

NEWS LETTER

November 1996

COMMENT

Reply: A letter has been received in reply to the in the last News-Letter on the current state of the RPSI. From our Carriage Officer in Dublin, it is printed in full elsewhere.

Dublin Update: From mid-February to mid-September there were over 220 recorded attendances at Heuston to work on our coaches by a team of 23 members. One member accounted for 43 appearances and only seven members turned up only once. The average number of attendances was 10, which if 4 hours of work was done, equates to 177 man-days or 23 man-weeks of effort. It is encouraging to note that 25% of the attendances were by four Junior members - a healthy percentage of the small workforce at Whitehead is also of quite a young age.

If this splendid effort was repeated in all areas of the Society, there would be no need for the constant appeals for help.

OPERATIONS

Oops (First Division): Apologies to the Operations Officer and those members who had planned to travel on the "Atlantic Coast Express" on 7th September - not 7th August as stated in the August News-Letter.

Derailment: More importantly, on the day of operation, while approaching Damhead North level crossing, south of Coleraine, on the outward journey, the leading axle of No.85's tender became derailed. A quick response by the footplate crew saw the train brought safely to a halt within a few hundred yards.

No injuries were sustained and no immediate damage to the locomotive or carriages was found. The track sustained minor damage but not enough to delay normal traffic after our train was moved

later that afternoon.

Fortunately for us, but not necessarily for the local populace, the train came to rest with the dining car straddling the level crossing. For safety reasons passengers were not allowed to detrain until a number of fire service crews arrived to help with evacuation. With the train safely emptied, the passengers were returned home by bus.

The Operations team would like to thank all the NIR management and crews who responded so magnificently and helped to ensure that our passengers and train arrived home safely.

"Portrush Flyer": Despite the smaller train this year, our Flyer season was very successful. The trains ended with a party when the local CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) branch had their now traditional annual outing with us. A cask each of Theakstons Bitter and Old Speckled Hen was polished off before the train was put to bed.

"Sixties Night": The results of our first attempt at something new were encouraging, but could have been better. Hopefully, this operation will be developed into a success akin to the barbecue trains.

"Greystones Shuttles": Unfortunately, one element of the scenario suggested in the last News-Letter has come to pass. This operation, scheduled for 22nd September had to be cancelled because IE could not provide a steam crew on the day. Our apologies to all those who had hoped to travel.

"Santa Special": This year operations are planned for 8th, 15th, 21st and 22nd December in Belfast and 1st and 8th in Dublin. Both operations officers would be very glad to have the numerous jobs filled at an early date.

Railtour 1997: It was widely reported on this year's tour that Waterford would be our next destination. Not to be! After the panic

that the Eurovision Song Contest might take place the same weekend and put up the cost of all the hotels in Dublin (it is a week earlier), we find that we cannot book enough beds in Waterford on the Saturday night anyway.

A quick check with the hotels in Tralee and we found they can accommodate us - so we are officially bound for Kerry on 10th May.

Having learned from this experience, the Operations team have already booked hotels in Waterford for 1998!

It is hoped that a trip to Blennerville on the reopened section of the Tralee & Dingle Railway can be fitted in.

LOCOMOTIVES

No.3 "R.H. Smyth": Due a boiler inspection and some minor repairs.

No.3BG "Guinness": Currently out of service, pending replacement of tubes, at Downpatrick.

No.4: Boiler - Now upright for all further work. Making and fitting of stays, water-space stays and crown stay nuts continuing. Longitudinal stays are being assembled.

Mechanical - Frames being cleaned and painted. Bogie removed for overhaul, dismantling complete. Wheels re-profiled. Dismantling of corroded bunker and tank plate-work underway. Fitting new plates.

No.27 "Lough Erne": Cleaning down, oiling and painting in progress.

No.85 "Merlin": Withdrawn pending investigation into derailment of tender No.73 on 7th September, tender uncoupled, springs removed, tested and refitted. Leading wheelset to be skimmed to remove derailment bruising.

No.171 "Slieve Gullion": Return to Whitehead deferred.

