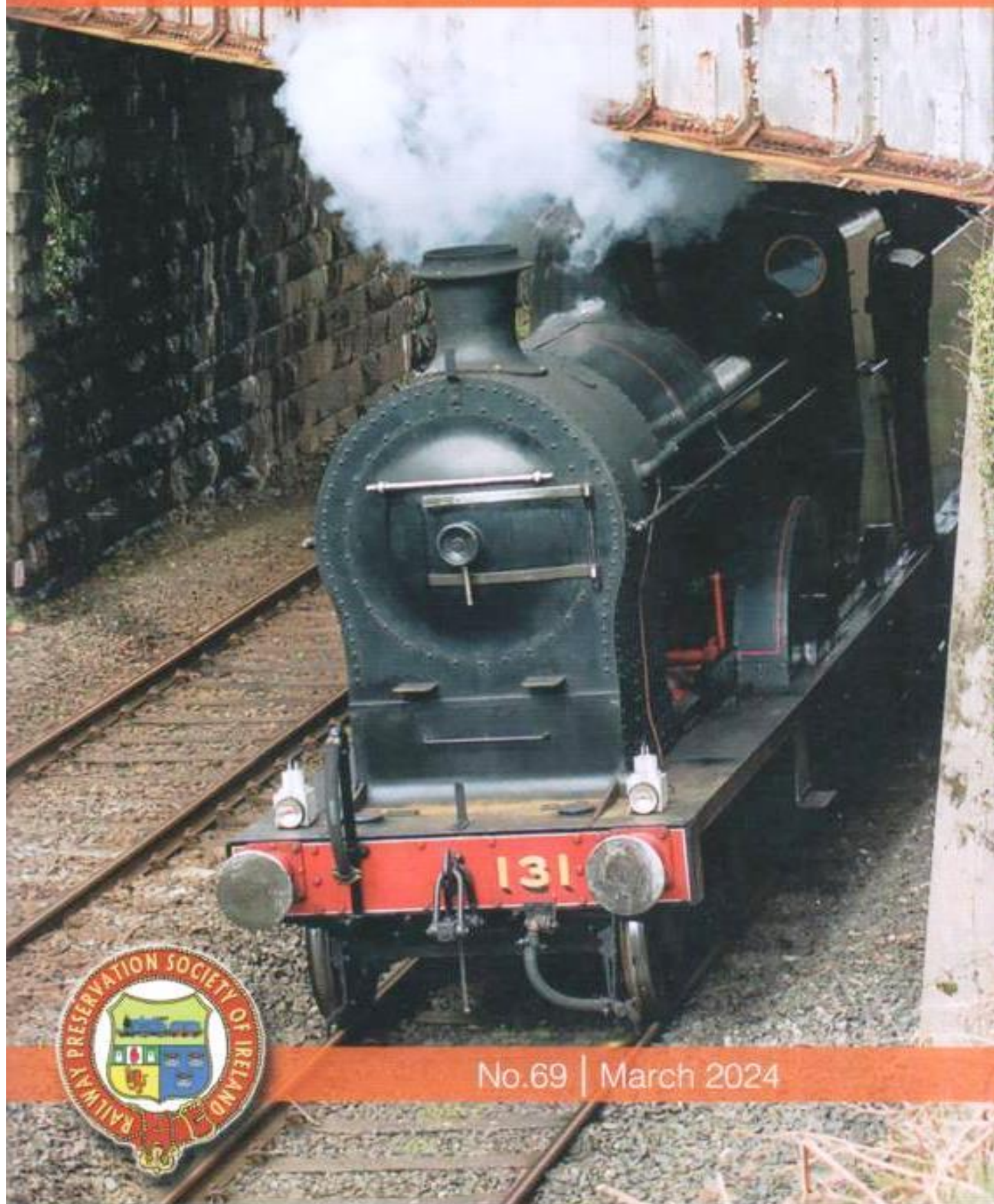


FIVE FOOT THREE

The Magazine of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland



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No. 131 'Bundoran Express', Dundalk loop, 01st April (Photo: M Crockett)

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To contact Five Foot Three with letters, photographs or other contributions, send an email to 5ft3magazine@gmail.com, or write to

**FIVE FOOT THREE
WHITEHEAD RAILWAY MUSEUM
CASTLEVIEW ROAD • WHITEHEAD • COUNTY ANTRIM
NORTHERN IRELAND • BT38 9NA**

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RPSI Loco Rep Gerry Mooney and Irish Rail crew consisting of Driver Robbie Jolley, Fireman Keith Farrelly and Inspector Mark Reck – prepare to take No. 131 south from Whitehead, 01st April. Photos without a year are (usually, anyway) 2023.

(Photo: JJ Friel)

Cover: No. 131 forges south, Kilmonagh Road, Goragwood, 01st April. (Photo: M Crockett)

2023 was yet another very challenging year for the RPSI. In Northern Ireland, the Society was faced with two major challenges. The first was the tragic and untimely death of Noel Playfair, who was the only NIR driver qualified to drive steam locomotives. As a result, we were unable to run steam hauled passenger trains on the NIR network.

The second challenge was linked – how do you train a steam engine driver when you no longer have a steam engine driver to help deliver the training? In meetings with NI Railways and our regulator, the Railway Safety Authority (RSA), part of Northern Ireland's Department for Infrastructure, it became clear that the steam locomotive skill set was no longer available in NI Railways. Noel's death, and the retirement of several other NIR staff who worked on steam, both on the footplate and in operational management roles, meant that training up a new driver would now sadly be outside the competence of the staff available.

The way forward is not simple or easy –

it requires the RPSI in Northern Ireland to become a "Railway Undertaking" (RU) – similar to a "Train Operating Company" (TOC) in GB terms. This will be a massive change in how RPSI steam trains are operated in Northern Ireland and would effectively make the RPSI a Railway Company in its own right. Our previous status was closer to a rolling stock provider and tour promoter, with the running of the train (crew, route planning, etc.) undertaken by NIR. Training new crew will need to be carried out by the RPSI and a licensed Train Operating Company with competence in operating steam trains on the main line. This process will not be quick or cheap – however progress is well advanced and we are in regular communication with both NIR and the RSA who are both offering invaluable guidance and every support.

With the benefit of hindsight, the guest operator status we had enjoyed with NIR might be seen as an anachronism, being unique in these islands. It is possible that



The only mainline RPSI movement on NIR in 2023 was No. 131's light engine run to Dundalk, seen here at Cloghogue, Newry on 01st April.

(Photo: CP Friel)



Phil Lockett, Adam Lohoff, Chris Ragg and Tyler Playfair with 3BG on Santa Train Rides on 17th December. Whilst retaining a "needs must" approach to operating nothing but Train Rides at Whitehead, each have had opportunities to work in Dublin in 2023. (Photo: P Lockett)

one cause of the current situation is simply that we are years too late going down the RU route. We will update members on the situation as it develops.

The lack of mainline running on NIR has meant that the humble Guinness engine has been the mainstay of revenue earning operations in Northern Ireland. A series of imaginative events have been run culminating in a very successful season of Santa operations, but it just isn't the same without the big engines and the mainline: empty nest syndrome? Fortunately given the lack of mainline operations from Whitehead, northern locomotive representatives were warmly welcomed on southern operations and, very importantly, their competency on – and familiarity with – the engines has been maintained. There have been some superb performances to boot.

B142 returned to traffic and immediately made life easier for the workshop staff

who can now shunt freely without having to steam raise and oil 3BG for several hours first. B142 is a credit to those who worked on it, from the heavy engine rebuild to the final paintjob. Van 411 received a comprehensive paint job, and it would be hoped that perhaps 114 could receive likewise.

Dublin operations have had a busy year which began with the move South of loco No.131 on a very wet Saturday in April, closely followed with a successful Steam Dreams charter in May. No.131 also successfully tackled the climb out of Dublin on the MGWR mainline with nine bogies on the Santa trains. The footplate crews in the southern area very much work as happy teams with a convivial yet professional atmosphere: they know their engines, they know each other, they enjoy what they are doing and because of this, the jobs get done to the highest standards. That is how the best steam

works.

The problems which No.85 encountered with hot big ends were finally resolved and – notwithstanding that the end of her boiler life rapidly approached – she returned to mechanical dependability. Things did not go seamlessly for the entire year, however with No.131 failing in Greystones due to injector problems. The learnings from the Greystones failure have been incorporated into the southern SMS.

Maintaining two stropky locomotives 130miles from their workshop has been a challenge which has been risen to by the Whitehead staff and the wider pool of volunteers. However, there are further lessons to be learned from an engineering point of view. These are the need to focus labour hours in Whitehead on carriages and locomotives which earn revenue. This will be a focus for the Board in the coming year.

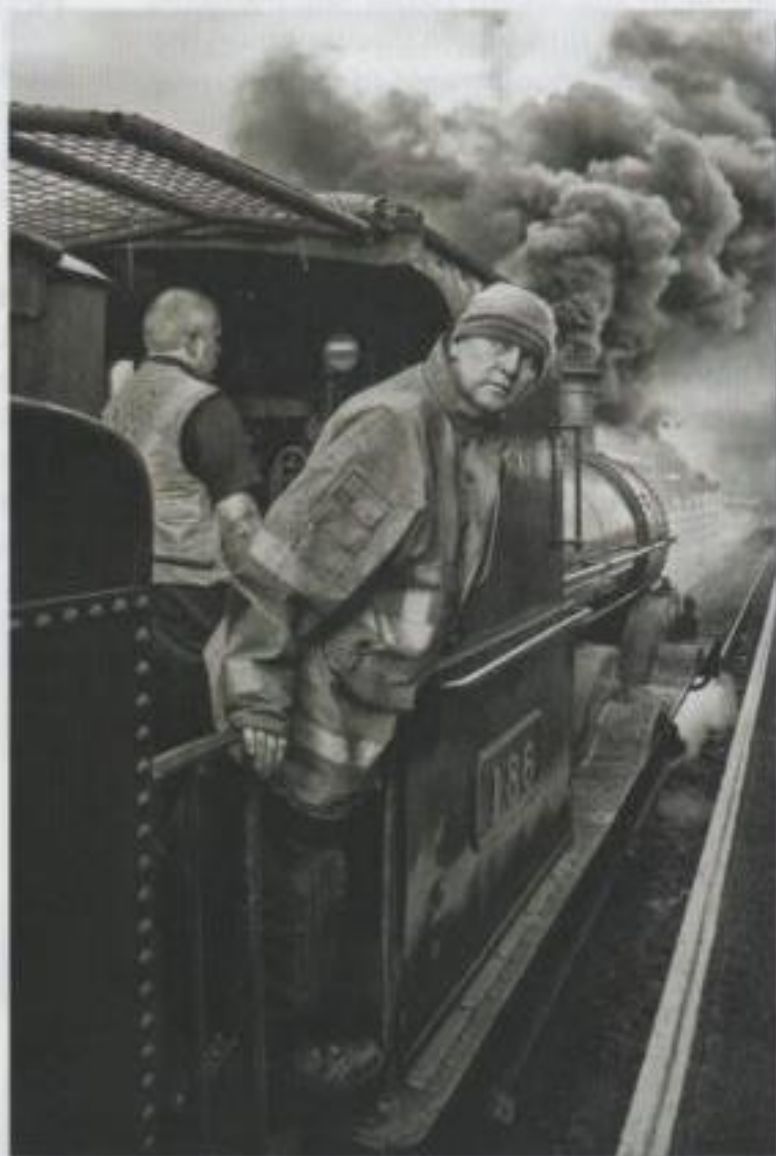
Looking across the water a number of preserved railways are facing financial, managerial and operational difficulties. In these cases, the situation has not been helped by the duplication of effort between operation companies, railway societies, volunteers and the full-time workforce. This has shown that our single unitary structure of a Society has proven to be the best fit for our organization.

The Board continues to function, meeting at approximately 6-weekly intervals through online Teams. This has proven to be a more efficient use of time than weekend Board meetings in Belfast, Dublin or Dundalk. The BMC and DMC continue to manage the day-to-day operations of the society North

and South.

It is worth noting the space taken up in Five Foot Three by Obituaries unfortunately continues to increase. Thank you to those who have contributed articles which still await publication, I will get to them!

Finally, the usual thanks to Translink NI Railways and Irish Rail.



A notable retirement from NIR at the end of May 2023 was Driver Assessor Michael Hamill, seen here in Portadown on No.186. Firm but very fair as a Driver Assessor – we more lazily but incorrectly referred to the role as “Inspector” –, “Micky” also proved himself very capable in the driving seat of our steam locomotives and covered some of the driving turns for a period. Micky had enthusiasm, ability and interest in the steam locomotives and offered solutions. It is a great shame that using Micky as a Driver was not a road which was able to be opened permanently to us. (Photo: Gary McParland Landscape Photography).

The year started off with some very sad news - the passing of steam driver Noel Playfair in January (see elsewhere in this issue).

Apart from the devastating news for his family, with Noel being the only current driver in the steam roster on Translink, this opened up a whole discussion on the training and appointment of steam crews - which continues to the present time. Others more qualified than I am will in time bring the story up to date. Suffice it to say, the process is ongoing.

Some highlights from the year:

Train Rides and Sold-out Dublin Trips

With mainline operations not being possible out of Whitehead, it was heartening that Dublin trains remained

popular. Booked-out trains throughout the year were supplemented by a very successful Steam Dreams charter in May, which featured both No.85 and No.131, the latter having been transferred to Dublin in April. Indeed, No.131 proved itself a very capable locomotive for all the Dublin outings it took part in.

Operations in the north were confined to events and train rides at Whitehead, with a couple of mainline CAF trips. These proved to be a mixed bag, but culminated in a very successful Christmas season.

Charity

As in previous years, the generosity of members has allowed us to make seats available on our Whitehead Santa trains for needy families. This year, although confined to Whitehead, two sessions were made available to the Salvation



*Steam still continues in the big world - No.85 climbs away from Headford Jct near Killarney, 09th May.
(Photo: CP Friel)*

Army and DePaul. Thank you for your support!

Winter Meetings

The meetings in January, February and March meetings continued to be held online.

However, for the new season in October, we returned to Parke Hall at Orangefield for 'live' meetings. These were probably not as well attended as we would have liked, but hopefully that will improve. The good news for those who could not attend is that we are trialling recordings of the meetings, and one session is already on the website.

The meetings were excellent, so well done to Charles Friel and his team.

Changes at Board

In October the Board said goodbye to Mervyn Darragh and Mark Kennedy; Mark Bailey subsequently stepped down. We thank them for serving. Rachael Harris and Mark Parker were welcomed to the Board.

The Board is now:

Chair: Peter Rigney

Treasurer:

Directors: Jonathan Clinton
Martin Devlin
Sue Harpur
Rachael Harris
Paul McCann
Joe McKeown
Jim O'Neill
Mark Parker
Mark Walsh

External: Dermot O'Hara

Health & Safety

As part of the negotiations with Translink regarding the resumption of driver training, referred to above, the Society's Safety Management System is being expanded to include more of the

NI operations. A dedicated team is undertaking this onerous, but critical, task.

Administration

The capable team of Lisa Adair and Graham Nortje continues to be busy keeping things ticking along. As does James Friel in the Engineering Department.

Locomotives and Rolling Stock

Apart from the current running locomotives, No.85 and No.131, the number one priority in the workshop has been the overhaul of No.171 "Slieve Gullion", and it successfully passed its steam test in December. It is hoped to transfer the locomotive to Dublin for running-in trials, then it will replace No.85 which has come to the end of its current boiler certificate.

At Whitehead, No.3BG "Guinness" was the mainstay of operations during the year, operating train rides and numerous shunting turns. It is undergoing retubing before the 2024 season.

While the Cravens fleet was kept busy in Dublin, the Mk2 stock saw occasional use on train rides at Whitehead. But in the background, work continues in upgrading the Mk2 set.

Membership

For another year, the number of members increased (marginally), which is reassuring despite the lack of mainline attractions in NI. It is also pleasing to report that accompanying donations also increased - thank you!

Online Facilities

The website resources continued to expand as and when new information appears. If you can help with additions to what is available then please do get in touch.

If you haven't visited the Members Area then have a look.



In a year where the Society lost many heavyweights, we should give a photo to Joe Galbraith, who died peacefully on 13th September. Joe was an extremely prolific painter – and, if anything, an even more prolific talker – at Whitehead for several years, between perhaps 2007-2012. (Photo: J. Spurlie)

Online sales continued to be impressive during the year, helped by a number of new books - heavily advertised to members and on our social media channels.

Thank You

As always, thanks must go to all who have served during another busy year on the Board.

The Posts of Special Responsibility to the Secretary for the year were: Charles Friel (Belfast Meetings); Ciaran McAteer (Legal

Advisor); Barry Carse (Dublin area membership queries); John Linehan (Dublin area membership finances).

Regular contact was maintained with the management of the railway companies, NI Railways and Iarnród Éireann. They continue to be supportive, so thanks to them.

As always, our volunteers rarely disappoint and they continued to help where possible. New volunteers are welcome - so give us a call!

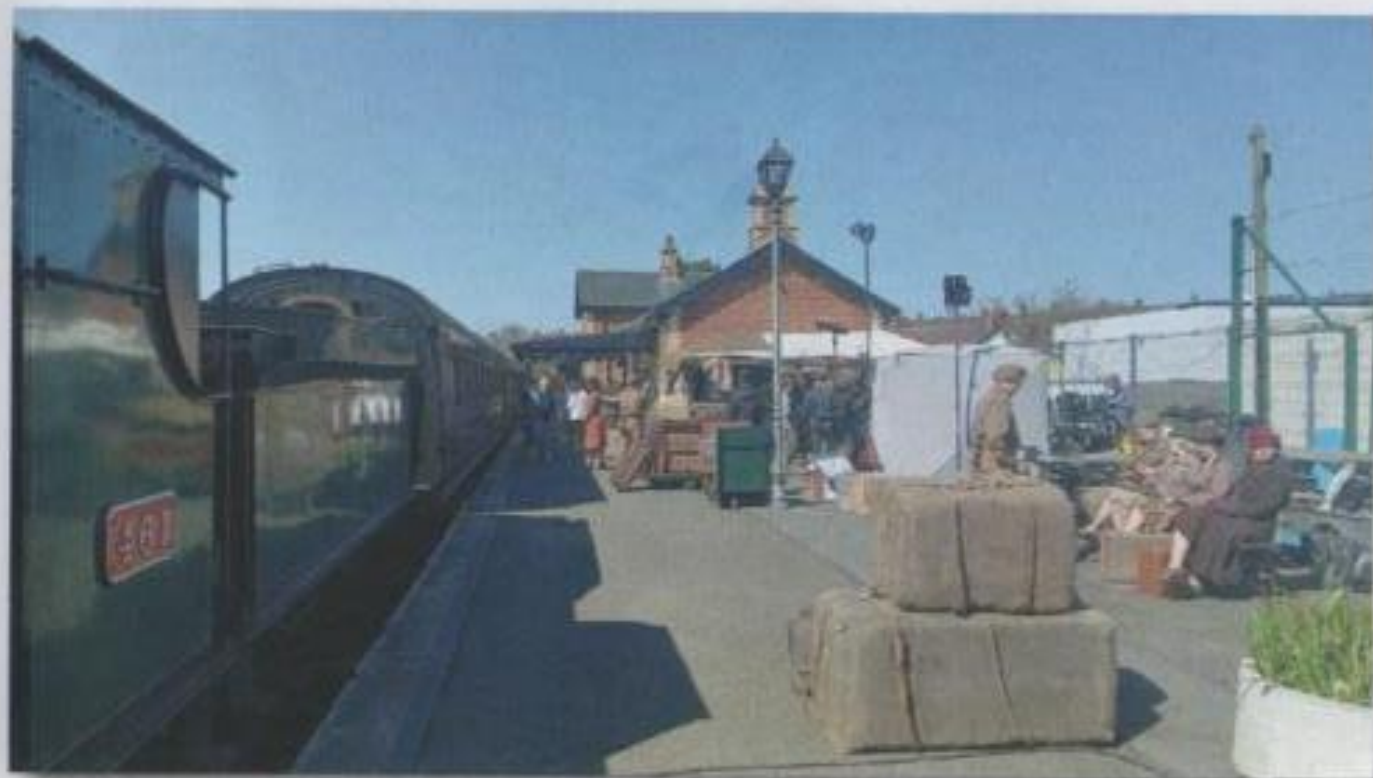
It is difficult to comprehend but this will be my fifth submission to Five Foot Three. The last five years have certainly tested all of us and, as the person tasked with overall management of the Society, perhaps me the most. 2020 saw Covid, 2021 and 2022 we lived with the new operating conditions and looked forward to emerging from the stasis, and 2023 was promising to be the comeback year. The number of tributes in this publication to Noel Playfair show how pivotal, influential and respected he was in the contemporary and heritage railway sectors. The Society lost a true and loyal friend, and my thoughts are still with his family who have suffered a punishing blow.

