

# LAST DAYS OF STEAM IN NI

(By J.A. Cassells)



## 1969 - The Last Full Year of Irish Steam

### 1. The Men And The Engines

Although steam on the Magheramorne spoil contract was to last until April 1970, the writing was clearly on the wall, and the engines were gradually being worked to death. Thanks, however, to the professionalism of York Road fitter Rab McDonald and the skill of the steam links at York Road, they were not in bad order. With his trademark duncher cap and oversized wellington boots Rab ("oul bendy boots" to most of the footplatemen) performed daily miracles in those days. His faithful lieutenant was Freddie Campbell. Something of ancient Scottish clan distrust may have been behind Rab's acerbic comment: "I can't turn my back on that fellow - he's a Campbell you know!" The inoffensive Freddie bore a passing resemblance to the Rt. Rev. John Moorman, with whom The Rev. Ian Paisley had a celebrated altercation on the steps of St. Anne's Cathedral in the mid 1960s. From then onwards, Rab referred to his mate as "The Bishop of Ripon".

The late Bob Clements, on his periodic visits to the NCC at this time, used to remark on the contrast between the state of the remaining Jeeps and that of his own beloved Midland engines during the last months of their lives a decade earlier. ("These men don't know what a bad engine is" he recorded in his notes!). Whereas the Midland engines saw out their last days on ballast and beet trains, however, the Jeeps had to top and tail 700 ton trains of rock fill right to the end of their lives. "Bendy Boots" and "The Bishop of Ripon" were largely responsible for keeping it that way.

Nos. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 52, 54 and 57 were the first of the Jeeps to be culled. No.1 had not steamed since 1966, when she saw out her last days as the York Road station pilot. After storage at Ballymena, she returned to Belfast for the last time in March 1968. No.2 was the first of the class to be officially withdrawn in June 1965, and was stored for two years in the goods shed at Carrickfergus before being hauled back to Belfast in late 1967. No.7 had last steamed in late 1965 before being moved to Ballymena and finally brought up to Belfast in 1968. No.8 last saw service in summer 1968 before disappearing to storage in Carrickfergus with No.2. Both were back at York Road for cannibalisation by the end of 1967. No.9 was one of a group of engines which worked the early Stone Trains from autumn 1966, though she last steamed in February 1967. Parts of this engine survived: her pony truck and smokebox door went to repair No.56 following damage the previous summer on the Derry Road lifting train, while her front buffers went to the platform stop block at Larne Harbour. No.52 was stored along with No.1 at Ballymena, returning to Belfast in March 1968. No.54 was in many ways the most surprising of the early withdrawals. She received a general overhaul as late as April 1965, receiving the reconditioned boiler of No.56 and a new firebox. The following month she became the first of the class to receive 'cribs' - an extended bunker to give additional coal capacity for Belfast - Dublin specials. But the new Swindon-built firebox was not a good job, and she was stopped in April 1967, her 'cribs' being transferred to No.56. After only 3,200 miles with a new firebox, she lay out of use pending a repair decision never authorised, and was scrapped in March 1970.

No.57, one of the Portadown stalwarts in the last days of Great Northern steam, retired to storage at Ballymena before returning to Belfast in August 1966. She briefly reappeared for shunting during the busy summer period, though her last fire was dropped on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1966. After a further sojourn in Ballymena, she was scrapped with the smallest mileage - 456,716 - of any member of the class. Each of these engines was recorded as withdrawn in March 1969.

The rest still had some mileage to go, and No.4 and No.53 eventually brought down the curtain on NIR steam, hauling the official last Spoil train in May 1970. No.53 had a close call, sustaining damage to her right hand cylinder and motion in November 1967, but following the end of steam she was in fact the last Jeep to be scrapped, in June 1971. She had a final moment of glory in June 1970, appearing (out of steam) at Whitehead for an RPSI Open Day before returning to her last resting place in Carrickfergus goods shed.

Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 50, 51, 53, 55 and 56 were the engines that provided NIR with its requirements at the start of the last full year of steam. No.3 was not however destined to last long. She spent most of 1968 on permanent way work, including the twice-weekly Great Northern ballast, and on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1969 she shed a slide bar on a ballast train near Bellarena. That of course was the end of her, hauled back to Belfast by No.55, and never used again. Her withdrawal was partly responsible for the end of regular steam working of the Great Northern ballast, which by late 1967 was occasionally being worked by MPD power cars.

No.56 was another early casualty. At her last overhaul in October 1964 she had received a reconditioned boiler off No.55 and a new firebox, followed in 1965 by a set of 'cribs' from No.53 which was reckoned less than fit for heavy summer Dublin specials. Those spare parts from No.9, donated as mentioned earlier after her Derry Road mishap, seemed to have guaranteed her a role in the last days of steam, but on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1969 she sustained damage to a cylinder in a shunting accident at Magheramorne which prematurely ended her working life. Harry Ramsey and "The Batman" Simpson at this time had her as their regular engine on the stone trains. She was one of the better engines toward the end, and her loss, just 80,000 miles after heavy overhaul, was a blow to them. No.3 and No.10 were both tried as their replacement, without any great enthusiasm it may be said!

No.10 was another engine not to survive the year. Her last passenger turn was on a surprise Portadown to Portrush Sunday School special which she worked as far as Antrim on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1969, having previously brought the empty carriages the long way round from York Road via Antrim and Lisburn. On 6<sup>th</sup> July she was out of steam at York Road when a fire broke out in the pit below her. No other engine was on shed at the time, and her paintwork - already pretty scruffy - was badly burned. She survived, though, being withdrawn in October.

The other engines soldiered on in a gradually deteriorating state. They received only such attention as would keep them working, and during the year Nos. 4, 50, 51 and 53 all received new sets of driving springs. No.50, though not necessarily a rough engine, seemed to be regularly inside Rab McDonald's wee "Hornby Tunnel" for attention. No.55 was omitted from the list, though she continued to be a strong engine, and retained the 'cribs' she had received in her Great Northern days. During the last steam "Sunday School season" in 1969 Nos. 4, 50 and 53 (the latter with very thin driving tyres) were the first choice for trains which began to load up to 11 bogies and sometimes ran without a pilot engine to Kingsbog despite being over the load for one engine. Nos. 5, 6 and 10 were generally kept off heavy Portrush work, but No.51 (another engine with thin tyres) and No.55 appeared on some of those Saturdays. Indeed on one occasion to be related later No.55, in the hands of driver Willie Gillespie, topped Kingsbog at 40 with an 11 coach special from Portrush.

Nos. 4, 50, 51, 53, 55 and 56 were the regular stone train engines though by 1969 their allocation to dedicated crews was beginning to break down. Mac Arnold recorded the 1968 allocations as being

Alan Robinson and Rab Graham with No.50, Tom Crymble and Percy Mitchell with No.55, Dan McAtamney and Willie McGarvey with No.51, and R.J. "Batman" Simpson and Harry Ramsey on No.56.

I have tentatively added some detail to this, though there is much more information in my companion history of the Stone Train contract:

56 (later 53 and then 4): R.J. Simpson + (Paddy Dobbin / Percy Mitchell / Jack Kitchen)

50: Alan Robinson + Tom Crymble (Rab Graham)

51: Davie McDonald + Harry Ramsey (Dan McAtamney)

55: Bertie Wright + Willie Gillespie

In 1968 a group of drivers either retired or left the railway. The departure of Ned Nelson, Willie Lamont, John Moore, Sammy Sloane and Paddy Shannon led to some reorganisation of the links, and by 1969 Paddy Dobbin, Willie McAleese, Davie McDonald and Jack Kitchen had joined the stone train link.

The final collapse of the fleet in 1970 was almost painful to witness by those of us who took a daily interest in the railway. In addition to the 1969 withdrawals mentioned above, No.50 shed part of her motion whilst working the Great Northern ballast at Easter 1970, No.53 got a patching up job when a crack was discovered in the firebox and No.55 failed the day before the end of the stone train contract in May 1970. By the very end, only Nos. 4, 51 and 53 were regarded as reliable engines. But on Easter Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March 1970 No.5 - on her last day in service - was a surprise choice for an evening Whitehead local. It was rather painfully appropriate that the doyen of the class should work one of the last passenger services on NIR. As she returned to York Road shed and her fire was dropped for the last time, she had accumulated some 800,000 miles - the highest recorded mileage for the class.

Two 'strangers' to be seen around York Road belonged to the recently-created RPSI. J15 No.186 and S class No.171 both saw periods of Company service during their early days of Society ownership, and even the diminutive No.BG3 - her wheel arrangement reminiscent of the pre-war BNCR 'donkey' before the war - spent a while at York Road before her final migration to Whitehead. There was also, of course, ex SLNCR No.27. Although unfit for any main line work, this handy 0-6-4 tank was to be found pottering about the shed, working the station pilot (invariably in the hands of Freddie Mahon and Willie McKenna) or going round the docks to collect rakes of coal wagons.

York Road was still turning out four engines each day for the spoil trains, as well as the station pilot, the docks shunter when required and an engine for any ballast working that offered. Steam substitutions, a frequent and welcome feature during 1966 and early 1967, were becoming less frequent, largely due to the introduction of the 70 class units. But occasional shortages did occur, and there was quite a flurry of activity in the spring of the year. I have records of seven different Larne line trains being either steam substituted or steam rescued around this time, including two cases of the DMU set of the 07.57 business express from Larne being rescued by an engine from Magheramorne. In the run up to Easter, the 17.30 Larne semi-fast was steam hauled at least three times, and I enjoyed

good runs with driver Alan Robinson and fireman Davie Lynch on 25<sup>th</sup> March, Alan Robinson and Arthur McMenamin on 26<sup>th</sup>, and George Houston and George Robinson on 31<sup>st</sup> March. On each occasion the engine was No.4. A walk around the shed yard on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1969 revealed No.171 working the station pilot, No.27 shunting round the docks, Nos. 10, 53, 55 and 56 working the spoil trains, No.4 in steam on shed and Nos. 3, 6, 50 and 51 having minor works attention.

The man who latterly kept the wheels turning was locomotive inspector Frank Dunlop. Frank had been an inspector for only seven years, but he had a status and a competence that put him on the same level as his illustrious predecessors Billy Hanley and Sam Bacon. The chair behind his office desk was rarely occupied, for Frank was ceaselessly roving the system, often anticipating trouble, and always first to arrive when an incident occurred. On the footplate he supervised continuously, taking a hand at both driving and firing to keep his skills honed. His great preoccupation was with water. "Is she bunged?" was the first question as he climbed on to a footplate before they left the shed.

His copy of the Easter and Summer Arrangements Booklets would be heavily annotated with the names of all the rostered crews, and on the back page were scribbled his check list of items to be dealt with on days of heavy steam traffic. A wagon of coal to be worked down on the goods - top up the coaling plant at Coleraine - check that the turntables at Coleraine and Derry were working and that the pits were clear - spare vacuum bags to be kept handy at Coleraine, Portrush and Derry. He led from the front with a sensitive blend of encouragement, good humour and when necessary firm discipline. No one messed with Frank! An occasion comes to mind when one driver's insobriety on duty drew the attention of a senior Management Executive in circumstances that might have put his future employment at risk. Frank took the heat out of this one at Head Office level, but a few days later he stopped the culprit on the platform at York Road and innocently asked him to open his bag and show his detonators and rule book. The bag of course was empty. When two days' suspension was duly handed out there was no appeal, but rather a sense of relief and a warning taken about future conduct!

