



April 2025

NEWS LETTER

TRAINS & EVENTS

Operating Licence: The Society's operating licence in the Republic has been renewed for a five year period to March 2030.

The single safety certificate is issued by the CRR via the European Rail Agency. This allows southern operations to recommence.

The previous certificate expired in late December, close to the Santa season so it was deemed prudent to have a renewal date in March. Unfortunately, this meant that the traditional Saint Patrick's weekend trains to Maynooth could not run.

NI Trains Update: We are pleased to report that significant progress has been made with a view to returning to the mainline from Whitehead.

There are still a number of issues to be dealt with and we will report more fully when there is more clarity.

Saint Patrick's Weekend: On Saturday 15th March, the train rides were operated by No.3BG "Guinness" plus LMS NCC carriage 68 and brake van.

Trains operated at half hourly intervals between 11:0 and 15:0 and most of the

coach's compartments were occupied for most of the trips.

As on previous train rides days, there was a pleasing number of cross border visitors. The dry, sunny weather meant that the outside tables were well used and the cafe did a roaring trade.

Easter Steam: Trains will be operating at Whitehead on Easter Saturday and Easter Monday (19th & 21st April).

Easter Eggstravaganza: The first trains of the year from Dublin will be on Easter Monday, with two return trips to Maynooth.

Premier Branch Line: The First diesel-hauled trip of the year, on Saturday 10th May, will be to Waterford, Limerick and Ballybrophy. 071 haulage has been requested, with changes of locomotive at Waterford and Limerick.

LOCOMOTIVES

No.4: Dismantling work continues as the locomotive is prepared for its overhaul.

No.85 "Merlin" & No.171 "Slieve Gullion": The RPSI has two operational bases, one at Whitehead and one in Dublin. Locomotives are regularly swapped between the two for traffic

and maintenance requirements.

Locomotive exchanges are either run as light engine moves, or with a train attached - the latter much preferred as it means the cost of the swap is covered by the fare paying passengers.

No.85 was last at Whitehead in October 2019, when she departed light engine for Dublin to work the 2019 Dublin Santa trains. Little did we know then that changing circumstances would mean that No.85 wouldn't return to Whitehead for another five years.

By early 2024 plans were underway to return No.171 "Slieve Gullion" to traffic after her major overhaul.

Normally, a locomotive fresh from overhaul would run light engine to Carrickfergus from Whitehead a couple of times. If all goes well, the next weekend the engine would take a short train to Carrickfergus, and if that works out, haul the train to Belfast and back. As confidence - and the miles run - build, the newly rebuilt locomotive will start to pull passenger trains on the Whitehead - Belfast route, increasing the speed and load incrementally with each trip. These aren't called "running in" or "trial" trips for nothing - usually as we test, we find things that require attention - sometimes a week's work in the workshops between one trial trip and the next. What we certainly do not do with a "new" engine is send it on a one way 130 mile trip in one day.

However this was exactly the dilemma that faced the locomotive department regarding No.171. With steam operations in Northern Ireland not expected to recommence until mid 2025, No.171, with her boiler ticket

already running, could either sit in Whitehead, depreciating like a new car locked in a garage, or move to Dublin to commence running in and start earning back some of the cost of her overhaul. Experience showed that sending No.171 130 miles light engine to Dublin - even overnight and at reduced speed - would probably result in the locomotive requiring workshop attention somewhere far from either of our two bases.

Another consideration was that the tender attached to No.85, tender 73, was now out of use after the expiration of Merlin's boiler certificate. Tender 73 already has the expensive set of modern electrical equipment required for operation on the main line railway fitted - a job that was just beginning on No.171's regular tender, No.12. Could No.85 be hauled "dead" all the way to Whitehead, the tender swapped on to No.171, and 171 run light engine to Dublin? The option was possible, but not desirable, for the reasons mentioned above regarding No.171's untried bearings and systems.

The final option was to use a low-loader to move No.171 to Dublin, load up No.85 and return her to Whitehead. At a stroke, this would remove any concerns about No.171's first trip being a long distance operation far from home. It also allowed No.85 to return to Whitehead without any concerns about hauling her 'dead' the 130 miles.

The locomotive department got to work on the plan. Low-loaders cannot access Connolly shed - the last time a locomotive (not one of ours) left there by road two enormous cranes were used to lift it off the rails next to the station car park. So the lorry would

have to go to Inchicore.

In preparation, No.85 was moved to Inchicore in September 2024. While there, the tender was to receive servicing that would see it ready for another 10 years of service, plus a fresh coat of paint. Paint samples from Whitehead were sent to Dublin so that the red and the blue could be mixed to match exactly the colours on No.171. The colour of GNR blue that we use isn't on any colour chart - it's close to a few RAL and pantone numbers, but not a match to any of them. It's based on an original sample from Dundalk Works. Crests and the "G" and "N" letters were printed by a contractor from computer files held by the locomotive department, and expertly applied. Finally, the tender bearings were examined and the axles ultrasonically tested.

