

Railway Ramblings

Issue 121

August 2020

The monthly newsletter of the Hitchin Branch of the RCTS

Meetings This Month

As a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis, branch meetings continue to be cancelled.

We are ready to restart but only when we are advised that it is safe to do so. You will be advised by email, using this newsletter distribution list, as soon as we are able to have a firm date.

From the Photo Album



Thompson B1 Class 1029 *Chamois* on the 10.35 am Cambridge to Kings Cross crossing the Digswell viaduct in July, 1947. As 61029 this locomotive was withdrawn from service in December 1966

Photo courtesy of Tom Gladwin/Doug White

If you have photos (old or new) that you are willing to share with other members please supply them, with a suitable caption, to the Editor (John.Dossett@btinternet.com). They should be photographs you own!

Chairman's Platform

First, I want to update you about our future meetings. As mentioned previously, we have been considering how, and when, we might be able to restart. The relaxation of most of the Covid-19 lockdown measures changed substantially in early July (and may have changed again by the time you read this) as the government tries to balance a return to "normality" with the changing risk. Clearly, coming to branch meetings might be "nice-to-do" but is almost certainly not something to do unless there is virtually no risk. Many of us are of an age where catching this virus is likely to carry serious consequences. At present we still have neither of our venues ready to enable us to restart and so for the time being we have to continue, without meetings, as we have for the past few months.

For meeting content, we are now ready to restart our previously published programme of branch meetings but can only do so if the venues are deemed suitable and we are satisfied that the risk level is extremely low. We need to be absolutely sure that we can fully comply with all of the government guidelines at the time. From this issue of RR, the editor is starting to again include programme details, but I stress that they will only be taking place if I have sent out an email to that effect.

This month we again have a bumper issue of Railway Ramblings and our editor is endeavouring to source content that might interest and/or amuse you. So, if any of you have railway related topics, with or without photos, which you could share with other members then please send them to the editor. The greater the variety the wider the appeal to our readers.

Please remember, whatever you do, keep safe and follow the government guidelines.

Steve Lacey

Notes About the Thompson B1 Class

(see photo on first page)

The B1 class quickly became the most successful of Thompson's locomotive designs and a total of 410 were built by the LNER and British Railways (BR). Introduced in 1942, the first example, No. 8301, later renumbered 1000 and finally 61000), was named *Springbok* to commemorate a visit by Jan Smuts, then Prime Minister of South Africa. The first 274 were built by the LNER and 136 were built by BR after nationalisation in 1948. The total number in stock at any one time however was only 409 as 61057 was involved in an accident in 1950 and was scrapped.

59 of the 410 locomotives were named. Early B1s were named after species of antelope, whilst later engines were named after members of the board of directors of the LNER. This led to the fact that the Class B1 contained the shortest name given to a British Railways locomotive, (6)1018 *Gnu*, and one of the longest, (6)1221 *Sir Alexander Erskine-Hill*.

Local Observations

All reports as seen at Welwyn North

On the days of **17th / 18th / 19th June** we had 60046 (light engine) make 2 return trips per day from Wembley to Royston for the purpose of driver route learning, a couple of them returned via Hertford North.

19th June We also had an unusual working when 700149 failed at Cambridge, this was hauled back to Hornsey by 700034 forming a 20-coach train, leaving Cambridge around 21:30.

Sunday 21st June Saw three engineering trains work past here, having part of a track renewal project at Finsbury Park, the loco's involved on the top & tailed trains were 56049 / 302, 66739 / 783 & 66594 / 746 all returning north by 10:00.

Monday 22nd June An Eastleigh to March engineers train passed with 66735 (13:41d) in charge.

A very quiet week followed until **Friday 26th June** we had 66705 / 748 rumble past at 05:30 returning light engines to Peterborough having spent a couple of days in Welwyn GC yard. Also, on this day 66753 (13:21d) passed with a Hoo Junction to Whitemoor empty ballast train.

Tuesday 30th June Saw a very unusual traction on a movement from Tonbridge Yard to Peterborough when 3 x Class 73s were used to haul failed class 66740, the same three 73s (73107 / 136 / 212) then hauled 66792 back to Tonbridge.

Wednesday 1st July 56103 was used on another route learning trip from Wembley to Royston passing at 12:33, the return journey was via Hertford North (15:48)

On **Thursday 2nd July** 37612 passed at 16:03 with a test train from Ashford to Derby.

