

ON SHED

The Journal of the 8D Association

Volume 5 Number 3 – September 2015



Warrington Dallam Shed – 22 October 1961

On 22nd October 1961 Jubilee class locomotive number 45731 *Perseverance* stands outside Dallam shed awaiting her next turn. **Photo by Harry Arnold MBE**

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Editor

For the first time since the 8D Association was formed one of our scheduled events was not able to go ahead. It was the Wapping tunnel visit that should have taken place on Saturday 13th of June 2015. It was a visit that many members had been looking forward to and securing it in the first place had been a real coup for the association.

The visit had been organised through the Friends of Williamsons tunnels in in particular through one of their members Chris Iles. Chris is a driver with Virgin Trains and a great enthusiast of all things underground. Unfortunately in the week before the visit was due to take place Chris became very seriously ill and ended up in hospital. This was the reason why the event could not take place. Chris is currently making a good recovery and he is determined that the event will be re-arranged as soon as it can be. On behalf of the association I have wished Chris a full and speedy recovery and we look forward to seeing him at a re-arranged visit.



Runcorn station in the 1950s. Photo by Roy Gough

Other site visits have been well received including our furthest jaunt yet which was by vintage bus to the Llangollen Railway.

We now move into our winter programme of illustrated talks which I hope prove to be as popular as this year's walks have been. **Paul Wright**

8D Trip to Llangollen Railway



The 8D Association pose for the camera at Carrog station goods yard on Saturday 15th August 2015 after they had just arrived on their special bus. Photo by Tony Foster

On Saturday 15th August 2015 the 8D Association visited the Llangollen Railway. This was the first time that the association had ventured so far and for the trip a Crossville Motor Company bus of 1963 vintage was used. The bus is co-owned by four individuals including 8D member Phil Creagan. The bus was built by the Bristol company and was a 'Low Decker' double deck bus. The 'Low Decker' designation was given because this type of bus was lower in height than a standard double decker which allowed it to pass under many low bridges. The bus used by the 8D Association had been based at the Wrexham depot of Crossville. The bus was driven by another one of the co-owners Nigel Massey and pick up points were at Warrington Bank Quay station and Victoria Square in Widnes. Twenty-four people travelled on the bus.

The group travelled to Carrog where the Llangollen Railway has a delightful rural GWR station that was for many years the western terminus of the preserved line. A journey to Llangollen on a Wickhams DMU of 1955 vintage followed. During the journey the group was accompanied by David Mulholland a volunteer station master at Carrog station. David is also a member of the Warrington & District Model Engineers and he had learned about the visit from 8D member Roy Allen. David wanted to make the visit something special so he had arranged a shed tour.



Left: Carrog station looking east on 15th August 2015 when the 8D Association visited. The Wickhams DMU is seen on a Corwen service. Photo by Tony Foster

Upon arrival at Llangollen station members split into two groups

as only ten people at a time are allowed on the shed tours. In the shed there were a number of items of interest including the new build Patriot class locomotive 5551 *Unknown Warrior* which is progressing very well.

The group then travelled to Corwen on a steam hauled service. At the head of the train was ex-GWR 2-6-2T locomotive number 5199. The section of line between Carrog and Corwen is the most recent extension of the Llangollen Railway. After a short stop at Corwen members returned to Carrog. There was then free time to enjoy the local scene before the group climbed back onto the bus for the journey home. There was unanimous agreement that the trip had been successful and something similar will be repeated in the future. **Paul Wright**



Left: The former Llangollen station goods yard is now the locomotive depot and works for the Llangollen Railway. In this view from 15th August 2015 members of the 8D Association can be seen enjoying the ambience during the second of two guided tours of the facility. Photo by Paul Wright

New Members

At the 8D Association membership is currently 69. Welcome to our latest members **Chris Jennings** from Latchford, **K C Lister** from Widnes and **John Sudworth** from Ashton-in-Makerfield.

Ellesmere Port Coal Trains End

The Ellesmere Port Manisty Wharf to Fiddlers Ferry coal trains along with the associated empty wagon movements from Garston have now ceased. This is due to the closure of the coal wharf caused by the proposed redevelopment of the Manisty Wharf area by Peel holdings.

For the present the sand train from Middleton Towers will continue to run to Ellesmere Port. However once new sidings near the site of West Cheshire Junction are brought into use this will become the new Terminus for this service. When this happens the stretch of line between the new sidings and Ellesmere Port will have no scheduled freight trains operating over it. There will only be the four return passenger services operated by Northern.

There was a derailment at Ellesmere port involving one of the sand trains on Monday the 27th of July 2015 when 66 015 came off the road while running round the Sand wagons. It meant all electric trains from Ellesmere Port to Hooton where cancelled on that day.

With the end of the Ellesmere Port coal trains and the suspension of the Liverpool Docks coal trains there has been very little traffic apart from light engine moves between Ditton and Arpley along the Low Level line.

Freightliner heavy haul have started running a Monday to Friday service between Hunterston and Fiddlers Ferry. The train utilises the former Ellesmere Port set of wagons which are still based at Garston. The empty wagons set off on a Monday morning from Garston to Hunterston. Upon arrival they are loaded with departure for Fiddlers Ferry being at 19.38 with the train travelling overnight to arrive at the Power Station around 05.00. After unloading the coal the wagons return empty to Hunterston thus completing a round trip every 24 hours. On Saturday mornings after

unloading at the Ferry, the wagons are returned to Garston after reversal at Latchford sidings.