No.184: Copper pipes and the maker's plate have been stolen from the tender which is to be moved inside the shed at Mullingar shortly.

No.186: At Inchicore following open day there.

No.461: Injector problem resolved. Spark arrester removed for investigation - there is evidence of poor steaming despite

successful operation of similar devices in No.85 & No.171. Minor boiler repairs underway.

MEMBERSHIP

1997: As usual we are giving you a chance to renew before Christmas. Please use the enclosed membership form. If paying in a currency other than British or Irish, please add the equivalent of £2 as this is what our bank charges to convert to Sterling.

Standing Orders: Please - this is very important! Would those members who pay by standing order kindly ensure that the payment due to be made on 1st February next is for the correct amount. If an amendment is required, fill in the details on the renewal form and send it to your bank or to the membership address. Thank you for the time taken to check your payment!

Covenants: There has been a very disappointing response to the mailshot earlier in the year requesting members to take out a covenant. The procedure was fully explained in the letter accompanying the forms. If you are still sitting on the forms please complete and return as soon as possible as the deadline for this year's claims is approaching. Why not send in the forms with your membership renewal?

GENERAL

AGM: The date will probably be 8th March in Whitehead, but this has yet to be confirmed. A Council nomination form is included with this mailing, and it must be returned by the date stated. Also, it should be noted that any member wishing to make a proposal at the AGM should communicate it to the Secretary by 1st January to allow time for it to be included on the agenda for the meeting.

Thank You: Our Treasurer acknowledges receipt of a donation of £1,000 from the London "Syndicate" of Lance King, Robin Linsley and Leslie McAllister. The donation is the latest of many donations from the group over the years, and their on-going support is very much appreciated. The Council plan is for this donation to go towards the Locomotive Workshop for which funds are currently being sought.

A number of individual members have also recently made substantial personal

donations, and to them too we are very grateful.

Small Scale: Studio Scale Models of Alhambra, Leopardstown Road, Dublin 18, (01 4909909) are currently taking orders for a limited edition of an etched brass kit of the GNR(I) S Class in 7mm. The various versions of the locomotive will be available, i.e. S, S2, original or rebuilt, 32mm or 36.75mm gauge.

Other kits available are: GNR(I) - K15, SG/SG2 goods locomotive, D1 tender, 20 ton brake van, T2 4-4-2T; GS&WR/GSR/CIÉ - 6 wheel coaches, J15 with 1,864 gallon small tender. A full list can be had from the above address.

BELFAST MEETINGS

11th December: (1) "North West Reminiscences" - Willie John Carlin recalls his days in Strabane. (2) "Early Tours, 1967-71" - Norman Johnston's look at old tours and faces.

22nd January: "How Steam Locos Go" - Peter Scott shows how our locos are restored and maintained. Please note this is a change from the published date.

SITE

Whitehead: The complete platform road has been relayed with concrete sleepers and the double crossover has had its timbers replaced. Attention is now being turned to the timbers of the turnout at the bridge end of the platform.

If the locomotive workshop gets the go-ahead, the carriage shop and the old NIACRO tarry will have to be moved to allow sufficient ground to be cleared for building work.

Mullingar: It is hoped that a JCB can be brought onto the site soon to help in a general clear out and minor shunt. Some derelict coaches are to be brought to the track-layer yard for scrapping and No.184's tender is to be returned to the shed for safety.

Locomotive Workshop: The Society is currently negotiating with ERDF the terms under which we will be able to finance the construction of our long-awaited workshop at Whitehead. At present, the cost of a basic building will be around £80,000. As ERDF will only help with 50%, the sum we

must find is £40,000.

The workshop is required to secure the long term future of the Society - it is becoming more and more difficult, and expensive, to contract out parts of our restoration projects, not to mention the unsuitability of our existing shed from the aspects of safety and convenience.

We are asking our members to help fund the Society's share of the cost of the workshop. This can be done in a number of ways, either by a simple donation, by increasing your standing order, taking out a covenant or by travelling on an extra train at Christmas or in 1997.

