

Brighton Lines, and a Preservation Pioneer

Until quite recent times the average Briton's concept of a holiday was a trip to the seaside, either just a day out or for the more affluent, a whole week or fortnight away from home. By the 1960s perhaps even a mixture of the two could be managed, the day trip maybe taken during the Easter or Whitsun bank holiday weekends as a special treat. The chosen resort was often the nearest one to home: my parents' families from east London traditionally went to Southend in the twenties and thirties; from the northern industrial towns it tended to be Blackpool or Skegness, Bridlington or Scarborough. Presumably Birmingham residents could exercise considerable choice and had a long journey in any case. After one early, windswept and damp experience savouring the undoubted delights of Bognor Regis, we went invariably to Brighton.

Our first visit - by train of course - was on Whit Sunday 1957. This was an organized excursion running directly from Staines, starting out quite early in the morning. Most surprisingly one of Feltham shed's ugly Q1 class 0-6-0s (freight locos if ever they were) brought a varied collection of ancient non corridor, non lavatory coaches probably of LSWR origin, out of the down loop on Staines common and into the platform at Central station to load up with the happy throng. This motley rake then proceeded very slowly via Ash, Guildford, Cranleigh and Christ's Hospital to our destination for the day. Most of the middle section of the route was single track with passing loops, causing further delay, but what wouldn't we give to be able to make such a sedate and scenic excursion nowadays? I have no recollection whatever of the return journey, as I probably slept soundly the whole way!

By 1960, probably due to the slowness of such cross country rambles my parents chose to travel "under our own steam" (but in fact, electric all the way of course!) via Waterloo and Victoria. This was the heyday of my loco spotting activities before the numerous old pre grouping locomotive classes were swept away, and resulted in some classic sightings of ex South Eastern and Brighton types along the main line: C and C2x 0-6-0s, D1 4-4-0s, and one of the elegant K 2-6-0s, though being a Sunday there was not too much on the move. The tally also included a couple each of Central section "Schools" and "Arthurs" with their unfamiliar short 6-wheeled tenders to suit the small ex LB&SC turntables, and further West Country / Battle of Britain examples towards a near completion of this class in my ABC booklet.

Most of the day was spent on the beach and around the Old Steine shops; at this time I also had a particular obsession with buses and trolleybuses, and there was a marvelous variety of types and liveries to be seen here. Loco spotting was restricted to a solitary standard 2-6-4 tank, an LB&SC E4 radial tank and several M7s seen around the elegant terminal station in amongst all the electrics, when we returned in the late afternoon to start our journey home. I realized too late that the large and well filled locomotive yard was close at hand, and its contents would have been easily visible from the street running along the top of the cliff like retaining wall on the west side just outside the station precincts.

I was determined to remedy this situation as soon as possible, but the opportunity did not arise until early October the following year. Our local coach company, Beach's were advertising a Saturday excursion to Brighton direct from Staines and I duly booked up, along with a fellow school friend, by way of a special pre Birthday treat; the last time I would be able to travel at the under-14 half fare rate. The cost as I recall was 7s-6d (37.5p)

This was to be my first and only experience of what was then regarded as long distance coach travel - though of course only a mere 60 miles or so each way! The comfortable red and cream painted Duple Vega bodied Bedford coach conveniently stopped to pick up outside the "Jolly Butcher" pub and at several other points along the main road towards Sunbury. Despite the relatively short run down to the coast it was deemed necessary to make a mid-morning "convenience" stop at a wayside hostelry once we had gained the main London to Brighton road somewhere in the vicinity of Horley, and the adults thus had their first opportunity to partake of alcoholic refreshment, rather early in the day. Us youngsters remained in the coach for this enforced delay - such was life then before fast motorway travel, on vehicle bars and toilets, drink cans in convenient

carry packs, or pubs with family beer gardens! While the adults - including the coach driver - were away we became aware of the back end of a very old and ramshackle lorry proceeding slowly but relentlessly towards our vehicle, aimed directly at a point beneath my seat. Just before it finally crunched into thin alloy side panels I took flight fearing that the window glass might crack. It didn't but the lorry driver then hurriedly and noisily re-engaged forward gear and shot off down the road in a cloud of blue exhaust smoke, as fast as he could go. We thus had the responsible and public spirited task of reporting the registration of the offender, carefully logged in our notebooks, to our driver on his return from the tavern with the other passengers in tow. After a further delay while the village bobby was summoned to attend on his ancient bicycle and the damage inspected, we were finally on our way again.

