be replaced using good quality second hand sleepers which we had acquired from the Dargan bridge relay. However the holes in these were for modern flat bottomed track and not the traditional bull nosed type we have throughout Whitehead. A special metal jig was made with holes at the right gauge for GNR chairs and the sleepers were drilled using a vertical magnetic based drill.

Despite a week of extreme cold and snow, the sleepers were packed with clean two inch ballast and the site levelled ready for traffic.

A Scrappy Month: When the full scrap skip was being collected in February Clearway suggested it was on its last legs and offered to replace it with a new one on long term, free loan.

In the past the skip had to be collected from Whitehead and then a second journey from Belfast to return it. With the new arrangements they will deliver another skip when they come to collect our full one; a much simpler and easier process.

This last load of scrap had netted £1,200 which included £200 for the old skip! All in all a win!

WHITEHEAD RAILWAY MUSEUM

Murder Mystery: The season kicked off with two very successful Saint Valentine's themed events on 10th and 17th February.

Platform 3 Café: It is with regret that

Rob and Louise, who have been our café stalwarts for well over three years, have decided to leave Platform 3 and take up a new opportunity, their last day being Friday 1st March. We wish them well in their new endeavours.

Due to these circumstances, the café will be shut on a very temporary basis after Saturday 2nd March until the events on 16th March. The museum will remain open as usual, with staff on site opening and closing for tour guides.

When the café reopens on 16th March Keeley Brown, who most café patrons will know well as one of the current staff members, will take over as Café Manager. There will also be new opening hours which will mirror the Museum opening hours of Thursday - Saturday inclusive, which we will keep under review. In terms of the food provisions, we will be starting with a soft opening where baked goods and hot drinks will be the focus.

WINTER MEETINGS

12th December: More Travels in Ireland with Mac

Taking up the regulator from his talk last March, Michael McMahon began our journey on Donegall Quay in Belfast with various tank engines working wagons between the cross-Channel boats and either York Road yard or through the Queen's Bridge subway to Maysfields and beyond. After a shot of diesel hydraulic No.1 being delivered by road past Milewater Road, and a look at events around York Road, we embarked on a trip to Larne Harbour before setting off down the main line and Portrush. After a pair of rare pictures on the Coleraine Harbour

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branch and at the dockside, we set off for Waterside. Along the way we had a huge variety of passenger trains, some steam substitutions with scratch sets of carriages, a couple of inspection saloons, some more failed railcars, impressive spoil trains and the occasional derailment (complete with steam crane).

Jumping south to Belfast Great Victoria Street, we saw work there and on the Belfast Central line before moving towards Portadown. This section included some of Mac's early colour slides which included a QL at the Boilie, west of Lurgan. Jumping to Dungannon, Michael and Mac then brought us down the Derry Road as far as Sion Mills with pictures which included some of the line's heavy goods trains. Moving further south to Goraghwood, we saw some of the Warrenpoint line and the final workings from Newry docks on the remains of the Greenore line before pictures of regular and special passenger trains on the main line to Dublin and reminders of the heavy goods trains hauled by a variety of Great Northern and NCC locomotives. After a quick glimpse of a very busy Navan with both MGWR and GNR 0-6-0s, we arrived into Amiens Street with both NCC moguls and VSs.

Michael told us that his commentary had been much enriched by the work of Joe Cassells who had identified many of the locations, and provided a lot of interesting information about the various operations pictured including many of their dates. Michael said that was all the more valuable since Mac's negatives had not been catalogued and had been badly stored without any information, though some did appear

in Mac's many photo albums - but sometimes with conflicting dates!

9th January: Omagh Railway Station - A Journey Through Time

Unfortunately, owing to illness, this presentation had to be cancelled. It is hoped to arrange for another date.

13th February: The Life and Times of Berkeley Deane Wise

This was Mark Kennedy's illustrated talk on the life and times of Berkeley Deane Wise. Born on 2nd October 1853 in Berkeley Forest, New Ross, County Wexford. The family later moved to Waterloo Road in Dublin (the house is now the Romanian Embassy) and studied engineering at Trinity. Wise started his civil engineering career in 1872 as a pupil to Marmaduke Backhouse as the Resident Engineer on the construction of the Navan & Kingscourt Railway. From October 1875 until December 1877, Wise was Assistant Engineer to the Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford Railway where he worked on deviations around Bray Head, involving a new 450 yard tunnel, and the rebuilding of several bridges. Mark described how one DWWR carriage survives in Cultra and is now one of the ten oldest carriages in preservation. Wise moved to the BCDR in 1878 and lived in Salem Cottage near Knock station. He worked on the doubling of the railway line as far as Knock and his first building for the BCDR, at Neill's Hill, opened in May 1879. It was a reasonably conventional two-storey building compared with his later more exuberant style. That style began to appear in 1886 in the shelter on the Up platform at Holywood and its signal cabin, both of which had roofs with large overhangs. Berkeley