SALES

New Face: Due to the pressure of studying for her exams Caroline Stewart, our northern-based Commercial Officer, has had to give up the post. Many thanks and best wishes to Caroline.

Arthur Wickham, who has twisted a few arms when carrying the sales tray on our trains, has agreed to step in and fill the breach. Welcome aboard Arthur!

Main Lines: A variety of branded RPSI items is always available from: RPSI Postal Sales, 45 Drumnacanvly Road, Portadown, Co. Armagh, BT63 5LX. The principal lines are: locomotive outline badges; videos; postcards; posters; pencils, rulers, etc.

For The Collector: Send details of your requirements to: RPSI Collector's Shop, 148 Hillsborough Road, Lisburn, Co. Antrim, BT27 5QY. Typical items are: drawings of a selection of Irish locomotives, coaches and wagons; back numbers of '5'3", tour brochures and various railway magazines; old timetables and tickets; etc.

The following books are available (prices include p&p): "The County Donegal Railway - An Irish Railway Pictorial", £8.72; "Locos & Railcars of Bord na Mona", £5.37; "Irish Railways, Traction & Travel", 3rd edition, £11.50; "The Works (150 years of Inchicore)", £6.68; "Irish Railways Past & Present, Vol. 1", £14.92; "The Derry Road", £3.30; "Slieve Gullion", £3.30; "Track Diagrams (Ireland)", £5.88; "Irish Railways in Pictures (The GNR)", £4.33.

VINTAGE TRAIN PROJECT

Background: During 1995, having had the idea in their heads for a number of years, David Humphries and Chas Meredith grasped the nettle and decided to officially ask the Council to back their vintage train project proposal.

It was felt that the project was necessary to generate an on-going income for the Society. It was also intended to secure the practical future of the Society by ensuring the continued support of IÉ, especially in providing trained locomotive crews, it being felt that the project would not be feasible without the railway company as a partner in the venture.

The Proposal: The basic idea was to produce a restored luxury train and return our two J15 locomotives to full running order, with a view to running 'all-in' package tours similar in nature to those in other countries, notably the "Royal Scotsman".

Operations would be on a 2 or 3 day basis from Dublin to Rosslare to Limerick and vice versa. Considerable funding would be needed and the proposal contained a business plan showing the predicted costs and income over a 10 year period.

Council backed the idea and a firm of business consultants, Tourism & Leisure Partners (T&L) was contracted to carry out a feasible study into the plan. Support was obtained from IÉ and Bord Fáilte both for the plan and for a major proportion of the £9,200 fees of the consultants.

The Report: Considerable effort was put into the study by T&L during the early part of this year and all members of the Council were interviewed in the process. The report has now been received and is being considered by Council and IÉ management.

T&L have concluded that, while the tourism industry likes the idea of a niche market quality vintage train, the industry does not regard the proposed itinerary or the proposed 2 or 3 day structure as fitting into established tourist trends.

We are advised that the industry regards Dublin as the only originating point for a product of this kind and the only workable version of the product would be day trips to established tourist destinations, in

particular Cork, Killarney, Galway and, in better times, Belfast (for Glens of Antrim and the Giant's Causeway) being identified.

This effectively rules out a genuine vintage train by reason of wooden bodied stock restrictions and rules out steam haulage, except in part, because of the speeds required for day trip excursions.

T&L then went on to consider what they termed 'vintage replication' using surplus NIR Mk2 or IÉ Craven coaches. Although the capital costs would vary for either option, replication costs would be extremely high and T&L concluded that insufficient traffic could be generated to make the venture economic.

The Next Step: While the Council regrets that our proposed vintage train, which was intended to make viable the restoration of our two J15 locomotives (and perhaps a third locomotive as well) and historic coaches not at present in traffic, has not found support, the proposal is not being wholly abandoned. Even now, our inventive (?) and lateral (!) thinking members are considering how a product might be developed which would be of mutual benefit to the Society and to IÉ, and perhaps involving NIR.

It is felt that the expenditure on the consultant's report was worthwhile even though it did not support our initial proposal - there are a number of suggestions within the report that are of great value and which we hope to capitalise on in the future. The support for the initial concept from IÉ and Bord Fáilte was also encouraging and hopefully this support will continue for whatever path the Society decides to tread in the future.

