Federation of Model Engineering Societies

A Little Traction Engine

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One of the joys of model engineering is the unexpected call from someone seeking help or advice, usually a complete stranger. Such was the call a few weeks ago when the voice said, "I have been advised to call a model engineering society and you are the closest". The caller went on to explain that he had a little traction engine that he was thinking of disposing of and needed advice on how to go about it. Now I have very little knowledge of traction engines being more of the loco on rails type of person but it seemed a good idea to go and have a look, take some photos so we could find the right sort of expert. A short trip took us there and we were greeted by a charming chap who introduced himself as Tim Knatchbull and who dug a box from the back of his garage. He suggested we take this into the kitchen and have look at it. Out of the box came a tiny traction engine about a foot long and which even I could identify as a ¾" Allchin, especially as the name was on the side of the model. Tim explained that this had been presented to his grandfather in 1978 when he opened the Model Engineering Exhibition. Of course, by then the rest of the detail came to mind and as Tim had been a little vague about just who his grandfather was, we were able to tell him that we had lived in Romsey and with my naval career it was pretty clear that Tim's Grandfather was Lord Louis Mountbatten. And I think most people will remember the well-known photo of Lord Mountbatten with his grandchildren in 1978. (See p8) The Allchin seemed a reasonably good representation of the real thing or at least as far a model that small can go as all the controls were there. Stephenson valve gear with proper reversing, the two gear options. Steering was by the usual chains operated by a worm arrangement. A true road engine aficionado would have seen a lot more of the detail and judged its appropriateness but to my eye, as taught by Fred Dibnah on TV, this looked like a lovely little engine. Tim showed us the correspondence that had passed between Lord Mountbatten and Gospatric Home, the Managing Director of MAP, publishers of the Model Engineer, regarding understanding how to operate the engine. This is a fascinating story in itself (more later) but it did capture an era that is long past and which few of us will remember. What strikes

one immediately is the kind and polite tone of these letters. Email seems to generate a brusquely curt way of communicating, not necessary even some 45 years on. But perhaps one of the most revealing aspects of correspondence is that Lord Louis certainly was exceptional as Viceroy of India as well as the First Sea Lord but as master of a ¾ Allchin he had met his match! Having examined the papers and the traction engine itself, we decided that we ought to do a little more research to broaden the story and the provenance of engine itself. This might lead to Tim successfully disposing of the engine as an item of historical interest rather beyond just a road loco. Where had the Model Engineering Exhibition which I remember my father taking me to when I was about ten got to? The Model Engineer has passed through some new hands since they put on the Exhibition. The maker's plate on the loco showed a Michael Holden Limited of Banbury, what ever happened to them? There seemed a good case for some research into the related history.

Builder's plate for the presentation engine

The Michael Holden Story.

A good place to start unravelling seemed to be with Michael Holden and Co of Banbury. During the 1970s, Michael Holden and Co. produced a series of kits for a number of traction engines of which the 1906 Allchin seemed to be the most popular. Indeed, today there is an owners club in Facebook with around 150 members. The first one mentioned in FB is No 10 certainly a predecessor to our No 500. The next one shown here gives us some useful information. *"3/4'' scale Allchin Showman's engine. Built from a Michael Holden kit by Taylor Hemmens Ltd who bought the remaining stock and tooling when Holden's ceased trading. Build date unknown. Engine No. 646. Lots of detail, motion all working, whistle, steam blower, designed to run on coal but appears to have never been fired. Copper boiler - no paperwork or history known. Complete with glass display case."*

Plate for No 10!

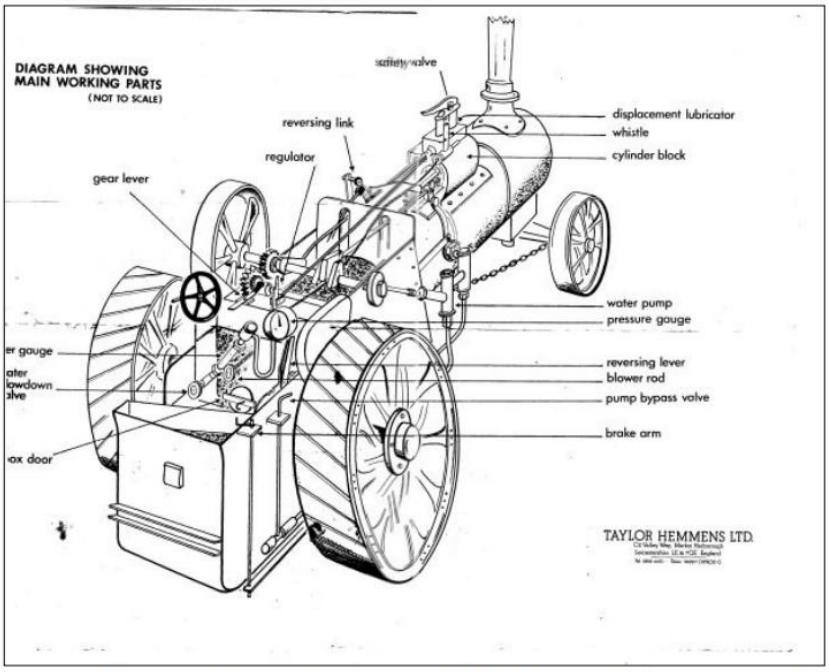
This is where the two other names associated with the Michael Holden engines come to the fore. These are Taylor Hemmens Ltd and Maxwell Hemmens Ltd. There seemed to be little knowledge of these two. The correspondence will reveal the Paul Taylor. Mr John Hemmens took my telephone call but his mind was on looking after his not too well wife and conversation was difficult. I did find out that his full name was John Maxwell Hemmens! That answered the missing Mr Maxwell. The correspondence reveals much of the story. It is worth mentioning however that Maxitrak eventually acquired the drawings circa 1990 and perpetuated the engines today albeit in an scaled down version, perhaps to keep them affordable as much as anything else. 'Andy' with whom I spoke, much admired the Holden kits for their detail and functionality. More of that later from the correspondence. There is also the tantalising comment from someone I will keep anonymous, "I remember Dad's workshop . . .". Oh, to have her here to tell us about the Michael Holden days. These kits came as coal or gas fired. No 500 came as a coal fired version but was soon converted to gas fired with a gas bottle in the living van. It appears reasonable to conclude that Michael Holden sold his 3/4" traction engine business to Taylor Hemmings Ltd toward or at the end of 1978. The presentation of No 500 to Lord Mountbatten might have been his closing glory, for in 1979 the name Taylor Hemmens Ltd appears in the Facebook page as mentioned previously and in the correspondence. However, before we go into the correspondence, we should briefly mention the Model Engineering Exhibition. Alas the exhibition as we might have known it in our youths is no more. We know of Percival Marshall founder of the Model Engineer magazine, the Society of Model and Experimental Engineers (SMEE) and the Model Engineering Exhibition. The exhibition was first held in 1907 at the old Horticultural Hall moving to the New Hall in 1946 and to various venues including Seymour Halls, Wembley Conference Centre, Wembley Exhibition Hall, Alexandra Palace and Olympia, then to Ascot and Sandown Racecourses until the last that was held at Brooklands in 2016 following declining duration, attendance and content. Thankfully, Meridienne Exhibitions has maintained a London based event at Alexandra Palace (Ally Pally) in North London and we look forward to the next in 2022. Over

