

INTRODUCTION

The steam locomotive developed rapidly in the mining areas of the North of England and Cornwall. It was a necessary development of stationary steam power, and could quickly and cheaply move large tonnages of coal in preference to horse haulage or canal. The technology spread rapidly throughout the country as motive power for public railways and industrial premises alike. As coal mine complexes expanded some very large railway systems, known as “internal users”, grew up while some lesser concerns made do with just a few sidings. Virtually every system was served by the company’s own steam locomotives.

Rail transport would appear to have arrived at Prestongrange Colliery in the 1870s. It was served by a branch line diverging from the Edinburgh – Berwick main line, south of Prestonpans Station. It ran northwest over level ground above the Firth of Forth to a point atop an escarpment then turned east down a steep gradient to reach the sea level of the Colliery. It was approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile long.

It was worked all its life by steam engines until closure in 1962. A total of nine locomotives have been recorded over this period. Of these only one survives – Andrew Barclay built No 2219 in 1946. The same builder’s No 224, built in 1881, was still at work in 1962 and despite the efforts of an enthusiastic signalman at Morrisons’ Haven Signal Box that locomotive, along with the rest of Prestongrange Colliery, was despatched for scrap. It would surely have been a fitting relic for Prestongrange.

In Scotland at large, steam lasted until 1981 working quietly away serving coal mining as it had done since the nineteenth century – 13 years after British Railways had itself dispensed with steam.

The mining complex lives on as The Prestongrange Industrial Heritage Museum, where railways and steam are an important aspect of its presentation. Steam re-appeared on rails in 1975 after a 13 year absence. This Historical Series booklet is proud to recount the tale of how and why the new railway was built.

FORMING AND STEAMING

For this author, at least, it began way back in 1963, through a series of coincidences, of which most people experience at least one in their lifetime. I have always been interested in railways, watching trains at pre-school age from my parents' bedroom window which overlooked the old station in Peebles. 1963 found me wandering cavernous Waverley Station in Edinburgh when I met Iain, now a lifelong friend. Iain was a railway signaller of the old school, shiny levers and continuous cups of tea, and his place of work was on the East Coast Mainline to London at Morrison's Haven, about 15 miles out from Edinburgh. Morrison's Haven was the now silted-up and filled-in harbour for Prestongrange Colliery and the signal box was named after it. Its purpose was to control the sidings for the wagons to-ing and fro-ing from Prestongrange Colliery. By the time I was paying my unofficial visits, the Colliery was closed but I enjoyed many sunny days, yes they appeared sunny then, observing railways.

Years passed. In 1969, exploring the Edinburgh outskirts in my faded blue aged Hillman Minx, re-designed at the back after the bus behind me one day did not stop, I discovered Lady Victoria Colliery at Newtongrange. I did not know the place existed but here were steam engines shunting this busy site, as they had done for over 60 years. I loved it!

More years passed. In 1976, I heard of a museum project being started at the site of Prestongrange Colliery and as it was close to home, decided this was the place to be. I investigated in my suave new White 1600E Cortina – no more beat-up Hillmans. What I found was the cleared site of the colliery, heaps of bricks and spoil and in the middle the embryo of what was to come. There, proud as punch in a gleaming coat of green paint, all on its own in a sea of dereliction, was the same locomotive I had watched in 1969. To the north, within shouting distance, Morrison's Haven harbour still lay waiting to be re-discovered and half a mile to the south, up the tree covered hill and across the North Berwick road was Morrison's Haven Signal Box, the site of my schoolday jaunts in 1963.

The locomotive was the first of many industrial-type railway artefacts to arrive at Prestongrange in 1975. It was being managed by three or four like-minded people and soon I

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was adorned in the traditional boiler suit and getting happily filthy. The site at this time was basically managed by a retired Area Mining Manager whose influence gathered many of the items made available to Prestongrange, and thus the collection grew. Fortunately, so did the number of people willing to become involved, until at the peak, around 15 were actively involved. Fifteen doesn't sound much but it was adequate to manage the requirements and, after all, how many societies can claim 100% of active membership; 15 members; 15 active people!