In the meantime, Council would like to thank David and Chas for the substantial effort they put into their well thought out and comprehensive initial proposal. Thanks are also due to IÉ and Bord Fáilte for their encouragement and financial support, and to all those who assisted T&L in the compilation of the data necessary to produce their report.

EDITORIAL ADDRESS

148 Church Road, Newtownabbey,
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REPLY TO COMMENT IN AUGUST NEWS-LETTER

“Is the RPSI experiencing terminal difficulties?” This is how the Secretary began his front page article in the August News-Letter. Well I hope not. While agreeing with the opening statements and observations he makes, I believe his reproach of the membership for lack of support is unfair.

Most of our members are people who see the Society as a good cause, joining up and paying their annual subscription is their way of making a contribution to what is after all a registered charity. Some are not fortunate enough to have the time that active members can give, or do not live close to any of our centres of activity, and travel can be expensive. For this they should not be made feel guilty. Personality clashes also have to be recognised. I know for a fact that there are members who would not work with me, and I am certainly not unique in this situation. So I think they can be spared what was called “That old spiel again”.

Also I take exception to the gratuitous lecture to southern members halfway through the same article. We are indeed pleased with our performance figures, which I believe are more due to a hard working sales team, using every available technique, concentrating on the appropriate market, and backed up by a well presented product, rather than a lucky act of fate. So the Secretary can rest assured that the smug complacency implied by him is far from the truth. And as to the statement that “the locomotives and carriages they operate rely on northern input for any heavy engineering repairs”, over the bar of 2421 there is a photograph of 461 hanging from a crane with its driving axle removed for repairs in Inchicore. With regard to carriages, only three of the nine currently in use have come from Whitehead, of the rest one was restored at Mullingar and the remainder came from the scrap-yard in Inchicore to be refitted by members at Heuston, at almost no cost to the Society.

While all of the mechanical departments are glad of any support we can give each other, with far less resources available now than in previous years, the Carriage Officer at Whitehead is hard pressed as it is, and can offer little support to the Southern Carriage Department, but even if this were not the case there is the prohibitive cost of transferring vehicles for repairs.

What is stated as a “logical conclusion” escapes me. The members may recall that a Council decision was made in 1988 not to spend money on the green-liveried southern set, part of the theory being that Whitehead would turn out replacement coaches, with the laminate carriages eventually ending up on the restoration assembly line, and even talk of three or four sets being restored, i.e. Bredin, GNR, laminate and NCC - a veritable wardrobe for any occasion. This totally over-ambitious plan did not work. The laminates were let fall apart, and out of nine only two have been spared from scrapping. Despite a massive ERDF investment programme, which created a much healthier financial situation, Whitehead failed to deliver enough vehicles fit for traffic in the south, leading to the carriage fiasco of Summer 1994, when IE coaches had to be hired.

The scenario of “Dublin providing the bulk of Society income” and “small but dedicated teams struggling against all the odds at Whitehead to produce locomotives and two trains of carriages for all our operations” is the sort of heady stuff which led to the aforementioned fiasco. Even Whitehead cannot work miracles, the necessity to use mostly paid labour in support of such a policy would incur costs far beyond the ability of Dublin to meet, and would certainly lead to “terminal difficulties” for the Society.

Struggling against all odds is not confined to Whitehead as it seems is being suggested. I would say that we are at war with “the odds”, and this war of attrition will only be waged successfully using a properly thought out strategy. The strategy of the Southern Carriage Department, to continue to provide a low cost but effective fleet for the operational section that is currently winning most of the battles, remains unchanged until something better is proposed.

Brian T. Gillen
Carriage Officer South

(The Carriage Officer's reply is accepted as valid criticism for the most part, but in one place he misses the point - in paragraph 5 and 6 he appears to believe that the “logical conclusion” was being proposed as a solution in the original Comment. Far from it, it was merely predicted as an outcome if the present trends continue without significant changes occurring, and THAT was the whole point of the Comment column being published.)