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Thoughts of Chairman Dell

I'll start by wishing everyone a happy, prosperous and healthy New Year.

The New Year is well under way and we've had the ME Exhibition at its new location at Sandown Park. Not as good as Ally Pally but nevertheless judging by the number of people present it must have been a financial success which bodes well for future exhibitions. John Squire and I attended the first day (a big mistake). We just could not see anything owing to the masses of people attending. I get the feeling the organisers didn't anticipate quite such a successful show and that next year it could be even better.

It comes to our attention that some members who receive our News Sheet would like an additional copy as they have sons and daughters who would like their own. Please let me know and I will pass the information on. One of our now ex-junior members has all his News Sheets from the day he joined the Society.

Can we live up to this? An extract from a booklet issued to all Aveling and Porter drivers, circa 1919, 'Instruction and Directions for Working Steam Rollers Manufactured by Aveling and Porter' reads as follows:

"The instructions in this book if carefully read will enable an intelligent workman with a few weeks practice to become a skilled engine driver.

The use of steam rollers and traction engines has opened up a new source of employment for a large body of men who would otherwise have remained among the class of hewers of wood and drawers of water. To become a first class engine driver should be the aim of the man who by his previous career as a steady workman has had the good fortune to become a roller driver. His manner of life must undergo a complete change. He must not associate himself too intimately with his late fellow workers as a roller driver he is a foreman with valuable property in his charge.

He must be respectful in his manners to his master's employees. He must pay attention to his personal appearance. There is no surer test of a slovenly engine driver than the condition of his clothes. Some drivers appear like chimney sweeps with sufficient oil and grease on them to lubricate an engine for a week and the engine is often in the same state and a disgrace to themselves and their class.

The first class roller driver respects himself, practices self denial and sets a good example to the rest of the men, is respected by his master and knows where to look for a few pounds in case of necessity. Ignorant, unreliable or ill-tempered men should on no account be entrusted with the management of steam rollers and all drivers should bear in mind the old proverb: A soft answer turneth away wrath.”

I feel that the crew of the Wallace and Steevens fall down on 90% of the above instruction. But we hope to do much better in the coming year.

And finally a big thankyou to all those who gave a big push on Sunday – the roller is now back home in its Shed. I’m glad you all had your Weetabix for breakfast.

Frank Dell

Robot Wars

This has to be one of the best meetings of the year 2000 (I was going to say millen.. but couldn’t spell it!) It was a combined General / Loco Meeting / Wine & Cheese Party, all of which were much appreciated, (I wasn’t driving). The Robot Wars chat was predominately a junior affair; they were all aficionados and were ensconced in the front rows.

I have to confess that initially I was a bit lost, not having seen the show, but fortunately my, and Mike Chrisp’s grandsons, Harvey and Jacob respectively, explained it in words of one syllable.

We had a bit of a problem as the van with the tail-lift had been ‘borrowed’ by another department so a replacement, had to be obtained to pick up the robots, hence a bit of a delay which was solved by having the nosh first. Due to my technical expertise I was given the task of opening the wine. (A most enjoyable spread, for which I was about to say a big thank you on behalf of those present, but JIM MACDONALD has expressly requested that the organiser remain anonymous.) When Chris arrived he had two robots in the van but only “Shunt” would go through our entrance doors. I forget the exact weight but you can tell those who carried it in by their consequent voices and supports. Those who wished to view “Dead Metal “ were able to do so by visiting the van. Chris Reynolds, a member of long standing, explained how he came to work for the BBC and to be a Senior Supervisor in the field of special effects. Also, how Robot Wars evolved and how he and his team became an essential part of it. All of the robots have safety devices in the form of a plug which when removed makes them inoperative. An essential precaution since these are far from toys and could be very dangerous if they ran amok. I was relieved to hear this as I was sitting next to “Shunt”. All the BBC devices, and most of the competitors, have battery powered propulsion with CO2 cylinders operating the “nasties,” like the spiked arm on “Shunt’s” roof. (A further safety precaution is to bleed off any remaining gas from the operating ram after a session, which would still have enough energy to make your eyes water.) Chris designed all the BBC robots, starting with “Shunt”.