Meanwhile at Whitehead, with the calendar counting down rapidly, the finishing touches were being made to No.171. Although she was officially launched in September 2024, numerous finishing off jobs were still required, including, but not limited to, running cables for lights and speedometer, fitting spark arrestors, adjustments to weights and big ends. Volunteers and staff rallied to the cause with a deadline approaching. All loose items were removed from the locomotive, for fear that they should come adrift on the way down the road, including the gauge glass protectors and sandbox lids. The footplate was scrupulously swept and vacuumed clean of loose coal and debris. An observant onlooker would have also noticed that No.171 was minus her cab windows, nameplates and maker's plates. These were removed before

leaving Whitehead in case anyone else might be tempted to do so at another time and place. None of the plates on any of the GNR locomotives are original, having been manufactured by the RPSI to replace stolen (or in the case of No.171, sold off by a previous owner) originals, sometimes more than once!

At Inchicore on Wednesday 15th January, No.85 was split from tender No.73, her companion for her last two ten-year periods of service. No.85 and tender had been stabled in road 7 of FCR1, and now No.85 was left in road 6, leaving the tender ready to couple to No.171 in road 7.

For her first period in traffic with the RPSI, No.85 used tender 31, originally delivered with a VS class locomotive, and tender 12, usually seen coupled to No.171. Our GNR(I) tenders are all interchangeable, and this has been carried through to include the electrical systems, which will plug out of one locomotive and into another.

At Whitehead on Thursday 16th January, a low-loader just off the Cairnryan - Belfast ferry reversed slowly into the site.

The tractor unit was a MAN TGX, specifically the 41.580 model. The TGX is a firm favourite of many heavy haulage firms in Europe currently. It has an 8x4 driveline, powered by a 15.2 litre MAN D38 diesel engine which delivers 580hp (hence the name).

The trailer was built by Italian firm Cometto, and allows the locomotive to be loaded/unloaded by splitting the low loader section from the 'swan neck' of the trailer, which stays attached to the tractor's fifth wheel. The trailer has many hydraulic controls

which enable the axles to be lowered up and down to allow tall loads beneath obstacles (as the escort driver later had to do, with the telegraph lines on Castleview Road). The trailer has no suspension other than the flex of the bed and the tyres. The trailer has wheels which can be steered independently of the tractor unit by a remote control at the rear. This allows the long vehicle to negotiate tight bends without excessive manoeuvring. The trailer was set up for 4ft 8½in gauge vehicles, but had recently been fitted with a third rail which permitted 5ft 3in gauge vehicles also to be carried.

The rig was aligned with the turntable road, and the tractor unit dropped the leading end of the trailer on the ground, and the haulier's men assembled the ramp. No.171, split from tender 12, was hauled out of the engine shed by B142 and positioned at the base of the ramp. A winch cable attached to the tractor unit and fed through a snatch block at the rear of the trailer was connected to No.171's rear drawbar, and the locomotive was winched slowly onto the trailer. The locomotive was securely chained down, and departure time from the site set for 2am the next morning.

Inchicore, Friday 17th January, at around 8am, the rig entered the Irish Rail works, negotiated various tight corners, and positioned next to the traverser. The ramp was very efficiently constructed and No.171 was slowly lowered down onto the traverser. The traverser positioned No.171 at the entrance to road 7 and the locomotive was pushed indoors and coupled to tender 73, looking pristine and matching No.171's blue

and red hues.

Next onto the traverser was No.85, like No.171 lacking gauge glass protectors, nameplates, works plates, etc. As she was positioned at the lorry ramp outside, indoors No.171 was being connected up to her tender, two water bags, two vacuum bags and an electrical jumper, in addition to the main drawbar and two safety links.

No.85 was winched onto the trailer and positioned accurately, and then chained down. Like No.171, No.85's cab was swept clean of loose coal.

No.171 had her nameplates, works plates and cab windows reattached, and headlamps (which for now still have No.85's number marked on the side) trial fitted and tested, tender floorboards which had been removed to give access to the coupling pins replaced. The new set of fireirons, which travelled from Whitehead in the firebox, were placed on the peg in the tender coal space.

The departure for Whitehead was set for 07:00 on the Saturday morning. By about 13:00 No.85 was being reversed up Castleview Road, and the by now familiar drill of dropping the leading end of the trailer onto the track and building the ramp commenced. No.85 was finally positioned in No.4 road in the "New Shed", although not yet coupled to tender 12.