Frank was not averse, though, to a little deception to keep things moving. Later it will be related how engine shortages led to fewer but heavier Sunday School trains at those busy weekends in May and June 1969. The first time an eleven bogie train was needed there was no spare engine as a pilot to Kingsbog. Frank went with "Batman" Simpson, who was rather puzzled at the engine being off the end of the platform as they came against the train. Eleven was over the load for a Jeep to Kingsbog, but Frank reckoned they could do it. So in answer to the Batman's query about the length of the train, Frank innocently stepped down and said he could see a couple of brown vans lying behind them against the buffers. As the train came off the viaduct, Simpson instinctively looked back round the curve and counted how many coaches there were in the train. Purple-faced, this mercurial character burst out with "You b\*\*\*d, Dunlop!" But "Batman" spent the next week boasting of how he took eleven bogies over Kingsbog with no bother at all, and the precedent was established!

## **2. The Start Of The Year**

The Christmas 1968 and 1969 New Year period yielded no steam passenger at all. On 13<sup>th</sup> December. The Rev. Ian Paisley organised a Larne special for the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee to give his blessing to a scheme to preserve the 1912 gun "Clyde Valley". The big man apparently turned up at York Road in the morning and told them to have the engine properly clean! No.55 worked a 10 bogie train, sort of clean and with whitened buffers. It was a dreadful day of lashing rain, and Willie

Gillespie and Barney McCrory had a pretty weary run, even dropping the tablet at Magheramorne. A ten bogie train could not be run round at Larne Harbour, so No.53 was worked down light to assist with the shunt. The only other movement of note was an absolute possession between Carrickfergus and Whitehead on 23<sup>rd</sup> December to facilitate PW work. These days restricted services on weekdays are relatively common place, but in 1968 such an operation was unknown apart from Sundays. The stone trains being suspended for the Christmas period, No.4 and No.55 worked short trains of spoil wagons carrying ballast rather than spoil. At the end of the day I witnessed the unusual spectacle of No.55 coming down the Up line with empty wagons and being passed by No.4 running light engine up the Down line en route from Magheramorne to York Road!

In the early months of 1969, NIR was glad enough to have steam engines to rescue failed diesels. The 07.57 ex Larne Harbour was twice hauled in from Magheramorne Loop by a stone train engine, and twice also the 18.15 from Larne arrived in Belfast hauled by an engine sent down from Magheramorne. On 1<sup>st</sup> February the 16.10 ex Belfast failed at Ballycarry, and the 18.15 from Whitehead was hauled in by No.5. Yet another interesting working involving stone train engines took place on 9<sup>th</sup> January and 14<sup>th</sup> March, when the afternoon Larne perishable was steam hauled. As this train has no return working, the engine in each case was detached from an outgoing empty stone train, and returned light engine from the Harbour to Magheramorne to take up its normal duty.

There were also some welcome nights of steam haulage on the 17.30 Larne. The first was on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1969 when Percy Mitchell and Gerry Phelan had No.50 with four bogies and the bogie van of mails off the 15.00 from Derry. The prompt departure of this train was a piece of very smart operation, as the through van had to be attached to the rear of the 17.30. This allowed only 20 minutes for No.55 on the station pilot to collect the van, put it on top of the stock for the Larne train and set the train into Platform 3. Percy Mitchell was an excellent engineman, and without any fuss he kept the diesel timings to Larne with an engine which at that time had the reputation of an indifferent steamer. Coming back all stations on the 17.15 from Larne it was the same story, and my logbook recorded a right time arrival in Belfast.

As the nights began to lengthen there was a minor resurgence of steam passenger haulage in the run up to Easter. After having lost some time through illness the previous year I was working quite hard in my third year at Queens, and it was good to get a few nights of light relief around teatime. An ex Great Northern AEC set was being trialled - not altogether successfully - on the Larne line at this time, and for two successive nights the 17.30 was steam hauled. Alan Robinson had No.4 with five bogies both nights, with Davie Lynch firing on 25<sup>th</sup> March and Arthur McMenamin on 26<sup>th</sup>. Once again without any histrionics these were good timekeeping runs. Disproving the 'third time lucky' adage, the 17.30 was diesel on 27<sup>th</sup> March, but there was the chance to photograph No.171 on station pilot duties as part of her running-in after overhaul at Harland & Wolff. She was fresh from a repaint in the goods shed at Lisburn, where I was a member of several work parties in February and early March. On the same day No.27 had worked round to the Low Docks for a load of coal for the shed, No.5 was on the Great Northern Ballast, No.4 was the spare engine in steam, Nos. 10, 53, 55 and 56 were on the stone trains, No.50 was in the works for minor attention, and Rab McDonald was dealing with minor issues on Nos. 3, 6 and 51. Just another day at York Road, with the comforting illusion that steam might just go on for ever.... We had just one more steam run on the 17.30 with No.4 and the usual 5 bogies in the hands of George Houston and George Robinson. Decent timekeeping runs they were, after a run of steam evenings I certainly hadn't anticipated.

And so to the Easter holidays. There was not a great deal doing on Good Friday 4<sup>th</sup> April, and it was only after the event that I discovered what I'd missed the previous day. NIR had facilitated the RPSI in running-in No.171 on the York Road pilot duty, but on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> April she was called on to work the steam crane to Knockmore Junction to assist at the derailment of the overnight Derry - Dublin goods.

The Easter Arrangements booklet showed no steam passenger trains, and a modest augmentation of normal services was covered by diesel sets. The 08.05 Belfast - Ballymena was extended to Derry, the 17.25 Belfast - Coleraine was extended to Portrush, and the 19.00 Belfast - Derry conveyed a through portion for Portrush. In those days there was a fair amount of cross-channel tourist traffic at Easter, and the instruction about the 08.05 was that "in the event of the steamers running late, a double-end power car will be detached and run to Ballymena at 08.05 and the remainder will run to Londonderry later, as advised by Control." Not having a great deal of interest in diesels at that time, I didn't go over to York Road to see any of this.

Rather, with one of NIR's Fifty Shilling Freedom of Northern Ireland tickets, I went from my home at Finaghy to Portadown, and photographed No.5 passing the remains of Portadown Junction cabin on one of the three-times weekly Great Northern ballast trains. My skeletal log of the run to Portadown with an ex-GNR AEC set shows the state into which some of these units had descended: Driver Mick Mullen took 18'40" from Lisburn to Portadown with a min of 40 at post 96, and a max of 58 before Lurgan! After this steam photo, I came straight back into Belfast, and out to Ballycarry to photograph No.51 and No.56 on the 14.25 Down empty spoil train. I made my way back to Jordanstown, whence I used the lineside path to walk nearly to post 6 for a shot of No.10 and No.53 on the 16.15 Down. I came back into York Road to see if there was any prospect of the 17.30 Larne being steam hauled. It wasn't!

The Easter Arrangements promised little steam apart from one steam working each day of the holiday period. More depressing still, an additional cyclostyled weekly notice contained an ominous warning from W.A.G. McAfee that with immediate effect the speed limit for WT class engines (the official title of the Jeeps) was permanently reduced to 50mph. For engines like Nos. 3, 5, 6 and 10 this was probably a realistic figure - but fortunately the men exercised their own discretion with the better engines, some of which were still in reasonable shape. As things turned out, a spell of good weather was responsible for far more steam trains than management had anticipated.

Two Portrush relief trains were scheduled on Easter Eve, Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April, one to the 11.45 Derry and the other to the 14.50. Passengers for Antrim, Ballymena and Portrush (normally changing at Coleraine) were directed to Portrush relief trains at 12.00 and 15.05. The 12.00 was shown as diesel, returning empty from Portrush to Belfast at 15.45. The 15.10 was booked for steam, continuing empty carriages to Derry at 17.30 to form an Easter Monday special to Portrush. In fact the 12.00 was steam hauled, continuing to Derry later in the afternoon. This was almost certainly a Frank Dunlop arrangement, as it allowed the Belfast crew to work all the way to Derry and come home passenger. So I had time for two quick shots of the Up morning stone trains, which on Saturdays finished at lunchtime. I photographed Nos. 53+10 at Whiteabbey, and then Nos. 51+56 at Greencastle, coming up with the second set behind the 10.08 ex Whitehead.

Back at York Road, No.4 with Rab Graham and Gerry Phelan had a handy 5 coach load for a train scheduled in diesel timings. As she would be going on to Derry for the weekend, the coal was piled



high in the 'cribbed' bunker, and by the time we were well into our descent of the bank a few lumps were be flying past the windows of the first coach in the train. No doubt the redoubtable Hanna, in the gatehouse at Ballymartin, was able to supplement her coal supplies that way! In good York Road tradition too, No.4 was well 'bunged' (even though there was the customary water stop at Ballymena), and as the engine touched up to the train a small wave lapped over the tank sides and splashed on to the ballast. Had the day been damp or the load heavy, Rab would have been dropping a trickle of sand as he came against the train, to minimise the possibility of a slip, but on this warm spring morning that precaution was unnecessary with a five coach load. Gerry Phelan was down on the cab step, ready to hop off before the engine touched the train, and then straight under to couple and cry "blow up!" to the driver, indicating the bags were coupled and the coupling tight. From the platform, traffic inspector McComb (always a good friend to us enthusiasts) would be keeping a watchful eye, while Rab was in conversation with Guard Jack Rickaby, who'd be telling him his load and the stops he had to make. The start of just another steam run on the NCC main line.

Today, however, there was an additional visitor. None other than W.A.G. McAfee appeared on Platform 4 as the train was about to leave. McAfee was a respected professional, but not necessarily popular among enginemen. Everyone still remembered how he'd arrived in a similar fashion the previous summer as engine No.53 was beginning to blow off before the departure of a delayed Portrush special. "Why is this engine blowing off in the platform, driver?" was his accusing comment to Davie McDonald. The reply was appropriate: "Because, sir, we should have been away five minutes ago!" Today, McAfee appeared to remind the crew of the new speed limit: "Remember driver, it's 50mph now!" Rab's face was totally expressionless as he simply said "Yes, sir." The 12 noon ran as a relief to the 11.45 regular which on this day did not convey Antrim, Ballymena or Portrush passengers, and its diesel schedule turned out to be just a bit tight for steam. Indeed, an analysis of this train's journey to Portrush shows something of what could happen even on a day with comparatively little additional traffic to confuse things.

Maybe McAfee's abrupt intervention may have taken the crew's mind off their task, for No.4 caught the water leaving Belfast (a bit of an embarrassment, as there was always a small audience at the shed, watching departures). This, plus a 25 restriction at Greencastle, resulted in a slow time of 10'6" to pass Whiteabbey, but Rab took his light train very nicely up the bank, falling no lower than 29 before Monkstown. We actually saved a minute on the 12 allowed from Kingsbog to Antrim, and although we exceeded the 27 minute timing from Belfast by three minutes, we cut five minutes off the 35 which the 15.05 relief was allowed. 15 minutes from Antrim to Ballymena was an easy enough proposition, but of course we needed water here, and so left 7 late. More time was lost by a stop at Cullybackey which was not in the book - I suspect the 11.45 running ahead of us had been delayed in crossing the 11.10 from Derry, and was still in section to Dunloy. We sat six minutes, then ran to Dunloy in 13'13" where we were held another few minutes to cross the 12.10 empty railcars from Derry. We left here 11 late, and a signal check at Ballyboyland cost us one minute on the 10 allowed to Ballymoney. Things were clearly in a mess down the line, for we lost another 14 minutes awaiting the 12.45 ex Derry, leaving 25 late. We lost another two minutes to Coleraine due to a very severe 15mph slack at the Two Mile Bridge (where the road was being widened), but saved three minutes over the branch in spite of a signal stop outside the station. Quite a group of timers stood on the platform talking to the crew at the end of the run. Mac Arnold, Norman Foster, Drew Donaldson, Ian Wilson, Irwin Pryce, Derek Henderson and Leslie McAllister were all out. In addition there were four comparatively new timers: Michael Stevenson, Alex Lindsay and Philip Preece, as well as young Robert



White from Holywood.