It was discovered fairly early on that a relatively simple pair of independently driven toughened rubber drive wheels was a lot more nimble and resilient than a complex “caterpillar” track drive. A conclusion that most of the competitors came to after the first season.

Chris is a natural speaker and had us all enthralled by the details of problems which arose and were overcome by him and his team. To illustrate his narrative he had brought a video, showing both the public action and that which goes on behind the scenes. It is quite common for Chris and the team to work straight through until four in the morning in last minute preparation, repairs and innovations for the next generation of mechanisms of destruction. This was an “in-house” video, not made for public consumption, but was, as well as being a record of hard work and the end results, a perfect example of the film makers art, bags of detail, lots of cut-away shots. Just to view this alone would have been worth the trip. I am sure that a good time was had by all, and thanks to Chris for his efforts in getting the hardware and giving such an interesting talk, and to Jim Macdonald and his team for arranging it all.

Jim Robson

Marine Mutterings

The Marine Section has two more meetings at H.Q. before it transfers its activities to Colney Heath. We hope to have some summer events organised in time for publication in the next News Sheet.

The February meeting will be informal with a spot of self entertainment but for the March meeting we have Ron Evans coming to talk about his experiences modelling some of the more important historic submarines. This should be a very interesting evening – so don't miss it!

Winter activity continues at Colney Heath on the laying of paved areas for seating and for boats. We hope, weather and effort permitting, to pave around the rear of the launching pit and to build a shelter with seating on one of the paved areas. The other outstanding task is to install facilities for lighting the site and for charging boat batteries.

Some small improvements to the bridge over the Cuckoo Line and some additional fencing would also be nice, again weather and effort permitting.

Happy boating!

Bernard Lambert

Slot Car News

Due to unforeseen circumstances and Christmas coming up on me when I wasn't looking, I didn't have time to write anything for the Christmas edition but I hope you all had a good one and are looking forward to the new season. Included in this issue are the final top six placings for last year's championships. If you are there, well done – if not you know what to do (me included).

I must take this opportunity to thank the North American Section's hospitality at their recent Christmas do. I declined the opportunity to have a go. Although trains operate at a far more sensible speed than slot cars at least we only have one button to press! I was most impressed how they managed to fit so much in a small area.

The annual Model Engineers Exhibition has been and gone and remembering fine shows in the past, this years I have to say was disappointing. There was only a fraction of competition entries on show and trade stands compared to previous years. Holding the event in Sandown Park didn't help. Presumably it was cheaper to hire than Ally Pally, but I think that a lot of people were put off having to travel so far south. I just hope that next year it will be back in North London so interested parties from other parts of the Country will feel that it's worth making the trip and not have the added burden of getting across London.

After our AGM (if you blinked you missed it) there are a few small changes to this year's racing. The 1/24th sprint classes will have bodies complying to the 2001 regs. If in doubt ask Paul Harwood (the quiet one). And the team race will be run for two classes, 1/24th production with pre '70 sports or GT bodies and GP12 cars with modern closed sports bodies. I am particularly interested to see the former, being old enough to remember the cars first time round. There were some, dare I say, beautiful cars around in the sixties; Ferrari P4s, Lola T70s, McClaren M8s etc. This will all lead on hopefully to the Tottenham series for cars built before 1972 really taking off. There are a few nights spare in the calendar and most people seem interested so here's hoping, but we need a list of rules published so we know what to build.

When I first resurrected this column last year I said that it will not write itself so if there is anything that you would like included – race reports, funny stories, car tweaks and general preparations please lets have it.

Steve Francis

[Tyttenhanger Gazette](#)

At the January Loco Section meeting it was announced that we are to host the Curly Bowl Competition on the 9th September.

Perhaps I should recap. After Curly's death in 1968 a fund was set up to purchase a silver trophy to be known as the LBSC Memorial Challenge Cup. This was to be awarded at the Model Engineer Exhibition for the best locomotive built or based on a design by LBSC. 'Best' was to imply general handiness, ease of control and effectiveness on the track rather than supreme workmanship, finish and appearance. The first competition was held in 1969 at the Model Engineer Exhibition. After a satisfactory beginning the number of entries slowly diminished so it was decided in 1980 to hold the competition at club tracks in future, the first being that year at our Society's track. Since then we hosted the competition in 1994 which was also the Club's 50th anniversary. Two video films were recorded of that day, an official one and a second one taken by John Riches on a basic 'point and shoot' 1987 camera. It was this second video we watched during the evening.