So, 2023 started with a stunned silence. It was quickly clear that mainline operations would cease until a new system could be found which suited both the needs of the Society and the requirements of our operating partner, Translink. This work is still ongoing and is complex in nature, but

it is the correct course of action which will future proof operations for many years to come. Can I ask that you please bear with us for the coming months as we hope to make an announcement about mainline running towards the middle of this year.

From the first operations on St Patrick's Day in 2023 to the last static Santa operation, I was keen to ensure that activity on site supported the very real need to increase event revenue streams. This was challenging to say the least, with a broad spectrum of activity tried throughout the year. I must convey a huge amount of gratitude to all volunteers who gave of so much time to support these events. It never ceases to amaze me that people are so willingly give of their time and contribute so much as volunteers. I am sincerely indebted to you.

I also need to acknowledge some other individuals without which the Society would be much the poorer. My team of



Filming "Freud's Last Session", at Whitehead on 18th April.

(Photo: Editor)



On 07th May, CAFs were hired to run from Lanyon Place to Whitehead, where a dinosaur show was held. "Blue" the velociraptor is unimpressed by 3BG, which provided token steam for the day. (Photo: Editor)



David Orr, Peter Stark, Eleanor Rimmer, Mark Parker, John Friel and Matthew Wilson at Whitehead on 02nd December. (Photo: CP Friel)

office and workshop employees have made sure that administration is undertaken expediently and with care, and rolling stock is tended to when necessary. This has, in turn, ensured that our Dublin operations have been supported, from a technical standpoint, ensuring steady income flow from our southern jurisdiction which is vital and very appreciated at this difficult time. So, thank you James, Jim, Billy, James, Adam and Graham for your skill, professionalism

and support during 2023.

Finally, I can't leave 2023 without mentioning the passing of our previous Chair, John McKegney. I had known John personally for most of my life and it was quite special that our paths reconverged in the last few years. He was warm, compassionate, good craic, and, importantly for the Society, a grand proponent of Heritage Rail. You are sorely missed John but will live on in our thoughts.



The Whitehead MK2 carriages still exist and some availed of 3BG's recently installed steam heating through the Santa season. Adam Lohoff acts as Guard in brake van 81 "Ivan", back in service following replacement of a spring. 02nd December.
(Photo: CP Friel)

Operational locomotives:

No.3BG. A. Guinness, Son and Co 0-4-0ST. In traffic, Whitehead.

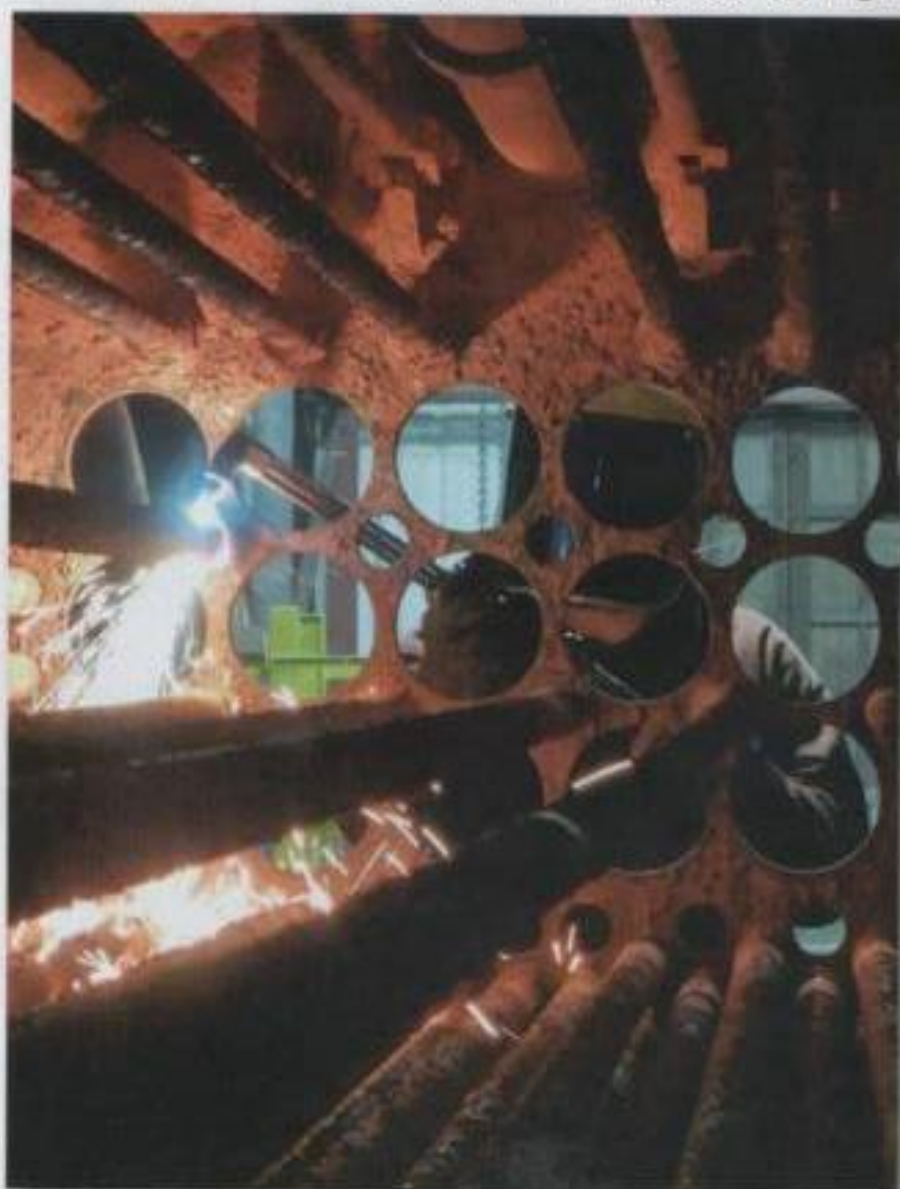
The "Guinness" engine worked the majority of the shunts and train rides in 2023, although the reappearance of B142 in traffic has reduced her workload a little. A set of boiler tubes was ordered for 3BG in March, and after many frustrating phone calls they finally arrived at Whitehead in October. During the annual boiler examination, it was good to see how clean the internal surfaces of the boiler were, thanks to the boiler water treatment which we have been trialling for some years now in 3BG. It will be interesting to see how the platework looks when we dismantle the boiler for retubing in January. The generally good condition of 3BG's boiler means that we will plan to keep her in traffic for the foreseeable future, as LP&HC No.3's boiler requires more significant expenditure to put that locomotive back in use.

No.85 "Merlin" GNR(I) V class 4-4-0 compound express passenger loco. In traffic, Dublin Connolly shed.

"Merlin" spent 2023 based in Dublin. The recurring big end problems of 2022 were cured with the fitting of new big end brasses in March 2023. These were cast in bronze at a foundry in Middlesborough which

has now unfortunately shut down – we are finding getting parts cast in bronze, steel and iron more difficult, as foundries close and experienced staff retire across the UK.

The big end problems now behind us, No.85 performed well during May's "Steam Dreams", including a brilliant climb out of Cork, until some leaky rivets on the second last day forced a substitution with No.131. Later in the year No.85 worked to Dundalk in August to Kilkenny, her last long-distance, high-



The large flue tubes already having been removed, now one of their holes in the smokebox tubeplate can be used to cut loose the small smoke tubes, during No.131's February – March re-tube.

(Photo: JJ Friel)



Sam Hall cleans out boiler tubes on 3BG, 15th October. (Photo: Editor)

speed runs before her impending overhaul. She worked the majority of the Dublin Santa season, but graciously stepped aside to permit No.131 to operate a couple for test purposes.

No.85's ten-year boiler certificate having expired at the end of December, she awaits transfer to Whitehead in 2024, very probably by road. After returning to Whitehead, she will need a boiler lift and mechanical overhaul before returning to traffic.

No.131. GNR(I) 4-4-0 Qs class express passenger loco. In traffic, Whitehead.

No.131 was split from her tender and moved into the Dunleath Workshop and

stripped for retubing in February 2023. We employed a mixture of volunteer, staff and contractor labour on the retubing job – the most intensive period being 12 days in early to mid-March, starting with the boiler fully dismantled, and finishing with testing the fully reassembled locomotive in steam in the yard.

The "Robinson" type superheater elements, unique to No.131 in our fleet, took a bit of lateral thinking to dismantle without damaging them. Unlike the ball ended elements used in the other locomotives, these are plain tubes expanded into the superheater header.

There being no requirement for her in Northern Ireland, she departed Whitehead for Dublin on 1st April, with an Irish Rail crew and NIR route conductor. The torrential rain on No.131's first trip south of Portadown in her preservation career could not dampen the spirits, and the triumphal arrival into Connolly's train shed had a real buzz about it. Since then, No.131 has visited Galway, Waterford, Kilkenny, Limerick and Rosslare, performing very well with a 7 coach + van train on the formidable Woodlawn and Rathdrum banks. Unfortunately in August, air leaks at the injector water valves meant the locomotive was failed on a "Sea Breeze" operation – but this was easily repaired and No.131 ran well for the remainder of the 2023 season, including two appearances on the Santa Trains in December. This was not because of any problem with No.85, but because the weather conditions (primarily rail adhesion) were good and we were confident that she could take the load, this time 8 bogies + van. She most definitely did take the load and took the climb to Maynooth in a confident manner, with the boiler pressure at 160 psi and the water at the top of the glass. Maybe the old GNR enginemen who used to say



The Editor and Adam Lohoff refit pieces to 3BG's gauge glass assemblies prior to her annual boiler inspection, 17th November.
(Photo: JJ Friel)

a Qs could be better than an S-class were right after all?

Locomotives out of traffic:

No.171 "Slieve Gullion". GNR(I) S class 4-4-0 express passenger loco. Under overhaul, Whitehead.

Once the excitement of the "Steam Dreams" operation died down, No.171's frames went back on her wheels in late May 2023.

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. The new disc was machined at the RPSI's "Tech Class". The snifting valve is just one example of the various parts that have received attention, either by replacement, or re-metalling, and machining by staff or volunteers, before

being replaced in its proper position on the locomotive.

No.171's boiler passed its "out of frames" test for the boiler inspector in December 2023, and at the time of writing is being readied for lifting into the frames. The major task for the workshop crew in early 2024 will be the reassembly and testing of No.171.

One small but important detail will be the manufacture of two new works plates - the previous set (also manufactured by the RPSI) went missing when No.171 was in England for contract overhaul a decade ago - do any readers of Five Foot Three happen to have a GNR(I) Dundalk 1938 plate we could borrow to have copies made?

No.4 LMS (NCC) class WT 2-6-4T mixed traffic loco. On display, Whitehead.

We plan to begin dismantling No.4 once No.171's overhaul is winding down. She requires substantial boiler work before she can return to traffic.

No.186. GSWR 0-6-0 J15 class standard goods loco. On display, Whitehead.

No.186 is on display in the engine shed at Whitehead and makes an interesting comparison to sister locomotive No.184. Unless circumstances change, there is no plan to return No.186 to traffic. With a top speed of 40mph, a maximum train of 7 coaches on Belfast – Whitehead, and 5 coaches on Belfast – Dublin, No.186 is not fast enough to get a path on several routes and won't pull enough passengers to cover the costs of an operation.

No.184. GSWR 0-6-0 J15 class

standard goods loco. On display, Whitehead.

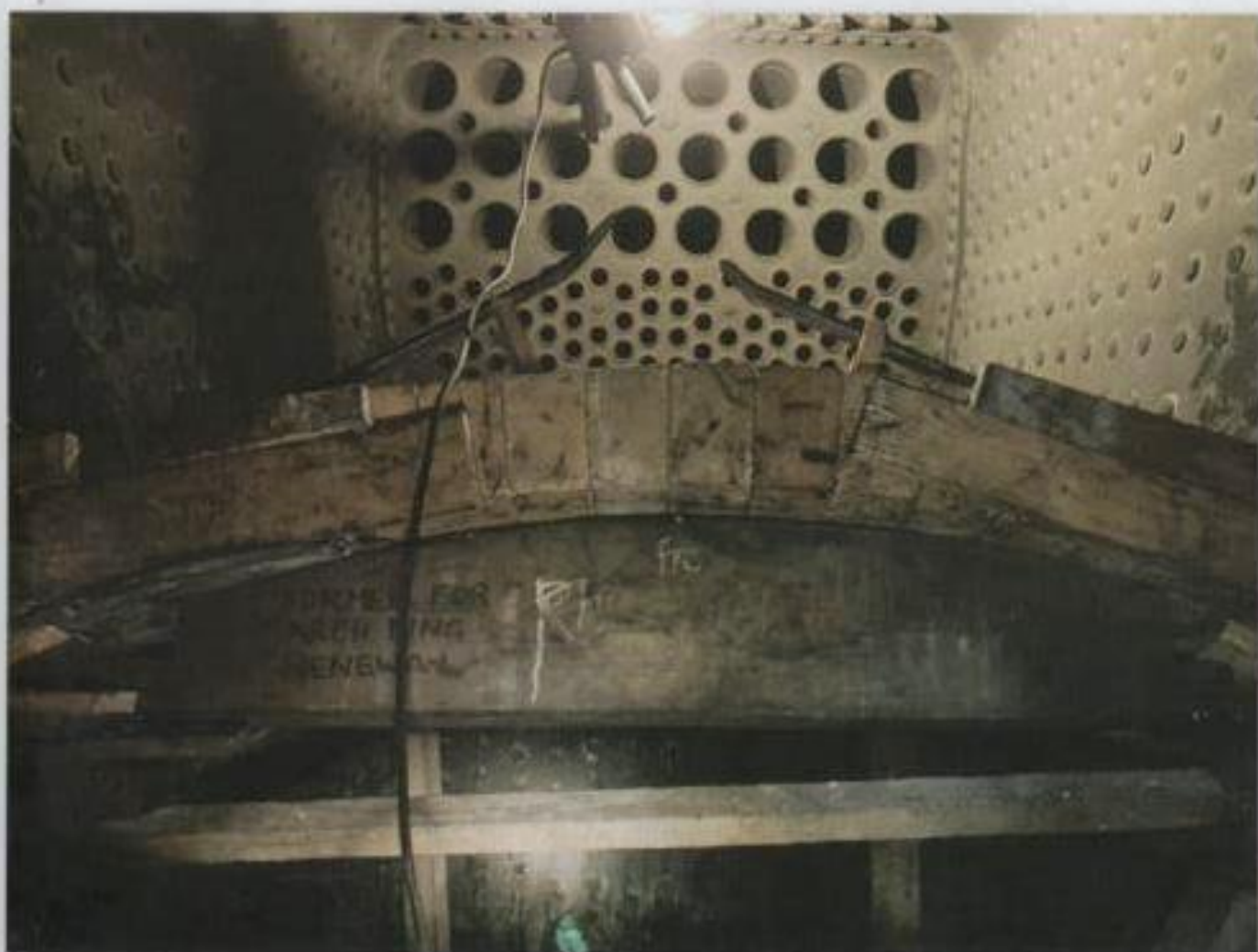
No.184 now sports some green gloss paint and is having her cab controls put back in place for static display.

No.461. D&SER 2-6-0 K2 class goods loco. On display, Whitehead.

While also being limited to 40mph in Northern Ireland, No.461 is a bigger engine and will take a substantial train. This locomotive's boiler is also in very good condition, having received the most substantial rebuild carried out so far at Whitehead. Watch this space – No.461 won't be a static exhibit for long.

No.3 "R H Smyth". LP&HC 0-6-0ST loco. On display, Whitehead.

No.3 now looks splendid with a freshly



No.85's brick arch, with former underneath and crowbars braced to wedge the bricks together, undergoes repairs, 25th November.

(Photo: N Lawrence)

painted cab. She requires extensive work to firebox crown stays before a return to traffic can be contemplated – there are currently no plans to overhaul this locomotive at this time.

No.27 "Lough Erne". SLNCR 0-6-4T loco. In store, Whitehead.

No.27 sits in the engine shed beside

No.184 at Whitehead. She is the youngest of all of our locomotives, built in 1949 to a much earlier design. She last steamed in 1972 and lay outside until the carriage shed was built in 1993. Like Nos.184 and 186, her limited top speed and haulage capacity means that she is not suitable for the sort of main line operations that we currently run.



No.171's boiler blows off on 20th December, as it undergoes its out-of-frames boiler inspection which it passed that day. (Photo: Editor)

B142

For the last number of annual FFT reports the Diesel Locomotive Department output has been in the main about B142. This is simply B142 is very useful for maintenance stock movements

whether carriage, wagon or steam locomotives and a lot of work is needed to maintain the locomotive.

At the end of 2022, engine work was complete, and the locomotive performance tested over several



Looking like it's had a mud pack on 19th June, B142 stands in primer.

(Photo: J Clinton)

significant shunts, the last of which was to bury itself in the Paint Shop at the back of the Whitehead Depot.

Martin Devlin led the charge to complete the external paint work supported by Staff and Volunteers and started the preparation to about 75%.

Unfortunately, further work was put on hold as further fabrication was required throughout the Spring months.

The lower temperatures of this time of the year also prevents any paint related activity particularly on this scale.

With the fabrication work completed there were a few preparation tasks required both in the Paint Shop and the Locomotive.

Preparation activities continued into the summer months such as removing the walkway hand rails and marker lights. Masking off the cabs, windows, radiators underframes and engine compartment. Other activities, perhaps not so glamorous but essential, was provision of reasonable work at height, volunteer training, safe plan of work and risk assessment to cover the required activities.

Other considerations were provision of adequate and appropriate extraction and air flow through the Paint Shop as well as ensuring the correct personal protective equipment was available.

The first undercoats where applied and B142 took on somewhat orange



The cab numbers were applied to B142 on 13th October.

(Photo: J Clinton)

appearance which kept everyone guessing as to what would be the final livery albeit this was only prime coating.

Work continued towards undercoats and then the final coats before waiting a period until these hardened allowing for the final livery and lining.

At this stage a few questions arose regarding the final livery. Old photographs were collected and checked, some had no CIE rondel while others had; in the end it was agreed to return to the delivery livery and numbering as close as possible.

Finally, the paint work was complete and the locomotive, unnumbered, exited the Paint Shop back into 4-Road in the Locomotive Shed, in a big shunt undertaken by 3BG. A question would be why not just start up the locomotive? After a long lay up the engine needs to be primed, the batteries charged and a comprehensive examination of both engine and associated systems is required before pressing the 'go' button.

During testing of the brake system, the locomotive would not clear the safety interlocks controlled by pressure switches on the main reservoir air, brake pipe and vacuum train pipe. Once again, support was forthcoming from Phill Clampett of Irish Rail (my continued thanks) and a test protocol was developed.

The problem was identified in the train air brake pipe, in which pressure could not be maintained by the compressor. This caused the pressure switch on the train pipe to trip, the vacuum to destroy and the 'PC' to trip. Once tripped the locomotive cannot take power, or power is dropped as a failsafe design.