***On the 11th of June 2015
4F03 the 15.15 Fiddlers
Ferry Power Station to
Ellesmere Port Manisty
Wharf empty coal train is
seen passing through the
site of Norton station. Photo
by Doug Birmingham***

Steam Workings



Stanier Duchess Pacific locomotive number 46233 Duchess of Sutherland is seen passing through Roby with the Crewe to Carlisle Cumbrian Mountain Express on Saturday 18th July 2015. Photo by Doug Birmingham

On Saturday 18th of July 2015 Stanier Duchess Pacific number 46233 *Duchess of Sutherland* passed through Runcorn on the rear of the 05.14 Crewe to Carlisle Cumbrian Mountain Express. The train made a stop at Runcorn to pick up passengers at 05.48. The outward working was via Liverpool Lime Street. From Lime Street number 46233 headed the train on the next leg of its journey which saw it pass through Huyton, St Helens Central and Wigan North Western. It then travelled via Blackburn, Hellifield and the Settle and Carlisle line. The return from Carlisle was via Shap Summit and Preston with the Duchess on the rear from Liverpool Lime Street back to Crewe setting down at Runcorn.

The Duchess was due to work the following days North Wales Coast Express from Liverpool Lime Street to Holyhead, but was ruled to be out of gauge between Frodsham and Helsby. Jubilee Class locomotive number 45690 *Leander* was scheduled to replace her, but repairs had not been completed on a stuck regulator which had resulted in this engine being removed from a Cumbrian Mountain Express at Carlisle several weeks earlier. Sister Jubilee 45699 *Galatea* was therefore substituted and was at the rear of the empty stock from Crewe to Liverpool. Sadly the Jubilee failed to make it to Holyhead. She was removed from the train at Llandudno Junction due to a hot axle box being discovered. The assistant diesel locomotive was removed from the rear of the train and hauled it minus *Galatea* through to Holyhead and also on the return to Liverpool Lime Street. *Galatea* was

subsequently scheduled to return light engine from Llandudno Junction to Carnforth Steamtown.

Interesting workings

A South West trains Class 158 unit number 158 889 has been operating in and out of Liverpool in the formation of services to and from Norwich. The unit has been leased to East Midlands trains for two years supposedly for operating the expanded Nottingham to Newark Castle service. It has been placed in the general pool of 158 unit's so can appear anywhere. It has had its South West trains decals replaced by those of East Midlands Trains. The livery is slightly different however despite both companies being owned by Stagecoach.



Left: A Northern Electric 319 number 319374 passes through Whiston on 19th July 2015 on a Liverpool Lime street to Manchester Piccadilly working. Photo by Doug Birmingham

Also now making visits to Liverpool Lime Street on the

Birmingham services are some of London Midland's new Class 350/3 Desiro units. These were built as part of the joint order with Trans-Pennine Express (who ordered class 350/4 units). The London Midland units which have a top speed of 110 MPH were built to increase capacity on the Crewe and Birmingham New Street to London Euston services. It would appear that they have now just been put into the general pool of units at Northampton depot and they are allocated on an ad hoc basis to any service. This has resulted in the Crewe to Euston service being sometimes formed of Class 350/2 sets which have a maximum speed of 100 MPH when the service south of Rugby is timed for 110 MPH operation.

London Midland are set to lose their last remaining seven class 321 unit's as they are being transferred after losing one carriage to Scotrail. As compensation London Midland will receive a like number of class 319 units from Thameslink which will be refurbished at Wolverton Works. Although they are supposed to be for operating Northampton and Tring to Euston services there is every possibility that they could appear on Birmingham to Liverpool services. If that occurs, we would then have two different operators of Class 319's on services into Liverpool.

Head of Steam Reopens

On Tuesday the 7th of July 2015 the former Head of Steam pub that was located at Liverpool Lime Street station was reopened as the latest new Wetherspoons in the city. It is named "The North Western" and has some railway artefacts on its walls along with a tiled map of the railways in the area.

An A4 at Dallam

On the 12th of June 2015 Gresley designed class A4 Pacific number 60009 *Union of South Africa* was scheduled to run with its support coach from Crewe to Carnforth so that it could haul a special train "*The Hadrian*" on the following day.

The *Hadrian* originated from Leicester it was supposed to be hauled by the A4 from Hellifield to York via Carlisle and Newcastle.

Unfortunately upon arrival at Warrington Bank Quay the A4 locomotive was stopped as a hot axle box had been detected. The engine and carriage were then moved to Dallam Freight Terminal pending a decision as to what to do with them. There they remained for six days with the engine being removed by low loader on Wednesday the 17th of June. The tender was collected by a low loader the following day but the coach remained at Dallam until the following week..

The *Hadrian* rail tour did run but was diesel hauled throughout, no doubt to the disappointment of the passengers.