The competition was held on the Cuckoo Line. The main track was used for rides which were charged for to help pay for the event. A ground level track was layed around the area where we park the cars, with three exhibition tents and one trade stand tent, inside the track circuit. The video captured the tables being assembled in the tents for displaying the models and strip lights being fitted. As all the sections were involved each had their own display and eventually all was operational. We saw the late Ralph Dapling pumping water into a boiler at his statioary steam display. The Club's portable track was erected and locos one behind the other were displayed along its length.

It seemed a carnival atmosphere and the rolling motion picture had familiar faces raising steam, telling yarns and laughing all to one soundtrack of Chariots of Fire as played on TV during the London Marathon. Inside a tent the portable model railway layout was being run, the operators concentrating quietly on controlling the locos, whilst above model aeroplanes hung from the roof of the tent. In the sunshine outside, boats were being controlled on the temporary pond and traction engines hauled trailers of passengers. A small slot-car track was in operation, cars hurtling around like mad, young eager faces shouting and watching. Inside the station hut was the ladies handicrafts. A dolls' house had the hall floor tiled in black and white whilst stairs took ones eyes to the upper floors. There was much patchwork quilt and embroidery; all part of the feminine art.

After tea break the meeting continued with another video of the International Model Locomotive Efficiency Competition (IMLEC) held during July last year, which was hosted by the Leyland Society of Model Engineers. Each of the drivers were interviewed and they spoke of their loco's history, problems in building it and changes of design as well as work carried out since it was built. Many drivers rattled off figures such as bore size, length of stroke, type of valve gear and spoke freely and in depth of this highly technical subject. I must add a personal note: I do enjoy this 'special interest' type of film where individuals convey all the technicalities which contrasts widely with the typical TV locomotive shot inside the firehole door to the tune of 'The runaway train went down the hill as she blew' which fortunately drives many back into the workshop. One driver described himself as a novice having had no engineering background and yet had designed and built the locomotive himself, based on the full size and using no castings. Even the wheels were fabricated. His A4 looked superb.

The drivers having had an earlier test run would come onto the main line, the dynamometer truck connected followed by a chap noting the readings and then the train would fill up with ones choice of load. Each run was for half an hour. Some locos were hauling a driver and 15 passengers at a brisk speed. As they approached on the final lap the driver could be seen closing the regulator and applying the brake. The train slowed to a halt amidst a cheer from the spectators, whilst this time the sound track was not Chariots of Fire. However I felt it had all the tension and the climax of the London Marathon itself.

Many of the locomotive crews were clad in a blue boiler suit with an occasional matching jacket with a BR grease top hat. This seems to have become the national standard uniform for the model locomotive engineer.

One unusual loco was a BR class 9, a 2-8-2 with tender. It was designed by BR to replace the 9F but was not built. This loco pulled a heavy load at speed.

A pleasant distraction from the main event was a loco complete with 13 wagons plus a brake van. The driver sat on the roof of the first wagon. This is for those who would rather build and haul a train rather than passengers and is catered for by the gauge 5 Society.

Our Mike Chrisp was present at the competition and at the end gave a speech which summed up the enjoyable two days and then announced the prizewinners.

It was a delightful video that captured all the characters and the spirit of the hobby which we all enjoy.

Roger Bell

[A Most Unusual Holiday ~ \(The Wolsztyn Experience\)](#)

Compared with the majority of model engineers, my interest in steam locomotives developed somewhat later in my life, as did my interest in building models of them. My passion during my formative years was electronics, so I must have been one of the few young lads of my generation, who did not want to be an engine driver when I grew up. Sure, steam locomotives were a familiar sight to me as a child. I used to travel on them regularly to school and on other occasions such as visits to relations.

As children did in those days, we often used to walk up to the front of the train, to thank the driver and fireman, usually at the end of a long journey finishing, at a main London terminus. The crew would be leaning out of the cab, miles above our heads, casually watching the passengers stream by and no doubt admiring and commenting favourably on the occasional female passenger. Some things never change. We would linger for a while, absorbing the sheer scale of the gently hissing monster locomotive, absorbing all the familiar smells associated with it. It never occurred to me in my wildest dreams that one day, way into the future, it might be me up there.