The main group aim was to manage and operate items of equipment pertinent to the site, but principally the steam locomotive. All this was done on a somewhat ad-hoc basis, along the lines of – *Question: "Who will be here on Sunday?"*; *Answer forthcoming: "Oh good, then we can do this and/or that"*. This sporadic planning was fine up to a point but lack of continuity could hinder a planned project. One subject that was a total commitment was to steam the locomotive on the first Sunday of the month from April to September, and the Museum authorities expected this. Footplate "trips" were offered.

Thus in 1980, the members formally formed the Prestongrange Society. Along with the usual office bearers, it was recognised that groups managing certain disciplines were desirable and from this the Engineering, Permanent Way (P/way), and Operating Groups were formed, with a nominated "person in charge". Each member selected a group they would prefer to be associated with, usually determined by their skills. As in most groups, the membership's occupations ranged over a broad spectrum from engineers, farmers, lawyers, bankers, professional railwaymen, mothers, etc. However, those in charge were allowed to "poach" from other groups if manpower was required. One of the nice advantages in such a small working group is the ability for everyone to be involved in all tasks and the flexibility it produces. For example, during tracklaying, six people working in unison could manhandle a 30-foot length of rail with comparative ease.

Written rules was another item which had not been investigated before. Thus a Rules Committee was formed to produce formal rules for operations which would suit all the membership and embodying what was already being done in practice, and also to satisfy the Railway Inspectorate. This eliminated any discrepancy for people thinking they were doing the correct thing but misunderstood by someone else. "Did that strange hand signal mean stop?"

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As expected with all groups, Annual General Meetings are held and minuted. At first, they were held “on site” at Prestongrange in the Beam Engine House. Unfortunately, this had its drawbacks. Chiefly, as the AGMs are usually held in December, the Engine House could be extremely draughty and cold – although this did make for very smart proceedings. However, the lady members declined the comforts and after one very cold meeting, it was decided to have the meetings at members’ houses – why this was not done at first defies logic. The AGMs generated into social evenings going on until the small hours, with much food and drink being consumed. One lady member is renowned for her fresh raspberry and cream sponge and was dared to turn up at meetings without it! Latterly, these flourished into two or three gatherings a year with Belhaven beer being very popular.

For a number of years there was an outing, usually to another railway site, but as the membership had declined this has not happened for some time.

Time has taken its toll on the size of the membership. Over the years people have moved, lost interest, had other commitments and unfortunately died. Despite efforts “lost” members have not been replaced and at this date the membership is down to eleven, not all of whom are as active as they were some 20 years ago.

The Society now owns one steam and two diesel engines. It is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the remaining steam and diesel locomotives and although not belonging to the Society the upkeep and expansion, where possible, of the track. All this is now enough to keep the level of membership fully employed and whereas it used to be involved with other museum artefacts, these responsibilities are no longer part of the Society’s remit – hence the change of name in 1995 to “The Prestongrange Railway Society”.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Initially, after Prestongrange Colliery closed in the early 1960s, the site was cleared leaving only the Beam Engine, the large building which was the colliery generating station, or Power House, and various sundry buildings. The brickworks were still in operation. Onto the virtual wasteland arrived locomotive No 7 in 1975. Acquired from Lady Victoria Colliery, Newtongrange, where it had recently ceased working

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commercially, this locomotive was built in 1914 by Grant Ritchie of Kilmarnock, a town which will appear again in the text. It was protected from curious youngsters, but not the elements, by a vertical steel fenced compound. From this projected eastwards around 200 feet of track and on this short auspicious start the locomotive was steamed up and down, offering footplate rides.