A4 class locomotive number 60009 *Union of South Africa* stands at Dallam on 12th June 2015 after a hot axle box had been detected at Warrington Bank Quay station. Photo by Neil Wilson

The Widnes Inclined Plane (The Bongs Bank)



Looking north from Halton View Bridge in the early months of 1976. This was the location of the Widnes Inclined Plane which had operated from February 1833 until 1850. The inclined plane was to the left of the railway seen in this view and it followed a slightly straighter course. The bottom of the plane had been close to this spot to the left of the diverted passenger train which can be seen heading towards St Helens. The section of railway on which the train is travelling dated from 1850 and had originally been double track. Photo by Bevan Price

The St Helens & Runcorn Gap Railway was one of the earliest lines in the country opening throughout on 21 February 1833. The line was built primarily to carry coal from St Helens to Widnes Dock for onward transportation by river in direct competition to the Sankey Canal. The railway followed a fairly direct route between St Helens and Runcorn Gap (Widnes) which meant that it had to rise steeply in two locations one being just to the south of St Helens at Sutton and the other being at Widnes. The climbs at both locations were too steep for locomotives to work so inclined planes were built.

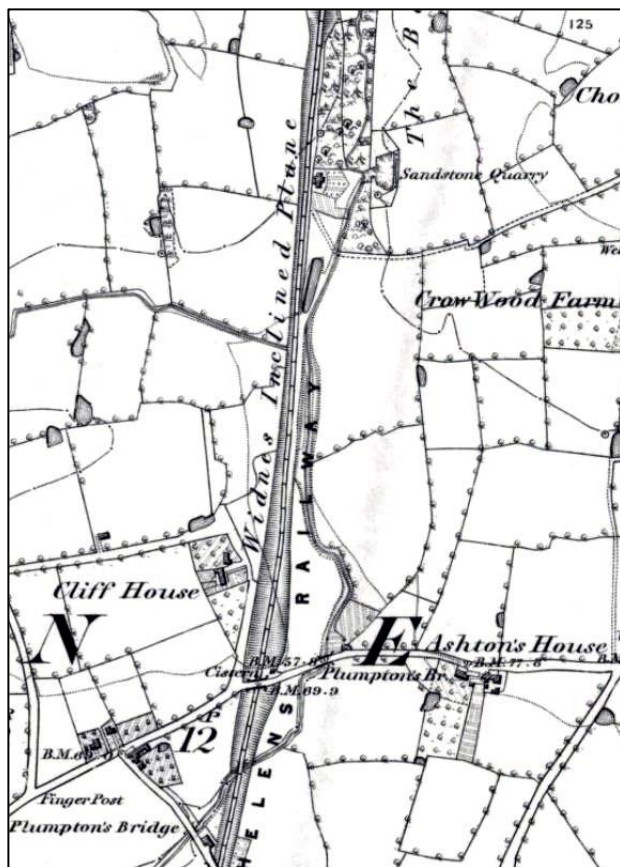
An inclined plane is basically a steep piece of railway that is worked by rope and gravity. There were a variety of inclined planes some being rope worked both up and down the hill and some just up with gravity being used to go down. Also inclined planes could be worked by stationary steam engines or purely by balancing of weights in the up and down direction (the weight of wagons going down being used to haul wagons up).

The inclined plane at Sutton was worked by a stationary engine but that at Widnes is described in a later authorising act (of 1847) as being worked by 'self-acting machinery', that being the balancing system. The inclined plane at Widnes and the

section of line between what was known as The Horns (present day Derby Road) and Runcorn Gap was built by the contractors William and Benjamin Seed for £24,700.

The Widnes inclined plane was located between the present day Halton View and Derby Road bridges at the location that is known locally as the Bongs. It was about 1½ miles long.

The plane is shown on a six-inch scale Ordnance Survey map published in 1846 (see below). Although the map shows quite a bit of detail including overbridges, culverts and local landmarks being only six-inch scale it doesn't show the inclined plane in any detail so it is hard to know what it looked like.



Left: The Widnes Inclined Plane shown on a six-inch scale map from 1846.

What is known is that both of the inclined planes were a serious obstacle to growth. Passengers were first carried between St Helens and Runcorn Gap in September 1833 (they had been carried between St Helens and St Helens Junction from 2nd January 1832). The journey of only 7 miles took 1 hour 45 minutes because of the inclined planes. On 21st July 1845 the St Helens & Runcorn Gap Railway Company took over the Sankey Canal Company and formed the St Helens Canal & Railway Company. This put both

the canal and the railway on sounder financial footings which allowed for expansion plans to be drawn up. By the 1840s locomotives had become more powerful and the company realised that the inclined planes would hamper any expansion. So on 22nd July 1847 they obtained an act which would allow them to double the line and ease the inclines so that locomotives could work throughout.

The contractor Robert Daglish Junior was appointed to the contract for all of the works which had begun by November 1847. The plane at Sutton had been eased by February 1849 but there seems to have been some discord between the railway company and the contractor as John Smith had been appointed to build the new alignment at Widnes by April of that year. Work began on the new alignment in April 1850. It was double track and located just to the east of the inclined plane. It was not as straight as the original course which allowed a gradient of 1 in 70 to be achieved. Alterations included the demolition of bridges that carried the Widnes and Warrington road (Halton View Road but along its original alignment which was just to the north of the present day route) and a minor road (Sadler Street) over the line. They were replaced with level crossings. The new alignment had been completed by the end of 1850 and the contractor then moved onto the task of removing the rails, sleepers, ropes and pulleys from the inclined plane.