Well this did happen to me, for a whole week in fact, during October 1999. A party of six, which apart from myself, included two past members of the NLSME, Mike Radford and Roland Doyle. Roland is also currently the General Manager of the Welsh Highland Light Railway and both have been involved in model engineering. Another member of the group, Tony Bohan, runs a miniature railway in Cyprus. The remaining members of the group, Mike Haywood and Dave Walker are model engineers and traction engine owners respectively. A fifth member Andy as well travelled to Poland to try out the Wolsztyn Experience. For those of you who may not have heard of this, let me explain. Over in the west of Poland, they still run regular scheduled services, commuter and freight trains, which are hauled by steam. With the relatively low costs of both labour and coal, together with an extensive legacy of huge Prussian, Polish and German steam locomotives of various classes, it is still economically viable to utilise them, just. However, just as steam motive power has been replaced in the UK and most other countries of the world, it will inevitably also fade away in Poland. But it hasn't yet.

One Englishman who is determined to stay the executioner's axe for as long as possible, is one Howard Jones, co-founder of the Wolsztyn Experience. He has managed to secure a contract with PKP, the Polish State Railway, to organise and run, 'steam locomotive training courses', for foreign nationals. The scheme is being encouraged because it brings in valuable foreign currency, and this enables the Poles to maintain and hopefully preserve their unique steam heritage. The drivers, firemen, guards, signalmen and others involved in making the scheme work, benefit from a useful bonus to top up their normal wages and the punters like us, get a fantastic, once in a lifetime opportunity to fire and drive monster steam locos, hauling scheduled passenger and freight services, for a whole week.

Before I go any further, let me make clear that the term 'steam locomotive training course' is a very loose term. Whilst you certainly learn, and fast, there is nothing formal about the course format. There are no classrooms, no tests, no rule books to learn and no route knowledge to mug up. In fact, since none of the drivers or firemen speak any English (and none of us except Howard, spoke any Polish,), all communication was conducted using sign language, sometimes very animatedly and always highly amusing. Interestingly though we soon learned that the sign language they had evolved, was very

clear and unambiguous. In any case verbal communication is not that easy on the footplate of a 150 ton steam loco doing 60 - 70 mph, so sign language has an awful lot going for it.

I suppose the one aspect of the whole experience which impressed us all the most, was the almost complete absence of any rules, regulations and formality of any kind. We tend to forget how much our lives today are so ring-fenced by rules, regulations and restrictions. Some of these are for sound safety reasons, but it seems our society is continuously pervaded by the creeping insidiousness of bureaucracy. Administrators constantly dream up ever more rules and restrictions, sadly just to try to stay one step ahead of litigation law. We have only to look how our own hobby has changed. The enjoyment we used to get from giving children rides for pleasure and fun, has deteriorated to the point where many of us feel it is potentially too risky to do it any more. The informality of Poland was like a breath of fresh air, but at the same time, one still felt a deep sense of responsibility towards the people whose lives, without exaggeration, were temporarily in our hands. One cannot help thinking that over regulation de-sensitises people from this sense of responsibility.

So, how did it all work? Well it has to be said that Mike Radford had done an excellent job of organising the whole trip, through Howard. The day arrived when we finally met up at Heathrow, from where we all departed on British Airways flight BA982 bound for Berlin Tegel airport. From there we caught the X9 bus to Berlin Zoo main railway terminus, to catch the electric train, which would take us on a journey of just under two hours, across the border to Rzepin. Here we caught a connecting diesel train to Zbaszynek. This leg of the journey took about an hour and from there we were met by a couple of taxis organised by Howard, to take us to the 'hotel', in Wolsztyn.

In fact the hotel turned out to be a large private house, beautifully maintained and owned by the trust. It was located a short walking distance from the station. The accommodation was very comfortable, well heated and with excellent bed-and-breakfast facilities, . . . Three of us elected to share the large bedroom, with its own en-suite bathroom and shower, whilst the remaining three had a single room each. The lounge included a television and video player with a large library of English video tapes, many of them covering steam railways. A well stocked bar provided a 24 hour self service, food and drink facility. This proved highly convenient for the very early or late turns. Two Americans, lawyers from New York, who were there the same week, were accommodated in a nearby hotel, and we usually met up with them for dinner in the evenings.