No.4 and the nominally empty train was now booked to run from Portrush to Derry, with a stop at Coleraine to turn the engine and take water. This gave a handy margin of time to slip over to George Watters's Post Office in Railway Place, which had a convenient cafe attached to it. In those days, coffee shops and cafeterias were in short supply, even in fairly sizeable Ulster country towns! Our time from Coleraine to Derry non-stop was 48'19", pretty much what the schedule demanded of the original 18.05 path which this train should have been following. Clearly the timetablers hadn't been appraised of the 50mph limit which steam locomotives were now supposed to observe, as speeds in the sixties were necessary to keep it. We all came home on the 17.40 ex Derry, while No.4 retired to the roofless shed at Waterside until Easter Monday, and her five coaches were added to the six which had been previously supplied through the week to make up an 11 coach rake for Easter Monday.

Absolutely nothing doing on Easter Day, and very little booked steam for Easter Monday 8<sup>th</sup> April. The sole rostered steam train to Portrush was at 9.25, followed by diesel specials at 09.40 (empty to Antrim and thence advertised at 10.15 to Portrush) and 10.25. I can't now remember how I found out that the Antrim special was to be steam, but I started on the 09.25. Rab Graham today had No.53, with Barney McCrory firing to him. With 9 bogies, we had a run which was very much in the NCC style: restrained out the Lough Shore, with no fireworks up the bank and losing almost three minutes on the 18 minutes allowed to Kingsbog. Down the bank was pretty restrained - certainly not quite as good as Saturday - and we stopped at Antrim in 32'09", allowed 30. I left the train here, discovering later that a very good run was done to Portrush, keeping the booked running time of 66 minutes despite a stop for water at Ballymena and - of course - hand ring exchanges at each block section.

Curiosity, and I suppose the attraction of being the only one to record the steam substitution coming behind, led to me leaving the 9.25 at Antrim and awaiting No.56's arrival light engine from Belfast. I still don't know why they hadn't double-headed the 9.25: at this distance in time I can only assume that when the decision was made to take an engine to Antrim there could have been a slight delay in preparing No.56 and finding a fireman? Anyway, it was George Houston and Gerry Phelan who appeared with this gleaming engine. A complex shunt had to be done to gather up a train from among the stored coaches in the old Great Northern yard, so it was 10.40 by the time the 10.10 special got away. The conditional stop at Cookstown Junction was required, and we dropped a minute on the 17 minutes allowed to Ballymena, but 56 max with a seven bogie train wasn't bad stuff from a good engineman who normally shunned any histrionics. Water at Ballymena, of course, added to the deficit, and we left 26 late. Acrid smells were beginning to drift from one of the bogies in the second coach, so there was no option but to run easily. 5 minutes was lost on the 12 minutes allowed to Dunloy, although only another minute was dropped to Ballymoney, run in 11'10". We left here 41 late, and a further 13'14" brought us to Coleraine, by which time the 11.37 branch train from Portrush had arrived, steam worked by the engine and coaches of the 09.25 from Belfast. The main line was quiet in the Up direction, and the only delay we caused would have been about 5 minutes to the 11.10 ex Derry, which we crossed at Coleraine.

Leaving George Houston to plod on to Portrush (where the front two coaches of the set were eventually removed), I waited for the 11.25 special from Derry, which I knew would have a big load. No.4 and 11 bogies came in with Coleraine driver Paddy Eliot and Derry fireman Gerry Lland, running 15 late. With a signal stop outside Portrush, we had a bit of a struggle to Portrush in 15'40", but the fireman would have been a bit inexperienced, being for most of the year a 'lookout man' on the MPD

power car which did what shunting was needed at Waterside, as well as working the "Limavady Sundries" as far as Limavady Junction.

The 13.10 light engine path from Portrush (for the engine off the Derry special) was in fact used to bring No.56 and five empty coaches to Coleraine to form the 13.30 branch train in place of a diesel unit. This was a connection out of the 11.45 Belfast - Derry, and on a very summery day, the railway was taken by surprise at the number of people travelling to Portrush! This 13.10 empty train made a slow start out of Portrush, as a gorse fire was being dealt with at Dhu Varren, and In addition we had a signal stop at Portstewart. Leaving Coleraine 22 minutes late, the 13.30 local made a fairly tame run into Portrush, including another signal check at Portstewart where No.4, running light back to Coleraine to be turned and serviced, was waiting to cross. After this flurry of steam activity, No.56 ran back light to Coleraine to be turned before returning to Portrush.

Estimates of the numbers of Belfast-bound passengers had in the meantime been sent to Belfast, and the available diesels were clearly reckoned to have inadequate capacity. So Control next directed No.4 to run light from Coleraine to Antrim to gather up nine coaches, including everything from GNR K15s to NCC North Atlantics, and arranged for No.10 to work light from York Road to Portrush. No.10 arrived at Portrush following the empty train from Antrim, and No.56, which had worked back light from Coleraine to Portrush. As if that wasn't enough, No.53 had to be commandeered to haul the failed MPD set of the 19.00 Portrush - Coleraine, before taking forward the late evening Portrush - Derry special. Thus, four rather than two steam specials left Portrush that evening: No.10 on the 19.15 Belfast with Jimmy Donnelly and Ryan Davis, No.56 on the 19.30 Belfast with Paddy Dobbin and Davie Smith, No.4 on the 19.45 Belfast with Bertie Wright and Arthur McMenemy and No.53 on the 20.35 Derry with a crew whose names I didn't record.

For the sake of old times on the Great Northern, and to get a run with an engine which was by now a rare visitor to the main line, most of us went on the 19.15 special with GN driver Jimmy Donnelly. Nominally nonstop to Belfast, it was pretty well inevitable that the crew would stop at Ballymena to take water. Two minutes were dropped on a fairly slack 55 minute schedule to Ballymena, and there was some delay here as another coach axlebox was carrying heat. The offending vehicle had to be removed, and the 19.15 left Ballymena 40 late. This delayed the 19.30 special, which was held outside while the shunt was taking place. I got off to wait for this train, and although Paddy Dobbin managed 63 before Antrim, the time of 15'55" wasn't really good enough to tempt me to stay on board. Those of us who detrained made no mistake, for following a superb start up the bank, it seems that No.56 died a bit towards the summit. I'd be inclined to wonder whether Paddy had unwittingly beaten his inexperienced young fireman? So in the gathering dusk a group of us waited at Antrim for Bertie Wright and No.4 on the 19.45 special.

The 19.45 left Antrim 43 late and we had a decent run up the bank, with 45 min at Doagh. To our surprise the brakes came on, and when we stopped at Kingsbog the train was boarded by the R.U.C. Police enquiries were focussed on reports of the alleged harassment of a young lady on the train. Though serious, this had its lighter side when the police entered a dimly lit compartment of which Mac Arnold was the sole occupant, and began to question him! Once away again, Bertie at least gave us a 60 coming in the Lough Shore, and a long day ended 53 late at York Road. I think a careful reading of this day's travels will certainly dispel any notion that everything always ran smoothly in the good old days of steam!

There was no nonsense about diesels on Easter Tuesday. The 09.25, 09.45 and 10.25 specials were all booked steam haulage, and for good measure S class No.171 "Slieve Gullion" - theoretically owned by the N.I. Transport Holding Company but to all intents and purposes an RPSI preserved engine - worked the 10.25. Today was to be her debut on a scheduled passenger service - the first, and still the only, one she worked in preserved ownership.

I started with No.4 with 9 bogies on the 9.25 special in the hands of Willie Gillespie and Barney McCrory. This was a pretty grim effort, falling to 18 on the climb of the bank and barely managing 64 down into Antrim. So I got off once more to await the second special, which today arrived as the 09.45 empty carriages from Belfast yard. Clearly there was to be no more trifling with wrecks of coaches in Antrim yard. No.56 was again the engine on a six bogie train, with driver Jimmy Anderson of Ballymena and fireman Davie Smith of Belfast. Of the small group of Ballymena drivers, only Tom Smith had any real spark of enthusiasm for their occasional appearances on steam. Willie Leatham, John Scott, Jimmy Anderson and Sam McIlhagga were not really known as great runners. Even on that bright spring morning, in the spotless cab of an impeccably cleaned engine, all Jimmy could think about was the new 50mph speed limit. "This engine's nice and clean, but they aren't as good as they used to be you know," was hardly a very promising reaction to some mild incitement I attempted before the train left for Portrush. We had a pretty pedestrian start, taking 19 minutes to Ballymena on top of 13 minutes lateness away, but at least the train was not over-full and I had no problems about a milepost seat. We were 17 late leaving Ballymena, and dropped another minute to Cullybackey. Thence to Ballymoney was, in fairness, not too bad, and he did allow her to run up to 56 down Ballyboyland bank. The stop at Dunloy was not required today, but even so we lost three minutes on the 23 allowed from Cullybackey to Ballymoney.

Here I decided to get off, and wait for No.171 on the 10.25. She arrived 11 late, with driver Joe Cairns of Coleraine and fireman Johnny Magill of York Road. Inevitably, Inspector Frank Dunlop was with them too, and I reckon he was assisting with the work. Although Coleraine had very little steam, Paddy Elliott, Ned Carson, Willie Cameron, Jimmy Coulter, W.J. ("Ernie") McCahon and Stephen Friel were quite hard runners, who looked forward to any chance of a steam run. Joe Cairns and the senior man Laurence McCahon were a bit more conservative in their attitude to non-diesel power. But on a strange engine, Joe did not too badly. 53 was No.171's max from Ballymoney to Coleraine with a seven bogie load, and we nearly managed a 40 running into Portrush. Yesterday morning the problem at Portrush was carriages; today it was the engine. No.171 was found to be carrying strong big end heat, so once again they were on the phone to York Road, and once again No.10 was sent down light engine to bring a special up from Portrush! In those days there was rarely a problem about getting a run in empty carriages, so a group of us used the 12.52 local to Coleraine and then the 11.45 regular from York Road to go to Derry Waterside for the 15.25 e.c.s. to Portrush. This was engine No.53 and the coaches of the previous evening's return excursion from Portrush to Derry. It was the last time a 'company' steam engine stayed overnight in the Maiden City, though of course 32 years later No.4 stabled at the new Waterside station before working an RPSI Santa Special on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2001. It was also the last run I was to have on a scheduled service between Derry and Coleraine.

An all-Derry crew of Bertie Davis and Albert Plews worked this train, which started from the yard. Bertie loved steam, and following his retirement his burly figure was regularly to be seen in the dining car of the RPSI Portrush Flyer after that long-standing operation began. Ten bogies was a sizeable load for this largely level road, and since we were crossing the 14.50 from Belfast at Castlerock, there was

no need to hurry on an empty stock working. We took 43'41" to Castlerock against 41 allowed, and as the Down diesel unit was running late, we left Castlerock 8 late for Coleraine. Here No.4 with Jack Kitchen and Willie Graham came on to the other end of the train to allow No.53 to be serviced at the shed, and the opportunity was taken to top up No.53's bunker from the tender of the stricken No.171.