Once the Widnes Inclined Plane had gone journey times improved dramatically. Passenger trains could do the journey in only 25 minutes and as a result passenger journeys had risen to over 100,000 per year by the 1850s. In 1852 stations were opened at Appleton close to where the bottom of the incline had been and at Farnworth (later to become Farnworth & Bold) which had been close to the top. Further developments occurred in 1873 when the Cheshire Lines Committee railway was built at the north end of the incline (passing under the 1850 alignment running east/west) and in the 1880s when a bridge was built to carry Halton View Road over the line (allowing the two crossings to close) .



A view from 1981 looking south towards Appleton along the 1850 alignment that replaced the inclined plane at Widnes. The inclined plane would have been to the right of the alignment shown in this view. The line became single at this point with effect from 4th November 1973. Photo by Paul Wright

Saxby & Farmer signal boxes were opened at Appleton and at Farnworth & Bold in the 1870s. Both were later replaced in the London & North Western Railway era by standard design boxes of that company.

Even though the inclined plane had been eased the 1 in 70 climb between Appleton and Farnworth & Bold stations was still a formidable challenge for trains working in the up direction (to St Helens). It was equally as challenging for heavy goods trains working in the down direction (to Widnes) as the maximum braking power was required to stop trains running away. Banking engines were required for heavy up trains and in the down direction brakes had to be pinned down. Banking engines worked from Vine Yard and became known as the 'Vine Banker'. In later years the banker duty became Target 81. Brakes were pinned down at Farnworth & Bold station where a large sign had been erected warning train crews of the steep bank.

Despite these precautions there were runaway incidents well into the BR era.

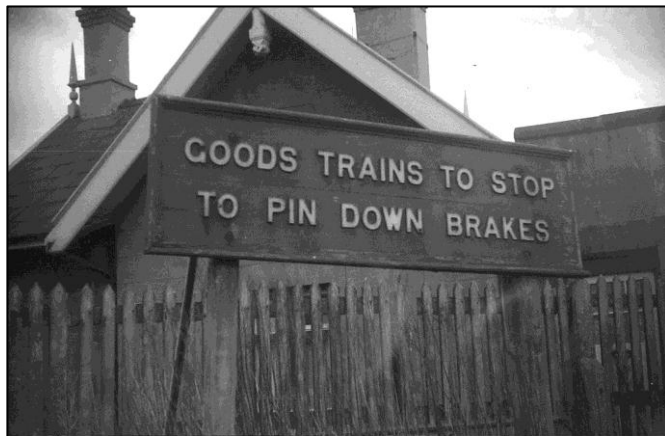
The duty of pinning down wagons was supposed to be carried out by the guard. In BR days it was often undertaken by the fireman. Rod Dixon who was based at Sutton Oak from 1954 until 1967 undertook the duty on many occasions. He explained how "it made sense for the fireman to do the job. We could jump down off the locomotive and then move along the train as it slowly crept forward. At the rear of the train we simply jumped onto the brake van and rode down to Widnes where we could re-join the loco. On one occasion when I was doing the task the train picked up speed as I was trying to carry out the task and I couldn't get onto the brake van. I was left behind at Farnworth & Bold and had to walk all the way to Widnes. When I got there the driver just looked at me and said where have you been". Colin Turton worked at Widnes Shed from 1961 until 1964. He often worked on the 'Vine Banker'. Colin described how "it was hard going pushing a heavy train up that bank. The idea was that the banker was there to assist a train. So you would have the locomotive at the head pulling and the banking locomotive pushing. Locomotive crews from Garston were notorious for letting us on the banker do all of the pushing while they did very little until they were at the summit. This made the task all the harder for the banker and seemed to be a source of great amusement to them".

Signalmen also had a role to play in making it easy for trains to get up the bank. Local signalman Brain Tighe often worked at Widnes Number 2 box (Ann Street). He once explained the importance of giving trains a clear route through the crossing so that they could get up the bank. Stopping trains at Ann Street could mean that they would stall half way up the bank. Brian was also witness to a runaway train that had not pinned enough brakes down. The train was not able to stop until it had passed the Widnes Dock Junction where Brian was working in Widnes Number 4 box.

In the 1960s local criminals used the steep incline for their gain. They would grease the rails close to Halton View bridge so that trains would slip and either stall or be reduced to walking speed. They then stole items from the trains. The practice

resulted in the British Transport Police having to mount an operation and a number of arrests were made.

The introduction of diesel locomotives made workings between Appleton and Farnworth & Bold much easier. Banking engines had ceased to be required by the end of steam.



Left: The instruction sign that was located at Farnworth & Bold station seen in the 1960s. Photo from the Richard Mercer collection.

Having carried millions of tons of freight the former St Helens & Runcorn Gap Railway went into decline at the end of the 1960s.

The 1850 alignment that had opened as a double track railway was singled with effect from Sunday 4th November 1973 (the line being made single from Widnes Number 1 Box to Farnworth & Bold). The former up line was taken out of use and the former down line became an up and down single line. The redundant up line was lifted in the early months of 1974. The line closed as a through route on 1 November 1981. The last trains to climb the bank did so in the weeks following on track lifting duties. Track was removed from the 1850 alignment in January 1982.

In the 1990s the Watkinson Way bypass road was built along the course of the line.

University of the Third Age

The University of the Third Age (U3A) movement is a unique and exciting organisation which provides, through its U3As, life-enhancing and life-changing opportunities. Retired and semi-retired people come together and learn together, not for qualifications but for its own reward: the sheer joy of discovery. Meetings are usually fortnightly during the day, Mon-Fri, but it's entirely up to the particular group when and where they meet. A local Halton group has been established and they would like to have railways group interest. They need someone to lead such a group and have asked if there is anyone in the 8D Association who would be interested.