On this visit to Brighton we made a conscious effort to inspect the contents of the locomotive yard from that delightful vantage point atop the aforementioned high wall, though being a Saturday, numbers were somewhat depleted. There was no obvious easy means of access to the sheds themselves; I suspect some local knowledge would have been useful here! In the course of an hour or so of observation, conveniently combined with consumption of our packed lunches, we logged several K and U1 class moguls, E4 tanks (plus a solitary example of the very similar E6 class) and a couple each of the standard 84xxx auto fitted tanks and the elderly and tiny LB&SC A1x "Terrier" tanks. One of the latter was 32635, the former Brighton Works pet, still decked out in Stroudley ochre livery and known locally as the "Yellow Peril". The L&SWR M7 tanks seemed to have largely disappeared from this area by now, replaced by the 84xxx engines, also numerous Ivatt 412xx series machines, on their secondary passenger duties. There was also a far greater presence of 80xxx series 2-6-4 tanks than previously, but this type had long been common in the area.

Most of the later afternoon before we had to return to the coach was spent looking at buses and the seafront. Another highlight of our visit was meant to have been a trip on the quaint little Volk's Electric Railway along the foreshore, again taking the opportunity of a last ride at junior half fare. However the officious lady ticket clerk who seemed to occupy most of the very limited space in a small wooden ticket booth flatly refused to accept that I qualified for the child rate despite my protestations, so we in turn refused to pay up, on principle. We made up for this by walking along the line, a surprisingly long trek, inspecting it at close quarters instead and saving a few pennies into the bargain. With sore feet and aching limbs but principles intact, the plush deep upholstered seats of the Beach's coach were a welcoming sight, and once again we slept through most of the journey home that evening.

For some time now, the magazines had brought news of strange goings on deep in the heart of the Sussex countryside, which had to be investigated at first hand. The Bluebell Railway, which commenced activities in 1960 from Sheffield Park station represented a novel concept in railway preservation, difficult to put in context today, whereby old engines and carriages were set to work in their natural environment giving rides to visitors, rather than being shut up in museums as static exhibits as was hitherto the norm. Admittedly the narrow gauge Talylyn and Festiniog Railways had already been doing this in North Wales for a few years, but the Bluebell was the very first such standard gauge operation, using mainly ex British Railways equipment. Who could have foreseen then that this very small scale activity would lead to the vast countryside (if not worldwide) steam railway scene we now enjoy?

After a couple of years operating a shuttle service out of Sheffield Park, necessitating an engine at each end of the rake of carriages, the society was given permission to run its trains into Horsted Keynes station, then still owned and used by BR. It thus became much more accessible, and provided us with the opportunity to make a visit, long awaited, on a Sunday in the late spring of 1963 as part of our regular excursion to Brighton. That it was possible to do all this in the space of one day (albeit requiring an early start), having enough time at both centres to make the visit worthwhile and relying solely on public transport, may seem surprising today. The key to the plan was that a British Railways service still operated from Haywards Heath on the main Brighton line, via one intermediate station at Ardingly, to meet up with the Bluebell trains at Horsted Keynes. Even more surprising was that this branch line was electrified, so we were able to break our journey down from Victoria easily and board the 2-BIL unit forming the connection. It is hard to appreciate how this service could possibly have been viable before the Bluebell had arrived, since Horsted Keynes station seemed remote from

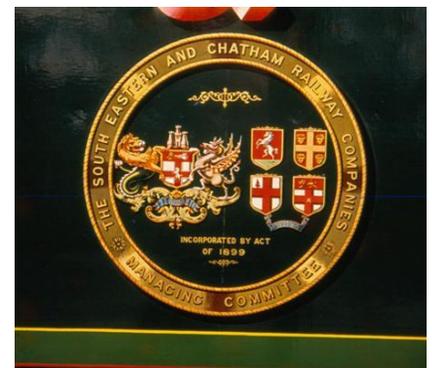
any centre of population whatever, but now it had a useful purpose on summer Sundays at least. This notwithstanding, only a few months after our visit, at the end of the 1963 summer season BR cut the service back to Ardingly, so the Bluebell became once more accessible only by infrequent bus or to those lucky enough to have their own car, at that time still very much a minority. Despite this setback, the preservation society went on to take over completely at Horsted Keynes and with subsequent developments it is now difficult to visualize that the Southern third rail electric system once existed here; it is one of very few such lines to have ceased operation.