After much listening and searching along

the train brake pipe a significant hole was discovered; the pipe was buried in rust within the brake control compartment, thereby masking its discovery. This was cleaned out and all became apparent.

Unfortunately, this was in a very awkward location buried under Cab #1 under the hood frame. This required the floor lifted and removal of a section of the fixed hood, together with some creative welding techniques by James Friel to replace the corroded section of brake pipe with an appropriate weld. The area and new brake pipe were given a proper coat of primer and paint and the floor replaced through the efforts of James Spurlie.

The locomotive was tested and all was resolved, so the locomotive could be returned to traffic. Regrettably the delay meant that the planned roll out day had to be postponed, as it was late autumn by that stage.

Finally, the locomotive was once again renumbered, regaining identity as B142. A cohort of Volunteers, myself included, received instruction to correctly applying numbering onto railway vehicles.

Regrettably in January 2024, news filtered through that the Modern Railway Society has decided to discontinue, I would like to express my thanks to their ex-members for the generous donations to B142 over the years.

Lastly, I would like to thank all those who support the efforts of the Diesel Department in the RPSI organisation. Particularly new Volunteers, while principally interested in steam traction, are content to help with equal enthusiasm on Diesel Traction.

Over the past year, pattern making has continued and most of the steel items have now been cast. Work has moved on to the patterns and castings for cast iron and brass components. These include items like valve chest covers, valve liners and pipe fittings. Also one rear cylinder cover – annoyingly, there are several items where we have one existing component but the locomotive needs two, so the pattern still has to be made. Unfortunately, only the simplest component can itself be used as a pattern – often the pattern equipment is complicated and looks nothing like the finished casting.

Regarding machining work, heavy machining like rolling the boiler barrel and machining the cylinder blocks is contracted out but lighter work is done at the Society's Whitehead workshop, by

professional engineers or volunteers as appropriate. Machining of the horn guides, axle boxes and valve liners is currently progressing. I am glad to report a recent increase in volunteer support, both for the Mogul project and the Society's overhaul and maintenance work in general.

At the time of writing, the frames have been set up on stands for aligning and fitting of the saddle casting, stretchers and "flanged plates" which form the connection between the main frames. There are 15 major flanged plates which perform this duty, 29 if you count the smaller ones such as footsteps and brackets.

Sourcing of missing components for a steam loco is straightforward in some cases – it is pretty basic engineering and



The crosshead pattern equipment and a new crosshead casting, 31st December

(Photo: P Scott)



Frames showing flanged plates, stretchers and smokebox saddle, 05th November. (Photo: N Lawrence)

the materials and tolerances are not exacting in many cases. Modern equivalents will often either meet or exceed the original specification. However, this is not always the case. For example, even Whitworth bolts that used to be available over the counter now need to be specially made.

One particular problem was sourcing the front buffers. The Mogul, in common with other NCC locos, employed the "Ibbotson Patent buffer". To use a pair of "Jeep" buffers like loco No.4 would be an easy solution, but would look entirely wrong for the Mogul, being much heavier and with oval heads. However, a pair of Ibbotson buffers was located at Portrush where they formed the buffer stop at the end of the engine release siding. Thanks are due to the keen eye of the person who spotted them, and to Northern Ireland Railways Infrastructure for helpfully making them available.

The boiler which is being rebuilt could be used for either Jeep No.4 or the Mogul, since the basic boiler shell is identical.

Recent progress has seen the dome base and top feed seating riveted to the boiler shell. The boiler barrel, throat plate, firebox wrapper and door plate should soon be set up with the barrel for marking out and drilling – at which stage the assembly will begin to look a bit more like a loco boiler.

As to where we are in the progress of the Mogul project, I would be positive and say approaching halfway to completion. There is precedent for the project in the recent restoration of the GNRI Q-class No.131 – we were faced with having the bones of a locomotive with many parts missing. Yet No.131 is now back hauling trains and acquitting herself well. The Mogul is a restoration based on even fewer bones! Future progress on the Mogul depends on cost and sourcing of materials, availability of manpower, other RPSI commitments and any number of unpredictable events – and of course on funding. Financing of the project is still provided primarily by a small number of individuals, to whom all thanks are due. Wider support would be welcomed!

With main line activity sadly at a standstill in Northern Ireland during 2023, it was up to Dublin to keep the wheels turning for the RPSI. In one sense we believed that by continuing to operate main line steam on Irish Rail we were honouring the memory of our friend Noel Playfair, the Translink steam driver whose sudden death on January 16th came as a shock to us all. Noel was a great friend and colleague of Dublin Operations. We recall with gratitude the occasions of which he volunteered for footplate duty out of Dublin to help us out of a hole. In particular, we will always remember the time when we in Dublin were short a steam crew member and he happily worked the DSER to Rosslare Harbour and the MGWR to Maynooth, as well as on the GNR(I). Ar dhéis Dé go raibh a anam.

As ever, the year started with the annual maintenance period for carriages and locomotives. We knew from the outset that 2023 would be a busy year because we had been contracted by UK travel company Steam Dreams to operate the Emerald Isle Explorer, a mammoth eight-day steam and diesel charter which would take us to most corners of the Irish railway system.

Among the requirements for this charter were that an additional carriage had to be brought up to Pullman style. This involved wiring each table for lamps, changing the moquette on the seats, getting curtains and antimacassars made and the laying of carpet.

On February 7 our brake / generator / boiler van 3173 was out shopped after a complete makeover. The Irish Rail Paint



No. 131 on Steam Dreams in Athenry, 06th May.

(Photo: CP Friel)



Jayne-Louise Emsley and Nathan Lightowler, on loan from the Strathspey Railway, help keep No.85 in shape at Killarney, 07th May.
(Photo: CP Friel)

shop did a fantastic job by painting both the exterior and the interior. The vehicle was soon pressed into service and on February 28 Irish Rail used it on their Sperry track inspection train, when its route extended as far as Newry.

Former GNR(I) Compound No. 85 Merlin received a replacement big end bearing during the maintenance period and on March 12 it undertook a successful light engine run to M3 Parkway. And so were all set for our first train on March 26, with No. 85 hauling a trainload of 280 passengers from Dublin to Maynooth. The temperature of the new bearing was checked at Clonsilla. After a quick turnaround we departed Maynooth, with a further stop to check the bearing in Coolmine to check the temperature of the bearing. All was good with 85. An inspector from The Commission for Railway Regulation (CRR) travelled with

us and carried out an audit on our operation.

More excitement was to follow on April 1 when former GNR(I) Q Class No.131 ran light engine from Whitehead to Dundalk, where it hooked up to the Cravens for its first journey back into Dublin since 1963. A large crowd had gathered at Dundalk for this historic occasion and at 15.12 the engine appeared and crossed the points into the down siding. To mark the occasion a lone piper was on hand to play The Rising of the Moon. A most moving event.

The RPSI stock had been worked north from Dublin by 071 class 074 with 268 passengers on board. But it was steam all the way on the journey back to Connolly, where No.131 had been shedded before being withdrawn from traffic 60 years earlier. The footplate crew were driver

Robbie Jollie, Connolly Shed. Keith Farrelly, Drogheda Shed and Inspector Mark Reck, Connolly Shed. Translink NIR driver Anthony Dargan was the route conductor.

Sporting the "Bundoran Express" headboard (donated by the family of the late John O'Meara) the locomotive made a fine sight as we pulled out of Dundalk. A number of guests were on board for the Dublin leg of the journey, and to celebrate No.131's return, champagne was poured and a toast was drunk to the return of a beloved loco. RPSI chairman Dr Peter Rigney addressed the guests as the train, now with 298 passengers on board, got under way. The footplate crew were very satisfied with the performance of No.131 both light engine and pulling the rake of six Cravens and van. The last time that a Bundoran

Express left Dundalk on a Sunday was August 11 1957.

On April 10 we were out on the Midland with our Easter Egg Express trains to Maynooth. The Easter Bunny travelled with us on both trains giving out Easter Eggs to all the children. Total passenger numbers were 563.

On April 22 April we operated our first diesel railtour of the year - The Sligo Leitrim. This route was to be Dublin Connolly to M3 Parkway - Dublin Docklands - Sligo - Dublin Connolly - Bay Platform Grand Canal Dock. However, due to issues over signals at Docklands and Grand Canal Dock Station we were prevented from accessing Docklands and the Bay Platform Grand Canal Dock Stations. 201 Class GM 216 in Belmond livery arrived off



No.131 crosses Limerick Junction en-route for Waterford, while No.85 waits to return light to Dublin Connolly, 09th May. (Photo: CP Friel)



The signalman at Carrick-on-Suir hands Ken Fox on No. 131 the staff for Waterford West, on a wet 09th May. The staff from Clonmel lies where Ken dropped it off, by the bottom of the footbridge steps.

(Photo: CP Friel)

shed and took up position at the front of the train.

As we waited for the road the dining car was in full swing. The aroma of sausages, bacon and white pudding floated across the platforms at Connolly and before we left at 08.12 we had large queues at the counter. When we arrived at M3 Parkway everybody had to detrain and the train moved into the head shunt towards Navan. GM Loco 087 arrived and brought the set back onto the platform. GM 216 arrived light engine in behind us and hooked up. We picked up at Broombridge and crossed the up passenger in Enfield. We went nonstop through Mullingar, crossing in Longford.

Our 45-minute stop in Dromod gave our 286 passengers time to visit the impressive Cavan and Leitrim Railway centre. We arrived into Sligo four minutes early and a little bit of history was made

because this was the first time that a 201 class had brought a passenger train into Sligo. We enjoyed a superb run back to Dublin with many photo stops and arrived at Platform 5 Dublin Connolly. Then it was off to Tara Street, Pearse and finally to Grand Canal Dock Station. Loco 087 duly arrived and brought us back to Dublin Connolly.

Thursday May 4 saw the start of our eight-day tour with UK-based Steam Dreams. A lot of planning had gone into this event. Dublin Operations met Steam Dreams and Locomotive Services Ltd on a number of occasions during 2022 and 2023. The original contract had been with Steam Dreams but they had been taken over by Locomotive Services. One requirement was a third Pullman Style carriage to go with our other two Pullman Style carriages, so it was necessary to change the moquette in

Craven 1523 to the Pullman Blue.

The carriage had to be wired to take table lamps on each table. New curtains, antimacassars and floor carpet had to be purchased and fitted. This was a huge task for our Carriage Presentation Team. Great credit must go to our Inchicore volunteers who provided a magnificent rake of carriages. All our stewards were smartly turned out in the RPSI uniform of white crested shirt and black trousers.

The set consisted of BR van 3173, 1523 Pullman dining, 1505 Pullman, Dining, 1532 Pullman Dining, Bar Car 1514, Dining Car 1522, 1506 Premier Dining, 1541 Standard class. On day one we enjoyed great running with No.85 to the up Portarlinton loop, where we changed engines to No.131. After a stop in Athlone we arrived into Galway at 16.40. On Saturday the 6th we departed Galway

with No.131 tender-first running to Athenry. So it was chimney-first as we headed down the Western Rail Corridor. Large crowds turned out to see the steam train at Ennis, where we stopped briefly, and Sixmilebridge stations. On arrival at Limerick the passengers disembarked to see the city.

Both Nos.131 and 85 could be seen together in the yard at Limerick and then No.85 Merlin hooked up to the rear of the set and propelled it down platform 3 to load our passengers. We enjoyed good running from Limerick to Killarney with stops at Limerick Junction and Mallow.

On May 7 No.85 took the train Killarney to Tralee and back and the following day it was a trip from Killarney to Cork. For this excursion we dropped Craven Carriages 1506 and 1541, due to restrictions on the steep gradient out of



Ken Fox, complete with his seat cushion, is every inch the professional with No.85 on a Maynooth Santa trip, 16th December. (Photo: M Crockett)

Cork station. At Limerick Junction No.131 took the train forward to Waterford. From there we went to Carlow to stable the train. The following day, No.131, which spent the night in Kilkenny, arrived light engine and hooked up to take us to Kildare where GM 076 was on hand to take us to Wexford.

After an overnight in Connolly No.131 – substituting for the planned No.85 - was back on duty to take us south to Rosslare Strand, where it ran round for the trip back up to Wexford. We had now traversed the famous Wexford Quay line four times in two days so quite a few our passengers were lined up to record us on our return. At Wexford we loaded our passengers for the last time. A spirited run by No. 131 had us back in Dublin Connolly on time.

Feedback from the passengers was that the trip had exceeded all expectations. Both RPSI steam locomotives behaved magnificently, the only problem being a water leak issue with No. 85 on the last day. But we need not have worried. No.131 was in great form. I would like to thank Gerard Owens for stepping in at the last minute to take the role of Train Manager for the complete tour. It was a hectic eight days for the volunteers but it was all well worth it.

On June 14 Dublin Operations held its annual Safety Forum in the premises of the Irish Railway Record Society at Heuston Station in Dublin.

Three days later, on June 17, we were back on the DSER for our Sea Breeze to Rosslare Harbour. We were in the midst of the driest June on record in Ireland and as part of the planning Dublin Operations carried out a risk assessment. It was decided to replace steam traction with diesel power and passengers were notified. With 187 passengers on board the train departed with GM Loco 087. It has been a long time since an RPSI train

brought passengers onto the platform at Rosslare Harbour.

A dry June was followed by a wet July and so it was back to steam (No.85) for a private charter from Dublin Connolly to Dundalk for the Soroptimists International Convention on July 28. One carriage was turned out in Pullman Style. After departure at 19.24 with 287 passengers on board we ran non-stop from Dublin Connolly to Dundalk and during the journey served each passenger with a cold meal, bread roll, cake and wine. A busy evening for our stewards and catering departments.

On Sunday August 13 we were back on the GSR with our Marble City trip to Kilkenny from Dublin Connolly. Our passengers, 293 in all, were entertained by the Sir Henry Inglesby Fife and Drum Corps both on the platforms and on the train. One carriage was dressed in Pullman Style for the "Whiskey on the Tracks" event and No.85 performed well.

On Sunday August 20 it was No.131's turn to provide the motive power to Rosslare. However, at Greystones, there was an issue with the injectors and the driver declared the locomotive a failure. A replacement diesel was sought and 074 arrived and the train departed for Enniscorthy. Due to the delay involved, it was decided to terminate at Enniscorthy.

Happily No.131 was declared fit for our next outing – two runs from Dublin to Maynooth on September 10. All told we carried a total of 692 passengers.

The Dublin Riviera is always a popular outing and our trip on September 24 was no exception, attracting a total of 852 passengers. No.131 hauled the first trip from Dublin Connolly to Bray, from where a local trip was run to Wicklow and then a round trip from Wicklow to Greystones, finally returning to Bray to collect the Dublin passengers.

Our second diesel railtour was a first for us – a weekend event - and took place on October 21 & 22 and attracted a payload of 230 passengers. The Liffey Leesider ran from Dublin Connolly to Howth and then Dublin Connolly to Limerick Junction before heading across to Clonmel, thence to Limerick City and finally on to Cork. GM locomotives 075 and 083 hauled the first two legs while 081 took charge from Limerick to Cork. Loco 234 brought the train to Cobh, but due to flooding in Midleton it was decided to divert to Killarney. From Killarney it was back to Dublin Connolly and up to Dundalk.

For Halloween we ran the Haunted Express Monday October 30. Steam Loco No.131 operated both trips to Maynooth. The carriages were all suitably turned out in the Halloween/Haunted theme. For the two trips we carried 705 passengers.

At the beginning of December the carriages were decorated for our busiest time of the year - the Santa Trains. Three nine-coach trains ran each Saturday and Sunday for the first three weekends in December, the first two being steam-hauled and the final train of the day diesel-hauled. Duties on the steam turns were shared between Nos.85 and 131. To put it mildly, it was a massive undertaking, involving a major commitment by our volunteers.

We had to look after everything from selection boxes for the children, mulled wine and mince pies for the adults, plus running a bar and enlisting musicians. Santa and his elves were the VIP guests and the opportunity for photographs with Santa at Maynooth proved popular. Over the three weekends we carried

7,413 passengers on 18 trains. All credit must go to the Dublin Fundraising Team which with its raffles and sales brought in an amazing €32,753 on the Santa trains alone and sold 674 RPSI Calendars.

For the year as a whole, we carried 13,369 passengers (14,043 in 2022) while the Dublin Fundraising Team raised income of €55,000 (€45,462 in 2022) – a new record - and sold 1,004 calendars. A superb contribution to keeping everything going! We were delighted to learn just before Christmas that the Dublin Fundraising Team had been shortlisted in the Team of the Year category at the annual Heritage Railway Association Awards. Fingers crossed!

I should like to thank all those volunteers who contributed to another highly successful year. They gave of their time unstintingly and made possible all that we do. Thanks are also due to Irish Rail at all levels and in particular to our team of steam footplate crew. And I also wish to acknowledge the support of RPSI Whitehead in helping to keep Nos.85 and 131 on the road. We have had great service out of No.85 and note with regret that the engine finally came out of ticket at the end of December 2023. Merlin has been a stalwart of Dublin Operations for many years.

At this time we remember the passing of Vincent Byrne, (steward); John Fullerton (steward); Joe Fitzpatrick (founder member of Dublin Operations); Paddy O'Brien (Carriage and Locomotive Department) and our Past Chairman Canon John McKegney. May they all Rest in Peace.

Early January saw the Site squad doing its by now usual post-Christmas routine with help from Tom Mathers: taking down the tree, dismantling the globe and shifting Santa's sleigh. Unfortunately a large water leak had developed in the Larne forklift radiator which had to be removed and sent locally to have a new core fitted. The brick arch in the large manhole at the entrance to the inner yard had collapsed and needed urgent repairs by George Smyth. Fortunately the fixed radiator was in place for the middle of the month allowing the fork lift to move the very heavy fire box wrapper plate for the Mogul boiler into the workshop. It was also the only piece of plant capable of lifting the ex-Belfast gasworks Waller engine onto a low trailer for its trip to

restoration in Carlow. At the end of January we lifted off a lorry and stored, all the new tubes destined for No.131's boiler overhaul.

On 31st January we had a visit to the site of inspectors from both the Health and Safety Executive and the Railway Safety Authority. I am pleased to report that after a detailed discussion on procedures and an hour long full track inspection, our systems were found to be acceptable for public train rides with only a few minor weaknesses. In the first full week of February we carried out essential repairs to our three yard wheel barrows which were in a sorry state. The following week we scrapped 24 old NCC type sleepers, recycling the cast iron chairs, which together with a lot of other old steel



A-Road gets attention from the Site Squad, 02nd March.

(Photo: J Cassells)



David Orr, Dermot Mackie, Peter Lindsay and Roy Thompson at work on 4-Road, with 411 in undercoat behind, on 26th July.
(Photo: C Stewart)

items, netted £1,050. The ash pit was by now very full, so we used the bucket of the JCB to take five loads around the back and on each return trip we filled up with coal from the overflow pile and took it to the main bunker.

It had become apparent that the short 4-foot sections of rail at the carriage shed door of A-road were not fit for heavy use, the joints being a particular weakness. Over two full working days, at the end of the month, we took these out. Also, by removing 26 feet of the approach rails, and replacing the whole section with long 30 foot rails and extensive jacking and packing of sleepers, we have greatly strengthened this problem area.

March started with the Site Squad cutting up over 100 old boiler tubes from No.131 for recycling and Roy Thompson and Peter Lindsay helped to move new tubes into the workshop for the re-fit. In the second week we masked off and painted a yellow line at the platform edge in the museum and glued on the foam protective edging. A full track inspection

was then carried out prior to a busy operating weekend of Saint Patrick's and Mother's Days. Later in the month No.131 was pulled out for her first steam test of the newly tubed boiler and we took 6 tons of ash to the back of the site. At the end of the month I gave the site its first application of weed killer and John Williams assisted with re-paint of the broad yellow line on the main platform.