If you are interested there will be a general meeting on Thursday 10 Sept, 2pm at Widnes Masonic hall. Everyone is welcome and there will be an opportunity to join. Membership is only £20 per year. The U3A is a non-profit making organisation and is all voluntary.

Alternatively you can telephone Paula Fox (Chair U3A) on 07977 073847

My Friend Alan Robinson by Chris Hollins



Left to right, Alan Robinson, David Warner and Chris Hollins at Warrington Bank Quay station on 18th June 2015. Photo by Anne Warner

Alan Robinson was a keen railway enthusiast and someone who I am proud to say was my friend. He was born in

Ormskirk on the 29th of December 1942. He later moved to Penketh with his parents, and qualified as a teacher from Edge Hill College in Ormskirk from where he took up a maths teaching post at Fairfield Secondary Modern School in Widnes.

I was a pupil at Fairfield and I first spoke to Alan in the school library during March 1971 when I was in the third year at that school. A fellow pupil Brian Guest had asked Alan about where the coal came from that was used to power the recently commissioned Fiddlers Ferry Power Station. Alan wasn't sure but a young 14 year old Chris Hollins interjected and said "Sir I know where it comes from". This was the start of a 44 year old friendship which sadly ended on the 1st of August 2015 when Alan passed away.

After that first meeting we started talking to each other. I still referred to him as "Sir", which embarrassed him and he insisted that I should only use the formal title if he was taking my class for maths, any other time Alan would do.

Although not my regular maths teacher he did take our class when the regular maths teacher was away for any reason. When he did my fellow pupils were given mathematical problems to solve whilst he and I would pour over timetables. Our first two Merseyrover weekend trips in 1972 were drawn up in maths lessons. You knew that he was a slightly different teacher as he had a British Rail Vale of Rheidol Poster stuck on the back of the door in Hut 6.

He acquired this from Gerald Bland who was another friend of his and worked for British Rail at Crewe in the carriage rostering department. Gerald would advise Alan in the week about what special and excursion trains were being operated at the

weekend as he was the person responsible for finding enough carriages to operate them.

In the early 1960's, Alan and Gerald set up the British Transport Enthusiast Guild. By this time with the running down of steam and steam engine sheds they would set out on weekend trips using North Western and Ribble coaches to record the loco numbers and try and visit every remaining steam shed in the country. While Alan never saw every British Railways steam locomotive he did see every diesel and electric locomotive plus every DMU. I was with him when he saw the last DMU he needed to complete the set. It was on a visit to my late Father's Signal Box at Ditton Junction No 2. The stock off the afternoon Chester to Runcorn service came down to Ditton Junction to reverse over the down to up slow crossover to return to Runcorn. Both of us looked at the second carriage and there was M51200 a Metro Cammell Motor Brake Second. It was based at Chester but had somehow managed to elude Alan. A big grin appeared on his face he had now seen every BR DMU.

After steam finished on BR Alan's interest in buses, which had been there since the early 1960's, took off. He always said to me that if he couldn't see his beloved Stanier Coronation Class Pacifics in full cry on the West Coast Main Line an Alexander bodied Leyland Atlantean Double Decker or Leyland Leopard single decker was a good replacement.

It was during this period of time, that he started photographing buses before some of the remaining corporation fleets were lost and the various National Bus Companies were broken up under deregulation. He loved visiting bus depots and I accompanied him on many a trip during this period. He used considerable charm to "wangle" our way round some depots especially places where the company didn't like enthusiasts. One of his feats was to get round every London Transport depot apart from one. We never did convince them at Potters Bar even when it changed ownership. After deregulation a lot of depots closed and Alan would travel far and wide to record these for posterity on film.

In 1972 desperate for steam Alan ventured to Germany and courtesy of a friend Chris Inman who was living in Frankfurt at that time, they toured the southern part of West Germany in a Bedford van visiting the remaining steam engine sheds, riding some steam hauled services and linesiding. While in Saarbrücken, it was suggested they cross the border to France and to their surprise and delight in the town of Sarreguemines they found the SNCF roundhouse full of Class 141R 2-8-2 locos which were still in steam. This was one of the last pockets of French steam on the SNCF network and upon his return Alan said he rather liked the 141R's as they reminded him of Austerity's with smoke deflectors.

After this he was smitten with European Railways. I accompanied him on several trips in the 1970's and again in the 1990's. In 1975 he was content to sit by the lineside at Lathen watching double headed Class 051 2-10-0's hauling 3000 ton Iron

ore trains from Emden Docks to the Ruhr Steel works, he said it reminded him of BR standard 9F's hauling Tyne Dock to Consett iron ore trains but bigger. One incident he always remembered from a trip to Switzwerland in 1976 was when after arriving in Domodossola in Italy he suffered a nose bleed. His blood dripped into the station drinking fountain which turned to red. He said he had performed a miracle turning water into wine!