Although Wolsztyn is a small town, there are some excellent restaurants and bars within walking distance of 'the house'. A cash dispenser which accepted most credit/debit cards was also nearby. We quickly discovered that not only was the food excellent, but the prices were silly. Six of us could have a three course evening meal plus drinks and still have change out of thirty quid, for all of us.

Howard suggested that the best plan was to team up in pairs for crewing turns. That way one of each pair could drive on the outbound journey, whilst his partner fired. We then changed places for the return leg. Roland and I teamed up and drew the short straw for the first turn on the Monday morning. Our rostered turn was the first commuter train of the day, leaving Wolsztyn for Poznan at 5.00 am. This meant a very early start, which at that time of the year, was in total darkness. Strange time of day to get up when on holiday. We had only to turn up at the station ten minutes before departure. The loco had already been lit up and prepped by the Polish crew during the very early hours of the morning.

As it was still dark, this was my first close up sight of the monster, whose footplate I would be travelling on. At this stage any thoughts of firing it, let alone driving it, had not yet really kicked in. The loco rostered on this turn was a recently re-built PM36, a 4-6-2 Pacific class passenger express. We would be taking early morning commuters some 50 miles to the city of Poznan, a round trip of 100 miles. It was not a non-stop service, there being some twenty or so country halts and stations along the route.

Having climbed up a small ladder to reach the cab, Howard introduced us to our Polish crew, Gabriel and Josef. As far as steam locos are concerned, there is no distinction between driver and fireman, they are interchangeable. They carry out one function on the outward leg and swap over for the return leg. Whilst we were waiting for the guard to blow his whistle and give us a 'right away', I started to take in the sight before me, illuminated by stray light through gaps around the firebox door. Being more familiar with narrow gauge locomotive cabs, such as those on the Ffestiniog Railway, this cab seemed positively enormous. Ballroom dancing might not have been totally out of the question. The backhead towered above our heads and the main steam manifold was so high that valve handles on long spindles, loomed out of the gloom, angled down at 45 degrees. Roland, who had in fact been here before, pointed out the less obvious controls and gauges. The pressure gauges for boiler and steam chests, seemed strange at first until I realised they were calibrated in Mega Pascals (Mpa). 1 Mega Pascal is approx. 145lb/sq in. The brake system gauges were calibrated in Bar. Polish locos utilise compressed air brakes rather than vacuum brakes, the whole system being driven by a Westinghouse type compressed air pump mounted beside the smoke box.

Anticipating that our departure was only minutes away, our hosts stirred themselves into activity. Josef opened the firedoors and I had my first look into the cavernous firebox. Well, to begin with I could not even see the tube plate, partly because my eyes needed to adjust from the semi-darkness of the cab, but mainly because it was so much further away than I expected. The glowing coal bed was fairly thin but bright orange all over, the loco having been dormant for an hour or so. Josef started to spread a few rounds on. He starting off by tucking a few rounds into the corners of the backhead, then he handed the shovel to me. Through Howard, we had indicated earlier that Roland would take the driving controls for the outward bound leg, whilst I would try my hand at firing.. Well, as I later realised, they were anticipating a huge laugh at my expense. Josef indicated that I needed to start building the fire from the tubeplate, working back towards the cab. I consider myself reasonably fit for my age having hand mixed quite a few tons of concrete in my more recent years. Try as I might I had the greatest difficulty in hurling even a modest shovelfull of coal, through the fire door and onwards to anywhere near the front of the grate. And remember, at this point we were motionless. After much hilarity, and with the shovel passing back and forth between me and Josef, I realised that he was trying to demonstrate his firing technique. It became clear that you needed to somehow bounce the underside of the shovel off the bottom of the firehole, so that added impetus was given to the coal, launching it into the required trajectory. This then carried it in an arc, up and over towards the front of the grate.

