Federation of Model Engineering Societies

"Pimlico Light Railway"

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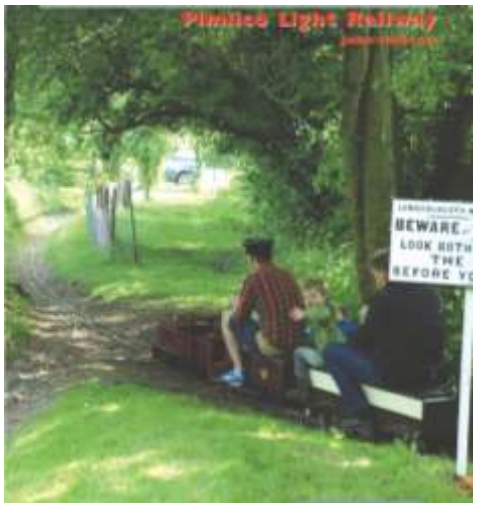

A train crosses the footpath on the steepening gradient into Denyer's Descent. The branch on the left leads to a head shunt where trains reverse to reach the shed 32 Miniature Railway.

The Pimlico Light Railway has been a gleam in my eye since I started building my first locomotive in 5-inch gauge, 'Pansy', a GWR pannier tank by LBSC, and that was way back in 1974. Because of moves and family commitments the build took 15 years, and its completion coincided with our arrival at Pimlico House in Northamptonshire, which made a ground level track look possible. In 1991 I laid a short length of about 60 yards of track and the 'journey' began!

It wasn't long before the idea of a circuit for continuous running was raised. The space was there and my out and back line left something to be desired. Digging began after levels were taken, but

construction took several years, with various adjustments to gradients because of the need to avoid large ABOVE: Cutting the first sod in 1989.Techniques later became more mechanised! BELOW: Running the first train in 1994 33 tree roots and unforeseen pipes (later found to be buried scaffolding pipes going nowhere!). A circuit was finally arrived at and the first run round took place in 1994.

There was absolutely no suggestion of public running or heavy use at this stage, so the line included a long climb of 1:60 to miss the pipes, and then a drop of 1:70 with a reverse curve to avoid getting too close to the septic tank and back to the level section - in all a distance of 112 yards.

The circuit established that there was a ‘serious’ railway in the hamlet of Pimlico and I found quite a lot of interest from people in the area, who came and ran their locos. During 1994 and 1995 various groups, from family parties to parish church open days were held, and we soon realised www.miniature-railway.com Miniature Railway useful when running two or more trains, and this was added in 1995.

That summer the railway was ‘blessed’, when all the local Anglican clergy came to ride, drive, eat and drink. There’s something about clergy and railways, summed up perfectly by the Reverend Audrey, who said ‘the church and the railways are the safest way to get you to your destination’.

I was already experiencing expansion problems with the track, solved by enlarging the fishplate holes in the rail ends to allow greater expansion of the aluminium. By this stage, the wooden sleepers hardwood offcuts acquired over many years were beginning to show signs of rotting. Initially they had been soaked in creosote, but this was such a messy process and didn’t seem to prolong the life of the wood by a great deal. The best woods of course are members of the teak family, which contain a lot of natural oil, and some of those are still sound after 20 years on the ground. On top of all that, the cows got out and changed the alignment fairly significantly in several places - the joys of living in the countryside!

Further Growth

The idea was already forming about extending the line, and preparations were made to build a much larger loop right around the house. Unfortunately, we live on a sloping site which is - incidentally - little more than a mile from the old Great Central main line, which also struggled a bit with the topography here. After digging through stone to a depth of five feet the realisation began to dawn that to complete the circuit would mean digging to a depth of almost ten feet, even with a long 1:50 climb, which was really too much. We all metaphorically sat on our spades and revised the plans.

We could build westwards, but this would mean crossing a public footpath. There was nothing for it but to contact the footpaths officer.‘ Oh !’ he said ,‘We haven’t had this kind of application for a while - I’ll have to get back to you.’ Well he did, and the very amicable end result is we are obliged to have signs up whenever we’re running to warn passersby. Now as it happens, someone had given me an old LNWR sign, which originated from Parsley Hay, with a warning to the public about crossing the line. Two replicas were duly made and they now grace the two places where the track crosses the footpath.

It will be obvious by now that we were not getting any younger, and our backs had cried ‘enough’ after digging the basic trench, so we borrowed a JCB and found a friend who knew how to drive it.

So in November 1998 we dug a large loop, crossing the footpath twice and joining on to the tentative extension we had already excavated by hand. Machines can only do so much of course, and there was still a great deal of hand digging to do, shaping the cuttings, laying ballast and building track. Dig a hole in a field and it becomes a river! This is the scene in November 1998, looking up from what would become Fieldway to the summit of the line at Whitehead Way.