In those days getting to the continent was by train and ship. Alan wouldn't fly and he didn't really like ships. When going from Harwich he would always ensure that was in bed in his cabin before the ship sailed. I would always have to assure him that the vessel had arrived at the Hook of Holland before he got up. Surprisingly he did like Hovercrafts and really enjoyed a journey we made from Boulogne to Dover when returning from one of our Switzerland trips. He also enjoyed with me our one and only trip on the Night Ferry Sleeper from Paris Gare Du Nord to London Victoria where he was amused that the compartment we had in the carriage, had two life jackets in it.

Apart from his interests in transport Alan also enjoyed classical music, comedy (especially Morecambe and Wise) and detective stories. He was a keen Sherlock Holmes fan another interest he shared with me and with our joint American friend John Baesch who is a member of the Sherlock Holmes Society.

Alan also enjoyed listening to all the on train and lineside recordings that he had made once preserved steam was allowed back on the main line. It was from these that with encouragement from myself and a few friends he set up Heritage Steam Archive and decided to sell them on CD's commercially. To show how popular they have been at the time of his passing with a collection of 55 Volumes nearly 10,000 had been sold. For the people who purchased them they will remain a legacy of his work.

Alan wasn't a member of our association but he would always ask me about how we were doing and any requests for information I needed were always dealt with. He knew quite a few of our members and in the last two years of his life he enjoyed the companionship and friendship of our newest member Chris Jennings. It was fitting that several 8D Association members attended his funeral service at Walton Lea Crematorium on the 13th of August 2015. One of his recordings played at the service was of favourite Duchess Pacific 46229 Duchess of Hamilton departing southbound from Appleby on the Cumbrian Mountain Express in 1983.

Alan was a kind good hearted person who didn't suffer fools gladly. Sometimes we would have different views on things but in all those years I cannot recollect us having an argument with him and to me his passing is a great loss, but I can say I was honoured to have been his good friend for 44 years and will be sadly missed by many.

Life on a Branch Line by Tony Foster



Left: British Railways standard class 3 locomotive number 77014 in Lambley station, having completed the weekday morning shunt at Lambley colliery. Photo by Tony Foster

Great Uncle Bill was a railwayman. To be precise, at the time that I knew him, he was a

retired railwayman having been a platelayer with the LNER. He and his wife Cissie had settled in a railway cottage at Lambley, alongside the Alston branch of the Newcastle to Carlisle line. In 1943, at a time when my father was an air fitter in the RAF, busily maintaining Lancaster bombers and a variety of other aircraft at various airfields around the country, it was my good fortune to have been shunted off (as an infant) with my mother to 'a place of safety' with Uncle Bill and Aunt Cissie. Although my period of residence at 2 Station Cottages ended in 1945, I have vivid recollections of the 5 or 6 weeks that were spent at Lambley during each of the long school holidays in the 1950s. Quite simply, for a young boy fascinated by all things 'railway', it was an idyllic location.

In addition to the pair of railway cottages, the station house and a farm, Lambley (sometimes referred to as Harper Town) boasted a further 15 or 20 houses situated half a mile to the north of the station. Despite the tiny population, the village had a post-office, a church (complete with vicarage and Vicar) and a chapel.

The Station Cottages had no electricity, gas or mains water supply. Lighting was by way of paraffin lamps or candles, and all cooking was done over the fire or in the range oven. As a memento of those days, I still have the lamp with a glass bowl and a Pyrex funnel etched 'LNER'.



Left: Nos.2 and 3 (No.2 nearest to the line) Station Cottages, Lambley seen in 1957. My bedroom, facing the station and viaduct, was indeed a room with a view.

For me at least, from my bedroom facing the station, every weekday started the same way. At about 7.30am a distant rumble grew ever louder, until eventually the house began

to shake as the first train of the day coasted tender first down the gradient from

Alston and sizzled its way past the house, covering the 350 yards to Lambley station. My recollection is that only 2 or 3 people ever boarded that first train, and I don't ever recall anyone getting off it. Tablet and token were exchanged between footplate crew and the solitary member of the station staff before the train shuffled off across the viaduct towards the next station at Coanwood - three quarters of a mile away - where tablet and staff would again be exchanged.

After the departure of each scheduled train, the valley sank back into an incredible peace, punctuated occasionally by the sound of lapwings or curlews, the bleating of sheep on the fells, and a permanent accompaniment of a babbling South Tyne.

If the wind was in the right direction, the sound of the block system bell from the signal box shortly after 8.00am heralded more activity on the line. If I hadn't previously set off, my job on hearing the bell was to make my way down to the station in time to meet the train on its return from Haltwhistle. In the absence of telephones, televisions or even a reliable radio (see later), the source of news was the Newcastle Journal, traditionally delivered each weekday on the 8.25am. As it drifted across the viaduct and around the very tight curve into Lambley station, there was (in me at least) always that sense of excitement. Who would get off the train? - few ever did. What would be offloaded from the guards van? - almost always baskets of pigeons to be 'clocked and released' and bundles of important looking railway documents.

A final check would be made that there really were no passengers for Alston - or that the one or two who said they would be there had actually boarded - before the train then wheezed its way up the hill, past Uncle Bill's cottage, under the wooden occupation bridge, around the right-hand curve and out of sight, past the disused Lambley distant signal, and on to the intermediate station of Slaggyford. From a standing start, I could usually beat the loco over the 350 yards back to No.2. For a time, the valley fell silent again, and much as I wished it to be the case, I could not increase the amount of traffic.