Once I got the hang of this, my ability to put a blacker top on the fire somewhat improved. That was until we started moving. Trying to do the same thing in the bucking cab of a loco doing 60 mph, is something altogether different. I lost count of the number of times I smacked the shovel into the edge of the fire hole rather than going through it. Several times I had to grovel around in semi-darkness, picking up lumps of coal from the cab floor. Hardly had the loco left the station than Gabriel vacated the driver's seat and offered it to Roland. I was motioned into the fireman's seat and the two Polish crew went to the back of the cab, lit up cigarettes and proceeded to shoot the breeze. Talk about feeling abandoned to get on with it. I looked at Roland and he looked at me with a

shrug as if to say, 'what did I tell you'. I took some comfort from the fact that he had at least done this before and was a passed out driver on the Ffestiniog. Besides, despite casual appearances, the crew were very much keeping a discreet eye on the proceedings.

After a while Josef wandered over and showed me how to operate the fireman's injector. This puzzled me at first until I realised that it's operation was much simplified. Both water and steam valves were combined into one control. This only required one complete rotation of its handle, for the steam to pick up the water and produce the familiar 'bubbling' sound of water entering the boiler. It operated faultlessly every time, (which was more than could be said of the compressed air pump). When a bit more firing was required, signs were made to that effect. A similar indication was given when more water was required to be put in the boiler. Each time I thought I had finished placing thirty rounds or so, Josef would inspect my handiwork and tidy up with a few extra strategically placed shovelfulls where I had let things get a bit thin, mainly up the front.

Meanwhile, Roland was quickly mastering this particular regulator. From a standing start, the idea was to nudge it open, whilst carefully observing the steam chest gauges. When they climbed to about 0.5 Mpa, further movement to the regulator was halted, and we sat and waited. At first nothing seemed to happen, after a second or so there was a creaking sound and one became aware that the cab seemed to be rolling slowly forward. After having travelled some six feet or so there was a single muffled 'whoosh' from the direction of the chimney, somewhere in the dark, way up the front. This was followed by further 'whooshes' in slowly increasing succession, as the loco picked up its feet. Once under way, the regulator was increasingly pushed further over in a series of jerky shoves, until the exhaust was barking just below the point where it felt as though wheel slip might start. At this point the driver indicated that the wheel operated reversing gear, should be wound back in stages to about the 60% cut off mark.

For most of the 50 miles the single line track ran along a fairly level landscape, alternating between fields and woodland. There were virtually no signals except for whistle boards and there were lots of these. So much so that much time was spent operating the whistle. Being generally flat in this part of Poland, track crossings, footpaths, farm tracks and road crossings are mainly un-barriered. Only main roads would have half barrier crossings. On unprotected crossings it became clear that some locals delighted in racing trains to the crossing. On more than one occasion, the Polish driver would commandeer the whistle and hang on to it continuously before, during and after a car had done one of these 'chicken runs'. This was the only way to express disgust at such recklessness. However it is generally understood by the populace that a train will not slow down at these crossings if they are clear and if you are hit, it is entirely your own fault. As it was still very dark for the outward leg of this journey and there were no signals, we had no idea where the intermediate stations were. With little more than a token platform and no station lighting, it was virtually impossible to see when they were coming up. We were entirely dependent on the crew's route knowledge, for them to indicate to us when to start a brake application. Being compressed air operated brakes, the control handle operated in a slightly unfamiliar mode compared to vacuum braking. Arriving at a platform in total darkness, sometimes produced amusing results. Either the speed would drop off too rapidly and one had to crawl the last 50 yards or so with a touch of regulator. Alternatively, if left too late, the train would come to a shuddering halt halfway beyond the end of the platform, sometimes ending up straddling the foot crossing, which provided access from the opposite platform. The crew handled all this in good humour and we soon recognised the Polish expression for 'bloody piss artist'.

Eventually, as dawn was slowly splitting apart the sky up ahead of us, we approached the suburbs of the city of Poznan and it's main railway terminus. At this point the crew took over from us since we were now coming off the single line track and were encountering light signals as well as merging with other tracks and traffic. We rolled into the terminus on time, and watched the passengers disgorging from the carriages. As they walked past us, heading for their shops and offices, my childhood memories returned. I wondered if it could have possibly occurred to those commuters that their lives had been temporarily in the hands of a couple of Englishmen, one of whom it was experiencing only his second day in their country.