April started with pulling out No.131 for the mainline Phoenix trip and continued as a busy time getting everything ready for the 3 days of Easter Bunny train rides. Following this we moved the Larne forklift and the Atlas over to 4-road to allow No.171's boiler to move onto 1-road. In the middle week we moved the forklift and the Atlas back to 3-road to release a coach from 4-road for the film contract. We also put the two recently arrived MR NCC bogies from Embsay Railway into the third road siding.

The last two weeks in April were especially busy. Three new signs directing visitors at the NIR station to our

Platform 3 cafe were put up. The contents of the scrap iron skip netted £750 and David Lowry recycled a small amount of copper and aluminium to raise £75. The filming contract took place on the 18th, culminating in a running, nighttime shoot of the track from the Atlas bogie wagon. Two days later Robin Morton helped with some track repairs and the last week in April was spent with gardening duties and repairs to the football fence.

Early in May the JCB was used to put 21 tons of coal from the back store into a lorry for Cork as a critical part of the Steam Dreams venture. The small amount of remaining coal was transferred to the front bunker and the empty iron scrap skip was returned to its usual position. We pulled out 3BG with the Atlas in time for the Dinosaur trains on the 7th and carried out a complete track inspection before the arrival of the NIR six car sets at our platform road. The following week I carried out a weed spray of the yard and we helped turn the Mogul boiler. During this time the electrical squad installed a single and three phase power outlet in the back yard bunker wall using the supply which had originally supplied the sleeping coach. This will be very useful and negate the need for long extension power leads across the back yard. The Atlas was given its annual major service at this time and later in the day we helped to shunt 2 coaches to the platform for afternoon teas. Tuesday 23rd was a milestone day with the Site Squad assisting the full-time workers in shunting and placing of the complete wheel set into the frames of locomotive No.171. On the following Thursday we moved the two heritage bogies, which had been returned from the Embsay Railway in England, to the old sleeping coach siding, using the Larne fork lift.

Whitehead in Bloom supplied us with 5 beautiful hanging baskets of lovely flowers

for under the station canopy in early June. About this time we set in a vertical five-foot piece of flat bottomed rail beside the station building onto which, later in the month, was mounted a King George V Royal Mail post box. On the 15th, the hottest day of the year, we pulled out 3BG for the later Father's Day weekend trains. We also trimmed some of the trees at the end of the car park which were fouling our BT overhead wires. The following week we did some track repairs in the heat wave and, the by now essential task, of watering all our flower tubs and baskets. At the end of the month, we carried out necessary structural repairs to the roll bar of the JCB and the Site got yet another round of weed spraying.

At the start of July, we used the Atlas to bring 2 bogie sets from the big siding which were subsequently used to swap the craven bogies from under coach 306. After a week of holidays, we carried out jacking and packing of the switch blades which control access to the loco running sheds and I did some tidying of the car park vegetation with our petrol strimmer. The Saturday afternoon of the Murder Mystery train gave us an opportunity, with 3BG in steam, to pull out diesel GM B142 from 4-shed road. Unfortunately, this revealed a serious spreading of the track outside the shed doors. Although the locomotive was safely returned to the shed urgent repairs were obviously needed. After initial investigation by removing surface stone with the Atlas excavator we were surprised to find that at least two sleepers were completely decomposed and had no functional integrity. All was dug out with help from Gordon Hunt and two new sleepers were fitted in the vacant space. The track was jacked and packed, the correct gauge re-instated and the site was levelled with ballast by the big bucket of the JCB.

In August David Orr made a new large

box for track keys from good decking planks donated by a member and three new signs advertising our Platform 3 Cafe were put up in the Castlevue Road area. Throughout the month we did weekly track inspections on Thursdays before each of the Steam Saturdays and the NIR Princess Sunday train on the 20th. Other weekly tasks included watering of all the flower baskets and we also did a serious tidy of the vegetation in the car park and along the walk way to the stables. The end of the month saw us putting 30 boiler tubes into a container at the back of the site and moving 2 very heavy Mogul steel connecting rods into the wheel drop road.

September started with a remarkable heat wave and the arrival of OTT, a railway subcontractor who saw Whitehead as an ideal training ground for their apprentices. We moved the new saddle for the Mogul to be sandblasted and then back to the workshop, where it was given a coat of metal primer. The glass canopies above the museum entrances were pressure hosed to remove green mould and 2 sleepers were replaced near the track beside the signal box. A side window in the Larne forklift was replaced by Colin Stewart giving a safer, clear view when reversing. On Tuesday 19th we moved 3 MK2 bogies from the third road with the Atlas so that their axles could be sonically tested. The following Thursday I cleaned out the side and back gutters of No.1 shed roof which had been overflowing and flooding into the Dunleath workshop. During the last week we painted the internal walls of the small machine shop using white masonry paint and this, together with new modern, brighter lighting, has enhanced the visibility in this work area. At this time we were also very busy making preparations for the Home Front Festival on the last Saturday of the month which included shunting with the Atlas to pull out 3BG

and the GNR brake van.

In the first week of October we tidied up after the Home Front Festival and on the 12th all the Site plant: Atlas, JCB and Larne fork lift, passed their annual insurance inspections. The water pump in the turntable was fixed with great help from Willie Hollinger and in the first week in November a concerted effort was made to sweep up autumn leaves and I emptied the stable gutters. By now preparations were beginning for the Santa season although serious flooding of the tracks over the Halloween weekend meant the drainage needed urgent attention. The JCB received its major annual service in the middle of the month and new recruit David Linton, did a super painting job on the doors and surrounds to the Station building. Unfortunately, the Atlas developed a faulty fan belt sensor, a crucial item in an air-cooled engine, which was replaced together with 2 fan belts. At the same time, we took the opportunity to replace two 8-year-old batteries which were seriously under power. By the end of the month we had erected the snow globe and the Christmas tree and the good people of Whitehead in Bloom bedded up our boxes with delightful winter annuals.

December was a very busy period with many of the Site squad doing several duties on the Santa rosters, bins needed emptied every week, track was inspected before each weekend and 3 BG was usually pulled out on a Thursday. In fact, the 21st was the last day for this task and the Atlas was called upon to put No.171's boiler into one road, after it had successfully passed a full steam test the day before. The previous week we had had our annual Christmas Lunch in Platform 3, a wonderful opportunity for the Tuesday and Thursday squads to meet up and enjoy each other's company. So once again a successful and satisfying year.

A casual glance at the visitors' book at Whitehead Railway Museum suggests we must be doing something right. "Wonderful tour, my guide was extremely knowledgeable" (California); "Amazing tour, brilliant tour guide" (Dundalk); "We would recommend that everyone visits" (Salisbury). And so on.

The reality is that the museum, now in its sixth year, is by this stage an established tourist attraction in its own right and is attracting visits - and winning favourable feedback from near and far. Our team of 25 volunteer guides invariably win kudos from visitors and their depth of knowledge always impresses people.

With mainline activity sadly at a standstill in Northern Ireland during 2023, the focus fell on Whitehead Railway Museum. It became the RPSI's primary shop window in Northern Ireland and principal point of contact with the public. The RPSI's website plus our presence on social media and the marketing efforts of

Belfast Welcome Centre - not to mention those brown roadside signs - combine to put the museum on the map. But word of mouth remains the most effective means of attracting new visitors.

The absence of mainline steam dented visitor numbers at the museum as we were hitherto able to include passengers arriving on RPSI trains such as the "Steam & Jazz" as part of our footfall. But to make up, a series of special on-site events took place at the museum. Weekend numbers at Easter and in the summer were boosted by our steam train rides which give visitors a short run up and down the site. Often this is sufficient to evoke memories of steam train trips of the past - and to fire the imagination of younger folk.

The museum is nothing if not flexible. In April the excursion platform was the setting for the filming of scenes for a movie about Sigmund Freud and CS Lewis called on "Freud's Last Session".



No. 184's cosmetic overhaul progresses.

(Photo: CP Friel)



Sam Hall shows visitors the interior of the signal cabin.

(Photo: R Morton)

The movie was set in World War Two so our station building was given a makeover so that it resembled a 1930's English railway halt. The RPSI laid on a suitably period train headed by No.461, complete with steam machine to provide steam effects."

During the year a number of initiatives were held designed to extend our market. These included St Patricks Day, Mother's Day, Easter Bunny, Dinosaur Express, Doggy Day, Teddy Bears' Picnic a Ceilidh Day and a Hero & Princess event. At the start of September the museum was the location for a Photo Charter event for photographers looking for new angles. And over Hallowe'en the museum played host to a Murder Mystery night plus an event called Scream Saturday.

Another innovation was our Home Front Festival at the end of September, effectively extending the late summer season at WRM. Visitors were transported back to the wartime era of

make do and mend, when American soldiers were based in Northern Ireland and the music was upbeat. Appropriately, we used side-corridor Midland Railway coach 68 for the train rides. It has a special wartime connection in that it was shipped over from England to replace a coach destroyed in the 1941 Belfast Blitz.

Christmas was something new, too. No mainline steam but our Charity Santa worked out well. Translink kindly partnered with us to transport groups from St Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army to Whitehead in November, the first weekend of our brand new Victorian Santa Experience. This popular event ran each weekend through to Christmas and involved a professional company, an enchanted forest, a train ride, refreshments and a singing reindeer.

Such promotions help to bring new audiences to the museum and our visitors quickly learn that we are about more than nuts and bolts and engine wheels. Indeed

we are starting to learn that our museum is multi-faceted, providing a location for anything from photoshoots to plays, dance performances and even a search dog training day. It's all footfall and income, and every visitor counts.

There are so many elements to our award-winning five gallery museum that it's hard to explain to the public what a treasure trove we have. Social history – and the changes the railways made to society in general and to Whitehead in particular – plays a key part. These are the stories of the people who made it all happen.

The museum evolves as locomotives or carriages are relocated and additions made to the various displays. The curatorial committee has been busy making use of free wall space to show off more historic artefacts from our archive. These range from a fine array of locomotive nameplates to fascinating collections of carriage and wagon plates, and a selection of trackside furniture such as mileposts, gradient posts and enamel “no trespassing” signs. All these items have a story to tell and the curatorial committee has carefully carried out research and produced easily digested information panels to set everything in context.

Thanks to the curatorial committee and members of the site squad significant improvements were carried out in our showpiece Signal Box Gallery during 2023. These include the installation of interlocking points and signals, allowing the system to be demonstrated to visitors in conjunction with the working signal repeaters, while the levers have been painted in the appropriate colours. Visitors young and old always enjoy pulling the signal lever and making the signal at the end of the platform change.

Safety is paramount and to this end an automated announcement now reminds visitors to the carriage gallery platform to

stay behind the yellow lines. In addition, a new set of fixed steps complete with handrails is now in use by visitors who wish to step on board the footplate of No.461, which has been transformed by volunteer Gill Lewis. Thanks to her efforts the footplate fittings and glasses are spotless and gleaming – cleaner probably than they have been at any time since the engine was built in 1922.

How appropriate it was therefore, that Gill was honoured for her work at the annual awards of the Heritage Railway Association, being named at the ceremony in Birmingham in March as runner-up in the “Rising Star” category.

Another winner was volunteer John White, who was highly commended in the UK-wide Volunteers for Museum Learning awards run by the Marsh Charitable Trust and the British Museum in October. This award was in recognition of John's herculean efforts to refurbish No.184, which is on display in the museum. The 0-6-0 – the only Irish-built steam engine in the collection used to look so forlorn but already the star of “The First Great Train Robbery” film looks much more loved.

Indeed, the museum itself was highly commended for its involvement in the “Made for Memories – Enabling People Living with Dementia to Access Heritage” project in September 2022. Whitehead Railway Museum and Carnlough Heritage Hub were the chosen sites, and our thanks go to Mid & East Antrim Borough Council for including us in the submission.

Further thanks are due to the council for sponsoring the publication in booklet form and online of a Pre-Visit Accessibility Guide designed to assist those planning visits by groups with mobility issues. It shows that the museum is fully accessible with wheelchair lifts at key points. One group which took advantage was Blesma,

the charity for disabled veterans, whose members had a successful tour of the museum in March.

Our marketing received a boost when WRM featured in Michael Portillo's Coastal Railways of Britain series. The presenter, who interviewed several leading lights during his visit a couple of summers ago, was clearly impressed by what was on offer at the museum.

The acquisition of two new items was announced in the summer. They are the buffer beam number plate from GNR(I) Class VS No.207 Boyne, a purchase which received funding from the Northern Ireland Museum Council's Collecting for the Future grant scheme. The number plate has pride of place in the Enterprise display in The Stables Gallery. Funding from Esme Mitchell Trust was key to the acquisition of a BCDR monogram from Queen's Quay station in Belfast.

It's important to ring the changes at the museum and provide new points of interest, while the core offering remains the same. One thing that is never static is the number of tour guides which increased during the year by four.

The Tour Guide sub-committee organises an induction process which involves would-be guides shadowing existing guides and then being interviewed. The sub-committee is always on the look-out for new guides and more females would be particularly welcome. In-service training is provided on a couple of occasions each year. This involves guides being given safety updates and learning about new exhibits. These sessions give everyone a chance to meet colleagues, take stock and chat about improvements.

Advance bookings for the museum are made through the Belfast Welcome Centre but walk-ins are almost always accommodated. The guides base themselves, not surprisingly, in the

welcoming Platform 3 Café which is very much at the heart of the museum. Refreshments are always available for visitors, whether or not they are coming to the museum or simply there for elevenses or lunch. The friendly staff are the first point of contact with visitors and the day always starts with a friendly smile and greeting. Quite often, those who simply drop in for a cuppa decide to go for a tour as well.

Grateful thanks are due to all those who give unstintingly of their free time to make the museum better and to improve the visitor experience. So many people combine week by week in different and often unseen ways and the result is that we are making our mark. The volunteer effort is of course underpinned by our ever attentive General Manager Lisa Adair and the Society's administrative officer Graham Nortje. Among Graham's tasks are liaising with groups which wish to plan a visit – and drawing up the monthly roster for tour guides.

I wish to record my thanks too to the hardworking members present and past of the Events & Marketing Committee. The committee had been in operation for many years and had organised a range of functions, official openings and launches on behalf of the Society. The committee's work in support of the General Manager was assimilated elsewhere in spring 2023 as part of a rationalisation by the board of the RPSI's committee structures.

If you are an RPSI member don't forget that you are entitled to a free visit on production of your membership card. So come down and see us and if you would like to volunteer in some capacity, you'd be doubly welcome. There are many roles members can undertake – and not all of them involve getting your hands dirty. And when you do visit, remember to give us feedback in that well-thumbed visitors' book.

Who or what is the E-Squad? The E-Squad was created in 2000 and was made up of a group of members who were interested in carrying out electrical work at the RPSI base at Whitehead.

The group was: Tony Ragg, Ken Pullin, Wesley Chapman and myself. In those days we met at Whitehead on alternate Fridays. We had been requested to provide electrical power for 37 three phase machines and also lighting in the then new Dunleath Workshop. As the lighting required the hire of a cherry picker, which was not a practical option for use once a fortnight, we asked Owen Collins, son of Bob Collins, a member who had provided most of the electrical work up to that time as a volunteer, to carry out the provision of lighting in the Workshop.

After completion of the work in the Workshop, we moved to providing power to the Carriage Shed. Again, we asked Owen Collins to install the lighting while we completed the rest of the job.

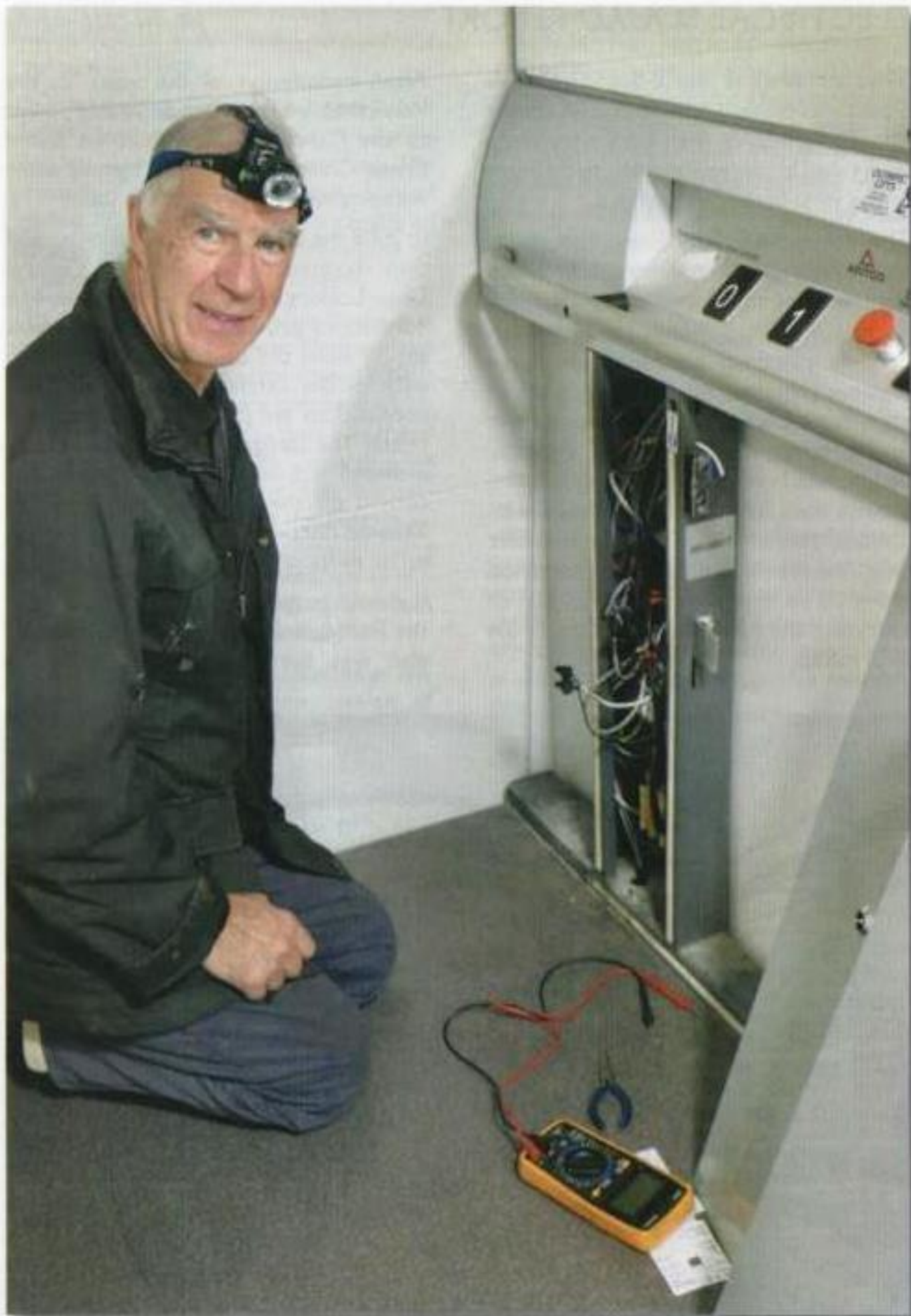
In 2008 the Mk2 coaches were in use and they required to be fitted with Central Door Locking and a Train-line. A Train-line consists of providing a 3 phase 44-volt supply from the on-train generators to each of the carriages. Plug and socket connections are provided between each coach. The design work for the system included a built-in safety feature that turned off the supply should any plug become disconnected either accidentally or on purpose.

It should be mentioned that not only was the Train-line designed by the RPSI but so also was the door locking, using BR



The new, improved lighting in the Dunleath Workshop.

(Photo: A Maxwell)



Ian McBride sorts out the recalcitrant station building lift.

(Photo: A Maxwell)

standard lock control panels which were modified to operate electromagnetic door locks.

We started work on eight coaches in February 2008 and spent a month completing the first one, dining car 547. This work included design and testing of both the Central Door Locking and the Train-line. Once we had completed the work on 547 and by working 5 days a week, the four of us had the rest of the coaches finished in time to be used for the 2008 Steam & Jazz Trains.

