

8E Railway Association – December 2014 meeting in Northwich

As always the December meeting of the 8E Railway Association took the form of the AGM, followed this year by films on North American steam. The AGM was a relatively calm affair, with the usual reports and elections. The changes to the Committee were as follows: The Chairman, Wayne Jones, has taken the vacant position of Vice-Chairman and his place has been taken by Mike Lenz, who also retains the post of Membership Secretary. Peter Dixon has resigned from the committee. The other posts are unchanged.

Mike Lenz showed two films covering North American steam, mainly from the 1950s, on the Eastern and Western sides of the country. Unfortunately the quality of the films was not of the standard to which we have become accustomed with more modern technology. However, the content provided a fascinating view of the challenges faced and the solutions produced by the engineers and designers. The word "big" springs to mind: big loads, big distances, big hills, big loading gauge, big locomotives to cope and "Big Boys". The mind boggles at the prospect of a 4-8-8-4 wheel arrangement! Another other iconic design was the Southern Pacific "Cab Forward", built to reduce the chance of asphyxiating the crew in the many long tunnels on the route. Health and safety at work? An unexpected piece of information was that for several companies the use of steam continued into the 1960s, not too dissimilar from our experiences in Britain. Despite the pervading gloominess this proved to be an absorbing show.

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Having heard him in May and been enthralled by his presentation the 8E Railway Association invited Les Nixon back with alacrity. His talk this time was entitled "55 years of Railway Photography, part 1". In fact his first colour photograph was taken in 1953 and was a decent effort on film which has not aged too well. However, the bulk of the images on view were stunning.

The apparently random selection was devised to illustrate various facets of the constantly changing scene. This was aided by the fact that he has lived in or visited 53 countries. The themes seemed to be subject, composition, ambience and opportunity. A prime example was a picture of Normanton station, looking across a damp, empty platform with a solitary gas lamp, towards terraced houses and a Victorian factory chimney, into a misty, setting sun. This was a magical and unrepeatable image and one of many which now represent an historical record.

His travels in Asia showed the Khyber Pass in its barren majesty - never a place to linger! And the Darjeeling railway, with people sitting on the front buffer beam ready to spread sand on the rails should it be required, particularly in the monsoon season. Health and safety at work?

Les is an excellent photographer and a most genial raconteur. We finished late and nobody left early. That says it all.

8E Railway Association – October 2014 meeting in Northwich

Last year Phil Braithwaite delivered to members of the 8E Railway Association a talk entitled "British Steam from 1958 to 1968". This was well structured and autobiographical in flavour. This time he continued from 1968, but in an apparently random fashion. This ploy kept the audience's interest, since it was impossible to predict what would come next!

As before the quality of the photography was extraordinary and featured both black and white and colour. Although the latter should represent verity monochrome pictures always seem excel in terms of detail and atmosphere.

So what did we see? Bulmers of Hereford provided the first operating base when preserved steam returned to the main line in 1971, with "King George V" and a set of Pullman coaches. The railway preservation movement was gaining momentum during the 70s and we saw long forgotten images of the Keighley and Worth Valley, Bluebell, Severn Valley, Llangollen, East Lancs and many more railways.

We also had a look at the Ffestiniog and the Welsh Highland railways, which operates large engines brought from South Africa and which he had seen in operation there.

His current favourite spots for observing steam-hauled excursions include Helsby and Acton Bridge. So we can all join in!

8E Railway Association – September 2014 meeting in Northwich

The 2014 – 2015 winter season of the 8E Railway Association began with a talk by Andrew McFarlane, ambitiously entitled "Preserved Main Line Steam and Preserved Railways". Andrew is a well-known figure on the Mid-Cheshire line through his work with the Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association. He is also extremely knowledgeable on the railway scene past and present.

Against this background he delivered an insight into the fortunes of the railway preservation movement since the official end of British Rail steam haulage in 1968.

Any talk like this has to include iconic locations such as the Settle and Carlisle line, the Welsh Marches route and Manchester Victoria and Miles Platting bank. Less well-known are the Carnforth to Settle Junction line and the Diggle route. For local interest he included views of "Clan Line" and "Princess Elizabeth" at Knutsford and Northwich, and of Chester station and its environs.

The Bluebell Railway was probably the first of the Preserved Railways and the Severn Valley Railway one of the longest. A welcome inclusion was the Bo'ness and Kinneil Railway. And there were views of the ever changing scene at the National Railway Museum. A fascinating evening!

8E Railway Association – May 2014 meeting in Northwich

A key test of the success of a meeting is whether you would wish to invite the speaker to come back. Les Nixon passed this test with flying colours and has already been booked for next year! On this occasion he took the 8E Railway Association on a tour of Scotland. This replicated to some extent one he made with a friend on a motorbike in the 1950s. The object on that occasion was to visit every engine shed, and was an exhausting experience. However, this talk was a more leisurely progress, the slides covering the period from 1965 to 1995.