What next for No.85? We have her on loan from National Museums Northern Ireland until 2037. The intention will be to return her to service when time and resources allow, probably after No.4's recently started overhaul starts to wind up in a couple of years. Her boiler is in good condition, and according to the crew on her last few Santa Trains,

the locomotive was running better than ever on her last weekend in service in December 2023. She has run relatively few miles during her ten year ticket, including two years with no miles beyond short movements to keep bearings in good order. So No.85 will not require extensive mechanical work either. In the next few months she will be cleaned out and cleaned up, and greased and oiled to prevent deterioration during storage, and of course be coupled to tender 12.

More immediately what is next for No.171? Once moved to Connolly Shed, there are a few final jobs and static tests to be completed, before running in can commence, probably in late February or March.

A big thank-you is due to the staff and management at Inchicore Works, who facilitated us with the logistics of moving the two locomotives in and out on lorries.

The locomotive department both Dublin and Whitehead have put a lot of effort into making the moves happen, both volunteer and full time staff.

Other departments at Whitehead, including the site and electrical squad, supported them at various times. Our thanks are due to them all, and here's to a steamy 2025 - both north and south!

WHITEHEAD SITE

Track Matters: February, a month without operations at Whitehead, has traditionally been an opportunity to do site maintenance. This year, with a week of cold dry weather in the offing, we decided to tackle an ongoing drainage problem in the platform road.

In the past we have installed a longitudinal drain but the ballast between sleepers at the Belfast end is a bad mixture of some stones, mud and ash and holds water. To remove this we hired a micro excavator which is only a metre wide and fits neatly in the six foot.

Over three days this week the Site squad was able to remove the old ballast from between 56 sleepers over a distance of 150 feet. Over the next fortnight we will re ballast this area with clean 2 inch stone which will drain properly.

WINTER MEETINGS

7th January: Modern Traction on the Great Northern

Michael McMahon brought us the story, in pictures, of how the Great Northern Railway (Ireland) modernised with petrol and diesel power. This may seem an odd topic for an RPSI meeting but Charles Friel reminded us that, many years ago, the St Jude's programme had included one modern traction topic. That was dropped when the Modern Railway Society of Ireland was formed and began running its own meetings. But now that the MRSI has been disbanded, he had been encouraged to include modern traction again.

Michael began with County Donegal Railcar 1 which had pioneered internal combustion on Irish railways and the less well known pioneering work of the Dublin and Blessington, the Midland Great Western and the Clogher Valley. The GNR was much involved in the County Donegal's use of diesel power. While the MGWR had a petrol-driven inspection car, the NCC was the leader

on the standard gauge with Railcar 1 (now in the Society's collection) while the Great Southern experimented with Dr Drumm's battery-driven railcars. The GNR bought a chassis from Kerr Stuart and there were pictures of it in rudimentary form at Castlebellingham with some cold-looking engineers. Michael described how the bogied Railcars A and B were followed by the three articulated C railcars and the higher capacity of D, E, F and G which had a power unit in the centre of the formation.

We were told how, after the Second World War, the GNR invested £269,000 in 15 new steam locomotives and the NCC spent £396,500 on 18 Jeeps - the equivalent of £12.5 million and £18.5 million in today's money! Very soon afterwards, in 1950, the GNR began buying a fleet of railcars from AEC which brought a new level of service to the Belfast-Dublin main line, the Derry Road, the Newcastle branch and between Belfast and Clones. That example was soon followed by CIÉ but the GNR turned to British United Traction for the more powerful and more versatile BUT railcars which soon replaced steam on the Enterprise Express and made inroads on the Derry Road too.

The 1957 BUT-worked fast service between Enniskillen and Belfast via Omagh was designed to show the Stormont government what a modernised railway could deliver but, despite its success, the effort fell on deaf ears.

Michael then turned our attention to the GNR's work in developing a succession of rail buses and the Howden-Meredith wheel which gave a much smoother ride. Michael

described their use on the Sligo Leitrim and the Dundalk, Newry and Greenore lines, including the survival of No.1 in Cultra.

Michael concluded his talk with a description of how the GN's attempt to get a diesel-powered locomotive. This resulted in the German-built MAK No.800, an 800 horsepower diesel-hydraulic which remained a one-off thanks to Government reluctance.

Looking at some of the proposals, Michael wondered how the Enterprise might have developed had things been different.

4th February: The Derry Road Remembered

Back in 2019, in our last meeting before the Covid lockdown, Jim Donaghy presented a night about the Derry Road, the GNR's line from Portadown to Londonderry (Foyle Road). For various reasons, that talk only got as far as Omagh before the clock beat us. For last night's meeting, Jim had another go at reaching the Maiden City - and succeeded in fine style!

Jim began by paying tribute to three railwaymen who did a lot to encourage Jim's interest - Portadown drivers Jimmy Donnelly and Peter McCann and Inspector Frank Dunlop. Indeed we were to see several pictures of Peter McCann, with his cap ever at a jaunty angle, in action catching staffs and tablets on the Derry Road.