The newspaper safely delivered, Uncle Bill and Aunt Cissie had a strict timetable of 'morning' jobs that I was encouraged to assist with. Mondays was washday, a fire to be lit under the boiler in the scullery, and muscle was required to operate the enormous mangle - a cast iron contraption with huge wooden rollers that regularly crushed the buttons. Tuesday was reserved for lamp cleaning / trimming and brasses etc. Wednesday was black-leading and white-stoning day. Bread was baked on Thursdays, and Friday was the big day out. Shopping at Haltwhistle ensured the supply of essentials, including a 12" length of rope tobacco for Uncle Bill, and the weekly exchange of the 'accumulator' battery - a very heavy glass device with battery plates and acid - used only occasionally to enable listening to the 1.00pm news.

My moment of glory was to come in 1953 on just such a shopping trip with Aunt Cissie. Having boarded the return (c.11.50am) train early, I can clearly recall the occasion when I got off the train and stood on the platform alongside the G5 0-4-4 tank engine, peering into the cab as the footplate crew were preparing for the run. With 5 minutes before the 'off', the driver uttered those words that every 10-year old rail enthusiast wants to hear - *"Don't stand out there, come on in"*. After the briefest of introductions - this is a shovel - that's where the coal goes - I could hardly believe my ears when he said, *"Go and ask your Aunt if you can ride up here with us"*.

Agreement obtained, I ran back to the loco before anybody changed their mind. That 15-minute journey from Haltwhistle to Lambley made an enormous impression - I was hooked. No longer would I have to dream about being an engine driver - I was one.

My street (or rail) cred was enhanced considerably when I demonstrated to the station staff at Lambley (2 on alternate shift patterns) that I was willing and able to take on the most mundane of tasks - paint the white line on the platform edge, collect the tickets (there weren't many), oil the trolley, feed the station cat and keep the ticket office tidy. I graduated to spending time in the signal box, where I was allowed to pull signals off and assist with the important task of selecting horses from the day's racing calendar. Signalmen along the line seemed very keen on placing small bets, and the telegraph provided the only way of dealing with such business transactions. I suspect the train itself was used to transport the stakes. Above all, I was generally welcomed onto the footplate for the 40-minute shunt at nearby Lambley colliery each morning (Monday – Friday), and from time to time, I was given the opportunity to have a cab ride to Alston or Haltwhistle.



Left: Lambley station in 1975. Note that the oil lamps are still in evidence, although the signal box (previously sited at the far end of the platform) was long gone. Photo by Tony Foster

It was quite normal for the train to make 'unofficial'

stops (on request to the guard) so that folk could be dropped off at convenient points along the way. Uncle Bill's status as a retired railwayman occasionally resulted in an unscheduled stop alongside the house and a couple of hundredweight of coal being heaved off. On one such occasion, I recall passengers opening carriage windows and chatting with Aunt Cissie about the weather, the gladioli that she grew, and a new recipe that she might like to try (rabbits featured regularly until the advent of myxomatosis in 1953).

Sundays on the branch were, to me at least, dreadful. After the last train (ie. the cinema train SO c.10.20pm) from Haltwhistle on Saturday evening, it seemed like an eternity until that rumble at 7.30am on Monday signalled the start of another railway week.

It's true to say that, for folk living in the South Tyne valley, their days were largely regulated by the movement of the trains on the single line branch. Meal times seemed to be based around the timetable, and it certainly paid to know precisely when was a good time (or not a good time) to walk across the viaduct to and from

Coanwood. Despite the cast iron NER notices from a Mr Smith, warning of a penalty *"Not to Exceed Forty Shillings"* for trespassing, few people wishing to cross the river made the tortuous journey down the 120 or so steps at the Lambley side, then cross the footbridge attached to the base of the viaduct, before making the climb back up to the other side. The three or four minute walk across the magnificent (but very narrow) viaduct always seemed a much more acceptable alternative. I know that a local farmer almost came unstuck when his sheep ran amuck on the viaduct. In that case, branch line courtesy came to the fore and the approaching loco slowed to walking (i.e. sheep walking) pace, and was used to gently nudge the flock back to safety on the Lambley side.



***My parents photographed on the steps of Lambley signal box in 1938.
The box was located on the station platform.***

During the winter, the branch was literally a life-line for the valley. Indeed, it survived the Beeching cuts in the 60s on the basis that there was no viable alternative route between Haltwhistle and Alston in severe weather. The line finally succumbed on the 1st May 1976, by which time an 'all weather' road had been constructed to cross the South Tyne at Lambley, about 1 mile downstream of the viaduct.

Although I continue to pay the occasional visit to Lambley, my family connections with the village effectively ended in 1958 when Uncle Bill and his wife were persuaded to move to a less isolated part of country, where medical facilities, shops and buses were close by, and their remaining family members could keep an eye on them. I'm glad to say that my memories of Lambley are all of the steam variety. DMUs were introduced in 1959.

You will probably know that there is now a narrow gauge railway (South Tynedale Railway) based at Alston. Using the original track bed, the STR is slowly edging its way back along the valley. Although there are many logistical problems to overcome, I know that they eventually hope to reach Haltwhistle.