He started at Berwick, continued up the East coast through Edinburgh and Aberdeen to Thurso and returned through Kyle of Lochalsh, Aviemore and Mallaig to Glasgow and Ayrshire. Most of the trains featured were locomotive hauled, with a wide range of steam and diesel power, now relegated to history or perhaps preserved. There was lots of interest in the infrastructure and some stunning scenery, particularly on the Kyle line. He also explored some of the industrial railways which used to cover the country. And there were some engine sheds, harking back to the original tour.

Les is an excellent photographer, his work still regularly appearing in print. He also proved to be a most genial raconteur.

8E Railway Association – April 2014 meeting in Northwich

Chris Banks continued his exploration of Engine Sheds at the April meeting of the 8E Railway Association. We have now reached Part 3. This presentation ranged alphabetically from Consett to Eastbourne, including the sheds associated with the major locomotive works at Crewe (North and South), Darlington, Derby and Doncaster.

Consett (county Durham) was built as a two-road shed in 1875. A further two roads were added by British Railways, replicating the original design and materials. Other small sheds included Dorchester, which featured an immaculately kept T9 4-4-0 used as a reserve engine for the Royal Train, and Duffryn Yard (Port Talbot), whose allocation consisted entirely of tank engines.

Larger allocations were to be found at Dumfries, a solid, spacious Glasgow and South Western Railway depot, Dundee Tay Bridge (serving the routes to Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Perth), Dunfermline, sporting a new front wall, and Eastbourne.

Yet more important in terms of size were the works sheds. These had the added attraction of locomotives in pristine condition being run-in before being returned to their home shed.

Many of the depots featured had undergone some rebuilding, but for some, like Crewe North, this was never completed, leaving an odd configuration and glimpses of what might have been.

8E Railway Association – March 2014 meeting in Northwich

The latest 8E Railway Association meeting was a talk by Paul Shackcloth entitled “Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Locomotives at Work”. However, this was just one of three talks covering different parts of the system.

He started at Manchester Victoria, explored various lines around Manchester and then followed the Calder valley route into Yorkshire. The L&Y did not have a large range of locomotive types, so we saw a lot of views of “A” class 0-6-0 tender engines and of radial tanks (mainly 2-4-2 designs), leavened with “Dreadnoughts” on express passenger trains and 0-8-0s working heavy goods trains.

There was, however, much of interest in the pictures. The oldest one (about 1880) showed the eastern end of Victoria station, the view being dominated by a huge, forbidding building - the workhouse. To be avoided if possible!

Electric trains were introduced on the Bury line in 1916. This showed a far-sighted approach by the company. The original stock lasted until 1959.

The “Jellicoe expresses” were introduced during the First World War. These were coal trains to supply the fleet at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. They were considered to be so important that they had precedence over all other traffic, including express passenger trains. Another fascinating evening!

8E Railway Association – February 2014 meeting in Northwich

“Salt and Subsidence in Northwich and Marston” sounded a rather dusty topic, but the audience at the 8E Railway Association meeting was enthralled. This was quite an achievement by Colin Edmondson, particularly since there hardly a railway in sight!

Colin explained the relationship between the natural brine streams near the surface and the rock salt beds below. Pumping of the brine allowed fresh water to percolate across the top of the rock salt bed towards the pumps, creating valleys deep underground, eventually causing subsidence. Worse still the prospect of water entering the salt mines would be increased. Once this happened it was difficult to prevent the pillars of salt supporting the roof of the mine from being dissolved, the roof collapsing, the mine being lost and the land above subsiding. But it would produce another source of brine!

The most of the area under Northwich and Marston was used for salt extraction and the consequences are well-known. He showed us many buildings sinking and at bizarre angles, prior to destruction or abandonment. To counter the problem a style of building using timber framing on a raft was devised. This proved effective in allowing buildings to be jacked up to a new level.

8E Railway Association – January 2014 meeting in Northwich

Traditionally the January meeting the 8E Railway Association has been a presentation by Karl Jauncey and Dave Richards from PSOV with their review of steam on the main line last year.

This time there seemed to be a lot of scenes around Shap and on the Settle and Carlisle, including the snow in January and March. Perhaps the most spectacular sequences were of an excursion along a freight line in Yorkshire. The line runs along the cliffs where the North York moors meet the sea, with frequent use of long lenses to put the scene into context. There was also a feature on "The Jacobite" series of scheduled trains between Fort William and Mallaig. The sheer grandeur of the scenery was breath-taking.

The only new locomotive was the Jubilee class "Galatea". Unfortunately, it performed poorly. In contrast "Bittern", one of the six surviving A4s, was allowed (officially) to run at up to 90 mph. It also took part in the "Great Gathering", with its sister locomotives at the National Railway Museum. Two of them normally reside in North America and this was the first time they had been seen together for 50 years.

As usual the quality of filming was excellent throughout.