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Who You Know

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What it is to have contacts. At this time there was no railway club as such, just a hole in my field and the support of a few friends. The concept of insurance hadn’t really raised its head, despite the increasing use of the line by various schools and church groups. As I was the local vicar, there was a sort of tacit feeling that the third party insurance cover provided by the church Parochial Council would cover any problems, and as the majority of events were either church-connected or family and friends, we carried on. Naive or what!

As to the contacts, the major concern was getting hold of enough ballast would surplus road grit be any good, asked a friend? Well, there was a fair amount of dirt in it, but the offer of 40 tons of the stuff delivered by a farmer friend who happens to live locally was too good to refuse. It still had to be moved, but it was a great heap!! As with most railways, maintenance relies on a dedicated band of enthusiast.

The annual maintenance Day always attracts a good crowd of volunteers, here awaiting lunch in 2013! we had a figure of eight and a head shunt to get the engines on to the track, in total about 1/4 mile. By this time I had been approached by the mother of some children who came to one of our ‘Under 5s’ services. ‘Do you ever run? That was the start of another regular running session.

All this time Pansy had been our primary locomotive, along with a Speedy, another LBSC tank locomotive based on the GWR 1500 class, which had been built in the 1950s. Two visiting Sweet Peas completed the locomotive stud, but it was becoming apparent that we needed flexible, instant power and so a class 08 shunter was built using the ‘Charlatan’ parts from Blackgates Engineering.

The rolling stock also needed improving and updating, and a couple of ‘B’ set look-alikes were made, which started out with vacuum brakes which have since been disbanded. Then a couple of simple riding cars were added, as well as various driving vehicles, all based on my preference for the Great Western Railway. As I was making them, that seemed reasonable!

Based on the impressive performance of the loaned Speedy, another was built, and this too proved very successful. As the numbers of steam locomotives increased so the business of testing them became more difficult, until the tester (who came from Milton Keynes M.E.S, where I was a member) suggested that a club should be formed, enabling us to do our own boiler testing. This also came at a time when I was retiring from working full-time as a vicar, and it was becoming increasingly clear that we had no insurance cover for the drivers, or anyone else for that matter, in the case of any incident. Station Water Tower Pimlico lies in a gently sloping valley, with high ground to the north and east of the property. When the original loop (bottom right) was extended to create today’s much larger layout, the new line was laid up the valley just to the west of the house.

This kept earthworks and gradients to a minimum while providing an interesting run, with plenty of challenges for the driver.

Despite this, we continued to run for the public through 2005, as we had always done, even finding the time to complete a Maxitrak Warship. This has regenerative braking, which proved very useful on our steeply-graded track.

The railway had seen visits from clubs at Northampton, Bromsgrove and Bolton over the years, plus local primary schools, playgroups, baptism parties, children from Chernobyl, Brownies and Cubs, all of whom had been and enjoyed themselves. But we still hadn't formed an official club. That was about to change.

The Pimlico Light Railway

In April 2006 we held the inaugural meeting of the Pimlico Light Railway, and yes, there is a local connection with Pimlico in London, but that's another story.

We opened six times for the public that first year as an 'official' railway, and club membership expanded to around 25, of whom quite a number were juniors. The running was by line of sight, with two trains running at a time and on average about 50 visitors for a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon.

The club's philosophy is based on sending half the takings of each afternoon to the charity 'Send a Cow', whilst encouraging youngsters into the hobby, and just happily running trains for the enjoyment of those who visit.

The railway typically attracts about 50 visitors on a Sunday afternoon. This is the lawn area near the station, with visitors arriving from the bridleway in the background

Things have, of course, moved on. The numbers attending our running sessions are not large - still in the region of 50 to 100 each afternoon - and apart from local advertising, we do very little in the way of publicity, especially as the capacity of the garden is limited. With 100 people here it can feel pretty full and the four trains that we usually run are kept fairly busy.

Club membership now stands at 35, of whom 21 are adults, five are aged 16/17 so able to drive for the public- and a further nine are under 16, so it can be seen that a large proportion of the club are youngsters, and we do everything we can to support and encourage them.

We have a dedicated training scheme, with awards at different levels giving caps with Bronze, Silver and Gold badges. Then a Greasetop is awarded when they are 16 and have passed the required stages, plus a signed certificate for them to use at interviews etc, stating all their achievements while they have been members of the club.

The Pimlico Light Railway makes a special effort to attract and train youngsters, who leave with a wide range of skills and a certificate to show prospective employers. In a competitive jobs market, this sort of dedication and ability to pick up new skills does not go unnoticed

There are three dedicated Saturdays throughout the year when the under 16s come and drive under the supervision of a Senior member. In 2015 the over-16 Juniors will be given the responsibility of being Track Marshal and Stationmaster during those sessions, in preparation for taking on those roles when we run for the public.