the years it has been opened by notables including Sir Josiah Stamp in 1935, Sir Nigel Gresley in 1937, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh in 1948 and Lord Louis Mountbatten in 1978.

The Correspondence. The engine came with a set of "Operating instructions — Coal Fired Engines". These are headed Michael Holden Limited. Here Lord Mountbatten had noted, "terms underlined not known, perhaps a diagram of the engine is available." The underlined items included, pump bypass, displacement lubricator, steam cheat, drain plug and small electric steam raising blower. Gospatric Home, Managing Director of Model and Allied Publications, then publisher of the Model Engineer magazine, writes on 16th January 1979 forwarding the above to Mr Paul R Taylor at Taylor Hemmens at Market Harborough. We can see that Taylor Hemmens Ltd have taken over the assets of Michael Holden Ltd, at the end of 1978. The blower was provided and the diagram promised. Gospatric Home writes also to Lord Mountbatten to confirm the above.

The next important letter, dated 16th March 1979, is Gospatric Home forwarding the diagram of the engine to Lord Mountbatten for his grandsons. The diagram shows a very useful sketch, see overleaf. As usual and with great politeness, Lord Mountbatten thanks Gospatric Home for his kindness and attention. There follows a gap in the correspondence now and the reader know why, for Lord Mountbatten and members of his family were killed whilst on holiday in Ireland, the most utterly unnecessary and sad happening ever. Having survived, Tim Knatchbull bravely carries on the correspondence with Gospatric Home in early October 1979. He reports that the engine is a success and they are enjoying it. There are a few problems needed to be fixed and he arranges for it's return to Mr Taylor. Mr Home replies six days later with a most kind and sympathetic letter. In this he suggests that it is difficult to keep the coal fired engine in steam and that he will arrange conversion to gas firing. Mr Home tells Tim that earlier Lord Mountbatten continued to show interest in the Exhibition and agreed to a silver cup to be named the Earl Mountbatten Trophy to be awarded for the best naval model ship in the Exhibition and allowed his cypher to be used on the cup. Additionally, Lord Mountbatten wrote to the winner and Gospatric Home suggests that Tim's mother might agree to continue the role. The rest of the correspondence deals with getting the engine to Taylor Hemmens for conversation to gas firing and to confirm that Tim's mother agrees to writing to the annual winner of the Earl Mountbatten Cup.

Number 500, the 'presentation' Michael Holden Allchin engine complete with the living trailer that houses the gas bottle.



The original sketch done for the Mountbatten presentation engine in 1979. This may be the only one as it was not readily available at the time of the presentation in 1978 and the correspondence suggests it was done especially. Perhaps a historic document indeed.

A little more on the little Traction Engine

In the last issue we showed you the little traction engine on the right. The fascinating part of the story was just how it came to be as in the 1970s and before Michael Holden seemed to have a thriving business and produced many road locos and traction engines. There is indeed a busy Facebook page where devotees exchange knowledge and views and appear to buy and sell from each other. This is the Michael Holden Steam Engine Owners Club and is worth a look at even if you are not a died in the wool road loco person. There is a clue to what 'happened then' through an entry by a Mrs Davidson, Michael Holden's daughter. She agreed to have a chat by phone. As we had supposed Michael Holden sold the business to Taylor Hemmens at the end of 1978 and according to his daughter, bought a pub. Michael was a very keen snooker player so this became his chosen direction never to enter the model engineering world again as far as we can find out. One can but surmise what might have happened is he had not sold the business but that is about as far as we can go with the story. We can add however that if anyone would like to own a fascinating piece of history this little Allchin could be made available to a potential purchaser. Just let us know if you would like an introduction!