Since then, the E-Squad has been more involved in day-to-day electrical maintenance with some new installation work as well.

A few years ago, the E-Squad benefitted from a Volunteer Recruitment Day at Whitehead and as a result our number of volunteers in the Squad has increased to 13.

With the opening of our Museum, we gained an IT Network to be maintained and expanded. We provided Wi-fi for use on the site and in particular for the office. The E-Squad have replaced the original 5 telephones with an IT telephone system which costs a lot less to run and is much more versatile.

At the start of 2023, the E-Squad changed the power supply to Platform 3 Café into two separate supply meters which gives a more accurate cost for the café operation.

In March we replaced the lights in the old Engine Shed with new LED lights which resulted in much improved lighting and about 50% reduction in the running cost.

In April we overhauled the CCTV system, whose surveillance area covered all around the outside of the engine sheds, workshop and carriage shed. We added one additional camera and replaced one faulty one. After that, we interconnected

the station platform system of CCTV cameras via our IT network to a monitor in the office to enable staff to have the ability to view the site. In April we also installed a power supply in the back yard for the Site Squad.

Work in May included replacing the center row of old discharge lights in the old Carriage Shed with, again, much brighter lights that are also less expensive to run.

We continued with lighting upgrades in August by replacing the Machine Shop fluorescent lights with LED equivalent lights. This hopefully will make it much easier and safer for staff and volunteers to see the jobs at which they are working.

September was the month in which we undertook to improve the site's fire and intruder alarm systems. Instead of having two of each system and therefore two monitoring fees etc. we now have one of each system. To achieve this we had, with great difficulty and perseverance, to draw in 2000 meters of alarm cables into the existing on-site duct system.

We were back in the old Carriage Shed in October where we replaced more of the old discharge lights, on the Larne line side, with LED lights and this brought the same improvement and cost savings.

In November we cleared faults and repaired lights in the new Carriage Shed and in December we fitted dimmer switches to the café lights to help improve the atmosphere during evening events. We also repaired the yard lights.

The E-Squad now meets on Wednesdays when we normally have eight or so volunteers who work in groups of two or three.

We rounded off the year with a delicious and very enjoyable Christmas Lunch in Platform 3 Café.

Unlike many of the volunteers at Whitehead, I wouldn't describe myself as a railway enthusiast, I do however love engineering and fabricating things! My day job working in IT couldn't be further from what I get up to at the weekends in Whitehead.

My attention was first drawn to the prospect of volunteering for the RPSI when someone in work had visited the museum and noted there was a volunteer open day the following weekend.

Knowing that I like tinkering with things, they told me all about their visit and the volunteering opportunity. After enquiring via the website, the following weekend I was sat in the stables listening to various talks from the heads of each department. But it was during the walk around of the workshops, that confirmed exactly what area I wanted to volunteer in.

Fast forward a few weeks and with my membership admin all sorted, I was stood in the Dunleath workshop with Peter Scott, and sat before us was a large lump of metal, (I now know it is a flanging block!). Originally used to create boiler parts, the block needed some minor repairs before it could be pressed into action to make parts for the new Mogul engine that the Society is building.

So, I happily spent the day wielding a drill, removing broken bolts and then with the angle grinder in hand, making some spacers to pad out the edge pieces of the block. That first weekend was in October 2019, and I have been there most Sundays since.

I have been heavily involved in working on building the Mogul engine, becoming the master of the mag drill. Drilling a few hundred holes in the frames along with the boiler barrel and firebox, it's a bit of a boring job... but it needs done!

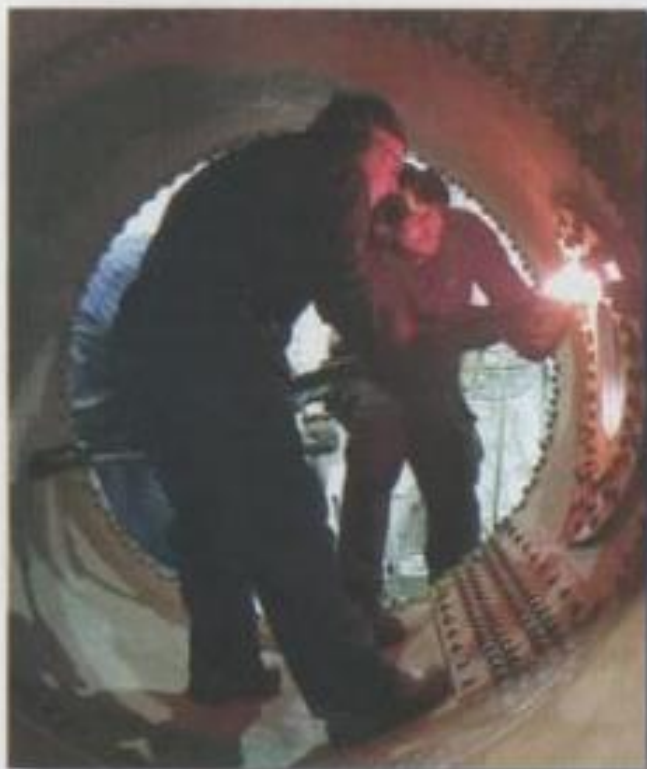
A few side projects here and there thrown in to add variety to the weekends,

notably a bit of woodworking on the Guinness grain van, and the Newry and Bessbrook tram trailer affectionately known to the Sunday gang as the "Nun Bus".

Another notable project was the cosmetic restoration of Donegal's Drumboe engine. The highlight of which for me, was being in the cab to "toot" the whistle as it left the RPSI yard at Whitehead destined for Donegal once more as a film crew from RTE captured the scenes. Fame at last!

Most recently we have been riveting parts of the boiler barrel together, a hot and noisy task, but it's great to see lots of constituent parts finally come together to take their final form.

So, you see you don't need to be a railway buff knowing all sorts of railway related trivia to volunteer for the RPSI. A sense of humour, willingness to learn and not being afraid of getting your hands dirty is all it takes.



Stephen Peacock smiles as a red hot rivet is passed through the mogul's clock valve base, for him and Mervyn Fleming to bead over, 15th October.
(Photo: Editor)

My name is Damon Brunkard. I have been a volunteer with the RPSI for the last 18 years. I started when I was 10 years old with my grandparents, just going on the trains and learning the goings on. I then started volunteering in the carriage department in my early teens collecting rubbish and cleaning tables and floors. From here I then started stewarding on the trains for a while, which gave me the opportunity to meet some great people.

Following a number of years in the carriage department I got the opportunity to join the locomotive department on a probationary basis to see if I can manage. Nicky Cox took me on board and showed me the basics of steam raising and how to service a locomotive in regards to oiling etc.

After a short probationary period, I was in the locomotive department full time as an assistant / trainee steamraiser where I continued to work on light-ups with the rest of the team. I have just recently passed my steam raising theory and practical exams and am now a fully competent steam raiser.

My plans for the near future in the RPSI are to keep training and

get more experience within the loco dept and my aim is to train for RPSI loco rep in the south and trainee fireman in the north thanks to our loco officer James Friel for the opportunity for this.

Also a big thank you to Dave / Gerry / Nicky / James and everyone else across the RPSI and IE crew for their help over the last number of years. It is because of our fantastic volunteers that these trains can run.

See you all out on the rails!



Damon Brunkard aboard No.85, December 2023.

(Photo: provided by D Brunkard)

Before I joined the RPSI as a volunteer in 2019, we would watch locomotives such as No.85 *Merlin* and No.4 on the *Portrush Flyer* at Peter's Bridge, between Antrim and Ballymena. I used to marvel at how you could hear the crescendo of the approaching engine for two minutes prior to coming into sight, as she climbed the slight gradient beyond Drumsough level crossing. When the engine passed, the fireman would be peering out with his elbow over the edge of the cab. All of these things made me think at the time, "I would like to do that someday".

That ambition would be realised on the

13th August 2023, when I was fortunate to help with the *Marble City* excursion from Dublin to Kilkenny as a RPSI footplate trainee with No.85. Despite working with steam locomotives at Whitehead since 2020, I did not know what to expect from the trip.

We arrived at Connolly Locomotive Shed, and wisps of steam were blowing from the roof extractor outlets. Inside, *Merlin* looked mighty and imposing as she simmered away on the raised rails, immaculately turned out by the Dublin steam raisers. I helped my fellow crew members to prepare the engine; oiling the



Nathan Lawrence, on platform, and David Orr on 09th September at Athy, as No.85 returns from Kilkenny. (Photo: JJ Friel)

motion, checking sandboxes, cleaning the running board. Dave Orr, the RPSI representative for the day, warned me that "the oil will come out thin and fast" – and it did. With the locomotive prepped, it was a pleasure to be introduced to the Dublin crew and Driver Ken Fox.

Everything felt familiar when we reversed light engine out of the shed and into the yard, where a tipper lorry filled with coal awaited us. *Merlin's* coat of GNR(I) sky blue looked resplendent in the morning sunlight. The first leg of the trip was spent assisting the Southern carriage squad with watering the Craven stock, followed by servicing of the engine when we pulled into the siding at Kilkenny. As James Friel cleaned the fire, I pulled the 'good' coal to the front of the tender for the fireman. Whilst performing these tasks, it made me appreciate the work of steam drivers and firemen in days gone by – a notion that I have experienced throughout my experience with the RPSI to date, in both the operational and engineering spheres.

On the return leg, when we made a brief crew stop at Kildare, I was invited to board the footplate. Everything resembled the footplate environment that I was used to when trundling about Whitehead yard, until about thirty seconds after departure. I was astonished at how quickly *Merlin* could get up to speed with a laden train, and I had never felt bumps and jolts like it in my life. The difference between leaf springs and modern forms of suspension became readily apparent!*

Our fireman, Connie O'Gara, had managed to attain a perfect harmony between water and steam pressure; the pressure stayed just below blowing off, and the water level remained steady whilst the injector was running. I took a seat on the fireman's side of the cab and was tasked with operating the injector and blower. I learned to shut the blower

when Ken opened the regulator and open it when the regulator was closed.

Riding on the engine was a whole sensory experience; when passing below bridges, each structure flew above the cab in a black flash, accompanied by a sharp 'whish' sound. Soot swirled around the cab, and farm animals bounded back from the lineside when 105 tonnes of steam locomotive broke the peace and quiet of the Kildare countryside. Railcars flew by in the opposite direction, and it was great to look out of the cab window and see the large boiler and oncoming track tapering to a point in the distance. Perhaps the most notable part of the journey was our passage through Phoenix Park Tunnel. As the engine approached, I was instructed to crack the blower on to protect against blowback of the fire.

The train became shrouded in darkness, and the bark of the open regulator was amplified by the tunnel walls. I turned around to see only the faces of the crew lit by the light of the fire, and a pyrotechnic-like display of sparks flying over our heads. It was a truly unforgettable moment. As we approached Drumcondra, I looked out of the cab to observe a platform lined with elated spectators who, mostly, were there solely to watch the steam train. At that moment it became apparent that I was in the position which I had aspired to years before when watching the *Portrush Flyer* at Peter's Bridge, County Antrim.

**[The Editor, along with James Friel, Phil Lockett and Chris Ragg, once had a race in dirt buggies along a forest course. The proprietor exclaimed excitedly as we strapped in "You will never have felt anything as boneshaking as this!" He seemed a bit crestfallen when he afterwards asked what we thought, and we all said things like "Certainly had much worse", "What bumps?" and "Call that boneshaking?"]*

If you have ever travelled on any of our trains you will have seen coach marshals in the carriages. They are recognised by the uniform that they wear consisting of white shirt, maroon RPSI tie, black trousers and an RPSI coat. They should also wear protective footwear, carry a pair of protective gloves and an orange high-visibility vest, which is only to be worn for some specific station duties and when instructed by the Train Manager or his Deputy.

Who are they and what do they do, you may ask?

They have different roles to perform. They are there to ensure the safety of our passengers, the comfort of the passengers and to communicate information to our passengers.

Depending upon the trip, the Marshalls, who are allocated to a specific carriage, may also have cleaning duties or station

duties to perform.

The train marshals are responsible to the Train Manager or his Deputy.

Marshals play an important role in meeting and greeting our passengers, opening the doors for them and if needed, show them to their seats.

Coach marshals are the shop window of the RPSI whilst working on our trains.

We currently have vacancies, so if you think that this is a role that you feel you would like to be part of drop an email to the Train Manager at johnw1952sky@gmail.com

Training will be given, including further information on the role, First Aid, Child Protection and Safeguarding of young persons and Vulnerable Adults.

I look forward to hearing from you.

John Williams RPSI Train Manager.



John Williams, Peter Stark, Matthew Wilson and Mark Parker preside over Santa Train Rides, December 2023. (Photo: provided by J Williams)

I joined the RPSI as a coach marshal in 2017. My role involves maintaining a high standard of customer service to our passengers and insuring they enjoy their journey.

I also man the train doors at stations, assisting passengers boarding and alighting the train and answering their inquiries, plus keeping an eye on the safety of the passengers in my coach. I am also responsible for making sure my coach is kept clean and tidy between & during journeys.

My favourite aspects of the job are getting to travel around the railway network north & south whilst making sure our passengers enjoy their experience with us.

I like providing a high standard of customer service whilst working with a great team on and off the trains.

My least favourite aspect of the job would

be dealing with delays, disruption, complaints or disruptive passengers.

I have been a railway enthusiast all of my life and had been following the RPSI since a young age. I was always going out to watch and take photos / videos of the trains as well as travelling on them. This then led to me deciding to join the RPSI in early 2017 as a tour guide in our museum at Whitehead and then I decided to become a coach marshal shortly after, as I wanted to be a play a part of keeping our railway heritage alive.

I have loved every minute of being a volunteer for the RPSI I have got to work with a great bunch of people north & south, from fellow coach marshals to museum tour guides & staff, operations staff, management and our collages from NIR & Irish Rail.

I look forward to many more great years volunteering and performing my duties with the Society.



Coach Marshalls can have plenty of time to admire locomotives too. Matthew Wilson is photographed with the as yet un-numbered B142 on 03rd September, a photoshoot day arranged by Martin Devlin who did much of the preparation and painting.

(Photo: J Clinton)

This is the story of Sean Furlong, retired coach driver and guide who recounted to this author his experiences working in his first job back in 1947 for The Dublin Laundry Company, located at Dartry and Milltown, Dublin and how lingering to watch the mighty Maedb G.S.R. No.800 got him into a lot of trouble.

As Sean explained, life was hard in Ireland in the late 1940s as The Emergency, as World War Two was called in Ireland had left an impact on the economy and he had to leave school at fourteen and go out to work.

Sean had a life-long interest in all things transport and later in life, in 1959 he would go on to establish Furlong's Coach Hire in Dundrum, Dublin.

LEAVING THE DEPOT

Sean recounts his memories of that first day on the job making deliveries for The Dublin Laundry Company on the roads of Kildare. "As the trustful Morris commercial 7-ton sped towards the plains of Kildare on that May morning of 1947, loaded to the roof with fresh smelling laundry, consisting of bagwash, fully finished and huge hampers of hotel linen, the snow-capped Dublin and Wicklow mountains, glistened in the sunlight. The early hours of the next morning, would see us returning the same road, loaded with foul smelling laundry."

The villages and towns of Blackchurch, Red Cow, Rathcoole, Johnstown, Kil, Naas and Sallins and all the points in between had to be served, as Kildare was a once-a-week delivery run and collection.

RATIONS FOR THE DAY

Sean outlines the meals for his working day. "A hard day's work lay ahead of us, with little sustenance, rather than a chunk of Gur cake, some broken biscuits, a small bottle of lemonade and five Woodbines,

would see us through until we got our tea for free at Osberstown House Hotel, at 8:00 that evening."

THE VAN BOYS

To a 14-year-old boy, who just got his first job, the future looked rosy. As Sean recounts as he was big for his age and he was allotted to the "Country Van" as he could carry hampers on his back and all for £1-2 shillings and 6 pence per week. He was told if he worked hard and was diligent at his work, he might become a laundry man for the Dublin Milltown laundry.

Sean recounted, "As there were two van boys, and providing we sorted our parcels right, the day would pass without incident, providing you didn't break your neck jumping off the running boards of the moving van, as you had to do."

THE DUBLIN EXPRESS

Sean's second day in work went without incident, until about seven o'clock that evening, when he left the van with two parcels for two customers. One of the parcels contained a dozen starched detachable little "collars" (collars) for an old gent who lived in a house with a half mile drive to it. So having delivered and collected the collars, he made his way to the next customer, the Station Master at Sallins station. At the station he heard the telegraph bell ringing in the signal box and knew a train was due. Asking the Station Master what type it was? "You're in luck son" was the response, "It's the Dublin Express and it's headed by the Maedb". As a keen railway fan, like so many boys of that era, Sean knew that the Maedb was one of the three best locomotives ever built in 1939 at Inchicore for the GSR (Great Southern Railway).

The Great Southern Railways Class 800 steam locomotives were built for the

express passenger service on the Dublin to Cork GWR main line. The locomotives were named after former Queens of Ireland, Maedb (800), Maća (801) and Táiite (802). They used eight tons of coal and 5,000 gallons of water on the run from Cork to Dublin and could reach a speed of 100 miles an hour, weighed 92 tons and hauling 550 tons.

These three locomotives held the distinction of being the largest and most powerful ever to operate in Ireland by a considerable margin and were the only three express passenger locomotives manufactured in an independent Ireland, the Irish Free State.

RAILWAY MEN

The Driver and Fireman on the footplate were Sean's heroes. Stepping as near as he dared to the edge of the platform to see this mighty example of Irish engineering thunder through the station at 80 mph. When the Maedb went through the station the whole place would shake. As Sean put it so well, 'The platform furniture, the weighing scales, and the chocolate dispensing machine would put River Dance to shame as it sped through.' And to think that twenty minutes later, Maedb would gently kiss the buffers at Kingsbridge Station (Heuston).

COLLARS GONE

Seeing Maedb thunder into the distance through the smell of hot metal, steam and coal dust, Sean bent down to pick up the collars. To his dismay, he spotted them like wasps in a whirlwind halfway to Hazelhatch. The slipstream had caught them, and so were his chances of ever becoming a Van man.

Sean got on with his job and never mentioned the loss of the collars to anyone. The following week went slowly by until the following Thursday as Sean's lorry crew were loading the van for Kildare. The Tannoy blared out that he was to go to Mr. Benson's office. When Sean meekly knocked on his door, the response roared out was "Where are Charley Kelly's collars?" Sean had no option but to tell him. "You'll not watch any trains in my time", he roared back. Mr Benson demanded of Sean; how much do you get a week? Sean responded he was paid £1-2/6 I replied. "Right, until the collars are paid for, 2 and 6 will be stopped out of your wages each week."

PAYING MY DEBT

Sean was in despair and he said it was "like Lent twice in the one year. In those days, money was scarce. The pound was handed up at home and so for the next five weeks, I would miss my twice weekly visit to the cinema and have to cut down on the Woodbines and the four pence wafers."

REUNITED AGAIN

Forty years later, Sean Furlong encountered Maedb in the Ulster Transport Museum, looking good as ever and the memories came flooding back of nearly losing his job in 1947 to the lure of this mighty locomotive.



Sallins – No.4 storms through with the Silvermines Railtour, 29th September 1974. No laundry baskets, but plenty of spectators. (Photo: CP Friel)

I first came across the Society after seeing Drew Donaldson's O Gauge clockwork railway at the Antrim Castle Steam Traction Engine Rally in August 1968. It was fascinating to watch the operation with Drew shouting out how many turns of the key were needed to bring a loco to a halt at the right point. I was very pleased to see his models are now at Cultra. There were some leaflets describing the work of RPSI and the railtour programme.

Society publicity worked and we took part in the Colmcille railtour in November with Nos.186 and 50, diverted via the Antrim branch to Dundalk, following a washout at Glarryford. I remember the steam heating eventually making a slight impression in the carriages that had probably not seen service since the summer season. There was an impressive run past at Poyntzpass and an opportunity to see the CIÉ operation at Dundalk. Another memory was of Portadown station with its island platforms and canopies.