By the time of our journey only a single 2-car unit shuttled back and forth, using the southernmost or former up line in both directions. The down line was in use for storing a great variety of old carriages, mostly made redundant by the Kent Coast electrification schemes, and there must have been some 200 of them stretching almost the whole length of the branch. A wonderful potential source of vehicles for the preservation society, but selection and extraction of individual items from this great mass must have been problematical.

I have to say that my first impression of the Bluebell operation, after all the publicity build up, was somewhat disappointing. Unlike nowadays we had of course no established benchmark against which to judge, so what we saw could only be taken at face value. Also of course there were dozens of quite similar branch or country railway lines still operating, hundreds of country stations surviving in largely unaltered condition, and thousands of steam locomotives and old carriages still in everyday use, even including identical types to those preserved here. The very name "Bluebell" conjured up a somewhat juvenile image, and the bestowal of painted names onto the tank sides of the little SR P class 0-6-0s ("Bluebell" and "Primrose") was sheer heresy, of which the present day equivalent would be perhaps the painting of a Severn Valley Railway Great Western pannier tank in "Thomas" guise!

The stations then still looked somewhat forlorn, with weed infested sidings and little in the way of public facilities, largely devoid of signalling, signware and all the other such nostalgic paraphernalia which has since been carefully re-instated. Sheffield Park's main platform and station house had however already been considerably smartened up, and a start made on the provision of some under-cover restoration and storage facilities for rolling stock; most of the limited number of acquisitions made to date were still kept out in the open air. The train itself was a quaint affair consisting of the relatively huge L&NWR observation saloon mated incongruously with the set of four 4 short, compartmented vehicles of the Metropolitan "Chesham" set repainted into a maroon and off white colour scheme. Only very small locomotives were available, and one at each end was deemed necessary to climb Freshfield bank reliably; in the event this seemed to present something of a struggle, almost resulting in stalling.

The two engines on our train were however immaculate, the Brighton Terrier "Stepney" (the very first locomotive acquired, in 1959) in LB&SCR ochre, and no. 27 (BR's former 31027) of class P by now thankfully de-named and restored into former SE&CR mid green livery with beautiful lining out and coat of arms. We had a brief opportunity to look round the





yard at Sheffield Park before the return journey and photograph the other engines: (32)473, the Brighton E4 radial tank, also newly repainted, this time in the later LB&SCR dark umber livery and carrying its former name "Birch Grove", North London Railway tank 58850 now in plain L&NWR black with cast number plates as 2650, the second P class tank (31)323 also in black but still named "Bluebell". The locomotive stock was completed by GWR "Dukedog" 4-4-0 no. 9017, the last survivor of this peculiar welsh mountain breed now a long way from home but still largely in BR condition and not then operable, and old friend Adams radial tank 30583, to me hideously desecrated by repainting into supposed L&SWR livery, an insipid and impractical pale green. There was one other machine, the only one not obtained from British Railways, the quaint industrial contraption known as "Baxter", a rare example of Fletcher Jennings build, and amazingly workable. Altogether a very cosmopolitan collection; the more uniform Southern Railway image and atmosphere was still many years into the future.

Additional coaching stock was sparse, comprising a couple of shabby Maunsell era vehicles plus some old black painted L&SWR examples rescued from BR departmental service and requiring much work before becoming fit for passenger use again. Freight wagon preservation was unknown; it would have served no conceivable purpose in the railway's new role.

I am not sure whether my impressions were to any extent universal; most of the visitors seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. In any case, with hindsight we have cause to be extremely grateful that the few individuals involved at the time had the foresight and perseverance to achieve what they did, as pioneers of the standard gauge railway preservation movement.