There was a choice of four trains back to Belfast, and as far as I'm aware there was at least one timer on each of them. My own preference was the first departure at 18.40, a modest 5 bogie train for which Paddy Dobbin and Albert Plews had engine No.53. Paddy, a highly intelligent engineman, produced a very sound run as far as Ballymoney. Rather than go on, I decided to double back to Coleraine using the 18.00 railcar from Belfast. Whilst waiting at Coleraine, we saw Bertie Wright coming through with No.10 and ten bogies on the 19.15 booked nonstop to Belfast. I was quite surprised to discover later that he had indeed run this sizeable train through to Belfast without a water stop. Next in was the 19.30 special, No.4 and 7 bogies with Jack Kitchen and Willie Graham. I'd had a soft spot for this pair - whose combined ages would not even have added up to 50 - ever since an heroic run they produced with engine No.51 on the 8.35 Derry in July 1967. Jack, along with Paddy Russell, Tommy Deane and Barney McCrory, was one of the last four men passed out as steam drivers before the steam age finished on NIR.

Willie Graham (a.k.a. "the wee wasp" due to the distinctive sharpness of his teenage tongue) may have been slight of build, but was an exceptionally strong fireman and a real enthusiast. If he had one defect it was a tendency to carry his water too high, and indeed tonight a bout of priming gave us some problems on the climb of Ballyboyland bank. We did well to run in the mid fifties along the undulating section from Dunloy to Cullybackey, though two hand exchanges, the TSR at the Two Mile Bridge and that catching of the water cost us six minutes on a fairly sharp 41 minute booking from Coleraine.

In no great hurry home, I opted to wait at Ballymena for the 19.45 special. None of us was to know that this would be the last passenger train worked by engine No.56, and with a nine bogie load her driver was Tom Smith of Ballymena. Since this man would need to catch the 10pm York Road - Ballymena to get home, I reckoned he would want no undue delays. The train still arrived 18 late at Ballymena, and it was quite a professional piece of work. 60 after Kellswater was good for a train of this size, but there was an unscheduled stop at Cookstown Junction (the legendary Maggie had obviously taken a day to herself in Portrush). Starting from Antrim, though, Tom hammered happily up the bank in the mid forties, doing well to accelerate back to 45 after catching the distant for Kingsbog and easing briefly to 41. Not quite a 60 in the Lough Shore, but 29 minutes was not a bad time from Antrim. The fastest run of the night, albeit with the lightest train, had been done by the first special, and the log tables of "NCC Saga" have the details of what was almost certainly the last sub-35 minute run from Ballymena to Belfast. Paddy Dobbin and Albert Plews were a good combination, and this was one of the last examples of a fast run down through Antrim in the high sixties.

On the way home that evening I was feeling rather warmer than I should have been, and a look in the mirror revealed that at the age of 22 I had indeed contracted measles! So I wasn't out to cover No.171 coming back from Coleraine on 9<sup>th</sup> April with a train of bad order rolling stock, nor did I see her working to Coleraine on an empty test train on 17<sup>th</sup> April - a running in turn for the RPSI "Brian Boru" railtour to Cork and Limerick on 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> April. No.171 worked this train along with No.4, still

a company engine and hired in for the weekend. Frank Dunlop had gone to no end of trouble to have the engine in first rate order for the weekend - even including a renewal of the timbers on the cab floor - and she was cleaned to Royal Train standards. During his painstaking examination he noted that the tyres on the pony truck seemed thin, and on the quiet he arranged for her to be taken into the works for it to be changed. Unfortunately, Billy McAfee got wind of this, and vetoed it. The engine's working life was limited, and in his view a change was an unnecessary and unjustifiable expense. The astuteness of Frank's judgment was proved when that pony truck derailed in Cork yard on the Saturday, and yet again on the Sunday. Not until she arrived back at York Road on 29<sup>th</sup> April was the job done properly.

### 3. The Sunday School Season

For most of the 1960s there were very few weekends without steam on the NCC main line between late May and early September. The North West 200 at the end of May was traditionally the start of weekend day trips to Portrush. Late May and June was the "Sunday School season" bringing children from most of the NCC's bigger towns to Portrush. Then came the July/August holiday season, with "The Twelfth" weekend thrown in for good measure. It wasn't until early September that York Road began to quieten down at weekends!

In retrospect these traffic flows record an era which has now long passed. A time when churches in Northern Ireland still had large Sunday Schools, when many people still used the train to and from their annual holiday in a boarding house at Portrush, and when large numbers of Scottish tourists crammed the ferries from Stranraer to Larne at the start of the "Glasgow Fair". In these respects, 1969 was really the last year of so much. By 1970 steam was gone, the start of civil unrest made Northern Ireland a much less attractive holiday destination and the gradual decline of the Sunday Schools meant that in the diesel era that particular traffic became much lighter. This was beginning even in 1969 - when for the first time there were no steam Sunday School trains from Derry to Portrush, and only one over the Antrim branch from the Great Northern.

Sunday school trains were a remarkable phenomenon - part church social occasion and part community festival in an age where leisure tastes were more easily satisfied than they are today. A recent article on this traffic in the IRRS Journal suggested that these trains were reserved for the most pious children and their parents, and that railway enthusiasts had no chance of travelling on them. This was rather wide of the mark. In Ulster rural communities in the 1960s "the excursion" to Portrush gave whole farming communities a day away from their unrelenting labour. Tickets were available from church families and sometimes from local shops. Nor were these trains exclusively for Sunday Schools. Spare capacity was filled by small parties, for the railway offered discounts for groups of 8 or more travelling together and it made sense to keep them away from the limited space available on regular Saturday service trains. Indeed on one occasion the late Irwin Pryce put the word about this around the train timing fraternity and got enough of us together to organise "Mr Pryce's Party" on one of the Sunday School specials. And in those more relaxed days, and armed with an ordinary day return ticket bought at the booking office, I never found any difficulty in slipping on to station platforms (usually avoiding the barriers) and gaining access to the trains. In four years of pretty intensive travel on these specials I was never challenged about why I was on board.

The 1969 season as well as being the last Sunday School season was also the quietest - a far cry from 18<sup>th</sup> June 1966 when eight engines brought trains into Portrush from Derry, Belfast and the Great

Northern area. This year there were never more than three trains, partly explained by the availability of less than 40 coaches in this final full year of steam. A similarly restricted number of engines came into Portrush: No.4 appeared on five occasions, No.51 on three, No.50 and No.53 twice each and No.55 just once. All but one of the trains were worked by Belfast crews - only on North West 200 day 24<sup>th</sup> May did Ballymena men appear, with Tom Smith on the 09.05 special and John Scott on the 18.45 return. On busy Saturdays "RDC" (Rest Day Cancelled) would be at the head of one of the columns on the York Road roster board, and I had runs with a small group of stone train stalwarts as Bertie Wright, Willie Gillespie, Davie McDonald, "The Batman" Simpson, Harry Ramsey, Jack Kitchen and Paddy Dobbin. As far as I can judge, the men who in 1969 had graduated to the main diesel link - Tom Crymble, Jack Macauley, Paddy Shannon, Percy Mitchell, Jimmy Simpson, Alan Robinson, George Houston and Dan McAtamney - didn't appear on Sunday School Specials. As I write this, I'm rather surprised not to find a reference to Rab Graham, but his name will come up when we get into the July holiday period.

Now to a summary of special traffic and other steam in the spring of the year. Steam appearances on the 17.30 Larne were now becoming rare, but on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> May Percy Mitchell and Davie Smith had No.4 on this train. Young Davie did a presentable run, and Percy would have enjoyed re-living his firing days - which included the Royal Train in 1953. There was even a 60 done on the return 19.15 ex Larne on the last short section from Whiteabbey.

I wasn't on the main line on the first day of the season, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May, but No.4 piloted by No.5 to Kingsbog worked a single 09.05 excursion to Portrush. I stayed in Belfast, for in the afternoon No.5 was out again on the 14.05 Larne - steam hauled by arrangement in connection with an RPSI open day at Whitehead. Alan Robinson and Tom McCrum worked the 14.05 Down, while Bobby Vance of Larne drove on the return working. I was pleased to get a run with an engine which by now was appearing only rarely on passenger trains.

I wasn't out on 17<sup>th</sup> May either, but No.53 and No.4 both worked into Portrush. The following week there was a very welcome two evenings of steam on the 17.30 Larne. It was Alan Robinson's week on this busy semi-fast service, and he had No.5 on 22<sup>nd</sup> May and No.53 the following night. With a handy load of four bogies and the through bogie van from Derry, Al produced two very tidy runs, easily bettering diesel timings. Coming back with just four coaches on the 19.15 he produced a quality of work which would have matched any MPD or MED unit. Indeed on the second evening his 6'29" from Whitehead to Carrickfergus was the fastest steam time I have recorded on this section.

Next day, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1969, was North West 200 Day, and Tom Smith and Gerry Phelan had No.51 on a 09.05 Portrush special. This was mainly a public excursion which possibly explains why there were two incidents of cord-pulling between Belfast and Kingsbog, the second of which brought the train to a halt. Coming behind was a 09.45 Sunday School train with Bertie Wright and Arthur McMenamin on No.53. I travelled in the first train to Ballymena, alighting to await the second, and came back from Portrush on the 18.45 special with John Scott. Pretty dire it was too.

Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May was a remarkable day, rightly described in Mac Arnold's *NCC Saga* as "the grand slam of steam in Ireland"; never again would six engines pass through Antrim working passenger trains. It was also the only occasion since the closure of Adelaide shed in November 1966 when there was a steam Sunday School excursion from Portadown to Portrush. The empty movements to and from Portadown, and the unavailability of coal at Coleraine put this job beyond the coal capacity of

one engine. So No.10 was the surprise choice for the first leg from Portadown to Antrim, with No.51 working the train through to Portrush and back in the evening, whence No.6 brought the excursionists home again. I had to make an early start from Finaghy at 07.12, changing at Lisburn into the 7.25 from Great Victoria Street. Jimmy Kavanagh and Cecil McAdam had only a seven coach train, and though we eventually got up to 56 after Moira the running was hardly spectacular. Given the nominal line limit of 25mph from Knockmore to Antrim, a max of 36 before Crumlin was not altogether bad.

No.53 and No.4 were on Belfast - Portrush Sunday School specials, and behind them was coming the second I train I intended to time that day - the RPSI "Sorley Boy" railtour from York Road to Coleraine. This train had been preceded by a photographer's special formed of one bogie and a full brake and worked by No.51 with Willie Gillespie, which set some participants down at Monkstown to photograph No.171's arrival with the main train. In a typically clever piece of NCC working, No.51 took the special from Portadown forward to Portrush, while No.10 worked the empty stock of the photographers' special back to Belfast. I slipped quietly out of the Sunday School special after it had stopped outside Antrim, and walked into the station to photograph No.171 arriving on the 10.20 special ex Belfast. Her appearance on the day was largely thanks to fitter Rab McDonald. There had been persistent trouble with the engine brake cylinder, and a replacement sourced from withdrawn UG No.149 (lying at Great Victoria Street awaiting scrapping) was fitted in the early hours of the morning before departure for Coleraine. Appropriately, Great Northern driver Jimmy Donnelly was in charge, with George Gaw firing, and inspector Frank Dunlop. With only five bogies, and mindful of Easter Tuesday, we had a careful run to Coleraine without exceeding 56.