We were scheduled a layover of about an hour before the return trip. This gave us an opportunity to wander off for a drink, a breakfast sandwich and a look around the nearest part of the city. Eventually it was time to get back to the station for the return trip and then it was to be my turn to drive the 50 miles back to Wolsztyn.

The crew took us out of the station, through the suburbs and to the point where we re-joined our single track line. At this point the driver vacated his seat and motioned me to take over. Prior to this point in my life, the largest regulator I had handled, with live steam behind it, was probably a club member's seven and a quarter inch gauge loco. To say I was somewhat apprehensive would be an understatement. That great mass of metal, all 150 tons of it and that latent power: All under the control of a seemingly very small hand. I can only liken it to the pilot of the jumbo jet you are going off on holiday in, inviting you to take it down the runway for take off.

Shifting the regulator was harder than it looked and it seemed to require me to throw my full weight behind it. Once rolling, tweaking it to get maximum acceleration without wheel slip became a rapidly acquired knack. When notched back in stages, to the 60% cut-off point, the exhaust bark settled down to a nice steady beat. To begin with, braking took a few platforms to get right. Anticipating the speed drop-off rate for a given duration of application, was tricky. With some twenty or so intermediate stations and halts, there was plenty of opportunities to practice starting and stopping. Gradually I managed to reduce the number of shuddering halts and the crawling advances along to the end of the platform. Not bad I was told towards the end, for my very first effort.

The next day we repeated the same trip but on the afternoon shift. This time our crew were Janus and Koscianski. Again we were footplating the same Pm36 Pacific, 'Beautiful Helena'. On this trip I drove the outward bound leg and fired for the return trip. This complete round trip was carried out in daylight, so there was a noticeable improvement in halting actually alongside the platforms, since they could be seen well in advance.

On Wednesday we took the same loco, under the watchful eyes of Gabriel and Josef again, but this time on a different route up to the town of Zbaszynek. We returned just in time to be offered a turn on a huge German built 2-10-0 Class Ty2 -406 freight locomotive. This was about to be despatched on a short round trip of 24 miles, to pick up a broken down Diesel hauled passenger train and bring it back into Wolsztyn.

That evening we joined crew members Stefan and Richard on another huge Ty2. This time our task was to haul a train of some 400 tonnes or so of empty cement 'flask' wagons. The run was the 35 miles from Wolsztyn to Zbasnyek and back. The shunting yards at Zbasnyek were quite interesting at dusk and once we became familiar with the signalling, our manoeuvres were quite easy. The return trip was made with only a single wagon so we were running virtually light engine, using just the engine brake for speed control. As before, picking out the whistle boards in the gloom was not too easy and

Stefan had to supplement our whistle blasts with a few extra ones where we had missed a board. If there was one thing I felt the Polish railway system could benefit from, it is the white reflective material we are now so familiar with here, on our road surfaces and road side signs.

Thursday required a fairly early start to take the Pm36 to Leszno and back, with Janus and Koscianski. On this trip I made one really embarrassing halt. It was at a single platform halt which happened to be on the side opposite the driver's side. As the locos are so huge, one loses sight of things up front, since they are soon obscured from vision, upon approach. I had thought that a road crossing was at the arrival end of the platform, so slowed right down as required. It transpired that the road crossing was across the departure end of the platform. By this time we had learned that there was in fact a bleed valve which could be used to cancel the braking effect in force at any given time. Having braked prematurely, a tweak was required on this bleed valve combined with a nudge of the regulator. Thus I was able to cover my embarrassment by drifting at a very geriatric walking pace along the platform. A final application brought us to a halt where the road crossing actually was.

For Friday morning, arrangements had been made for us to travel to Poznan in order to play trams around the city. Poznan has an extensive public transport tram system. Each tram has on board a facility to set points at junctions and at each junction the tramway is controlled by it's own set of traffic lights (white illuminated bars which change between horizontal -stop- and vertical - go). Our guide and instructor for this bit of fun was Christos, a fluent English speaking Pole. We each quickly learnt in turn, how to handle the combined dead mans handle and speed controller. As well as providing regenerative braking via the electric traction motors. The trams also had foot operated disc brakes for emergency braking. These were required on more than one occasion, since the locals are notorious jay walkers when trams are around. We all found it very easy to pick up and in no time at all Christos had us zipping around the city under his guidance. We were not allowed to carry passengers, although what the locals made of the headboard which proclaimed 'FFESTINI OG WHAM BAM SPECIAL' we will never know.