We returned to Horsted Keynes by early afternoon, thence Southern Electric whisked us quickly down to Brighton - a different world altogether. The weather was hot, and my pleas to be allowed to spend the rest of the day lurking around the environs of the railway station were understandably viewed somewhat askance, as my parents headed for the seafront. I was lucky enough on this occasion to gain access to the engine sheds by dint of a simple polite request, but the variety of locomotive types common here in earlier years was somewhat diminished. No longer were any M7 or H class 0-4-4 tanks to be found, but some ex LB&SCR machines lingered in the shape of several E4 tanks, a solitary E6 (32418), and the venerable little A1x "Terriers". Though most of these were obviously withdrawn from normal service and stored, one of the latter was still in steam and very active as the yard pilot for the day.

Rebuilt pacific 34014 "Budleigh Salterton" together with 34057 "Biggin Hill" in original condition provided me with two rare new sightings of these types. The 80xxx 2-6-4 tanks were now omnipresent, but a pair of BR standard moguls 76032 & 3 appeared to be stored out of use. I was told by the shed staff that there were further interesting engines stored a short distance away in the former goods yard at Hove station, which turned out to be a long hot dusty trek through endless residential streets, only to find that I had already seen most of the inmates - K class moguls, more E4 tanks, and a pair of "Schools" 4-4-0s 30911 & 23 - on previous visits to Brighton.

I managed to find a convenient bus to take me quickly back to the town centre, then a fair way further eastwards to just about where I judged that the old Kemp Town branch terminus should have been. I guessed badly, and only found it after another long and wearying walk. The main building still bore extensive evidence of collision damage and temporary repairs resulting from a nasty encounter with runaway E4 class tank 32468 the previous January (which explained the decrepit and battered state of this engine, by now recovered and stored at the rear of Brighton shed!)

Round at the back it was business as usual; the branch still very much alive with freight traffic, numerous sidings full of wagons fanning out from the tunnel mouth at the station throat. Having photographed the scene, it was time to hurry back to meet my parents at Brighton station for the journey home, walking as far as possible parallel with the branch back to its junction and the impressive viaducts in the vicinity of Lewes Road.



So ended our last "traditional" seaside day trip by train, spent rather unconventionally on my part, and managing to pack a tremendous amount of activity into just a few hours. We were soon to join the massing ranks of first time car owners, and things were never quite the same again!

We made several more trips to the Bluebell line, also to the fledgling Kent & East Sussex Railway, over the next few years. Here are a few pictures when we called in at Sheffield Park on 30th May 1966.....



Next stop on that day was at Robertsbridge station, where the K&ESR society had just taken delivery of a “Terrier” 0-6-0T and a pair of carriages from BR but had suffered a minor derailment during shunting there....



While this was being dealt with we wandered up the line a little way, finding this P-class tank loco out of use at the Pride of Sussex flour mill siding, and the two delivered carriages parked up just around the corner from the station. Here, Chris Leigh strolls along the former main line coming in from Bodiam.....



By late afternoon the loco had been re-railed and picked up the two coaches to run into the bay platform adjacent to the main line at Robertsbridge station. The leading carriage is a former Pullman car.....



Our next visit to the K&ESR was on 22nd August the following year, 1967, when Chris, Paul Chamberlain, Paul Ebling and myself joined a working party at Rolvenden station, clearing vegetation and generally trying to tidy up the site.

Here are Paul E. and Chris, hardly suitably dressed for a day's hard labouring! The “white-collar coalmen” are taking their old tin bath to load up with cinders and ash for removal to another part of the station yard.....

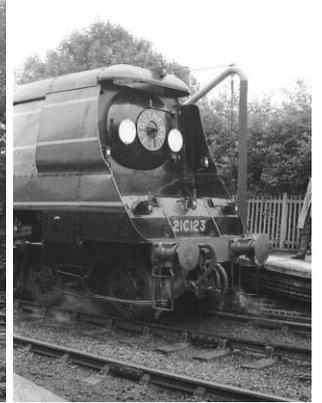


The second image shows the two Paul's (at right) with a hand-pump trolley conveying cans of paraffin to assist the vegetation burning which is going on in the background. On the same day, the preserved SE&CR H-class tank loco (31)263 was being steamed for the first time during its restoration at Rolvenden.....



I returned to the Bluebell line on 3rd July 1978, by which time many more locomotives and carriages had been obtained. This selection of black & white images shows progress by then in and around Sheffield Park station, and at Horsted Keynes. The H tank had by then moved across to the Bluebell line.....





The rest is, of course, history!

K.A. Jagers 1995