Leaving Coleraine at 14.23, No.171 ran through to Great Victoria Street via Antrim and Lisburn, max being 58 after Cookstown Junction, and after a careful run over the branch we did another 58 through Finaghy. The relatively new turntable at Great Victoria Street was deployed to turn the engine before the nominally empty train left again for York Road via Lisburn and Antrim. Here I got off to await the return Portrush - Portadown excursion. First, though, came No.4 through the station running nonstop to Belfast, followed by No.51 and the Great Northern excursion. York Road had turned out No.6 to take the train on to Portadown and then empty carriages back to York Road, and this gave me two "new" Jeeps on the Great Northern main line in one day! Billy Montgomery and Leo Foy were on the return leg of this train and I had a rather dull run back to Portadown. In retrospect, it was the only time I was ever to have two steam runs each way over the Antrim branch in the course of a single day. I just made the last train from Portadown, changing at Lisburn into the stopper and arriving home some sixteen hours after I'd first left. It was a memorable day!

7<sup>th</sup> June produced only one special, No.4 and ten bogies with "The Batman" Simpson and Albert Plews. Albert and Arthur McMenamin were Derry men who worked from Belfast, and both were good firemen. For once "The Batman" let his fireman drive as far as Ballymena - I'm not sure what explained this act of generosity. The following Thursday the 17.30 was again steam, I gather with No.51 and Jack Macauley.

On Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June there were three trains. The 09.05 special was No.53 and 11 bogies, and I have told the story behind this one already. Geordie Gaw was the fireman that day. Behind them was an 11.50 special with No.4 and 10 bogies crewed by Willie Gillespie and Jonny Magill. I have no record of the path of the third special worked by No.50 with Harry Ramsey and George Robinson. I came back with No.53 as far as Ballymena, then waited for No.50 through to Belfast. Rather enterprisingly I went out to Whiteabbey, for I knew the last special was setting down a party there. It was not hard to



mingle with the departing crowds and slip on to this train for a second run into Belfast! The day ended with an empty carriage working to Antrim with No.5. The remaining steam stock was stabled here through the week, so on most Fridays there was an evening empty working up to Belfast for the following day.

Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June was an interesting day. I was rather surprised to find Nos. 53+4 backing down on to the 09.05 special, but No.53 was working a second special from Antrim to Portrush using coaches stored there and thus piloted all the way. Bertie Wright & Tom McCrum were on No.4, with Willie Gillespie and Barney McCrory on No.53. Barney was the senior fireman at York Road, and before the year was out he had been passed out as a driver. ("We taught him how to start them ... all we have to do now is teach him how to stop them" was Frank Dunlop's sardonic comment!) I left this train along with No.53 at Antrim to sample both engines on my run to Portrush, and came back to Belfast with No.4.

The last Sunday School day produced a surprising number of engines. There was a Carrickfergus to Portrush special on 28<sup>th</sup> June, and Bob Hunter had earlier identified a shop in Carrick where tickets could be bought. Irwin Pryce and I went out on the empty carriages - the rather feeble No.6 and 9 bogies, departing from Belfast Passenger Yard. I can't remember the exact circumstances, but I don't think either of us particularly wanted the guard to be aware we were on the train. So we clambered in discreetly, left the train on the non-platform side when it arrived in the loop platform at Carrick, and then innocently presented ourselves at the barrier with our tickets! As we pulled on to the main line, we noted a second empty train in the yard behind the cabin, headed by Nos. 5+55. No.5 with "The Batman" Simpson piloted this train to Kingsbog, and then scuttled back to York Road for a second run up the hill two hours later. When the 09.35 special from Carrick got to Belfast two bogies were added and Davie McDonald and Davie Smith took an 11 bogie train forward to Portrush, again piloted to Kingsbog by No.5. It was a comment on the state of the coaches that there was an involuntary stop at Ballyboyland when part of the floor collapsed in the brake end of the rear coach - an ancient ex GNR brake compo.

I'm not sure what train brought No.51 to Portrush that day, but in the afternoon she brought empty carriages from Portrush for the shortest distance Sunday School train of the year. This was the annual outing of St Patrick's Parish Church Coleraine - to Castlerock! St Patrick's at that time was, in terms of families claiming connection, the largest parish in the Church of Ireland. The Castlerock outing was very much a town day out, and uniquely tickets were sold to all comers at the booking office in Coleraine station. Taking a chance we would certainly not try today, a group of us walked over the Bann Bridge and photographed this train heading out on its short journey. This train came back empty to Coleraine returning later empty to Castlerock to bring the excursionists home before continuing as empty carriages to Portrush for a 19.45 Belfast special. I came back that night with No.51 and 11 bogies on the 18.45 special, crewed by Paddy Dobbin and Willie Graham. Behind them were No.55 on the 19.15 special with Willie Gillespie and finally that 19.45 special referred to earlier. When the return Carrick excursion got to Belfast, it was taken forward by another unusual engine, No.6 with Jack Macauley. So five engines had been out on passenger trains that day - a figure that was never again to be exceeded.

In the run-up to the July holidays it was rather surprising that the 17.30 Larne train was steam hauled on seven successive weekdays between 25<sup>th</sup> June and 3<sup>rd</sup> July. On Mondays to Fridays coming up to "The Twelfth" I had a summer job with Cantrell & Cochrane, and so missed all these trains. Those who

were on them had the advantage of two of the best men in the link that worked the 17.30. Dan McAtamney and George Gaw appeared from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> June with Nos. 4, 50 and 6, and Percy Mitchell had Nos. 55, 53, 55 and 5 from 30<sup>th</sup> June until 3<sup>rd</sup> July. On the final evening there was some drama on the footplate as the shaft of fireman Davie Smith's shovel broke in two in the middle of the run! The next day the 17.30 was diesel but in its place the 13.50 Larne Boat Train was steam substituted. A large party of Orange bandsmen were en route to Glasgow for the following day's "Mini Twelfth", and in place of the usual 3 car MPD set No.5 and 9 bogies were turned out with Larne driver Bertie Vance. No.5 was one of the weaker surviving engines by this time, and blowing off at 175lbs didn't help; indeed the Stranraer steamer had to be held awaiting her arrival after a bit of a struggle. Another Larne driver Bobby ("Jehovah") Robinson had her on the 15.20 all stations to Belfast, and at Magheramorne they stopped to replace No.5 by No.55 on the stone train which was waiting to follow.

#### **4. Summer On The Main Line**

"Those were the days my friend / we thought they'd never end." So ran the lyric of a popular song at the time, and it pretty well sums up the way I felt in that last summer of Ulster steam. The possibility that a year later it wouldn't be there, and that life as I'd always known it in Northern Ireland would soon be totally changed just didn't register with me. For the moment there was steam - that was all! July was traditionally a busy month with Orange specials on "The Twelfth" followed by the start of the holiday season at Portrush and an increase in the volume of traffic on the Larne line as the "Glasgow Fair" fortnight brought Scottish tourists over on the Stranraer steamer. All three will feature in the next stage of the story of 1969, beginning with some detail of main line steam in the July holiday period.

#### ***The 'Twelfth' Weekend***

Fifty years ago Sundays in Presbyterian north east Ulster were still relatively quiet, so there was a day without any steam before the "Twelfth week" began in earnest on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> July. There were three specials from Belfast 09.25 with 53 and 9 bogies crewed by Harry Ramsey and Roy Robinson, 10.20 with No.4 and 9 bogies in the hands of Jimmy Coulter of Coleraine and Aubrey Ryans, and No.50 on a train of which I have no record. On the 09.25 there should have been no problems for steam, since both of the Robinson brothers were good men on the shovel, but No.53 was in sulky mood today. So after a min of 11 on the bank and no more than a bare 60 down the bank, we took all of 41 minutes to Antrim, and I got off to wait for the 10.40. Coulter was a man of experience and enthusiasm, but his fireman I think had a hard job providing the steam and we had a pretty ordinary run to Portrush. Even in those days lineside vandalism was a problem and No.4 arrived at Portrush with a smashed cab window following stone throwing by trackside louts.

The weekly notice indicated that the 13.15 regular Portrush service was to be steam hauled, and the 12.30 ex Derry was a handy way of getting back up the line to cross it. As the Up train was running late we went only as far as Ballymoney, where we had a rather long wait before the 13.15 appeared, formed of a 3 car MED set crammed to the doors on an afternoon of quite intense heat. It appeared that during a very long stop at Cullybackey the passengers in a crowded and over-heated train had threatened mutiny, and the station staff eventually produced a bucket of water and some cups to cool them down. Allegedly an angry man remonstrated driver Percy Mitchell: "This is disgraceful ... my wife is pregnant." "Well that's not my fault mister," was Percy's rather bemused reply! During the afternoon all three engines went to Coleraine to be turned, a job rendered the more difficult by

debris from the recently demolished coaling plant which was fouling the turntable road. Always happy to help the cause of steam, Ian Wilson and I gave the enginemmen a hand to deal with this obstruction!

My homeward journey began with an 18.40 special from Portrush worked by No.50. John Scott of Ballymena was not inclined to hit an engine too hard and though he had a good fireman - Albert Plews of Derry, based at York Road - I thought it better to take this train only to Coleraine, and make my way back to Portrush for the final special at 20.15 with the rather more lively combination of Jack Kitchen and Willie Graham. Willie was a good fireman, but he tended to carry the water a bit high, and we had some priming problems. This and temperamental injectors took the shine off the run, though we had a good spin down into Belfast and one of the very rare 70s of the year on the run into Belfast over track which by that time was technically limited to 50.

Next morning Harry Ramsey and Roy Robinson were out again on the 09.25 special, this time with No.50 and 8 bogies. No.50 was at times a sluggish engine and we had a dull enough run to Ballymena. I got off here to see if the 10.20 special would be any better, less than pleased to see Laurence McCahon and Tom McCrum arriving with No.53 and 9 bogies. McCahon was the most senior of the nine Coleraine drivers and claimed as a young man to have lit the first fire in U2 class No.74 "Dunluce Castle" back in 1924. He was not the fastest, and his rakish young fireman was not greatly troubled during a slow run to Portrush. I went all the way, returning to Cullybackey for the 13.15 which following yesterday's debacle with the MED was steam hauled and made up to 10 bogies. If I'd known that No.55 would be double-heading this train as far as Antrim I might have gone all the way to Belfast. With a 10 bogie load Rab Graham and Geordie Gaw did a sound enough run, though we didn't quite get a 60 anywhere.

Before the procession of Belfast bound trains, there was an 18.40 local service to Coleraine worked by No.50 with Paddy Dobbin. I took the chance to photograph this train passing what was then the quite newly opened station at Dhu Varren. The familiar 19.30 Portrush - Belfast path was now 19.45, and Paddy Dobbin and Albert Plews had No.50 and ten bogies. I left this rather dull run at Ballymena, awaiting the 20.15 special from Portrush with No.53 and 8 bogies, crewed by Bertie Wright and Willie Graham. To be honest it wasn't a lot better, though we did manage a 60 coming in the Lough Shore. There was a slowing to walking pace at Monkstown and my logbook records "set down inspector". At this remove of time I can no longer remember whether this was Frank Dunlop - or indeed why whoever it was needed to be dropped there anyway.

### ***The 'One Fifteen': A Last Hurrah For Express Steam***

The rest of my story of July and August 1969 has two focal points: the 13.15 Belfast - Portrush on the main line, and the weekend boat trains (and the occasional 17.30 too) on the Larne line. The remainder of this section will focus on the main line in general, and the 13.15 in particular.

Although the Working Timetable showed no steam at all on the main line the 13.15 Portrush was to be steam-hauled ten times in July and one in August. There was also a remarkably cheap afternoon Portrush excursion fare of 7/6<sup>d</sup> (equating with about £5.50 today. A bargain of this magnitude was even featured in the August 1969 "Railway Magazine"; sadly by the time this story appeared the 13.15 had reverted to diesel and Northern Ireland was no longer exactly the holiday venue of choice.