Following the railtour I joined the Society in late 1968 and my first visit to Whitehead was in September 1969 when the site was open with No.186 in steam, following the cancellation of the proposed St. Canice tour. It was a soft day and the steam and smoke hung low around the shed which was surrounded by a lot of long grass, some of it growing between the sleepers of the rather neglected track. We were invited up on the footplate of No.186 and took several trips up and down the sidings. I recall scrambling up on to the back of the tender for a better view of proceedings. I don't think the platform had any track at this time.

Steam was still around on the railway, mostly the spoil trains which I could see from the bus to school from Bellevue on the Antrim Road. The first train of the day would be arriving or discharging, and some days there would be a train there on my homeward journey. Sunday School specials were the mainstay of steam through Antrim, my local station, along



Colmcille railtour at Portadown platform 4, 02nd November 1968, with No.186 and NIR Jeep No.50. Compare Platform 4 here, to same location in 'Dad's Last Shift'.

(photographer unknown, CP Friel Collection)



Nos. 186 and 171 being prepared for the Inver railtour, March 1970.

(Photo: M Oliver)

with fairly regular light engine workings from Great Victoria Street on the branch in the late afternoons. Usually this was a Jeep, but *Lough Erne* would also feature from time to time.

At school I found there were several other railway enthusiasts, the term 'anorak' was coined much later! One of them was Robin Convery, who was a volunteer at Whitehead, so I decided to give it a go and take the train from Antrim to York Road and on to Whitehead. There were probably about a dozen volunteers there and I got to know a few faces and names, sadly too many of them no longer with us. Those I remember were Tony Ragg, Sullivan Boomer, Paul Newell and Johnny Glendinning. There was a lot of work to do; just getting the site tidied up was no small job, as no weedkilling train had been down the sidings in years. Someone knocked up a weedkilling trolley which quite amused me, as I was used to serious tractor hauled orchard sprayers at work at Greenmount College, where my father was head of the Horticultural Department. Anyway, it did

the job well enough, no doubt using something now long banned, like sodium chlorate. A combination of schoolwork and getting the music together for the Sunday services at my local church, where I was organist from 1971, limited my time at Whitehead.

There were three locos in the shed, Nos. 186, 171 and BG3. Stock, that I recall, was limited to the GNR 6-wheeled brake van, which served as a mess room until it was destroyed by fire - the work of the local youths - a horse box, and some open wagons. On open days NIR would lend us a carriage for the trips from the platform, up to the bridge, and then down to the shed. I spent some time on points duty for a couple of open days. The horse box served as a stall for air rifle shooting at an early open day. It had lost most of its interior woodwork by this time. A brown van was pressed into use as a cinema for showing Macha Film Studio's films. The slight fish aroma was nicely set off by the sounds of No. 171 running past at intervals with the borrowed carriage. I can visualise still the sight of Inspector

Dunlop on the footplate of No.171 heading towards the shed at around 30mph with the wheels at first locked, and then in reverse gear! I was waiting for the inevitable, but Frank's braking saved the day and thankfully the shed doors were open, otherwise we could have had quite a pile of unexpected firewood!

Work on expanding the site began in 1971 with clearing the site for the loco shed extension to the east of the engine shed. Some of us learned basic building skills with a borrowed cement mixer, scaffolding, mortar trowels and chisels to split the concrete blocks. I don't know if the walls were ever rendered on the inside, but there are several places where the chisels and lump hammers were used to retrieve dropped mortar trowels from the cavity. Much swearing and name calling went on during these enforced gaps in the block laying. The roof only went on the shed in 1979, long after I had left Northern Ireland. *[This shed now being the 'New' engine shed: 3, 4 & 5 Roads – Ed].*

Lunch would be taken in the mess room

at the rear of the shed. There were a couple of sofas that were almost as greasy as the overalls sitting on them. The floor was the same semi-matt cylinder grease and soot finish that these days you can probably find somewhere in the fancy paint makers colour charts. One advantage of this carefully built-up patina was that nothing was likely to break when dropped on it.

The first diesel loco arrived in 1971, the Planet from Irish Shell. One of the smallest locos I have ever seen, we couldn't get it to go for some time. Indeed, I have no recollection of ever seeing it operating, but it did lots of heavy work. The first carriage to be kept at the site was 861, brought North after the 1972 'Eblana' tour. I travelled in 861 on the first of the Portrush Flyers the following August. The wheel beat was memorable with the three axle bogies. The second arrival a year later was ex-GNR 150, the inspection saloon, in grey livery.

In September 1973 I saw a two-carriage



Starting to build the new shed, January 1973. Note the wooden mess room, later site of a tool store.

(Photo: CP Friel)



No. 186 near Muckamore in setting sun, hurrying coaches 861 and 552 to York Road and ultimately Whitehead, on 17th September 1973.
(Photo: M Oliver)

train on the Antrim branch, which was the empty stock movement from the Three Rivers Tour, so I made a dash for the main line near Muckamore station and got a shot of No. 186 in the last of the sunlight with 861 and 552 [552 became *Diner 88*, now in *Inchicore* – Ed].

The North Atlantic brake in the collection was still in revenue earning use at this time. The wholesale scrapping of the Edwardian carriages began around 1972, followed by the AEC and BUT railcars, many of them being burnt in the yard at Antrim. 'Jeep' No. 6 also met its end there, a very sad sight.

Back at Whitehead we had a special weekday event in April 1972 getting ready for the Governor's visit. By this time *Lough Erne* had arrived on site from its temporary storage in Carrickfergus goods shed. I spent some hours cleaning it with light engine oil and cotton waste, probably the last time it ever looked so good. There is a photograph in the Members' Gallery of me in my brown

overalls and Doc Martens getting on with the job. It is hard to believe that the loco was only 23 years old at this time, as it was such a dated design. Working around York Road she was usually wreathed in steam like something from a Monet painting of St. Lazare. *Lough Erne* has now been out of steam for 49 years and really deserves a better future.

Trains passing on the line at Whitehead were a mix of DEs and MPDs, easily distinguished by their exhausts on the bank in the Larne bound direction. The occasional Saturday stone trains would coast in the Up direction, so it was relatively easy to miss them. From Whitehead single line working started, however some drivers were not too particular about making it easy for the signalman to collect the tablet hoop on the Up trains. It could come flying across the platform in the general direction of the signal box if the train was non-stop.

Other work I remember was removing the boiler casing and then the asbestos

blankets from No.186. We did have some protection against the dust you will be pleased to know. The next stage was to scrape off the paint from the cab sheets and other areas. We had paint stripper, but it took several goes to get through all the accumulated layers. When the question of what colour to paint No.186 arose in the 2000s I was able to confirm that battleship grey had been one of the layers we removed.

In 1971, No. 4 arrived at Whitehead and one day required some attention to the bogie. The large spanner used to undo the nut that holds the bogie on was not quite doing the job. A length of pipe to extend the spanner didn't quite cut the mustard either, so we ended up with a brake lever borrowed from a wagon attached with two nuts and bolts to the spanner and at least six of us prone on the floor attempting to shift the nut. I can't

remember if we succeeded or not. Maybe we had to leave it soaking in WD40 until the next Saturday?

As the site expanded, we needed track to link up the carriage shed. Once the stone trains ended a working party was sent to Magheramorne to retrieve the now redundant bull-head rail from the former cement factory's sidings between the spoil loading sidings and Magheramorne station. Work had already started on clearing the site and some track had been bulldozed into the heaps of sticky red clay around the site. I was reminded of this work recently when watching Joe Cassells' excellent slide show on the spoil trains. It was backbreaking work, but there wasn't any alternative source of track at that time.

My last visits to the site were in the Summer of 1974 and I have a recollection of the introduction of a register of



Driving trailer 712 leads a down train past the RPSI Fergie, which has been engaged in rail recovery at Magheramorne on 02nd February 1974. It could be considered distinctly unlikely the Fergie shifted all the spoil heaped in the background! (Photo: CP Friel)

volunteers to sign on and off the site. Quite a far cry from the H&S of today, but I suppose that many of the volunteers in the early days were working full time in engineering and related employment, so we had a basic knowledge on what to do. There were no overhead cranes and very little movement on the tracks most days. All of us were used to walking on track, keeping out of the way of anything moving, from time spent watching trains and photographing them. This was well before the days of Hi-Vis vests or any serious concerns about non-railway staff being on the track during railtours.

My family left Ulster in 1974 and I rather lost touch with the Society. I made short trips back to Belfast for school reunions in 1984 and 1994. The railways by this time had changed out of all recognition. I decided to renew my membership and came over for the 1996 Knocknarea Tour. This was the first time I saw No.85 as it had been languishing in Lisburn goods

shed for many years. Although it moved to Witham Street around 1970, this was at a time when visiting anything in Belfast was not a priority!

I did not get back to Whitehead until 2001 at the end of the Northern Counties Tour, but this was only to see the outside operation. My first view of the inside of the sheds had to wait until April 2018 when we called in to donate a signal lever plate from Cookstown Junction box. I retrieved this after the box was demolished in 1970. Hopefully it could be used as a pattern to make a set of replacement plates for the society's own box. The museum section is most impressive and the tea-room and signal box recapture so much of the flavour of the railway architecture that I remember from the 1960s. The workshops are so much more spacious and well equipped it is hard now to imagine how limited the resources were in those early days.



Malcolm Oliver on No.186 in Whitehead Railway Museum, April 2018.

(Photo: M Oliver)

1947-2023

It was while he was enjoying a diesel railtour to Sligo in August 2017 that it was first suggested to John McKegney by a number of Board members that he should let his name go forward as Chairman of the RPSI. Around the same time, the idea was also mooted by a small group of senior RPSI members during a conversation with John following an informal lunch at the Ulster Reform Club.

With some reluctance and a certain sense of foreboding John agreed and went on to serve in the post with great aplomb for the next five years. It was a turbulent time for the Society, but John rose to the challenge and diligently steered the Society through many issues including the opening of Whitehead Railway Museum and the Covid lockdown. It was only when John's health deteriorated that he was obliged to step down from the board in August 2022.

Among Canon John McKegney's many attributes were an exuberant personality and a natural charm plus an ability to get on with people at all levels. He was an easy raconteur and had a fund of recollections and stories to suit all occasions. John was an able ambassador for the RPSI, perfectly at ease meeting Government officials, funders and railway officials at all levels. He represented the RPSI at the annual awards ceremony of the Heritage Railway Association in Birmingham on several occasions, and was well known throughout the wider preservation movement. He was most satisfied with his appointment of Lisa Adair as RPSI General Manager.

He will long be remembered for the many times he delivered well composed votes of thanks after meetings and other events. As befits a clergyman, he was an accomplished public speaker and his pre-



John McKegney

dinner graces were always fitting and appropriate. But above all, he was a great encourager and always got the best out of people.

John Wade McKegney was born in Derry in October 1947. His father was rector at St Augustine's Church of Ireland, known as the "Wee Church on the Walls", and John was brought up in a Christian household. He attended Foyle College and an early introduction to the delights of train travel were the annual Sunday School excursions from Derry to Portrush, trips he often recalled with pleasure.

John developed an interest in transport from a young age and he often recalled acting as a conductor on the Londonderry & Lough Swilly Railway bus services when he was a student at Magee College in Derry. In later years he took a keen interest in the development by enthusiasts of the preserved Foyle Valley Railway.

He joined the RPSI in 1972 but church

duties limited his active involvement in the Society. However, providence was at work and John's first post as a newly-ordained curate after completing his studies at Trinity College, Dublin, was at St Jude's Parish on Ormeau Road in Belfast. It so happened the church had a hall in Sunnyside Street which John reckoned would be an ideal location for the resumption of its indoor meetings. He encouraged the Society to take up the option and the Belfast meetings resumed with great success in February 1974.

In church life John progressed to St Comgall's in Bangor, where he founded the North Down Model Railway Society. He agreed to be the first chairman and served for a year, handing over to the committee. A keen railway modeller, John enjoyed visits to exhibitions throughout Ireland and in Britain. He amassed an

impressive collection of OO gauge models and built up a working layout which moved from rectory to rectory with him.

From Rathfriland to St Dorothea's in Gilnahirk, John moved in 1990 to St Mark's in Armagh where he served as rector for 23 years until his retirement in 2013. At the rectory John had a special model railway room built within the garage. But for his farewell gift the St Mark's parish presented John with money for a model railway shed which he erected in the garden of Tan y Bwlch (the house close to Dhu Varren halt in Portrush to which he retired). John derived much pleasure from setting up and operating the model railway in his shed.

During his time in St Mark's John was not



A 13-year old John McKegney, in gauntlets, with a BUT railcar in Londonderry (Foyle Road) one icy day in 1960. The All-Island Strategic Rail Review includes re-instatement of the Derry Road: but in the meantime, with the passing of the likes of John McKegney, such lines are now slipping from living memory.

(Photo: previously provided by J McKegney)

slow to capitalise on the links between St Mark's and the Armagh railway disaster of 1889. Parishioners from the church were among those who perished in the crash of the Sunday School special and 33 of the victims were buried at St Mark's graveyard. John was one of those who campaigned for a memorial to be erected and this happened in 2014, when the poignant statue of a little girl carrying a bucket and spade was unveiled on The Mall.

John was a fluent interviewee and regularly represented the RPSI on radio and television programmes. He appeared in the Channel 5 programme *Walking Britain's Lost Railways* in 2020 when the series came to Northern Ireland. He featured in RTE's *Nationwide* programme and was regularly interviewed by Anne Marie McAleese on Radio Ulster's *Your Place and Mine* series.

This role was appropriate because John had always taken a keen interest in broadcasting. In the 1980s he served on the Independent Broadcasting Authority Northern Ireland Advisory Committee as well as the IBA Central Religious Affairs Committee in London and the IBA Panel of Religious Advisers. He participated in various religious broadcasts and morning services. On one occasion he was able to make reference to the Armagh disaster during a "Witness" epilogue on UTV. John later developed an illustrated talk on the disaster which was well received by various church groups and Probus and Rotary Clubs.

John was able to bring his influence to bear during an IBA visit to the newly-opened Ardhoven Theatre in Enniskillen by responding to an idea that it would be a suitable venue for a night to mark the 30th anniversary of the closure of the railway line. John mentioned the name of Charles Friel of the RPSI as a suitable presenter and this led to a lengthy series of well-attended railway talks and film

shows in the Ardhoven. In turn the film shows prompted the publication of a book on Fermanagh's Railways by Norman Johnston and Charles Friel. The level of interest inspired local historian Selwyn Johnston to start thinking about opening the popular Headhunters' Railway Museum in Enniskillen.

After being diagnosed with cancer in 2022, John created a WhatsApp group and over the last year of his life he chronicled his life and the story of his "Cancer Challenge" as he called it. With characteristic candour and great clarity he updated his followers regularly on how his chemotherapy was going, how he was feeling from week to week and what the medics were telling him. He much appreciated the prayers of his followers and their messages of support.

There were many ups and downs but one memorable high was at Easter 2023 when with his partner Karen Braithwaite he managed to pay one final visit to his beloved Ffestiniog Railway. John was a life member and was delighted to take a trip behind newly restored NG 143. The engine was driven by Ffestiniog Railway GM Paul Lewin, so John was able to renew the acquaintance.

In early September John knew that the treatment had gone as far as it could. He signed off by saying: "Fret not for me. My memories are great and my faith is strong. Thanks be to God for the life I've had." John died on September 22, 2023.

John McKegney's funeral service took place back at St Mark's Parish Church on September 26, and the RPSI and other railway bodies were well represented. John was predeceased by his wife Carol. The RPSI's sympathy is offered to Karen, John's partner, and to his children Patrick and Ruth and their families. A life well lived.

My thanks to Ian Sinclair and Charles Friel for their input into this obituary.

It seems like only 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 Hunslett 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 islands either: during summer 2022 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 - though he first shovelled locomotive coal as a youngster. One of his pals was the son of York Road shed foreman Cecil McCracken, and when steam ended on NIR in 1970 a lorry appeared one day outside the McCracken household with a job lot of loco coal for



Noel Playfair in the driving seat, with Willie Graham, No.85 and "Victorians" at Belfast Central for "Ulster Railway 150", 09th August 1989. (Photo: CP Friel)



Noel looking relaxed with the seemingly applauding Nelson Poots on No.186 at Belfast Central, 27th December 2009. Applause from Nelson was applause indeed! (Photo: CP Friel)

which the Company had no further use. The two ten-year-olds spent the afternoon humping it into the coal shed. Though he didn't know it then, that was in retrospect the start of a career!

After leaving school he was taken on in January 1979 as a porter on the platform at his native Carrickfergus, rising to the rank of conductor guard and then a trainee diesel driver at Larne Harbour. The last generation of steam drivers were approaching retirement, and at Larne Noel would have rubbed shoulders with steam men like Jackie Kemp, John Weatherup and Bobby Vance. Passing out as a diesel driver in 1983, he lost no time in volunteering for steam training. On 31st August 1987 he joined Willie McCaughley, Bobby Quail and Inspector Frank Dunlop as a trainee fireman on the footplate of No.4 working a Bangor Belle. These three men were to have a major influence on his career as one of the first

generation of post-steam steam drivers, followed by two great friends Gary Moore and Stephen Glass. Three trainee firing turns in spring and summer 1988 led to Noel's first full firing turn on 4th August— with driver Willie Graham on a loco transfer involving Nos.85 and 171. The first of his many steam runs to Dublin was on 22nd August 1989 firing to Bobby Quail.

From the last of the steam generation he learned how to get the best out of any engine and, when the circumstances permitted, how to make them run. Bobby Quail in particular recognised the depth of Noel's enthusiasm and gave him the benefit of his many years of experience which included being a regular fireman on the "Enterprise Express" in the 1950s. On 19th December 1993 he was the fireman on Willie McCaughley's last steam run before retirement — the first of our main line Santa seasons from Whitehead - and

on 30th April 1996 Noel was passed out as a steam driver on a Whitehead to Lisburn special with No.171. By this time Inspectors Frank Dunlop and Roy Stanfield had also retired, so on this run he was under the scrutiny of Inspector Barney McCrory, with Willie Gillespie (junior) also being passed out as a trainee fireman. A quarter century of steam driving had begun.

Over these years he got to know Nos.4, 85, 131, 171, 186 and 461 – and even BG3! On at least two occasions when he was on a late shift at York Road depot he appeared at Whitehead on train rides days and had his drive of the "Guinness" engine. "This is another new engine for me to drive", he smiled to me. Typically, even though he was just running up and down the site, Noel took command of the tiny footplate with as much professionalism as if he was going to Dublin.

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. His attention to detail was legendary: it was from an RPSI footplate rep, for example,

that he learned the trick of dropping a bit of sand on to the track as he brought the engine on to the train round that sharp and at times slippery curve into platform 1 at Belfast Central.

I have already mentioned the first of his many runs to Dublin firing to Bobby Quail on 22nd August 1989. On 22nd October 2022 his last steam run on the Great Northern main line brought No.85 from Dundalk to Newry and back. The Compound was at that time based in Dublin, and for contractual reasons had to make a token trip into Northern Ireland and back on the day that she worked a special from Dublin to Dundalk. None of us were to know that this was the end of a main line steam career.

The crowning event of his footplate service was working our most recent Royal Train from Coleraine to Bellarena, 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 big 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!

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 new 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 one particularly freezing December morning, Noel appeared at Whitehead, obviously under the weather with a bad cold or even a dose of 'flu. "I feel dreadful" he told me: "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. He was fascinated by the pre-war Mail timings of under 40 minutes from Portadown to Dundalk and emulated this not once but several times – the best of



Noel's crowning moment was driving the Royal Train of 28th June 2016 from Coleraine to Bellarena and thence, de-Royalled, to LY. Noel was the true face of the RPSI in Northern Ireland for decades and media performance came as naturally to him as did locomotive performance.