Around this time a self propelled steam crane was acquired also from Lady Victoria Colliery. This vertical-boilered apparition is thought to date back to the 1860s. At the time of arrival, it was in working order. It proved useful for track laying, besides being of fun value.

The short section of track however, was not at all convenient for any steam engine to show a bit of pace, and to be honest, not very safe if anyone misjudged their stopping distance, so positive efforts were made to extend as far as possible to produce the "running line". As far as possible meant eastward for nearly a quarter of a mile to a point at the end of a small embankment in an area surrounded by trees, strangely dubbed by the membership as "the woods". To go any further would necessitate falling off the end of the embankment, 20 feet or so, and ending up in a local, long established scrap yard.

Up to around 1979, forays were made to various local coal mines that no longer used rail access to tranship coal, or had closed completely for business. Fortunately, one of the members is able to provide road transport, kindly supplied for the cost of his fuel. Lady Victoria Colliery at Newtongrange offered many yards and some pointwork. However, the drawback here was that much of it was in an area long disused beside the A7 road and was now so overgrown that we were working in a virtual forest, but it added to the interest of the job. If any reader cares to investigate the area today, I am sure some track will still be there that was not possible to extricate from around trees. Lady Victoria also donated some wooden wagons and weighing in at around 5½ tons were just within the capability of our member's transport.

On the other side of the old railway to Carlisle from Lady Victoria was Butlerfield, a coal stocking site. Also derelict by now with no rail access, two of the shunting locomotives were marooned on a short section of track, one inside a corrugated iron shed. This locomotive interested the Society as, being a product of Andrew Barclay of Kilmarnock, it was supplied new to the Prestongrange Colliery in 1946. A homecoming

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was obvious, and the locomotive was eventually repatriated in a blizzard, to no-one's pleasure. As it was felt at this time that allowing passengers trips directly on the steam locomotive footplate was not acceptable, this new arrival was adapted to carry a few people and used as a "carriage".

1979 also saw the Society and the Museum gain the heights of TV stardom. Scottish Television were producing a series of programmes called "Treasures in Store" and wished to feature Prestongrange. Filming was done over a day of dismal, grey cold drizzle in January. The film crew reflected the weather, the director really was a "dearie" and everyone was glad to go home. However, the final showing on television looked very professional and a nice unexpected surprise was all the members who attended were paid as extras! I clearly remember getting for that day what I normally earned in a week!

Two of the members bought a very small diesel locomotive from a distillery in Tomatin. Described as virtually a lorry engine, a cab and flanged railway wheels, it existed in a previous life shunting loads of material during the construction of the Tay Road Bridge and is believed to have at one stage ended up in the water, rather similar to its more unfortunate bigger brother when the original rail bridge collapsed over a century ago. It arrived, once again, on our member's transport and as it was driven on to the trailer at Tomatin, it was literally driven off again on to the ground at Prestongrange, its diminutive nature allowing it not to sink up to its axles. Facing the wrong way, a couple of ropes were attached to the front, some of the healthier members attached to the ropes and with some judicious grunting and tugging, the locomotive was driven and slewed simultaneously to line up with two old rails laid as a ramp. It was then driven up the ramp and with the whole exercise taking around half an hour, permanent track was found.

Using an old locomotive as a carriage for passengers had its drawbacks. The immediate one was capacity. As only three persons and a Society member acting as "guard" were allowed to travel at a time, the number of out and back journeys was considered excessive if the visitor numbers topped 300 in an afternoon. Something had to be better and the solution was found by a member who, at this time was a guard at the railway freight depot at Millerhill, near Edinburgh. He reported that an old van had recently been taken out of traffic as a departmental brake van, the type of vehicle that would