After the holiday weekend, the 13.15 remained steam hauled - and, though we didn't know it, a snap decision had been made to run a steam relief to Portrush at 10.20 as well with No.53. On Wednesday

16<sup>th</sup> Jackie Kitchen and Willie Graham had No.50 and 9 bogies on the 13.15. Although trains of up to 11 bogies had gone up the bank several times this year without a pilot engine, the addition of No.55 as far as Kingsbog today was at least a nod to the diesel schedule that had to be kept. No.55 was driven by Jim Simpson, who although a fine engineman had latterly very little time for steam and was frankly glad to see its demise. For all that, the two engines gave us a fine run up the hill, and after the usual slick detachment at Kingsbog, Jackie treated us to 75 down the hill.

The diesel diagram required the set of the 13.15 to work the 17.05 Portrush - Coleraine, then a 17.35 short working to University Halt, returning at 17.40 followed by the 18.35 Coleraine - Portrush, 19.05 Portrush - Coleraine, 19.25 Coleraine - Portrush and finally 19.55 Portrush - Belfast. The later departure reflected a retiming of the evening Derry train from 17.45 to 18.00 and a correspondingly later Portrush connection. This intensive afternoon diagram was a Ballymena turn, posited on the assumption that the driver would arrive at Belfast in neat time to catch the last northbound local to his home depot to book off. Judge then the surprise of driver John Scott when Jack Kitchen handed him over a steam engine and bade him a cheery goodbye. I'm not sure what the Board of Trade would have said about a propelled train to University, and carrying passengers too!

All those trains were indeed steam-hauled that day and the next, steadily losing time through the evening as of course the set had to be split for the local workings and then reassembled for the return to Belfast. And of course the engine had to be uncoupled and run round four times and to take water as well. I took the 17.05 ex Portrush to University Halt, alighting there to photograph the propelled working from Coleraine, then returning to Portrush on the 18.35 ex Coleraine. When it came to the run home I left John Scott to amble quietly back on the already late 19.55 (which had to be stopped at Kingsbog where the 22.00 Ballymena local was waiting with a relief Belfast driver and guard) preferring the 19.45 relief with Bertie Wright and Tom McCrum and 8 bogies. They had an interesting schedule stopping only at Ballymoney and Ballymena, though no very exciting running took place.

Next day, Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> July, there was nothing doing for steam until the 13.15, and since the grapevine suggested that Alan Robinson would have a steam engine on the 17.30 Larne I travelled only to Coleraine, returning on the 15.00 ex Derry for an evening on the Larne line, to be narrated later. Rab Graham and Tom McCrum had No.50 and 8 bogies, and once more that temperamental engine produced only a dull run in the hands of an experienced and enthusiastic crew.

Friday 18<sup>th</sup> July featured the same engine, driver and load, though today Willie Graham was on the shovel. On Fridays there was a 17.25 diesel relief (in place of the 17.20 Cullybackey local service) to Portrush, returning as the 19.55 to Belfast. So today the Belfast crew brought their train straight back on the 17.50 Portrush - Belfast, and gave us a stylish run each way and 72 down the bank as well. The best work was done between Ballymena and Belfast on the return trip. Times of 13'42" to Antrim and 24'50" to Belfast were good, and we even got a 70 coming down through Monkstown. That 50mph restriction on steam was now completely forgotten, and we were keeping the times laid down for an MPD unit.

I spent the whole of Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> July on the Larne line, unaware that No.53, with badly blown piston rings, had worked a Portrush special. Harry Ramsey, by all accounts, had a pretty weary day with a ten coach train. Running nonstop from Ballymena in the evening he planned to get momentum for a climb of the bank. But after a spirited run down through Cookstown Junction there was a sudden brake application as some lunatic on board attempted to open a door as they approached Antrim.

Although it was a pity not to have had a further run to Portrush, I clearly missed nothing!

More in hope than expectation I turned up at York Road after mid-day on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> July, delighted to see the station pilot putting eight coaches into Platform 2. It appeared that the 13.15 would be steam for the week, and that Control had rearranged the diagram to cut out that propelling working to University Halt. On arrival at Portrush the engine was booked to run light to Coleraine and back to turn, then empty carriages to Coleraine to work the 18.35 to Portrush, 19.05 Portrush - Coleraine and finally 19.25 Coleraine - Portrush. The rest of the diagram would be worked by one double-ended MPD car and a Coleraine driver.

This was Jack Macauley's week for the 13.15, but "Engine John" had swapped turns with Rab Graham who had No.50 with fireman Gerry Phelan and 8 bogies. We had a punctual run with no histrionics and an on-time arrival in Coleraine, where I got off. I photographed the light engine at Calf Lane gates, then the empty carriages near University and finally the 18.35 coming into University Halt where I boarded the train for the remainder of the diagram. Rab Graham had in the meantime handed over to Tom Smith, whose style of driving was a good deal more vigorous than that of most of his Ballymena colleagues. Although I didn't realise it, these were the last pictures I was to take of service trains on the Portrush branch. It was not the driver's fault that the 19.25 branch train was delayed 7 minutes awaiting the Down Derry, and after reassembling the train the 19.55 was 16 minutes late away from Portrush. No.50 was overdue for a boiler washout, and despite Tom Smith's efforts no time was regained. The 22.00 Ballymena local which finished his turn was delayed until the 19.55 from Portrush finally arrived 20 minutes after time. In consequence the diagram was further altered next day. The 13.15 became an out and back steam turn for a Belfast crew, with nothing for the engine to do in the afternoon except run light to Coleraine to turn. In the circumstances this was the wisest course.

On Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> July No.50 appeared again on the 13.15, still in need of a washout. With five regular daily steam diagrams involving the station pilot and the stone trains there was no surplus of engines or shed men, and much to his disgust Rab had to work an ailing engine gently all the way out and back. At least, in contrast to the previous evening, they were back in Belfast just in time for the Ballymena guard to nip round to join the 22.00 on his way home.

By next day, Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> July, No.50 had finally been stopped for washout and No.53 with a blowing piston ring was turned out on the 13.15. No.4 or No.55 might have been a better bet, but the stone trains had first call on the most reliable engines. Today Rab had just seven bogies, and with Gerry Phelan again on the shovel we had a competent run to Antrim in exactly 29 minutes, max 69. This was the fourth run in succession where we had a time of 30 minutes or better on this first section. I was only able to go to Antrim today, but I heard later that on the run home No.53 was no better than No.50 the previous evening.

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> July was Rab's rest day, and with the train restored to eight bogies we had No.53 yet again, crewed by Willie Gillespie and Gerry Phelan. It was clear from the outset that they were in for a hard day, and on the return journey they were really 'down the pan' as early as Ballymoney. In time-honoured fashion a note was tied to the hand ring at Dunloy asking the signalman to contact Belfast for some relief, and though we didn't know it, No.55 was taken off the last Down empty stone train of the day and despatched to Antrim to give assistance. As she backed gently on to the 19.55 driver Harry Ramsey was looking positively gleeful. ("Ah, we had to give Gillespie a pull up the hill!") The two engines whipped the train away to 60 at Templepatrick, and but for a distant signal at Kingsbog we

would have gone over the top even faster than our 50 min. We stopped at Whiteabbey in exactly 19 minutes to set down the guard for the 22.00 Ballymena. The most surprised person on the train was probably the late Derek Henderson. He hadn't been aware that a second engine was coming on at Antrim, and could scarcely contain his excitement at what seemed to be No.53's miraculous revival!

And so to the last day of that week - and the penultimate appearance of steam on the 13.15. No.50 was once again at the head of an 8 bogie train, and Geordie Gaw was firing to Rab on his last 13.15 run. We had another 29 minute run to Antrim, with the last 75 max down the bank that I timed in regular steam days. Not until the RPSI "Portrush Flyer" on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1973 was I to stop my watch again on the magic 12 seconds coming down into Antrim. We had a stop at Cookstown Junction, then ran to Ballymena in 11'29" with a steady 60/62 through Kellswater. Most exciting was Cullybackey - Ballymoney, for which the diesel booking was 20 minutes, not allowing for the hand ring at Dunloy. Entering into the spirit of the occasion, Rab stepped out of his seat as they approached Dunloy and took the tablet off his fireman: "I'll do this" he muttered, and he did too - at exactly 60mph! Then we were away to 72 down Ballyboyland bank, and the section was run in 19'50". 11'28" to Coleraine, max 64 coming down from the Two Mile Bridge, and 10'50" into Portrush, where the station clock showed an arrival one minute early! The return on the 17.50 ex Portrush was a quietly professional effort which brought us into Belfast dead on time - as Mac Arnold noted, with a level of performance equal to the MPD set which should have worked the train!

I was rather caught out by the appearance of steam on the 13.15 on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> July, and indeed only found out about it at the weekend. Dan McAtamney had No.50 again, though I gather the level of performance was constrained by the fact that they left Belfast without a full bunker of coal. Until this year that problem could have been easily remedied at Coleraine but of course by now the last provincial coaling plant had been demolished. Coming back on the 19.55 I gather they had a stylish run in 29'32" from Antrim, net 25 excluding signal checks, with a nippy 65 down through Monkstown.

On Bank Holiday Monday 4<sup>th</sup> August there were two steam workings on the Larne line as well as the 09.45 Portrush. Due to a spare diesel set being based in the North West for Derry Holiday Week traffic, the 17.30 Larne was to be steam each evening that week, and this morning I had an early start from Finaghy (via the 05.20 number 59 bus from Sicily Park) to make the 06.45 Larne. On the main line the 09.45 ex Belfast - a train which never usually saw steam haulage - featured two country drivers: John Scott to Ballymena and John Doherty forward to Portrush. No.53 had a train of 7 bogies and Davie Smith was the fireman. Although we had a slow climb of the bank, Scott let No.53 run up to 67 down the hill to Antrim, and after Ballymena Doherty did not badly considering he rarely had the chance to stand on a steam engine. A third driver was involved that day, Percy Mitchell having the honour of working the 19.55 Portrush - Belfast by steam for the last time, and one of the highlights of a good run was a speedy 63 round the Dunminning curves.

Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> August should have been one of the highlights of the year - indeed the previous year had been the last time six steam specials worked "Relief of Derry" specials into the Maiden City. This year, though, there was an air of foreboding overhanging the day, and the evening news bulletins were to carry stories that took my mind well away from railways. Only three timers ventured out that day for the two steam specials and I wasn't one of them. No.4 and Harry Ramsey worked a 09.05 from Ballymena, followed by No.55 and Davie McDonald on a 09.15 from Antrim. No.55 worked back at 18.45 with Bertie Wright, and No.4 at 19.05 with Paddy Dobbin. Mac Arnold later confirmed that no great quality of running had taken place. And that was the last steam "Derry Day".

I wasn't out either for a works excursion for Courtaulds Factory at Carrickfergus on 21<sup>st</sup> August. No.6 worked a nine coach train from Larne to Belfast where, due to smaller than expected passenger carryings three bogies were detached before No.53 took the train forward to Portrush and back. Symptomatic of the state things had got into, No.53's brick arch partially collapsed on the outward run. For the return trip down the Larne line No.4 was turned out. None of the three drivers involved that day were ex-LMS NCC men. Tommy Deane on No.6 had been passed out for driving in 1968, and Barney McCrory with No.4 was working his first main line steam passenger train since becoming a driver just the previous month. Driving the train to Portrush and back was a man whose experience had all been on the Great Northern. Peter McCann of Portadown, along with his colleague Jimmy Donnelly, had recently transferred to York Road. Peter had years of firing experience on Jeeps on his own main line, and knew very well how to nurse an engine with half a brick arch.