Saturday was a bit special as arrangements had been made for us to visit the Scroda sugar beet line. This is a narrow (750mm) gauge line running some 20 Km through the countryside. It was originally built between 1902 and 1920. Its purpose was to collect agricultural produce, mainly sugar beet, from the adjacent countryside. The sugar beet was transferred to the big sugar beet processing plant at Scroda. The two remaining Px48 locos are half size versions of 0-8-0 freight types seen on the main line.

Although both the locos and the track were in desperate need of maintenance, our hosts were real enthusiasts. The locos had been prepped and were ready for us to take off and play with. The line meandered up and down and weaved it's way across the countryside between vast fields of beet. We actually had to slow down in several places as the track was so bad we were in danger of being derailed. For the benefit of those with video cameras, a run past was arranged up a good gradient. With lots of smoke and steam belching into the clear sky and the driver trying to empty the boiler through the whistle, the sight was very atmospheric.

At the end of the line was a very interesting and well kept little museum. It had a wonderful collection of railway memorabilia, including many photos, uniforms, ticket machines, tickets and other items of interest. Whilst we were looking around the museum, our hosts had built a fire outside, over which we all barbecued large traditional polish sausages and trashed a few crates of the local beer. We all then returned to Scroda, everyone again having a turn at both driving and firing.

The following day it was time to head for home. This required an early start to get to Wolsztyn station in order to catch the early train to Poznan. Even on this train, we all took it in turns to drive and fire our own departure train. At about every fourth station, two of our party would come back from the footplate whilst two more from the front passenger coach would run forward to replace them. Once again I wondered what all the other early morning passengers thought was going on.

In conclusion, I rated this as one of the most unusual and enjoyable holidays of my life. Our hosts were excellent company, with the Polish crews and the two New York lawyers joining us for a drinks session most evenings, back at the 'house'. It is surprising how much international brotherhood surfaces, in direct proportion to the quantity of beer consumed. Incidents occurring during the day were recounted and swopped.

One related by the Yanks must have been without precedent. Apparently on one of their runs, the polish crew had to make an impromptu stop because the air compressor was not making pressure. The cure for this seemed to be for one of the crew to make his way to the front, along the running board and clout the pump valve gear with a heavy spanner. The adjacent field was separated from the track by a ditch and bank, but no fence. A nearby bull took exception to the racket and being totally unintimidated by the size of the loco, charged it. He succeeded in putting two dents in the cylinder casing and knocked himself out in the process, falling back into the ditch. The crew shrugged their shoulders and having sorted out the pump, continued with the journey. On the return leg, they observed that the bull appeared to have made a full recovery and no longer showed any interest in the moving locomotive. I think our new York friends must have dined out on that story for weeks.

All in all I can only say that I would recommend this trip as a 'must do', just once in a lifetime. At £750 or thereabouts, including airfares, accommodation, 'course fees' and all other costs except 'pocket money', it is a bit more than many people might want to spend on a holiday, but it was certainly worth saving for. Considering that it is helping to preserve steam for future generations might help ease your fiscal conscience. You only need to take some stout work boots, preferably steel capped and an overall, or 'bib and brace' set. A hat is optional and in any case the crew will be keen to sell you a PKP engineman's cap, as a souvenir. You are subtly encouraged to look out of the cab to admire the view. Whereupon the wind blows it away and they can proceed to try and sell you another one. This kind of holiday is so much better if you are part of a group of friends who get on. I would recommend that you join up with at least one other person you know, as you are crewed up in pairs. The lack of communication with the Polish crews would make the several hundred footplate miles covered in the week, a bit lonely without a 'mate' to share the experience with.

Finally, a word of warning. With creeping bureaucracy we do not know how much longer this opportunity will last. If Poland joins the E.U. I have no doubt in my mind that some killjoy in Brussels will soon put a stop to people like us enjoying themselves in such a fashion. So you have been warned.

For further information contact:- The Wolsztyn Experience, U.K. Office, 20 Whitepit Lane, Flackwell Heath, High Wycombe, Bucks. HP10 9HS. Tel/Fax 01628 524876

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