My lasting regret is that I did not take an interest in photography at an earlier age, and certainly at the time of my involvement with railway staff on the branch. Perhaps my most treasured photograph (slightly out of focus, taken in 1957 using a Kodak Brownie 127) is seen at the start of this article. BR 3MT No.77014 is seen standing light at Lambley station having finished the morning shunt at the colliery. I was charged with keeping an eye on the gauges whilst the footplate crew and guard were having a cup of tea and a slice of toast in the station house. I thought little more of that photograph, or the occasion, until 1992 when I read in a Steam Railway magazine supplement that the locomotive had achieved notoriety. On Sunday 9th July 1967, the final day of steam on Southern rails, 77014 hauled the last revenue earning steam train - a Bournemouth to Poole parcels. The article records -

"Well before midnight, No.77014 was bedded down at Weymouth shed, sighing as its steam pressure fell, to join the other 25 dumped Standards and Bullieds. It was a strange twist of fate that resulted in a 'non-Southern locomotive (and one that spent little more than a year on the region), hauling the Southern's very last steam train".

Looking at the photograph of No.77014 gently simmering in Lambley station on the sleepy Alston branch, who could have predicted that 10 years later, the locomotive would have secured a unique place in railway history. Southern steam enthusiasts never quite got over the surprise, or the indignity, of having a 'foreigner' take the final honours at the head of their last revenue earning BR train.

In conclusion, I hope that my brief sketch of the line and the valley has been of some interest to you. I recognise that I view the area (and memories) with glasses of the rose-tinted variety. Who knows, you may even be tempted to visit the location. If you do, I promise you that there is still much to see in terms of railway history.



A two-car Metro-Cammell DMU leaving Lambley station, joining the viaduct over the South Tyne sometime around 1974. Photo by Tony Foster

The importance of your Photographic Collections

As you may be aware, the Association puts on photographic display's at various venues in our area of interest. The displays allow members and especially the public to view the railway images from the past along with information on those images. The photographic displays are popular and they generate interest in our group and often result in us gaining further historical information.

The photographic display has generally put together by a couple of committee members who understandably have used images from the 8D archive or their personal collections. For those who have seen the displays will have appreciated that there have been some excellent reminders of yesteryear that we would not have seen otherwise. However, because the photographic display is representing the Association, the committee now feel that image contributions for future annual display's should also come from the membership as a whole and therefore we are approaching the membership to see if anyone would like to consider contributing images from their own personal photographic collections?

We appreciate, that not every member may have images to contribute, may be you don't feel your material is worthy enough for display or that may not think you have not any images applicable for the Associations display. However, until we see such material, we may never know.



Left: Looking north from Widnes vDock Junction in the early 1960s. Photo by Eddie Bellas

Image material we are seeking is really anything railway related to our area which basically within approximately 15 miles of Widnes "8D" Shed, which covers most of Merseyside and North Cheshire. Likewise, steam, diesel or electric colour or black &

white images are acceptable and have been taken especially during the last century. Railway infrastructure and human interest are especially welcomed. Clearly, we hope you may be able to provide caption details / information on the images but even if you do not have that information available, the chances are, that amongst our members, someone may be able to fill the missing blanks and along with the internet, we will have a reasonable chance of finding the information.

If you feel you are able to contribute, please contact myself or any committee member for further information, advice or assistance as our next photo display is not until Spring 2016, so you have plenty of time for us to consider your contributions.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Doug Birmingham ([email the_8d_association@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:email_the_8d_association@yahoo.co.uk))

From the Archive



Daresbury station seen from a passing train in the 1960s. The station had closed on 7th July 1952. Photo by John Kirwood



The diverted 08.32 Birmingham New Street to Manchester Piccadilly train is seen passing Latchford signal box on Sunday 12th May 1985. At the head of the train is class 47 locomotive number 47 599. The line closed just two months later on 7th July 1985. Photo by David Ingham

Events Programme

10.00 – Saturday 3rd October 2015 – Visit to Warrington & Stockport Railway (Heatley & Warburton to Dunham Massey) – Another guided walk along the Warrington & Stockport Railway this time covering the section between Heatley & Warburton and Dunham Massey stations. **Meet at the site of Heatley & Warburton station, Mill Lane, Lymm.**

19.00 – Thursday 22nd October 2015 – Steam Travel in Africa – Those who have seen a previous illustrated talk by Chris Lewis will know that this is one not to miss. This time Chris will take us on a journey through Africa. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

19.00 – Thursday 19th November 2014 – Widnes Locomotive Shed – An illustrated talk by Joe Cowley. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

19.00 – Thursday 3rd December 2015 – Railway Social Evening and Quiz Night - A chance to chat to fellow members and to test your railway knowledge. There will be a bar and snacks will be laid on. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

10.00 – Saturday 16th January 2016 – The Four-Masted Full-Rigged Ship *Liverpool* - The age of the sailing ship overlapped the introduction of steam ships by approximately a century. The *Liverpool* was one of the later sailing vessels designed and built to remain competitive with the increasingly-economical steamers well into the 20th century. An illustrated talk by David White. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

10.00 – Saturday 24rd January 2016 – The 8D Association AGM – The Annual General Meeting of the association followed by a guest speaker and a buffet. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

19.00 – Thursday 18th February 2016 – Vulcan Works versus The Somerset & Dorset Railway – An illustrated talk about a legal battle between two well-known railway institutions by Tony Foster. **Select Security Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**



'Where is this' competition? (Answers to pwright964@btinternet.com)
Photo by Doug Birmingham. The June competition was correctly guessed by Rod Dixon and Tony Foster. The location was Moss Bank station, St Helens.

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