(Photo: J Cassells)

them 37 minutes with an amazing minimum speed of nearly 50 at the summit of the Wellington bank. In one of the last emails I received from him, he gave me the details of what was to be the final time he drove an RPSI train – the empty return to Whitehead from the final Santa train in December 2022. He was all set for a good climb to Greenisland, but greatly disappointed to suffer a signal

check at Jordanstown that robbed him of what might have been a record.

I still remember a summer evening at Belfast Central after his first run from Portrush with the newly-restored No.131 in 2019. It was better than anything I could find with an NCC 'Scotch Engine' including a storming climb to Kingsbog. When I got to the engine to congratulate him he was already 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 – so very 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 his voice: "Ah – she's a great ol' 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 2022. 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 Garry 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.

A final memory of recent times is 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 during the event. Typical of the man, in every respect.

His funeral service on 25th January 2023 drew a huge contingent of the railway 'family' from both Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann, as well as RPSI volunteers of every generation. After the service, as the cortege approached the North Road Bridge, 14 steam drivers, firemen and RPSI loco reps lined each side of the road, holding firing shovels in tribute, while the headboards of the "Portrush Flyer", the steam "Enterprise" were also on display along with the nameplate "River Foyle", cast for GM loco 209 but never fitted. Appropriately, but sadly, this was the engine Noel had been driving before his untimely death in the old station yard at Portadown.

Rachelle and his children will miss Noel most, but a great tide of emotion swept those of us in the RPSI who were privileged to know him and share his love of our common interest.

I believe it to have been 11th May 2003 when I first actually noticed Noel's work, if not the man himself. It was my first trip to Dublin Connolly, with Mark Buchanan, in respect to RPSI duties. There we prepared No.85 to take the "Plains of Mayo" Tour to Belfast. At this stage I was never near the mainline footplate and I recollect little of the day, but I do remember being very surprised at just how fast Dundalk flew past the window in a flash of evening lights.

My first recollection of a footplate turn with Noel was 26th September 2003, when No.4 had to conduct a light engine proving run from Whitehead to Derry-Londonderry. The way out was somewhat tedious, following service trains bunker-first and waiting in Coleraine for the last one to reach the Maiden City. Noel on

several occasions expressed his hopes for a fast run home. In the way of these things, following a post-midnight departure from Derry-Londonderry, this idea came quickly asunder when a sound like a gunshot announced that No.4 had broken a spring crossing Ballykelly runway. Obviously thwarted, Noel nonetheless worked the stricken engine the 90-odd miles home at no greater than 30mph, finishing up about 0430.

I believe these two stories of my earliest experiences of Noel set the scene for the next 20 years. Here was a highly capable and confident Driver who knew when to push the engines and, more importantly, when to hold back.

Noel, of course, knew the lines between Dublin Connolly and Derry-Londonderry



Noel Playfair looking welcoming, as always, on No.4, 02nd June 2010.

(Photo: CP Friel)



Noel Playfair visits Whitehead, with sons Tyler and Daniel, on what may be 25th July 2015. The Editor and David Orr are with them on No. 131, which is operating Train Rides with No. 171's tender.

(Photo: J Cassells)

like the back of his hand, but that to Dublin was undoubtedly his favourite to work, at least in his day job. "Give me the Dublin turns for five and a half months and then two weeks on the others, just to keep my route knowledge up", he would say to me in York Road, 19 years later. Of course, what he meant was he wanted big challenging runs with proper trains, over those consisting of all-stops commuter runs in CAFs. On one occasion as Noel powered up the bank, he was concerned to see from the footplate that a new speed limit board

had appeared on Craigmore Viaduct, but it was still covered in a bag and so unreadable. He was pleased to inform me a few days later that he'd managed to see through the bag with the Enterprise's headlight one night and "It's a 60, so it won't be too bad for us".

Noel loved to talk about the engines and the railways to just about anyone who would listen. He was particularly delighted by the steam Drivers or Firemen from previous generations, who occasionally appeared. But he was also very good with anyone who was new to it, especially if they showed a bit of a willingness to learn. I remember Noel showing me around an 80-class power car cab and explaining to me the two most important elements. These were a short stick to hold the driver's side sliding window shut and a brush-shaft to wedge

between the cab front and the engine room door to ensure it stayed shut to "keep the noise down". One of Noel's mannerisms was to gesticulate enthusiastically while talking: brandishing and wedging in place the sticks provided ample opportunity here!

Having learnt the steam trade from the last remaining steam-era Drivers in the 1980s and 1990s, Noel could predict what the locomotives required in advance and was perfectly able to adapt his driving style for lack of steam. He would take a struggling or inexperienced Fireman

under his wing and direct him, as has been a necessary part of the steam Driver's repertoire since the very start. Noel saw poor performance of his train – whatever train – as a slight on his reputation and he particularly disliked re-assessment days, lest the assessor – over from Great Britain and used to, for example, LNER A-class engines – experience a sub-par performance from a small 19th Century 0-6-0.

Unfortunately, just such a situation occurred to Noel one day when he was acting as Fireman whilst a colleague was being assessed as Driver. In his nervousness, Noel inexplicably forgot to fill No.186's firebox before departure from Whitehead. Down crept the pressure gauge needle and over to an increasingly agitated Noel crept everyone's eyes, including the assessor's. Eventually Noel snapped, one of the very few occasions anybody ever saw or heard this. Launching into a very vocal tirade along the lines of "Why isn't this infernal thing steaming?", he flung open the firehole door to reveal two or three weakly glowing coals in the darkness. The 'box was duly filled, the smoke rolled and the pressure recovered just in time for the climb. "You pulled it back", nodded the assessor, as Noel fumed to himself in the corner.

When in the driving seat, at key points along the line, Noel would call the Fireman over to explain his next moves. Noel's right arm would go around the Fireman's shoulders and their ear would be drawn down to his mouth. At exceptionally short range, concise information of great importance would be imparted to the Fireman, such as temporary speed restrictions or summits. "I'll be shutting off in 3 minutes for a 40mph TSR, then you'll have 2 minutes and I'll be away again" would be a typical example. This was what was called among

footplate crew "An ear-licking from Noel". Another notable one being on a night run back from the North-west "I'm about to ease off after Slaght in case these signalmen are asleep again, but if it's green at Magherabeg, I'm away". Having received an ear-licking, the Fireman could break their "little and often" routine and do such things as open the blower wider to prevent blow-back when Noel shut the regulator, pull the damper up a bit and knock the second injector on to bring the water up and prevent blow-off. After the regulator had been shut for a minute or two, the Fireman could apply a round of coal in order to prevent the fire being torn up by the coming acceleration.

Noel's eating habits on the footplate perhaps reflected those of Drivers on the road generally, a sort of grab-what-you-can-when-you-can approach. Bananas were a favourite of his and Tyler has since described how each morning his dad would measure days by the amount of bananas he'd require. "Oh, this is a Dublin day, a five-banana day" or "this is just Santas, two will do".

On Enterprises or Flyers, a can of tomato soup was usually behind some fixture atop the boiler, to warm up for opening at the service stop at Dundalk or Coleraine. On one occasion the can survived to continue heating until somewhere south of Dundalk where its presence was finally noted. Upon opening and sipping, Noel's eyes bulged and he recoiled, declaring "UGH! That's far too hot – I'll put it in the fridge". "In the fridge", of course, meant holding the can out the side for a few minutes in an insulated glove.

Whilst Noel never quite managed to turn a cab's nooks and crannies into the sort of confectionary vending machines the Renehans in Dublin used to keep, he would occasionally ring up, after he'd gone home, to enquire if anyone had found, for

example, a half-eaten box of French Fancies he'd misplaced in the dark.

Regarding culinary tastes, Noel once, upon arrival in Dublin, suggested Bill White and I join him for lunch as there was a place which did food he particularly liked. Expecting haute cuisine within a reasonable distance, we readily agreed. What transpired was a prolonged schlep across the city to a nondescript greasy spoon with a large, bright blue fish tank. This served... egg and chips. "Only place you can get proper food in this city!" Noel declared, and tucked in.

As already stated, Noel could sense what the steam engines needed in advance and was delighted with Firemen who likewise could and who therefore got on with it, without him requiring to supervise. This allowed him to focus on getting the best performance out of the engine.

Thus freed, Noel would eye up record runs. He would previously have asked timers for the details of previous runs, for example from Dundalk to Portadown, and then try to beat these: as on 11th May 2003. This became increasingly possible around 10 years ago, with No.85 in good form and the raising of the permitted running speeds for her.

To us on the footplate watching them on the platform, it would sometimes seem like Joe Cassells was putting Noel up to something, by showing him details of a particularly good run from bygone days. Noel would then set out to try and better it. This was quite often achieved.

Noel always knew just what target to go for and when. For example, if attempting a fast express run Lisburn to Adelaide (completion to GVS rarely being possible), he'd always hang back slightly until Derriaghy, when he could be certain signals favoured him to run through Dunmurry's level crossings. Of course, there were occasional frustrations, as

indeed there was on his last steam run on Sunday 18th December 2022, the empty stock working back to Whitehead, with No.131.

Informing the Fireman that he was aiming for "Boat Train timings" (ie sub-20-minutes York Road to Whitehead), Noel was on for this as he thundered out the Lough Shore. He was undone by a yellow signal at Bleach Green and a red at Jordanstown... oh dear. An occasion to utter one of his most famous soundbites about NIR – "What a Firm!". Thus, it was not a blaze of glory, but a slow plod up to Greenisland, blowing off heavily, which brought the curtain down on Noel's stellar steam career.

Four Weeks Later

I now give two snippets of Noel's last 24 hours, 15th-16th January 2023, written on the evening of Monday the 16th, after the news of his death had broken. I was working in the Train Crew Programming (ie Rostering) office in York Road both days.

Noel was in the office with me for around half an hour yesterday afternoon at 1400 talking steam, Tyler, topper boats, Italian train passes and all sorts of Noel things. He had been planning how to get to Tyler [who had broken his leg] in Italy, but he had not had to go. Off he went to work his turn.

He called in again just this morning.

Tyler had been in a school skiing trip accident and stuck in hospital in Italy for a week, and only just returned over the weekend.

Noel took Tyler to A&E this morning for a check-up, when he was called upon to work a light engine to Portadown and collect a failed one from the old Platform 4 in Portadown, take it to Dublin and exchange for another.

Noel was not top of the list, but the

others turned it down. Not Noel of course, who said he'd be in when Tyler was sorted - and was.

He must have been in the office about 1130. He got the details of his job, had a (very fortunate) word with his brother Alan, left the office, picked up his engine, left the depot and will never come back.

From there he seems to have gone to Portadown, coupled up, taken a photo - which contains his shadow - of the pair of engines at the old Platform 4 ... and collapsed.

'Goodbye Mark!' Noel said as he left the office this morning. Goodbye is exactly what it was.

Goodbye, Noel.

Funeral of Driver Noel Playfair

Nine days after his sudden and tragic passing in Portadown, Noel's funeral was held on 25th January at 10am at Mulhollands Funeral Directors, Carrickfergus.

It was a simple Humanist service in a venue capable of holding a very significantly smaller group than the number of mourners who actually gathered: perhaps three quarters remained outside.

Present along with family and general friends were as many NIR train drivers as had been able to get the leave, a significant number of senior Translink management, Conductors, Driver Assessors, Fleet Co-ordinators, Train Crew Programmers, Signallers, Adelaide trainers and many, many more. There was also a very heavy turnout of RPSI representatives from the Chair down.

The funeral was live streamed so those outside, and also Stephen Glass in Australia, could watch.

Noel had long threatened to write his 'memoirs' and it was with surprise that

we learned he had started these, and they were read out up to the point where he joined NIR. They showed he had always had one eye on the railway since his schooldays.

Family tributes were read by Christopher, Rebekah and Daniel Playfair, along with poetry.

Following the lift of the coffin to the hearse, Noel was driven through town to the Victoria Cemetery. The route required the hearse to pass under the St Brides Street / North Road bridge, just east of Carrickfergus station.

The approach to this bridge was lined by Noel's friends and colleagues mentioned above, but immediately prior to it, 14 NIR, Irish Rail and RPSI steam drivers, firemen and loco reps held shovels in tribute, 7 on each side of the road. Ben McDonald, Lar Griffin, Gerry Mooney, Robbie Jolley, Connie O'Gara, Phil Lockett, Gary Moore, Adam Lohoff, Ryan Downey, Anto Dargan, Barney McReynolds, David Orr, Mark Walsh and James Friel.

The last on that list had been busy behind the scenes along with the Whitehead staff cleaning up and making stands for the Portrush Flyer and Enterprise steam loco headboards, plus the never-fitted nameplate for GM loco 209 'RIVER FOYLE', the loco Noel was driver of on 16th January when he collapsed at the site of Portadown's old station. These were displayed alongside the coffin in the hearse.

The hearse paused under the North Road bridge and the extended horn blast of the 1045 ex Great Victoria Street (Driver Alan Templeton) passing slowly overhead marked the start of a moment's silence. This ended with a similar extended horn blast from the 1055 ex-Larne (Driver Pauline McCambridge). Apparently one, other or both were slightly held by Control to permit this.



Funeral of Noel Playfair, 25th January 2023. Ben McDonald, Gerry Mooney, Connie O'Gara, Robbie Jolley, Lar Griffin, Philip Lockett and Gary Moore prepare to observe a moment's silence when the hearse pauses under the North Road bridge in Carrickfergus. (Photo: J Lockett)

There was spontaneous applause on the train horns either side of the moment's silence.

Noel was then taken to Victoria Cemetery and interred; his work here done long before any of us would have wished. May he find comfort and friends and competitive steam drivers in the shed in the sky.

We give thanks to Noel's fellow rail workers and the NHS staff who tried their best to save him.

Noel was as committed to the RPSI and running steam trains as the most enthusiastic volunteer. He was as much responsible for the continued operation of steam trains as anyone working in maintenance, operation or administration for the RPSI.

Noel was very much the public face of the RPSI and would take time to speak knowledgeably and enthusiastically to the passengers and members of the public about the locomotive, the carriages, and the railway in general. To the public, Noel was the face of the RPSI and main line steam.

Noel's encouragement and unfailing politeness helped keep the other NIR crew (other drivers, firemen, guards) involved. This also went for the volunteers working with him on the locomotives. We all learned a lot from Noel. We are part of his legacy.

Noel's good nature, reliability and competence on the footplate was in perfect partnership with the maintenance and operational parts of the RPSI. We were a team that worked with many challenges and difficulties. With Noel gone, we are having to go through a fundamental reorganisation to operate again. We will achieve this and, when we do, it will singularly be the greatest possible tribute to Noel Playfair.

Noel's tombstone proudly carries images of an 80-class railcar and No.4.

Noel is survived by his partner Rachelle, children Gemma, David, Christopher, Rebekah, Daniel, Tyler, Ben and Sam, plus his brothers Alan and John. To them, and the wider family, we offer our greatest sympathy and support at this most difficult time.

At the time of writing, it is somewhat hard to believe that we are approaching the first anniversary of my father's sudden passing. However, whilst naturally a time of sadness, it is a time to celebrate and be proud of his achievements, successes, and the man he really was. Therefore, I have decided to detail his last shift on the 16th January 2023 in writing as it was a true example of the generous good soul that he was and naturally 'Working his rest day'.

Monday 16th January 2023.

It was typical January weather although slightly colder with snow less than 24 hours away. Noel was rostered to be off-duty was attending the Royal Victoria Hospital that morning with Tyler, his then 15-year-old son who had suffered an ankle injury the previous week on a school ski trip to Italy. Accompanied by his partner Rachelle, they soon learned of hospital waiting times and Noel saw an opportunity to pop down to Great Victoria Street to submit his 2023 travel pass applications with intentions to be in Europe later in the year. On his return, being well known for loving his food, he popped to the canteen in the RVH where he was impressed with the pricing that every item was 50p each. Impressed so much, he commented on this to Rachelle.

Whilst at the hospital, he received a phone call from the Train Crew Planners in York Road asking whether he would be available to come into work to take two engines to Dublin (One, 8208, being failed in Portadown and needing collected by one he was to bring from York Road, 8209). Noel explained he would be available to do so at lunchtime. Once the hospital appointment was concluded, he took Rachelle & Tyler back to their family home in Carrickfergus. Notably, this journey was unusually via the M2. For Noel, he was historically known to take

the 'suburb route' via the Shore Road no matter what time of the day it was but, on this occasion, he knew the railway was waiting for him therefore needs must! Once home, he quickly changed clothes and getting his railway shoes on before giving Rachelle a kiss goodbye at the front door and going to his car to return to Belfast.

By midday, Noel was at York Road Depot and collected 201 Class GM No.8209 'River Foyle' from the fuel point before departing for Portadown. He was accompanied by York Road Shunter Adrienne Elson, also a keen railway enthusiast like Noel and at Belfast Lanyon Place, collected his Train Guard, Stephen Montgomery, for the journey south.

Arriving at Portadown Station at 12:40, he spoke to the Portadown Signaller by telephone to discuss the next batch of movements. Failed Locomotive No.8208 'River Lagan' was stabled in the headshunt



Noel looks back, near Dromiskin between Dunleer & Dundalk, on the return leg of the "South Munster Railtour", 11th May 2015.

(Photo: C Playfair)

of the former Portadown Old Station (now operated as the Permanent Way Yard). Discussions included whether he wanted to run round in the station or run round in the yard. Noel explained that he would decide once he was in the yard. The Signaller explained that he had the 'Up & Down Dublin's' coming through shortly to which Noel replied, "We're in no rush, I'm on my rest day". If there was ever any doubt on how Noel felt on this day, the fact he was working his rest day and making a point of telling the Signaller he wasn't in any rush, assures us of him being in good spirits, enjoying his day at work.

Once in Portadown Yard, he was met by Michael Quinn & Anthony Duran, two Irish Rail engineers based at Inchicore Works and they travelled from Dublin to help in case of any further problems with 8208. Noel shunted 8209 into the headshunt to be coupled to 8208 where it stood on the site of the former Platform 4 of Portadown 'Old Station'. Being the spirited railwayman that he was nationally known as, Noel made a point of getting a photograph of what was two NIR GM Locomotives in a historic GNR location. He sent the photograph at 13:10 to me, stating, 'Dublin bound sometime soon'.

Noel advised the Portadown Signaller that they would do the run round in the yard "in case there was any problems and it would save blocking the station up". Noel was always a man who thought ahead on the railway of the next potential challenge that lay ahead. This was typical of him being a highly skilled & qualified Steam Driver who would be thinking of the next gradient to attack with a Compound Locomotive heading to Dublin on a Steam Enterprise.

The run round took place between 13:20 & 13:40, where Noel took 8209 behind PD58 Signal and ran into Platform 2 in the main station before returning to the yard behind PD60 Signal. Whilst in the station,

he spoke again to the Portadown Signaller who requested him to give him a ring again when he was in behind PD60 to which Noel replied, "I will indeed". Once back in Portadown Yard, there were difficulties getting 8209 coupled to the Dublin end of 8208 because of the buffers, which needed adjusted. Noel stepped out of the locomotive and spoke to Shunter Elson who was attempting to rectify the issue stating that there were difficulties. Noel replied, "Have a break for a couple of minutes".

Noel took two steps forward and collapsed. Noel was unresponsive to those around him and not breathing. His guard, Stephen, ran to get the defibrillator from the P-Way building whilst Adrienne began to administer CPR assisted by the two colleagues from Irish Rail. The emergency services were contacted by his colleagues, and these arrived 7 minutes after the call was made. However, when the emergency services did arrive near the site, they were prevented from accessing the yard by road due to a low bridge on the approach to Permanent Way yard. Therefore paramedics & fire crews ran on foot to get to Noel. It was clear that Noel was in desperate need of medical attention, therefore the quickest way to get him to the ambulance was to transport him in the rear of the Irish Rail van. Whilst this was not an ideal situation for any person in a cardiac condition, it was the only option at the time. Noel was pronounced dead a short time later at Craigavon Hospital.