Two days later No.53 with a crane special and No.55 on a ballast went out to Lock Crossing for a renewal of bridge 219 on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> August. Mac Arnold photographed No.53 at Limavady Junction on her way home on the Sunday morning. Driver Willie Gillespie reckoned he hadn't enough water to make the column at Castlerock, and had to resort to using a tap and hose on the platform to top up the tank. As Mac wrote, that scene seemed to symbolise the end of NCC steam.

There was one further steam passenger job - a football special to Ballymena on 6<sup>th</sup> September with No.50 and Davie McDonald and George Robinson. She had a heating bag only at one end, so we ran bunker first from Belfast to ensure that the fans at least arrived in Ballymena warm. It was by no means the worst of runs, and we ran into the sixties going out and coming back. But on a dull and wet day it was, overall, a rather depressing experience.

## 5. Summer On The Larne Line

The last days of steam in Ulster were of course on the Larne line. Five times a day the spoil trains were bringing the M2 out along the foreshore of Belfast Lough, and would continue to until May 1970. Despite what seemed to be a sufficiency of diesel units, NIR seemed not to be able to dispense totally with steam on some Larne trains - indeed between 12<sup>th</sup> July and 28<sup>th</sup> August I left York Road exactly twenty times in steam hauled trains which should have been diesel. And of course the summer period saw - probably for the last time - large volumes of tourist traffic on the Stranraer steamer. Half a century ago people could still be seen trudging from the train to the Ferry Terminal carrying suitcases, and unencumbered by security checks. Stranraer was one of the busier seaports in the United Kingdom. And although an increasing number of cars were being driven on to the ferries now, the railway on both sides of the North Channel was still the transport of choice for many holidaymakers.

Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> July was relatively quiet. 1969 was the first year there was no steam on the GN area of NIR (an engine and coaches had been sent over the previous year for the Sham Fight specials between Portadown and Scarva on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1968) and there were just two steam specials on the Larne line. Paddy Dobbin and No.50 had ten bogies running empty to Jordanstown for a 10.09 special to Larne. A group of us joined it here, running nonstop on an unusual section from Carrickfergus to Larne Town. We headed back to Glynn by service train to photograph No.55 on a second ten bogie Larne special, and then on to Belfast as we knew the 14.05 regular train would also be steam hauled. Jackie Kemp of Larne with fireman Johnny Magill had No.53 and 8 bogies. On arrival at Larne Harbour No.50 shunted the stock out of the platform, and after the 16.10 from Belfast arrived No.53 shunted the vans off the back of this train. (The 15.55 perishable was cancelled on this day, and the vans for the steamer came



on the back of the 16.10.) So it was a busy afternoon at the Harbour - the first of many this summer. My day finished on 17.20 Larne Harbour - Belfast, No.53 again with 8 and a van, another Larne turn with driver Bobby Vance, and once again Johnny Magill. Johnny was rather a legendary figure - the young man who fired to Rab Graham one day in 1968 when there was a loco failure at Whitehead and one engine hauled 800 tons of spoil to Carrickfergus - surely a record for in BR terms a class 4 tank engine!

My next foray down the Larne line was on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> July, when I came back early from Portrush to cover the 17.30 Larne with No.50, Alan Robinson and Albert Plews. We had a cheery enough run to Larne, managing to get up to 62 down Mount bank, and 58 between Carrick and Whitehead. Coming back on the 19.15 from Larne it was soon clear that all was not well, and indeed there was a prolonged stop at Magheramorne to examine the engine. We struggled on, mostly in the thirties, to Carrick where a look out of the train revealed the driver on the platform examining the motion. Derek Henderson was on board, and he was soon down beside Robinson: a classic case of enthusiast and professional in co-operation! As a time-served ships' engineer, Derek was in a good position to help, and within ten minutes they had the problem sorted out. Characteristically, Mac Arnold was most displeased: "Dreadful business ... they should be arranging another engine and not struggling on with this one." But once on the move, we had a spirited climb of the Mount bank, and even worked up to 59 on the restart from Whiteabbey. There is a rugged durability in the steam engine not always present in more modern locomotive technology!

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> July was the first weekend of "Glasgow Fair" traffic, and Larne man John Weatherupp had an unexpected steam shift, having No.51 on the 07.55 and 14.05 boat trains. Dan McAtamney brought the engine off shed, and the two drivers changed on the platform. Weatherupp's mate in the morning was Paddy Lamb, and in the afternoon Arthur McMenamin. With an 8 coach train the two down runs were quite good and indeed on the 07.55 he whipped No.51 up to 60 between Greenisland and Carrickfergus. The returns were in each case on boat trains booked nonstop but with a conditional set-down at Carrickfergus. With a heavy load and an inexperienced fireman they lost 8 minutes on the 35 minute schedule, but in the circumstances it was unlikely that they were ever going to keep it. The 14.05 finished Weatherupp's day, and Bobby Kemp worked the 17.05. 29 minutes to Carrickfergus broke no records, but after a set-down stop we continued to Belfast in 17'04" managing to get up to 64 at Whitehouse.

Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July proved to be the last of the great days of steam in the history of the Larne line. No less than six trains - the 06.45, 07.55, 10.05, 13.35, 14.05 and 17.30 ex Belfast - were steam that day to cater for the returning Scottish holidaymakers. My coverage began with the 10.05 Down Boat Train, and one of York Road's more recently passed-out drivers, Paddy Russell along with fireman George Gaw. With 7 bogies we had an ordinary enough run out, returning on the 11.00 with an extra van of mails. I stuck with No.4 again for the 13.35, a bright effort with Percy Mitchell and Geordie Gaw once more. Max on this run was a cheerful 60 round Briggs's Loop into Whitehead. I got off at Glynn to photograph the departing train and the arrival of its return as the 15.00 from Larne. Still with 7 bogies we had another sprightly effort, though not quite managing a 60 in any section.

My third run to Larne that day - all with No.4 - was on the 17.30 and the crew was George Houston and George Robinson. Houston was a solid if unexciting man on the regulator, and we had a punctual but unexciting run to Larne. No.51 had gone down on the 14.05 to work the 17.05 Up boat train, and this passed us en route. The day ended with the 18.45 ex Larne, with two brown vans on the end of

the train. Another rather ordinary run, but a good day. It was almost certainly the first time I'd had three Down runs going beyond Whitehead in one day.

Ian Wilson went down on the 14.05 with No.51 and eight bogies, driver Jimmy Ramsey of Larne. Coming back with Bobby Vance, also of Larne, there was another brisk finish to the 17.05 ex Larne - 41 min at Greenisland, and a 70 coming in the shore. There were signals coming into Belfast and Ian reckoned the net time around 36 minutes.

The Larne line was steam-free for the following week, but preparation for the Derry Holiday Week contributed directly to another good day for steam on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> August. A set of coaches was worked to Derry, but hauled by a 70 class set which left them a bit short for another busy Saturday. So for the second Saturday in a row John Weatherupp of Larne had steam on the 07.55 with No.53 and fireman Tom McCrum. Rab McDonald had given her some mechanical attention during the week, and she produced a sound effort with an 8 bogie load, including an excellent 64 max between Greenisland and Carrickfergus. We'd been led to believe that there might be a relief train to Portrush later in the morning, so most of us headed back to Belfast on what turned out to be a wild goose chase. But at least there was the 14.05, with driver George Greer of Larne and once again Tom McCrum firing No.4. With 6 bogies he produced a bright run, getting into the high fifties between Greenisland and Carrick, and Carrick and Whitehead. At Larne Harbour we had the unexpected bonus of an impromptu relief to the 15.00 Larne - Belfast, an all-stations train which connected out of a sailing from Stranraer. This left seriously overcrowded, and the steam set followed at 15.15 instead of waiting to work the 17.05 express boat train. The running, however, resembled more an empty carriage working than a scheduled passenger train!

For the second successive Saturday I had a third run to Larne, this time on the 17.30 with the surprise choice of No.10. No.50 had already been despatched to Larne with empty carriages to work the 17.05 Up, and we passed this train at Whitehead. I was quick enough to get my camera out of the window and photograph - certainly for the last time - two scheduled steam trains passing on 5'3" double track. No.10's woebegone appearance was matched by the state of her footplate. As related earlier, a fire at York Road had destroyed some of the timbers on her footplate. Since by that stage she had been largely reduced to ballast work that kind of repair work was not seen as a priority. So fireman Willie Graham had to do his work almost literally walking the plank over a hole in the floor, and things were not helped by a stone-throwing lout who managed to break a side window in the cab, cutting Paddy Dobbin's wrist in the process. Injector problems and a sticking brake in the train made a bad situation worse, and the 18.45 from Larne became progressively more weary as we dragged towards Belfast.

I've already recorded the details of August Bank Holiday Monday on the main line, but a trip to Portrush that Monday 4<sup>th</sup> August was preceded by a run to Larne. Any thoughts that the previous Saturday might have been No.10's swansong were rapidly dispelled as she emerged from the shed to work the 06.45 Boat Train. The mercurial "Batman" Simpson was rather less than pleased to have such a crock of an engine, and a quiet lad like Aubrey Ryan would probably have been as intimidated by his driver's mood as he was appalled at the engine's condition. And yet, albeit with a 5 bogie load, the two of them produced a very presentable run. 58 at Whitehouse before stopping at Whiteabbey was quite remarkable, and every other section of the run produced a bit of sparkle. They kept the diesel schedule all right, but a ten minute turnround at Larne Harbour was nigh impossible for a steam train needing a complicated shunt. The train had to be pushed out of the platform to facilitate a run-round and then shoved back in again, so we were ten minutes late away. Some more

determined work won back four of them by Carrickfergus, and we were looking forward to the final nonstop dash to Belfast. Alas, from Bleach Green we were following rather than preceding the 07.20 ex Coleraine, and the run was spoiled by a signal stop at Whiteabbey, and two further checks coming into Belfast. As we came to rest nine minutes down in Platform 3, DH loco No.1, just four days in service, was shunting in the opposite platform. The shape of things to come!

Young Aubrey Ryan had plenty of steam experience that week, for the 17.30 was steam each night, and he fired four of the five runs. A word might be said about this train in the summer time, before an analysis of the week's performance.

For most of the year the 17.30 was primarily a business train. Many of its regular users would have had to make a smart dash from their city centre offices to the rather inconveniently sited York Road terminus. We timers would have found ourselves among gents in suits and soft hats, usually scanning the broadsheet Belfast Telegraph; in those far-off days "The Tele" published no less than four editions - Fourth, Early Sixth, Sixth and Eighth. In his banking days Mac Arnold was a regular recorder on this train. His legendary secretive manner included furtive recording of times and speeds, and his wife Kathleen knew not to make any conversation before her husband burst into the house and scribbled down a full set of memorised times for the last part of his log! In the summer, the staid season ticket holders were supplemented by holidaymakers en route for Scotland via the 7pm Stranraer Steamer. The official boat train was the 17.55, but the mails for the steamer went on the 17.30 along with quite a lot of passengers wanting to secure a seat on the boat if the sailing was busy.

Before 1966 timers on their way to Great Britain for railway holidays were often to be found on the 17.30, and later in the evening on "The Paddy" - officially "The Northern Irishman" night sleeper which was steam from Stranraer to Carlisle and sometimes onwards to Crewe. At this elapse of time the existence can now be revealed of the famous Whitehead to Ayr monthly return ticket which for a while Mac Arnold was prepared to hire to members of the timing fraternity - along with the dire warning not to allow it to be punched, or worse still collected. But that's a story beyond the scope of this survey!