Jim had refreshed many of the pictures and added many more as he wove in new tales of the men who operated the trains and the scrapes they got into. Using posters, timetables, weekly circulars and newspaper cuttings, Jim delivered a fast-paced and highly

entertaining feast of detail. There were lots of trains, of course, and lots of people too in all grades from track walkers to stationmasters. As well as the ordinary traffic, we saw pictures of pilgrim trains, weed-spray trains and troop specials as well as some of the traffic carried (from apples and mushrooms to parcels and cattle). Along the way, Jim described station layouts, the doubling and later singling of the line and the use of both traditional large staffs and imported NCC tablets to control the single-line sections.

Jim's commentary also included many highly amusing anecdotes; some only possible now with the passage of time! Jim even read a letter about the post-closure lifting train crash at Pomeroy from the driver involved, Andy Rush. There were other crashes and derailments too. One involved our own No.131 but the unfortunate SG3 0-6-0 No.13 was involved in three (one of them fatal for the unfortunate young fireman).

The line may have closed 60 years ago (on Sunday 14th February 1965) but Jim brought us right back to the days we hoped would never end and the years just fell away.

4th March: Belfast Great Victoria Street Charles Friel explained that after helping Translink with their booklet to mark the closure of Great Victoria Street in May 2024, he had wondered how to make better use of the many pictures gathered. He had mentioned this to Robert White who is a long-serving volunteer despite now living in England. Robert grasped the challenge with great enthusiasm and then did a huge amount of research for the talk

which, Charles said, would hold many surprises and delights.

Robert began with an aerial picture of the City Hospital and the Donegall Road area where his grandfather had a shop and where he began his fascination with railways - almost from his pram! Robert showed how the Ulster Railway's terminus might have been at May's Dock near the Queens Bridge over the river Lagan. But Great Victoria Street won the debate though the first buildings were replaced after only nine years by the familiar Godwin facade.

Using maps and overlays, Robert described the station's first layout which included much use of turntables, including inside the passenger terminal, as well as workshops on the city side of the-then level crossing. The Durham Street bridge arrived in 1863 and the site developed rapidly, especially on the country side of the new bridge. Robert covered the changes at Central Junction and the arrival of 'Belfast South' signal cabin. By the turn of the century, the platform layout and signalling had changed considerably and land was bought to allow for new carriage sidings. The new century also brought steam railmotors and the building of the 'motor platform', later renamed No.1, which led to many problems with the Board of Trade about clearances. There was an intriguing picture of staff which included a 'constable' and the many trains run for an anti-Home Rule rally in 1912 which included one from Wicklow! Robert shared a series of pictures of the Durham Street bridge being replaced in the mid-1930s, apparently with little disruption to services. (This bridge was completely

dismantled in early 2025.)

After reviewing train departures, attention turned to the hydraulic buffers and the platform barriers before a look at wartime traffic and huge queues outside the station. Robert then shared some particularly fascinating pictures of a 1943 model of how Belfast city centre might look after the war which included a two-level and multi-platformed railway station near the Queen's Bridge. As Robert said "Answers on a postcard, please!"

The end of the war brought a huge illuminated V sign over the entrance to Great Victoria Street and, in 1947, the Enterprise Express which was soon followed by the arrival of the AEC railcar fleet. As time was against us, Robert concluded with a charming trio of William Robb pictures of No.210 "Erne" and No.192 "Slivenamon" side by side, waiting to leave platforms 2 and 3 with the 8.15am Dublin and the 8.25am Derry trains.

GENERAL

New Director: In March, we welcomed our new external director, Stacey McWilliams, to the Board.

Stacey has worked in a senior leadership capacity for over 17 years across various industries, beginning her career in an operational capacity and moving into Human Resources.

She specialises in conflict resolution, performance management and commercial drive in the people area of businesses.

Five Foot Three: With postage costs now so high that they are greater than the printing cost of the magazine, we recently introduced an option to obtain

Five Foot Three as an online electronic version.

Many thanks to those members who chose to take this option.

Sales News: A new book has been added to the shop:

"Strabane's Railways Remembered" by Jim McBride, hardback, 23 x 15 cm, 52 colour photos, 130 b&w photos, 94 pages, £15 / €20.

HRA Awards: Congratulations to the RPSI's electrical squad for being named as runner-up in the Heritage Railway Association's Annual Awards. The winners were announced at a ceremony which took place at the Hilton Gateshead in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on Saturday 8th February.

The e-squad was shortlisted in the "Team of the Year" section and the blurb noted that the team comprised a group of volunteers who worked together every Wednesday at the RPSI headquarters in Whitehead.

As ever, it's good for the RPSI to be involved in this event. It gives the Society a chance to benchmark itself against the wider heritage movement and also to maintain our profile with the HRA and preserved railways throughout Britain.

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