Wise's last major project with the BCDR was to prepare for the replacement of the viaduct over the River Quoile at Downpatrick. The pinnacle of Wise's civil engineering career was his 18 years as Chief Engineer to the Belfast & Northern Counties Railway (BNCR), from 11th April 1888 until 1906 when his health failed. Wise promoted a standardised design of BNCR signal cabin and a few survive today including our replica at Whitehead Excursion station. The largest survivor, at Coleraine, was built in 1924, some eighteen years after Wise's death. His first BNCR station project was the huge wooden train shed at Larne Harbour; his similar Portrush station survives in private hands. Wise built numerous goods stores and waiting shelters in the same modular style. He designed the distinctive kiosks for Belfast York Road and Portrush, both of which survive in Cultra. He pioneered the NCC's use of reinforced concrete and did a lot of work on signalling, including the use of the Manson snatcher for exchanging tablets at speed. He did lot to develop Glenariff Glen for tourists and Whitehead as a place to either live or visit on cheap excursions. Among other things, Whitehead gained a promenade, a beach, and several performance kiosks as well as the Black Head Path. Wise's largest single project was the two miles of the Gobbins cliff path which included several bridges linking sections of walkway up to 70 feet above the sea and there was a section of tunnel beneath the waves. When first opened in 1902, it was described as "having no parallel in Europe as a marine cliff walk". At the same time, Wise and the BNCR introduced buses to Ireland with a

Greenisland to Whiteabbey feeder service. Wise's last big job was Ballymena's three-platformed station. Wise had a serious health breakdown from which he never really recovered. He retired from the NCC in 1906 and lived with his sister, Mrs Harding, in 18 Salisbury Terrace, Eglinton Street, Portrush, overlooking the railway station. Wise died on 5th May 1909 in his 56th year and his body was brought to Belfast by train for burial in the City Cemetery.

12th March: Some Proposed Reopenings

Roger Joanes will share pictures from the 1950s and 1960s along the ten routes proposed for reopening in the recent All-Island Strategic Rail Review.

Online: The good news is that so far three of the meetings have been added to the "Videos (Meetings)" page of the Members Area on our website.

And that page has information on how you can show your appreciation by making a donation in lieu of the 'hat at the door' at Orangefield.

50 And Rising: At the February meeting General Manager Lisa Adair told everyone she wanted to mark Charles Friel's first fifty years of organising the Society's Belfast meetings and John Friel's thirty years of running the bookstall at the meetings.

Charles thanked Lisa and said, hard to believe that it was more than 50 years since John McKegney had suggested to Robin Morton, Sullivan Boomer and Charles that they should revive the Belfast meetings in a hall belonging to St Jude's parish where he was the new curate. In those troubled days, John had stressed that the hall was in a

quiet area with lots of car parking. Charles said that the threesome worked near the city centre and would meet at lunchtimes in a pub near Cornmarket to plan the meetings. The first one, in February 1974, with a never-to-be-repeated Sullivan Boomer film show. After his job moved him away from the city centre, Charles did the organising but always with many helpful suggestions from Robin.

At first there were seven meetings in the season but train operations soon put paid to the April meeting and the pattern settled at six meetings over the winter and spring months which continued unbroken until three meetings were lost to Covid. Charles recalled that the meetings regularly attracted an attendance of more than 100. The record had been a model railway night which had been attended by more than 300 people. Another popular night had been a presentation by Joe Curran about the County Donegal Railway which had received widespread advance publicity. On that occasion the hall was full to capacity and some latecomers had to be turned away.

Charles paid tribute to all those who had put on presentations over the years, and mentioned Fred Cooper from Portadown whose annual film show invariably featured the Derry Road and the Warrenpoint branch as well as many surprising discoveries. The meeting topics had ranged from the Dublin & Kingstown Railway to the DART. He said that with the unfortunate demise of the Modern Railway Society of Ireland, it was hoped that one meeting per season would focus on the modern scene.

GENERAL

Modern Railway Society Of Ireland: It is sad to report that this society has wound down after many years of great outings and interesting meetings.

Fittingly, the presenter for the final meeting was Michael McMahon, founder and regular presenter.

HRA Awards: Congratulations to Society volunteer Sam Hall (Whitehead) and to the Fundraising Team (Dublin) on receiving runner-up certificates at the Annual Awards ceremony of the Heritage Railway Association which took place in Brighton in February.

The Fundraising Team - John and Gerard Owens and John Richardson - were shortlisted in the Team of the Year category, which hails excellence by groups of volunteers who work together in a particular field or work or activity.

Sales News: This new book has been added to the online shop:

“Irish Railway Rover, Part 2” by Michael McMahon, hardback, 19 x 25 cm, 90 colour photos, 80 pages, £17.50 / €20.

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