

Notes compiled by Iorwerth Watkin Jones MBE, and read out during his retirement presentation at Penrhyn Castle on 23rd November 2005

“My association with Penrhyn Castle came about through the friendship between my father and Mr. W.R. Parry, one time administrator. Mr. Parry had a small quarry exhibit at the Castle, and following the Royal Welsh Show held at Llandegai in the late 1950s he was presented with a model of the Penrhyn Quarry Railway which had been built by the pupils of The Charles Darbishire Secondary Modern School, Penmaenmawr.

In the early 1960s I was working at the quarry and learned from my father that Mr. Parry was having problems assembling the model, so I rang up and offered to help put it together. We could only work on the model at weekends and it was on one of those occasions that Mr. Parry mentioned an idea he had involving the use of the almost derelict stables at the Castle, as a railway museum.

In 1963 (I had) finished my apprenticeship at Penrhyn Quarry as a fitter and driver in the quarry and on the railway between the quarry and Port Penrhyn. One day we had a pre-arranged visit by a group of railway enthusiasts who had organized themselves a ride from the Port to the quarry on my train. In conversation they said they were members of the Industrial Locomotive Preservation Society. They had met Mr. Parry when they visited the Castle a year earlier and he had mentioned his hope of founding a museum related to local industry. They asked if I was the man who was helping Mr. Parry, and what I thought of the idea. I said I thought it was a sound idea and it would make good use of the stables.

At the end of 1963 the quarry railway ceased to operate. 'Linda' and 'Blanche' were sold to the Ffestiniog Railway, and 'Charles' by this time in poor condition, was stored in the engine shed at Port Penrhyn.

On my way into Bangor one Saturday I saw 'Charles' standing in the open outside the shed. Seeing it still there a week later I went down to the port to ask about the engine's future and I was told that it was to be scrapped by Sykes and Harrison at the Port Foundry, who were then using the engine shed as a pattern shop. Working with Mr. Parry that weekend I told him about 'Charles' and said I thought it would be a shame if the engine were to be broken up. I also said that if there was to be a museum then 'Charles' should be the first exhibit, being a link between the Castle and the quarry.

With the museum project in mind I continued working weekends, slowly clearing out the carriage sheds which contained vast quantities of straw and many wooden crates which once contained oil paintings. Some crates appeared to have been there since the First World War and bore dates from 1914. When clear, the colour scheme in the carriage shed was a depressing dark chocolate and bottle green. There was no electricity, light being provided by two gas lamps fixed to the door pillars. The gas system was old and leaky, so that the doors had to be opened to allow fumes to disperse before the lamps could be lit. No fire precautions in those days. Eventually we cleaned what was to be the first section of the museum to a state where we could persuade the National Trust that as a museum the stables had considerable potential. Actually there were only two people to persuade in those days. They were Mr. Fenton, the Historic Houses representative, and the Agent for the Trust, Mr. Tetley.

I was still working at the quarry while tentative enquiries were made about 'Charles'.

Meanwhile Lady Janet Douglas Pennant became curious about my regular use of her drive, so one day she stopped me to ask what was going on. I explained to her about the Museum and our hopes of saving 'Charles'. This really raised her interest and she kindly said that we could have 'Charles' if the Administrator could arrange for its removal. I reported this conversation to Mr. Parry, who contacted both the quarry and Lady Janet, with the result that shortly afterwards 'Charles' was moved to the stable yard, along with the Penrhyn saloon coach, which was also at the Port, and which Lady Janet wished to preserve.

In 1964 more engines arrived and part of the stable was opened to the public unofficially to assess interest in the project. As a result we were offered first, the Beckton Gasworks locomotive No. 1, then the Kettering No.3. Both engines were in very poor condition due to corrosion and lack of paint. They arrived before accommodation was ready for them and had to stand in the yard. Kettering No. 3 did not have a smokestack, but later on, after scouring around, I bought a suitable replacement from a friend who had a traction engine.

Progress meant an extended period of volunteer labour on my part in order to clean out the ride. This section of the stables was piled with ash and clinker to a height of ten feet, the dumped waste from Castle boilers over many years.

At last the engines were moved under cover. Interest grew and the National Trust were presented with two engines by John Summers Steelworks.

The museum officially opened in June 1965 and shortly after that the Industrial Locomotive Society Committee was formed to advise on matters relating to the museum such as layout, upkeep and so on.

The Committee decided to employ a man in the museum full time and I was offered the Job by Mr Parry. But there were other applicants and I had to attend for an interview during which I made known my feelings on the possibility that someone else could be asked to continue what I had started. And so I became a full time National Trust employee in January 1966 after struggling voluntarily for six years.

And we are still struggling!

When I started working for the National Trust, castle staff consisted of Houseman, Bob Davies, Mrs. Li Davies, cleaner, who lived at the Grand Lodge, and Joiner Vernon Davies. Outside staff were Gardener John Elias Jones and Groundsman Dick Thomas. During my early years at the museum Vernon the joiner and I were involved in grass cutting, roof cleaning and general maintenance.

Equipment for the grounds was limited. We had one Gravely truck for transportation, one Bonzer three wheel truck and one Ransome petrol mower. There were also three gang mowers. I made an attachment so that the Bonzer truck could pull a gang mower. Equipment included a quart of Castrol Engine oil which had to last all summer. Being the only self propelled mower, the Ransome was shared between grounds and gardens. The banks at the front of the Castle were hand cleared with rip hooks and raked clean.

As for the Castle itself, lighting was mainly electric, but the section from the kitchen (now the Trust Shop) along the servant's corridor to the Butler's Pantry still had that hazardously leaky gas lighting.

During the season Houseman Bob Davies acted as guide while his son Cyril took on reception. Visitors gathered at reception to await a guided tour with Bob; tours were in groups. In high season an extra guide was employed along with two ladies for security duties, one upstairs and one downstairs.

As the season drew to a close, furniture was gathered to the centre of each room and covered with sheets. Scaffolding and ladders enabled Bob and Cyril to clean the upper areas of each room, and when they moved on the cleaner would do the lower area. The rooms were then locked up for the winter.

At the start of the season the covers were removed and furniture returned to position so that the rooms could be cleaned and dusted ready for viewing. This was also the start of the window cleaning season. Bob Davies cleaned inside, then a rope was fastened round Cyril's waist and he clambered out onto the window ledge to clean the outside while Bob held firmly to the other end of the rope."