As for the track, we have installed an automatic signalling system essentially to protect the diamond crossing and also ensure that there isn't a coming together as trains leave the station area. It isn't perfect and it would be lovely to extend it, but it works. We did try using the track circuit method, but dirt on the wheels tended to give a negative train in section, and tracking across the sleepers on damp days can have the opposite effect and give a false positive! We now use plungers in the track - not 100% reliable, but pretty good, and the Track Marshal has a red flag if all else fails!

One constant request from visiting children was for a tunnel. This would have been a major undertaking and it would have stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, so we opted for a 'willow tunnel' instead, which seems to satisfy them.

The list of engines and rolling stock belonging to members continues to grow, with a Sweet Pea being added to the loco list, plus an electric loco from a Phoenix kit, and yet another Sweet Pea which I had been given as a box of bits. This has been put together by two Junior members and is now a reliable club loco.

Junior members have the opportunity to spend some time in the workshop and have built a Parcels Van driving car, a Travelling Post Office coach (useful on the driver training.

As long-standing Pimlico driver Bob Denyer runs through from the diamond crossing with 'Joey', Jim Powell and 'Lady Godiva' wait to depart from the station. This was June 2011 - the layout has since been altered to improve visibility!

There are many more projects under way another two driving trucks, a further Phoenix kit, work on a much modified Simplex, and several oscillating steam engines have been built too.

Send a Cow ‘Send a Cow’ is a charity that John Roberts has long supported, and it appeals to members as being an essentially practical means of helping people to help themselves. Cows were initially sent from the UK to those in need, at a cost of about £1,000 a time, but they are now sourced locally at a reduced cost, and although the charity has expanded into chickens and goats, bees and fruit trees, we like to think that we have managed to buy at least one cow each year!

Refreshments during the public running sessions have become an increasingly necessary and vital part of what we are doing. Usually it’s mothers or wives who run these, but every now and again the Juniors run it themselves, and they’re always rostered to help anyway. Jokingly it’s always said that we might as well just run a refreshment stall, as this aspect usually seems to make more money than the rides, but it’s all good fun and part of the whole. It is all a long way from my initial tentative steps.

The railway was not built for the fairly intensive use it’s getting today, and we would be nowhere if it hadn’t been for the enthusiasm, hard work and goodwill of many people over the years.

There is an annual maintenance day in March when everything is readied for the coming season, and more than anything else rotten sleepers are replaced. Mercifully we have a member who uses re-cycled plastic to make notice boards, and the off-cuts make excellent sleepers when cut with a suitable saw and drilled.

The only trouble is, being an oiled-based product they do burn very well, so we haven’t dispensed with wood altogether, and we still use it where steam engines stand for any length of time. GETTING THERE The Pimlico Light Railway is a private line open to the public only on specific days. For 2015, the railway will operate on the fourth Sunday of each month from April to September, 3pm to 5pm. For the latest information, please contact the railway.

FACT FILE

Pimlico Light Railway

Length: *112 yards/102 metres (1994-98), then approx 400 yards/366 metres*
Operational: *1991 on*
Gauge: *5-inch*
Location: *Postcode NN13 5TN*
Member's Locos *(not resident)*:

: *c1955 Sid Poynter* ***1507 Speedy*** *(GWR Green) 0-6-0T steam*
: *c1974 Chris Orchard* ***Simplex*** *0-6-0T steam*
: *c1975 (Builder Unknown)* ***Simplex*** *(GWR Green) 0-6-0T steam*
: *1987 J.Reardon/J.Dowse* ***Sweat Pea 'Edith Lea'*** *(Blue) 0-4-2ST steam*
: *c1990* ***Polly kit 'Polly IV'*** *0-6-0 steam*
: *1991 J.Roberts* ***LBSC 5700 'Pansy'*** *(GWR Green) 0-6-0T steam*
: *1994 B.Whitehead* ***Sweet Pea 'Florin'*** *(Blue) 0-4-0 steam*
: *2003 J.Roberts/B.Denyer* ***LBSC Speedy 1504*** *(BR Black) 0-6-0T steam*
: *2004 J.Roberts/B.Denyer* ***Charlatan 0800*** *(MR Crimson Lake) 0-6-0 battery/electric*
: *2004 J.Roberts/B.Denyer* ***Charlatan 0800*** *(LNER Apple Green) 0-6-0 battery/electric*
: *2005 B.Nicholls* ***Maxitrak Swallow*** *0-4-0 steam*
: *2005 J.Roberts* ***Maxitrak Warship*** *4w-4w battery-electric*
: *2009 J.Roberts/B.Denyer* ***Sweet Pea 'Jennifer'*** *(MR Crimson Lake) 0-4-2 steam*
: *2009 J.Roberts/B.Denyer* ***Sweet Pea 'Lady Godiva'*** *(LNER Apple Green) 0-4-2 steam*
: *2012 J.Roberts* ***Phoenix Titan*** *(MR Crimson Lake) 4w-4w battery-electric*
: *2015 J.Parsons* ***Phoenix Project Loco*** *4w battery-electric*

Operator: *John Roberts*
Contact: *john@pimlicohouse.co.uk*