The days ahead in the railway family were dull and dark. There was an eerie feeling around the network and a sense of emptiness felt by many. Someone like Noel who was very much 'part of the furniture' since 1979, suddenly wasn't there anymore. Noel was very much relied upon by a range of different people he crossed paths with, for example new drivers for knowledge & advice, his roster



Noel took this picture of the failed 8208, now coupled to 8209 in the former Platform 4 of the old Portadown station. He would proceed to haul 8208 from this siding, up the yard to run 8209 round via the mainline. Noel did that, but got no further, 16th January. (Photo: N Playfair)

clerks for his continuous goodwill, the RPSI during 36 years of commitment, but most of all, his family. You can replace a lot of things in life, but Noel Playfair certainly isn't one of them.

On Wednesday 18th January 2023, Noel's family attended Portadown Yard to lay flowers, rather appropriately timed when the 'Up & Down Dublin's' were passing at 13:00hrs, the same two services that were referenced to Noel 48 hours previous. Both drivers, Thomas Tennyson (Portadown) & Stuart Hutchison (York Road) sounded long continuous blasts on their Enterprise horns at slow speed as they passed the site. The horns were reportedly heard right across Portadown Town Centre and in the station, ½ mile away.

Thursday 19th January 2023, the locomotives that Noel was intending to take to Dublin, were moved departing at 11:30hrs, driven by York Road Driver Andrew Aicken whose turn was rostered as '2638', Noel's staff number. Locomotive 8209 carried a wreath on the front in memory of Noel and upon arrival in Dublin, this was taken to Connolly Locomotive Shed where it was placed on

Locomotive No.85 'Merlin'. A tin of Tomato Soup and a Crème Egg were left on the footplate, two of Noel's favourites regularly seen with him on a steam journey.

Noel was laid to rest on Wednesday 25th January 2023 in Carrickfergus at 10:00hrs. There was a huge representation from 'The Railway', some having travelled from as far as Wicklow & Kildare to bid farewell to their colleague and friend. For Noel's last encounter with the railway, there was a strong presence of 200 mourners on St Brides Street at the railway bridge next to Carrickfergus Railway Station. His journey to Victoria Cemetery was halted underneath the railway bridge for 5 minutes to allow the 'Up & Down Larne train's' to pass over, both of which gave long blasts on their horns as a tribute and farewell to Noel. End of an era, farewell Dad.

On behalf of the Playfair family, I'd like to thank those involved on the fateful day in January 2023 and everyone who has been of support to us throughout 2023. Your support has been really appreciated during times of need. My Dad would be extremely proud.

Noel Playfair – A Great Railwayman – Stephen Glass

I met Noel as a young 13-year-old RPSI Volunteer. At 18 I joined Northern Ireland Railways and I think it was the fact I knew quite a few Railwaymen that I settled into a career I love. Noel was the biggest influence on my career, always happy to give advice but also someone to look up to and see the true meaning of a Railwayman.

The bond on the footplate is hard to describe, learning how your driver controls the loco and learning how to control the fire to suit. With Noel's guidance, I progressed to mainline Fireman. I think we worked well together. I knew when he needed steam and when he didn't; and he knew when I was struggling to keep steam!

Working with Noel on the footplate was, and always will be, the best experience in

my railway career. I always strived to be like Noel and pass on my love for the Railway to newer drivers, both on NIR and now hopefully doing the same for the newer drivers in Australia. His influence has travelled worldwide.

In the latter years of my NIR career, they used to call us the Three Amigos: Noel, Gary Moore and myself the only three left doing steam. Amigos is correct: we were three friends doing what we loved.

To Noel Playfair! My mentor and friend will always be remembered.

Noel Playfair – Gary Moore

I have known Noel as a friend for over 30 years. During the years of working on the footplate, both driving and firing for each other, we had good days and bad ones. We worked as a team to make sure the engine performance was at its best every time we were on a run.



Noel Playfair and Stephen Glass on No.85, in the 1990s or early 2000's.

(Photo: J Cassells)



Gary Moore and Noel Playfair on No.4, 14th August 2010.

(Photo: CP Friel)

Noel was a great steam engine driver and he will be missed by everyone. Noel, keep the water in the glass, keep the fire

burning and your tomato soup on the regulator warming up until I see you again. Your friend Gary Moore.



It is perhaps a lesser-known fact that Driver Gary Moore retired from steam driving at the end of the 2019 season. Members of the northern operations quickly had a whip-round to purchase him a commemorative headboard, complete with representative pet owls, to express our very deep thanks for his quiet, competent and faithful service. It was the full intention to give Gary a worthy send-off on a mainline trip carrying the headboard in 2020. However multiple events conspired such that, by mid-2023, it was decided by the on-site team to quietly hand the headboard to Gary as a surprise following an invite to Whitehead.

(Photo: G Moore)

From his earliest days Frank Dunlop was marked out as a railwayman. His father John was a Permanent Way ganger, and the family lived at Railway Terrace Coleraine – within sight and sound of the station gates and the engine shed. In a way that was common in those days his father 'spoke for him' to Chief Locomotive Inspector Sam Bacon, and in May 1940 – six months before his fifteenth birthday – a raw teenager took his first steps towards becoming an LMSNCC engineman. But not at Coleraine shed. York Road Belfast was understaffed in the war years, so for the first month of his career Frank caught the last train from Coleraine, did his night's engine cleaning in Belfast and then got the first train home the next morning. Straight into bed – and up in time to do the same thing all

over again! No concept of a 12-hour rest period between turns either – there was a war on, and loco men were in short supply.

Within a year, though, he was back at his home shed, and after his 18th birthday he was eligible for his first firing turns. Coleraine men covered not only the main line and Portrush but also the Derry Central and the Draperstown and Dungiven branches, not to mention troop trains over the Back Line to Larne Harbour. There was even a short night shift turn in Ballycastle, keeping the resident narrow-gauge engine in steam until the next morning. Eventually he progressed to top-link turns with the Coleraine moguls. One that he particularly enjoyed was the 2am goods to Belfast, and back on the crack 08.30



Frank Dunlop, seated, receives a copy of "Steam's Last Challenge", from the author, Joe Cassells (right) who has visited Frank in his home on 23rd June 2022. Noel Playfair, of course, is also present.

(Photo: I Wilson)

Derry Express. In 1952 he became a passed fireman, and a fully-fledged driver in 1955. Union involvement as Branch Secretary in Coleraine brought him early experience of dealing with management. In 1960, at the remarkably early age of 35, a major promotion brought him to the grade of locomotive inspector, overlapping with the legendary Billy Hanley who was approaching retirement. From then until his own retirement, Frank became a legendary figure in the U.T.A. and later N.I.R.

His management and personnel skills were as legendary as his organisational thoroughness. He was widely respected as a boss who was not afraid to get his hands dirty, or to stay on site for as long as it took to sort out a crisis. Who but Frank would have spent a whole night at Ballymena following a derailment, knocking a local lorry man out of his bed to provide a Scammel tractor and enough chains to get the line cleared for the first train next morning? Frank was known and respected not only in Northern Ireland railway circles, but also on C.I.E., later Irish Rail. A book could be written about how he helped to keep the cross-border services running safely during the darkest days of the 1970s and 1980s. Outside of railways he was a keen and committed gardener, a pastime he followed in retirement. Until he was well into his eighties he made regular trips back to Coleraine to look after his sister in law's garden following the death of her husband.

From the foundation of the R.P.S.I. Frank was a firm friend of this Society. On our earliest day tours he was more than just the inspector on the engine: he managed the entire day's operations and even took his own turn on the shovel as well as the regulator. A particular favourite of his were the Dublin "Steam Enterprises" of the 1980s. On the homeward run he liked

his wee drive from Drogheda to Dundalk, and the chance of a bit of speed down through Dunleer ('timed' by the telegraph poles). Who can forget him chivvying tardy passengers back into the train after the water stop: "Come on... get in would yez if you want a run!" He was delighted when we acquired No.4 and on her first major foray on a May Tour he took time off to come with us for the weekend and give the CIE engine crews the benefit of his experience. It has to be said, though, that the blend of Coleraine and Limerick accents on the footplate led to some mutual incomprehension!

After 50 years of railway service Frank retired in 1990. His last day of service was appropriately an R.P.S.I. tour with N.I.R. 'Metrovic' 108, working the "North West Express" to Derry and Portrush on Saturday 18 August. It was a poignant occasion: Frank's brother George was on duty in the signal cabin at Portrush, and Frank Trainor the Coleraine station master came down in the afternoon to wish him well. After the weekend Frank cleared his office, handed in his keys, and a half century of service came to an end. In retirement he was a regular attender at Belfast Area meetings, inevitably to be found among a group of other retired enginemen – not shy of expressing their opinions either! There were also regular gatherings in The Dobbins at Carrickfergus for many years after his retirement, organised by the late Nelson Poots. Here, with a smaller, more intimate group of enthusiasts he shared his memories of a railway lifetime. Past and present railwaymen would often join us, and the stories would just flow – sometimes until a very late hour!

To his wife May, his devoted partner over 73 years of married life, his daughter Sharon and the whole family circle, the Society offers its sincere sympathies at this time.

Ken Pullin BEM, who died on June 7th, 2023 at the age of 94, was a man of many interests and happily one of them was the RPSI. Over several decades he was a regular volunteer at Whitehead, working at various times on the site, carriages and latterly as a dedicated member of the Wednesday electrical squad. In his career he was a problem solver and he brought this talent to bear in a very practical way at Whitehead.

Ken came over to Belfast from his native England in 1948 when Shorts moved its aircraft production from Rochester to Belfast. He happily adopted Northern Ireland as his new home and had an illustrious career with Shorts, moving in the 1970s to Shorts Missile Systems at Castlereagh.

He was a regular skier and hillwalker and loved nowhere more than the Mourne

Mountains. To mark his 80th birthday he climbed Slieve Donard, the highest mountain in Ulster at 850m.

Ken had always been a railway enthusiast – and was naturally attracted to the RPSI and joined the Society in the 1960s. During the 1970s he devoted a considerable amount of his free time to the Society. He served on the Council from November 1973 until December 1979 during a critical stage in the Society's development. He maintained his contact with the Society by attending the RPSI's winter film shows in Belfast.

In his time working on the site, Ken was responsible for designing the present track lay-out at Whitehead. The objective was to create a loop that could accommodate a locomotive and nine carriages, to facilitate an easy run-round. Paul Newell recalled that Ken and he



Ken Pullin working on a MK2 trainline, 12th March 2008.

(Photo: CP Friel)

organised the installation of the middle crossover, using trackwork salvaged from Magheramorne.

Ken's natural agility was an asset when it came to his work on carriages and he thought nothing of skipping along a carriage roof to repair leaks or rotten timber. Paul recalled that the two of them spent many evenings working on diner 550 (now 87) in the running shed at York Road depot.

In 2000, when Johnny Glendinning's electrical squad was wiring the Dunleath Workshop, Ken offered his assistance. He moved onto other projects, including the fitting of automatic carriage door locks to the Mark II operating rake. This involved designing the interlocking controls, wiring in the two on-board generators and installing cabling along the length of the

train. Ken did not return to work at Whitehead post-Covid lockdown but did join his Wednesday colleagues on the squad for lunch in Platform 3 on occasions, right up to earlier in 2023.

For 25 years Ken Pullin was actively involved in the Ulster Archaeological Society and served as honorary secretary for many years, leading field trips and regularly in attendance at their meetings at Queen's University. In June 2018 he was awarded the British Empire Medal in for his services to heritage and archaeology.

Ken is survived by his brother David, his nephew Andrew and his niece Clare. The Society extends its sympathy to them. A service of thanksgiving for his life took place at Roselawn Crematorium on Thursday June 15th.



PADDY O'BRIEN OBITUARY

Peter Rigney

Paddy O'Brien died shortly after FFT 68 went to press. He was in his 84th year. He had been a member of the Society for almost fifty years and had been awarded life membership in recognition of his services.

Paddy spent his working life in the telephone exchange, firstly as an operator and later as a night supervisor. He was the first Dublin member to possess a mobile phone, then the size and shape of a house brick. This groundbreaking piece of new technology frequently came to the aid of RPSI operations.

Paddy will always be associated with the expansion of RPSI operations to the Dublin area. This came about in 1976 when No.186 was transferred to Mullingar shed. Sam Carse, Dublin representative of the RPSI, asked Paddy to secure the cab of No.186 by fitting a sheet of MDF across the cab with bolts and locks (Paddy was the premises Superintendent of the IRRS). However, requests for assistance gradually increased and the Mullingar work squad was formed. Paddy built the team responsible for locomotive maintenance in Mullingar. It was natural that he assumed a leadership role as he was a generation older than the rest of us, and his day job was as a supervisor. Paddy and Peter Scott had a good working relationship which allowed the Society to easily tackle the problem of organising a second maintenance base over 100miles from Whitehead.

In 1977 loco Nos.184 and 461 arrived in Mullingar. Neither were in great condition and restoration was seen as a long-term project. However, later that year proposals crystallised for the film entitled "The (First) Great Train Robbery". This meant that an overhaul of No.184 would have to be undertaken in Mullingar. Paddy



*Paddy O'Brien quietly being useful behind the scenes, watering a locomotive.
(Photo: P McCann)*

took a leading role in that overhaul, with his contacts and capacity to network being crucial to getting the loco back running. Paddy knew people everywhere and everyone on the railway seemed to know Paddy. A typical example occurred in 1978 when he called at the Inchicore home of a retired brass finisher carrying a misbehaving injector from No.184. Once the man concerned had finished his breakfast, he diagnosed the problem within minutes.

Paddy had two trademarks: his suit and his Peugeot car. He always dressed immaculately, in a pinstripe suit and a white shirt. His Peugeot 404 carried work parties to Mullingar each Sunday, with a special fitment in the boot to allow bottles of oxygen and acetylene to be carried, (the amount of tools and components in the boot meant that the headlights often pointed skywards).

Up to 1988, the Mullingar locomotive was confined to one or two local trips per year in addition to the support role for the two-day tour. In 1988 that all changed with a large loco based in Dublin running regular series of Dublin based trips. Paddy continued to feature on loco work in Dublin. Mullingar concentrated on carriage overhaul. Paddy played a key part in the squad which overhauled two park Royals, and a number of laminate coaches. After the RPSI acquired Craven coaches, Mullingar converted two Cravens into catering vehicles. Mullingar was vacated in 2017 with the completion of van 3173. At that point, Paddy began to wind down his activity for the Society but remained as a reliable regular on rail tour watering parties. He appeared to know the precise location of every fire hydrant within 100 metres of the royal Irish railway system. *[The most likely location at any given station is in the car park, 3" from a brand-new Mercedes – Ed]*

While on the surface Paddy could appear

brusque, he was an unobtrusively charitable person, who understood people. Perhaps the best and most enduring tribute to Paddy was written in Five Foot Three by Peter Scott in his description of the overhaul of No.184 – "It was only due to the enthusiasm of the Dublin members that we proceeded at all." Enthusiasm and team spirit are values inculcated in that open maintenance team by Paddy O'Brien.

Peter Scott Adds –

Paddy O'Brien was my second in command at Mullingar, initially during the overhaul of No 184 for the First Great Train Robbery in 1978. I always found him thoroughly practical and reliable. If he agreed to undertake a task, you maybe heard nothing for a few days but knew that a satisfactory response would soon be forthcoming. Paddy did not need to be reminded.

His knowledge of CIE working was invaluable - even though he had little interest in footplate duties and preferred the maintenance and overhaul function, in spite of all the problems and challenges that are inevitably thrown up by this unglamorous side of the business.

Paddy and his team worked away at Mullingar often without involvement from me - other than by telephone. A phone call to Paddy always commenced in the same way -

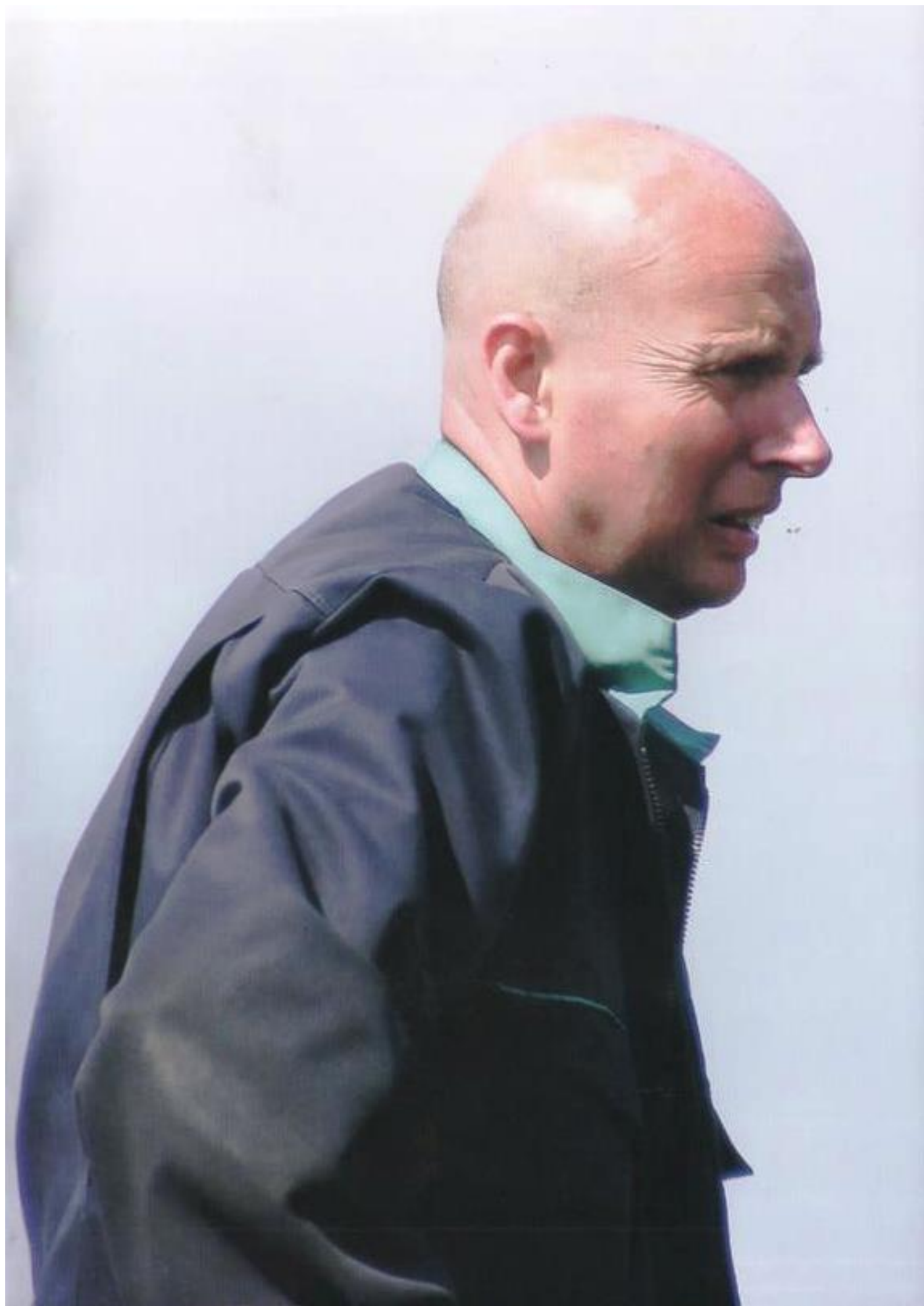
"O'Brien"

"Hello Paddy, how are you?" The answer was always the same:

"Bad!"

If the answer was ever anything else, you knew there was a problem!

The RPSI needs all sorts of personalities, but most of all the unsung hero - who simply gets on with the essentials that keep the organisation going. Paddy was very much in this category.



Profile of Noel Playfair, Bangor Belle, 01st August 2009. (Photo: CP Friel)



No.85, west of Currans heading for Killarney, 07th May. (Photo: C Friel)