Saturday 4th July A light engine 66717 came through at 06:20 running from Peterborough to Bounds Green, this locomotive then hauled another set of Mk4 coaches to Doncaster for scrap, passing Stevenage via Hertford at 08:40. Also, today saw 66751 hauling units 466019 / 039 from Slade Green to Doncaster, both of these trains ran via the Hertford loop, timed at Stevenage 14:36.

A rescue took place on **Tuesday 7th July** when 67028 was sent to Doncaster to haul back to Bounds Green a failed Class 91 (91106) The train passed here at 16:20.

Saturday 11th July Saw another MK4 set being towed from Bounds Green to Doncaster via Hertford North (10:40. (running 89 minutes late) hauled by 66713 and DVT 82224 also in the consist.

Monday 13th July had two more unusual workings the first being 2 x Class 321 being transferred for use from Doncaster to Clacton (321903 / 322484) at 12:50. These were followed an hour or so later by 57312 dragging 317662 / 888 from Eastleigh to Ely passing here at 14:30.

The latest Azuma 801230 made its first run to Kings Cross on **Thursday 16th July**.

Friday 17th July, we had the first sighting of a Grand Central unit since lockdown, also 66164 (14:35) southbound hauling two barrier coaches.

Then on **Saturday 18th July** early at 07:06 47805 passed with the Crewe to Paignton, *English Riviera Statesman* excursion, this returned at 22:19. Also, today 37254 ran past with a test train from Ferme Park via Hertford East to Derby at 09:12 and 47802 passing at 12:52, returning to Southall from Doncaster again with some barrier vehicles.

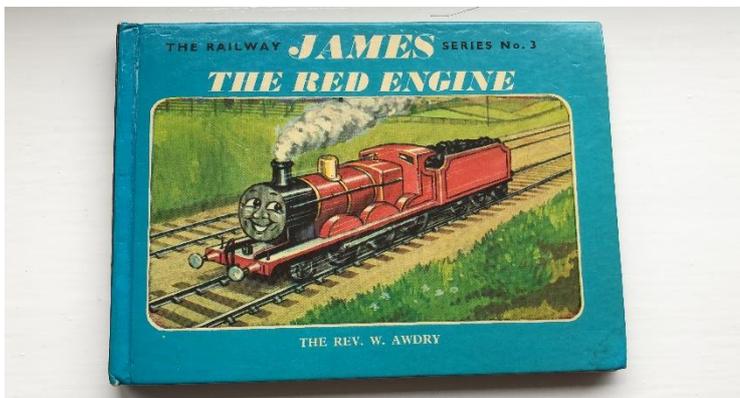
(Observations courtesy of our Branch Secretary, Dave Elsdon)

Where Did It Begin? – John Dossett

Having read Paul Holloway's article in last month's issue of RR, I thought I ought to try answering the same question. It is one which I've been asked a few times and usually given "off the cuff" answers. However, the more I search the (deteriorating) memory the more fragments of an answer I find. This is my (latest) summary:

When I was a small child we lived in various Suffolk and Norfolk villages – none with a railway and, like many countryfolk, we didn't have any transport other than bicycles – so I doubted that was the start. But I do recall that "James The Red Engine" (published in 1946) was my favourite book and was read to me time and time again.

About the time I started school I also know that I used to spend some of the summer holidays with my paternal grandparents who lived between Beccles and Bungay. During those stays we often went into Beccles, which in those days was quite a railway hub, and free of



parental constraint I used to delight in running backwards and forwards across the footbridge through the smoke and steam belching from the locos. I don't know that I took any interest in the trains themselves but maybe the smoke & steam got into my blood.

Roll forward a small number of years, probably early 1950s, and I know I yearned for a toy castle & soldiers for Christmas. My Dad decided that, unbeknown to me, what I really wanted was a train set! In those times money was not exactly plentiful so over the year he bought the various components, built a modest baseboard from old tea-chest panels, and put them all together. He did this in secret in a room from which he removed the door handle to hide it from (my) prying eyes. He decided on Hornby Dublo (Trix was the only alternative as Rovex was yet to appear) and to try to ensure interest I had a couple of sidings from the outset. Relatives looking for advice on what they could purchase "young John" for Christmas were steered in the direction of accessories for the train set. I do recall getting two level crossings which were promptly exchanged for two carriages (which I still have tucked away somewhere).