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accompany works trains. It was suitable as it was fitted with bench seating lengthwise along the sides, an open veranda, at one end with a powerful hand brake – admirable for a guard – and best of all, inside, right in the middle of the floor, central heating in the form of a cast iron stove, wood or coal, for the burning of. A deal was struck, low loader arranged, and disaster. At Millerhill the van was despatched to a remote area where it was convenient to winch up by our now well tried and trusted ramping, onto the low loader. The preceding evening, all was ready, material being deposited on the ground and on the trailer, bits of baulking, rail, etc. Next morning, SNOW and more SNOW hiding all the ground-loading material. However, after subduing initial panic, replacements were collected from Prestongrange and delivery eventually accomplished the next day – no snow of course! On site, the new arrival refused to run off the trailer by gravity so more brutal methods were adopted. A member – volunteering of course – manned the handbrake and with a bit of persuasion by tractor and rope, the van was set in motion. And motion it was as it took off at about 15 mph and careered about 80 feet along our track, this vehicle weighing about 24 tons. However, it was home and dry.

Attention then turned to its décor. Like Henry Ford's Model T, it arrived in any colour as long as it was black – black outside, dark green inside. But metamorphosis took place over the winter and maroon exterior and maroon and cream interior hid the sombre black. Ready for the next season was a vehicle in which could be carried up to 16 souls. This greatly eased the queues at the little temporary platform that had been erected from redundant sleepers. The practice now was to propel the van in the direction of “the woods” and obviously pull it back. The van has two windows in the end next to the locomotive and this went down very well, especially with youngsters who could now observe the loco crew at close quarters. Was this appreciated by the loco crews now under minute scrutiny? – ask them!

A short “end to end” railway was now fully operational, with a nice wee green engine hauling a freshly painted maroon van, so thoughts now turned to “What can we do next?”.

To date, everything was kept in the open, with the working steam loco, small diesel and the van secured in a high fenced compound when not in use. But at the north end of the site, behind the Visitor Centre, is the old colliery pit baths, once a scene of much scrubbing and activity as miners cleaned up at

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the end of their shift. Now derelict and home to the proverbial pigeon, one end had been converted by a haulage contractor to house lorries, necessitating a new concrete floor, but producing a long, wide empty gallery-like covered “shed”. While not ideal – access was difficult, the roof leaked, it was not heated and headroom not much more than around 12 feet – at least it was indoors. What the Society did have in abundance was track, so the plan was hatched to build a sort of rough temporary railway to enable rail access to “the baths”.

FORTUNE SMILES

Fortune smiled on the Society around this time. In 1980 another Andrew Barclay built locomotive was acquired. Last used at Cairnhill Colliery at the end of the 1970s, it was dumped at a withdrawn machinery store belonging to the NCB (National Coal Board) at Arniston, near Edinburgh. Incidentally, Cairnhill is in the middle of nowhere near Muirkirk, its solitude defies the fact that a colliery once operated here with steam engines and wagons crashing and clanking high up on the moors. This locomotive arrived by the easier method of low loader and crane; if only all our movements could have afforded the luxury of a crane. As this locomotive was not required to steam, and besides its condition was unknown, it was cosmetically restored (i.e. given a lick of paint) and put on display. A few years later, it was despatched to a new museum being established at Lady Victoria Colliery in fact a stone’s throw from where the Society collected it from at Arniston a few years earlier.

Of even more consequence was the acquisition in 1982 of yet another Andrew Barclay steam locomotive. This loco was virtually the last steam loco to work commercially in Scotland, certainly for the NCB. It was taken out of service a bit worn but in working order at Bedlay Colliery near Glenboig, simply because the colliery had ceased production. Bearing in mind that the working locomotive at Prestongrange could not work for ever, this new manna from heaven was an opportunity not to be missed. It arrived unceremoniously on site in September but it took ten years to actually put it into service. Although basically sound as a locomotive, it was assessed by our boiler insurers that work was required and that would entail removal of the boiler from the rest of the loco and sending it to



No 6 in action with wagons. Beam Engine in the background, 26.12.93



Prestongrange late 1980s



No 7 and van head towards the Platform 1989