Returning to the first week of August 1969 it is worth tabulating the performance during the last week when this iconic train was steam every evening:

Date	Loco/load	Driver	Belfast-Carrick	Carrick-W'head	W'head-B'carry	B'carry -Larne Town
Schedule			16	9	4	10
04.08	10+6	Crymble	13'56"	7'18"		
05.08.	4+6	Crymble	15'36"	7'53"	4'46"	11'46"
06.08	53+6	Crymble	13'38"	7'20"	4'09"	10'51"
07.08	50+6	Crymble	23'40"	7'49"	4'28"	10'57"
08.08	53+7	Crymble	13'35"	6'57"	4'07"	9'57"

To my mind the two most remarkable performances were on 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> August, when Crymble topped the short stretch of 1:97 at Greenisland without falling below 48, in each case getting up to 60 before the Carrickfergus stop. In the log tables of "Steam Over Belfast Lough" I can find only one better minimum speed of 50, on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1958 with driver Billy Steenson and No.9 with a load of 170 tons.

Equally noteworthy was the performance Crymble coaxed out of No.10 on the first evening of his week. Beyond Whitehead the run on 8<sup>th</sup> August was the only one to keep that difficult 10 minutes from Ballycarry to Larne Town - almost impossible since by that time trains had to slow into the twenties for a hand exchange at Magheramorne Loop Cabin. That night fireman Gerry Phelan was nimble enough to take the tablet at 30mph, and we shot away to 62 over the Glynn Causeway to stop in Larne Town just under the ten minutes. The times to Carrickfergus on 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> August seem rather slow, but in each case there is an explanation. On the first evening there was a dragging brake out of Belfast, and on the second Aubrey Ryans had a struggle to get No.53 "on the boil". That night we fell into the teens at Greenisland. Aubrey was a good lad, the last of that final group of teenagers engaged as cleaners at York Road in the early 1960s, and frankly admitted at Larne that this temperamental engine had got the better of him. It's to his credit that from Carrick onwards things were a lot better, and the run home perfectly presentable. No.50's appearance on 7<sup>th</sup> August was in fact her last Larne line passenger run, and her football special on 6<sup>th</sup> September was to be her final run on a passenger train.

The final 'big' Saturday on the Larne line was 9<sup>th</sup> August, when for the very last time three Larne trains left York Road on the same day. My two Down runs were with No.53 on the 07.55 ex Belfast, driver Bill Smith of Larne with a fireman by the name of Duffy whom I don't recollect encountering before or since, and No.55 on the 14.05 with Bobby Kemp and Gerry Phelan. In this rather melancholy period of 'lasts', this was to be No.55's final appearance in Larne Harbour and the final run I timed with her. With a 7 bogie load, Smith did a sound run to Larne, the best section being 7'10" from Carrickfergus to Whitehead, max 56.

Both the 07.55 and the 14.05 came back with nonstop boat trains, and for once everything went absolutely right. Two of Larne's best men were having their last experiences of express boat train running, and with hand exchanges at Magheramorne and Ballycarry to contend with the 35 minute diesel allowance would be a tight proposition. The steamers were running late, and the 09.40 was deferred until 10.55. This gave Bill Smith every incentive for a stylish run in 34'26", taking Mount bank at a min of 50 and doing 64 at Whitehouse on the run into Belfast. Surely that was to be the highlight of the day? Well, eight hours later the 17.05 boat train was also delayed, finally leaving the Harbour at 18.26. John Weatherupp had a bogie less than Smith, and he cracked old No.55 along very nicely indeed. 62 before Carrick seemed good preparation for the climb to Greenisland, but a signal check brought us down to 42 before the gradient eased. Down into Belfast was memorable, as for the very last time we had a cracking run doing 60 over Bleach Green and a max of 72 at Whitehouse. 34'32" from Larne was a tremendous farewell for No.55 and a great climax to her driver's steam career on his own line.

That left the 17.30, which had been steam for the sixth day in succession. We had of course passed it on the Up boat train, but as we came into Belfast Norman Foster shouted "Right lads - we'll get out for the 18.45 from Larne!" Since the station clock was coming up to 7pm, and the 18.45 was due to leave Carrick at 19.17 and Greenisland at 19.23, I thought the chances of success were nil. But with nothing else to do, I jumped into the back of the grey Morris Minor 1000. I have a vague memory of traffic being passed on the inside, and of praying that the RUC didn't stop us. At decision time for the turn up to Greenisland Norman shouted again "Right - we'll chance Carrick!" and we arrived there just as No.53 was coming in five minutes late. Worthwhile it was too, for with No.53 and Aubrey Ryans firing to him once more we got 62 max at post 2 on the last section from Whitehead. Norman would

have been staying with Mac, so leaving him to get the 20.10 back to Carrick to collect the car, I made my way home, well pleased with a splendid day's running.

Although I didn't know it, that was not just the climax of the summer, but really the beginning of the end. The 17.30 was steam twice in the following week, with No.4 and Dan McAtamney on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August. But with a high level of community tension that week I was reluctant to be coming back to Finaghy late in the evenings, and on Friday 15<sup>th</sup> August the 17.30 was diesel worked anyway. I ventured out on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> August. No longer having a Runabout Ticket I passed up the 07.55, and arrived at York Road in early afternoon for the 14.05 for which No.5 was the rather unlikely choice. In a summer when most Larne drivers had some steam experience Gordon Beggs and Tom McCrum had 6 bogies, but No.5 was no longer the best of engines for a hard run and we had a dull run. In contrast with the previous Saturday, the 17.05 Up boat train had a bad path - held to follow the 17.20 stopper. So Bob Kemp took it easy to avoid being blocked, and we had a set down at Whitehead anyway. 22'42" nonstop to Belfast wasn't the worst, though, and we got up to 62 coming into Belfast.

The rest of the story is briefly told. I had only one more Larne line run - the 17.30 on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> August with No.4, Dan McAtamney and Davie Smith. With 6 bogies it was a reasonable run, and we kept time out and back - even managing a 60 coming in from Whiteabbey. To my knowledge the 17.30 had its final steam haulage on 9<sup>th</sup> September, the last NIR service train to arrive in Larne Harbour behind a steam engine. A further section will complete the story of NIR steam through the last phase of the stone trains to a surprising appearance of steam at Easter 1970. But really the story of 1969 is pretty well complete - maybe just as well, as my final year at Queens University was about to begin!

## **1970 - The End Of The Spoil Trains, January - May**

*[Extract from work still in hand on the Spoil Train contract]*

### **The Final Months**

When work paused for Christmas 1969 only seven engines – Nos. 4, 5, 6, 50, 51, 53 and 55 - were still in nominal service, and No.50 was withdrawn on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1970 after failing at Mossley on the Great Northern ballast. It was as well that a temporary shortage of spoil led to a reduction in the number of trains in January and February 1970: in one particular week only 13 of 54 scheduled workings actually ran. Loads were beginning to fluctuate as well.

On a particular Saturday in February 1970 one set was composed of 15 wagons and the other of only 5. On 28<sup>th</sup> March No.5 was turned out on a Spoil train for the last time. Before the end of the spoil contract there were two final days of steam power on NIR service trains. On Easter Monday 1970 No.4 and No.5 were used to work some Carrickfergus and Whitehead local services, and No.5's last time in steam was working the 17.35 to Whitehead and 18.15 return. The following day No.4, working the 17.25 Whitehead - Belfast, brought down the curtain on Irish main line passenger steam. Strangely the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event has passed almost unnoticed in the railway press.

After Easter, with the working fleet now reduced to five engines in very poor order, it was sometimes difficult to turn out four engines, let alone cover the station pilot or any ballast work. Even No.6, probably in the worst order of them all, made a minor Spoil train comeback in those grim last days. Sadly, a fireman rushing off duty on 23<sup>rd</sup> April neglected to fill her boiler, and a melted fusible plug

ended her career. In the final weeks of operation one of the sets was reduced in size, sometimes worked by a single engine. During the last full week beginning on 27<sup>th</sup> April only one 20 wagon set was in use, and on the penultimate day of the Spoil train contract No.55 steamed for the last time. Notes from Charles Friel and Bob Clements again give a snapshot of shrinking engine availability in the last days of the contract:

20.10.69	51+53
<b>26.11.69</b>	51+53 / 4+55
15.01.70	51+53
21.01.70	51+53
27.02.70	55+6
28.02.70	51+6
<b>02.03.70</b>	51+53/ 4+55
28.04.70	51+53
29.04.70	51+53
30.04.70	51+53

### The End Of An Era

Just three engines survived to the bitter end, and No.4 and No.53 were chosen for the ceremonial last Spoil train. It seems rather surprising that No.4 should have been preferred over No.51, which was one of the most consistent performers during the last phase of operations. So on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1970 No.4 with Bertie Wright and Albert Plews and No.53 with “The Batman” Simpson and Johnny Magill slipped quietly out of York Road at 05.50 with a set of empty wagons for Magheramorne. A three car 70 class unit came out later in the morning bringing dignitaries to witness the loading of the last train, and a banner on the side of one wagon proclaimed that since the start of the contract 4,125,000 tons of spoil had been transported over some 7,600 journeys. Official figures released to the press by NIR claimed a total train mileage of 300,000, a locomotive mileage of 600,000 and a total of 137,000 wagon loads. Both engines carried commemorative headboards: it is fitting that one of them has survived and even graced the front of No.4 on the RPSI’s 2001 May tour.

After a final loaded run to Belfast, the two engines brought the empty wagons back to Magheramorne, and then ran coupled together to storage in the goods shed at Carrickfergus. For No.53 it was the end of the road: three months previously she had been given only a stay of execution following the discovery of a crack in the firebox. She never steamed again.

### Wiping The Slate Clean: Erasing The Age Of Steam ...

No.51 alone remained serviceable in what was left of the shed yard at Belfast, but on 24<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May 1970 No.4 was brought up from Carrickfergus to assist with a heavy train of bridge girders to Ballyclare Junction, where a motorway bridge was being built. No.53 had her final moment of glory when she was hauled dead to Whitehead as an exhibit at an RPSI Open Day on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1970, returning whence she had come the following day. There had been a rather grisly English parallel on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1967 when Bulleid pacifics 34013 and 34100, in course of haulage to Cashmore’s Scrapyard in Newport, were staged in Bristol as exhibits at Bath Road Diesel Depot Open Day.

No.51 had very occasional use as York Road pilot, and it is believed that her last steaming was on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1970. She was cut up in February 1971. In June 1971, No.53 was the last of the class to be

scrapped, but the following month No.4 was hauled to Whitehead to begin a life in preservation which has now well exceeded her working life as a company engine. On Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> October 1971 the goods shed and sidings at Carrickfergus followed their last occupants into railway history, and that really was the end.

Even the purchase of No.4 for preservation was a close-run thing. She was sold by tender to the highest bidder, but with the help of some 'inside information' the RPSI's bid was successful - by just £5! On the other hand, the Society had to pay an inflated price to secure the driving wheels from No.54. No.54's purchaser had a buyer for her motion, and he enlisted the help of fitter Rab McDonald to dismantle it. During this work, a connecting rod fell on the unfortunate man's foot, and by the time he returned, some of those motion parts had mysteriously disappeared. It was as if, even in death, steam had its last laugh.

Towards the end of the contract rumours proliferated that two engines were to be retained and overhauled for main line charter work: indeed at Magheramorne on the last day, one senior official told the press that NIR intended to run something like the British Railways "Fifteen Guinea Special" of 1968. He went so far as to predict that enthusiasts from all over the world would flock to travel on it!