The model railway (no longer a mere "train set") lasted for many years, certainly into my early years at grammar school. My grandparents moved to Felixstowe during this time and during my visits I often used to wander down to the station(s) and see what was going on – and I started to record numbers. The Felixstowe Branch line in those days was quite interesting – trains for Beach and Dock Stations had to go into Town station first as the direct loop had been lifted. I recall drawing the track plan as I thought it had great modelling potential – but have since lost it. I don't recall a great enthusiasm for "train spotting", it was just something that many boys of a certain age bracket did. The occasional trip to London or to visit relatives elsewhere in the UK only offered small opportunities to see railways in action.



DMUs 79252 and 79063 leaving Felixstowe Town station bound for Felixstowe Beach on 12 July 1963. The other line is to Ipswich and all trains for Beach (and Felixstowe Dock) had to go into Town first as the triangular link between the lines had been lifted. This was, of course, before Felixstowe docks was redeveloped as a container port.

Photo: John Dossett

So, I conclude that "James The Red Engine" was where it began. The ongoing interest was fuelled by small injections of real steam and railway modelling. It's not that different now – I still have a model railway, boosted when children started to leave the roost relinquishing a bedroom which was then allocated to me by the boss. My interest in 12-inches-to-the-foot remains pretty general and we have been on a number of railway themed holidays in quite a few countries.

I found it interesting to think back over the years to answer the question "where did it begin?" The next question I am now mulling over is "why is the GWR the focus of my modelling interest?"

John Dossett

Enjoy Your Cup Of Tea – Martin Elms

In my first year on the railway at Norwich in 1970, for my education and experience, I was attached to a gang of track re-layers for a month.

During a hard, cold night shift at Diss we paused for a snack in the gang bus which had a sort of kitchen in the back and sat about 15 of us. One of our gang was concerned that he had lost his flat cap, don't worry I said we will have a good look in the bus after the break.

The gang ate their food - doorstep sandwiches, raw onions, apples, etc out of metal sandwich boxes or paper bags, then had a smoke, the ganger with his faithful pipe – in the bus of course!

This was washed down with tea. This being made in a type of stainless-steel bucket with a spout, a handle and a hinged lid. Water, which was from a plastic container, was boiled in large black furred lined kettles heated on a gas ring also in the bus – health and safety not in evidence. The water was poured into the bucket – a packet of loose tea, a bag of sugar and condensed milk poured in. This may sound awful – but after the time spent in the cold on the track it was well appreciated.

The tea was then poured into mugs which I think were bought in the 60's from Norwich market, they had faded patterns, a selection of differing shades of brown and crazy pavement patterns inside, well chipped and some even had handles.

After this delight we went back to work – the final job of the tea boy was to pour the remains from the bucket on to the railway bank side – it probably made a good weed killer, the bucket was emptied and out fell – a cloth cap!

So, when you see Adrian come to a meeting wearing a cloth cap ensure he still has it on when making the tea or has hung it somewhere out of reach!

Enjoy your tea.

Martin Elms

A Love Affair (Part 3) – Steve Lacey

As explained in *A Love Affair Part 1* (June RR), my first volunteering day at Nene Valley Railway (NVR) started by assisting with an urgent repair job on *Thomas*. Having survived that, with both hands and eyesight intact, we went for a cup of tea, a recurring theme in locomotive restoration. I also find that as I get older, I have often only just climbed back up onto the locomotive, when the desire to climb down again to go to the loo rears its ugly head.....oh the perils of old age!

Alan Whenman, our CME, then had to find me my first job. Nowadays you get an induction course, but this was at a time when Alan had to find me the traditional awful job (in true, “what can we give the apprentice to do” mode) to test my metal. What better than ask him to clean out the smokebox? So, I was given a chipping hammer, a wire brush, a dust pan & brush and a bucket and pointed at the front end of the locomotive. What they didn't tell me, was that when she had failed 3 years previously, nobody had cleaned the smokebox out! Since then she had been stood in the sea air, rain and snow, with the wet slowly turning the contents into acidic cement.

The first task was to climb up onto the buffer beam. That is when you find that the steps are off-centre and there are few convenient hand-holds. Having made it safely up there, the next task is to open the smokebox door. This of course opens outwards, threatening to throw you back to the ground!

Now, as a child, I had been told that the handles on the front of the smokebox were set to show the train's departure time.....why do we tell children such porkies. I soon found out that one is welded

to the dart (a semi-circle of steel) which engages in a slot in a vertical bar across the smokebox, holding the door closed. The other handle is on a screw thread. This tightens the door against the smokebox, thus ensuring an airtight seal, vital to producing a draught through the firebox. If that makes no sense, a quick look at the picture might help!



This photo was published in *A Love Affair Part 1*, which was in the June 2020 issue of *Railway Ramblings*.

Photo: Steve Lacey

Anyway, my luck was in, as it was already ajar. Having opened it, I now had to squeeze past the bar and start chipping away. I later found out that the bar is removable as it sits in slots at the top and bottom of the smokebox, but beware, it is heavy, so just as well I didn't know that, as I had trainers on, not the steel toecap boots that are now mandatory.....potential "ouch" avoided. I spent the day chipping away, getting absolutely filthy, but with a huge smile on my face and a realisation just how long this job would take. On arrival home my wife pointed me at the shower, where I spent 15 minutes cleaning up. As I emerged, she pointed out all the bits that I had missed and directed me back in. When I next emerged, she directed me back in again, to clean the shower!

The next week, I arrived with an old plastic milk bottle filled with cold water, a bump cap, a face mask (topical or what) and a kneeler pad - I think it is called on the job learning. I forgot to say that, as with all jobs on *92 Squadron*, we always pick the worst weather, so I was cleaning the smokebox out during a hot spring weather spell, ideal to be in a black smokebox! In the course of 3 weeks, the hammer went through the thinned metal of the smokebox several times, with resultant mortification on my part. Only at the end of 3 weeks hard graft, did they tell me that the smokebox was scrap and only being kept as a pattern for a new replacement! I suppose the fact that I had stuck to the task and not thrown my toys out of the pram, resulted in me being welcomed into a great group of people.



This is the replacement smokebox, built using my cleaned-up scrapped box as a pattern.

Photo: Steve Lacey

Continues ...

Today, we have orange fire-resistant overalls, light and heavy-duty gloves, eye and ear protection, face masks, steel toecap boots and a personal track safety course and certificate before we are even allowed to wander around the yard. How anyone survived in the “old days” is a mystery!



Every restoration starts with the removal of the first nut and bolt.

Naturally the bolt head is wasted, the nut distorted and the spanner the wrong size! Deep joy.

Part 4, to be published in the September issue, will be the next test of my (and your) patience!

Steve Lacey

More from the Photo Album



Friday 18th July at 15:05 - Stevenage new (unfinished) Platform 5 hosts 717004 which is ready to depart ECS to Watton-at-Stone where it starts a service back to Moorgate. Passengers travel the Stevenage to Watton-at-Stone section by bus!

Photo: Steve Lacey

Newsletter Distribution

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Forthcoming Branch Events

IMPORTANT, PLEASE NOTE

As there is the possibility of being able to restart branch meetings the programme is shown here. However, at the time of writing, these cannot be confirmed. In the event that they can go ahead you will receive an email advising you of that, together with details of the safety measures which will apply.

During September 2020

At Hitchin (19:30-22:00, doors open 19:00)

8 September: **Welsh Highland Railway Rebuilding** "This is how it was done" Stephen Jupp

At Welwyn Garden City (14:00-16:30, doors open 13:30)

29 September: **Thrills and Spills** "An ex-railwayman's stories" Chris Blackman

A reminder that the suggested donation rates for Hitchin branch meetings are £2 for members and £3.50 for non-members. All attendees are entered into a free book draw and admission also includes refreshments at the mid-meeting interval.

All members are welcome at all meetings, at any branch of the society.

Contributions to Railway Ramblings

If you would like to make contributions – photos and/or text – to this newsletter then please contact the editor: John.Dossett@btinternet.com

Railway Ramblings is published by the committee of the Hitchin Branch of The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society. Such committee does not endorse any personal opinions expressed in this publication. The committee comprises Steve Lacey (Chairman), David Elsdon (Secretary), Paul Holloway (Treasurer), John Dossett (Newsletter Editor), Martin Elms, Roger Moulden and Adrian Scrutton. The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation Registered with the Charities Commission