



New Blooms at Bressingham?

Andrew Charman makes a long-overdue return visit to a Norfolk steam centre with much to offer the narrow gauge enthusiast.

It is a very long time indeed since your editor last paid a visit to Bressingham Steam Museum, the Norfolk site which has long been a mecca for steam enthusiasts, let alone those of a narrow gauge persuasion. To give you an idea, on my previous visit I was pleased to see the museum's founder, Alan Bloom, on the footplate of one of the quarry Hunsletts, and Alan died in 2005...

Happily a few weeks ago the requirement in my 'other career' to attend the British Touring Car Championship race meeting at Snetterton, just eight miles away, gave me the perfect opportunity to bunk off on Saturday afternoon and find out what's changed at Bressingham.

Alan Bloom was the guiding light that created the museum. A horticulturalist who became world-renowned for his plant knowledge, he bought the 220-acre site in 1946 with the aim of setting up a nursery. This thrived to become a prime destination for plant lovers in the UK and beyond, while meanwhile Alan was also able to enjoy his other great passion, for steam engines.

The first was a 1909 traction engine, built by Burrell in nearby Thetford and bought to compensate for the cutting up of a similar engine at Bressingham while Alan was on an ill-starred Canadian venture between 1948 and 1950. He thought the Burrell, named 'Bertha' would satisfy his passion for steam but before long more road engines arrived and the nucleus of a collection was formed.

The traction engines offered extra interest at nursery open days but did not routinely 'earn their keep' and

from this thought grew the idea of a railway. Having bought a 9in gauge locomotive and some carriages and proven to family members that visitors would want train rides, Alan then heard that the north Wales slate quarries were selling off their locomotives and several were heading for America. By the time he was able to make the trip to Penrhyn quarries in November 1965 most of the 'good stuff' had gone, but from four remaining locos he secured what appeared to be the best, Hunslet 'George Sholto' (994/1909). He also bought, for £30, the chassis of Hudswell Clarke 0-6-0T 'Bronllwyd' (1643/1930) – its cab and tanks having been used in a rebuild of quarry Hunslet 'Pamela'. Five wagons and a lorry load of track material also headed to Norfolk, followed soon after by a second Penrhyn Hunslet, 'Gwynedd' (316/1883) to form the basis of the Nursery Railway.

This line opened as a half-mile trip in 1966 and has run ever since, eventually growing to 2.5 miles and for many years being enjoyed as much by plant enthusiasts as rail enthusiasts as it traversed the nurseries where thousands of blooms could be observed growing.

Bressingham grew quickly after that, becoming as renowned for its steam as it was for its plants. The first standard gauge locomotive arrived in 1967, along with a large four-track shed to house it and those that followed. These would be some very well-known locomotives, the majority on long-term loan from the National Railway Museum and including LMS 4-6-0 'Royal Scot', 4-6-2 Pacific

Above: 'George Sholto' leaves the station at Bressingham for another trip around the Nursery Line.

Below: Not far away is the 15-inch gauge Waveney Valley Line station. 'St Christopher' is about to traverse the crossover with the 2ft gauge.

All photos by Andrew Charman, 2nd August 2014

'Duchess of Sutherland' and the pride of the collection, Britannia class Pacific 'Oliver Cromwell'. There was even a huge German Kreiglok 2-10-0 and a rare standard-gauge Beyer Garratt, 'William Findlay.'

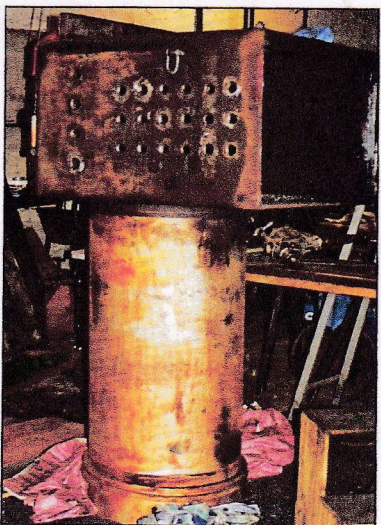
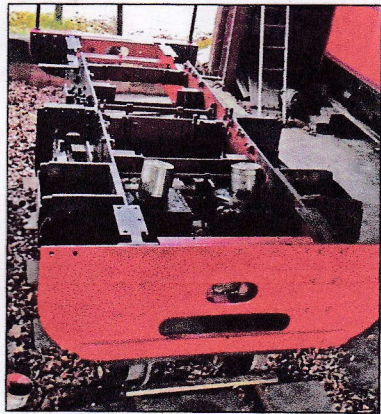
The Nursery line was joined by a second 2ft gauge route, the Woodland Line, worked for some years by Dinorwic Hunslet 'Maid Marian' (822/1903), Alan having offered a home at Bressingham to the loco's owning syndicate, and Bronllwyd, now back in action with the boiler from the then-derelict 1917 Kerr Stuart 'Stanhope', and destined to become Alan's favourite loco. But by 1973 the Woodland line would be reduced to 15-inch gauge, on which »





ran two impressive Krupp Pacifics, secured by Alan from Cologne.

And so Bressingham continued on its way, giving pleasure to many, and that's how I remembered it from my last visit in the early 2000s. Before his death in 2005 Alan placed the collection into a Trust, ensuring that it would not be



dispersed following his passing.

It is easy to find Bressingham today – very few garden centres have an enormous US-style 2-8-0 dominating their car park. And just the other side of the fence runs 'Alan Bloom', a 10¼in gauge 0-4-0 built at the museum in 1995 for a more recent railway, 1,350 yards long and running through attractive gardens created by Alan's son Adrian. With the very recently built 5in/7.25in model engineers circuit, there are now six gauges on the site...

On the footplate I meet Geoff Calver, a member of the museum's not huge but dedicated volunteer team, who serves as a very able host during my visit.

It is no surprise that a lot has changed at Bressingham in the years following Alan Bloom's passing and to those, like me, who remember the heyday of the late 1970s when the steam experience ranged through

Above: Seen from the other direction at the crossover, the narrow gauge atmosphere is very evident.

Left: Overhaul of 'Gwynedd' is well advanced, aided by a team from the Penrhyn line.

Below left: In the well-equipped workshops the boiler of Gwynedd is being rebuilt.

Below: Geoff Calver tends the fire of the 10.25in gauge 'Alan Bloom', with his assistant doing the physical bit...

15-inch pacifics to the quarry Hunslets to footplate rides on the likes of Oliver Cromwell, it is easy to think, wrongly, that the centre has declined. There have been high-profile departures, particularly among the standard gauge collection, but one could argue that seeing the likes of Cromwell and Royal Scot on main line steam duties is a more appropriate use for them, while there are still several large locomotives to see at close quarters, including the German 2-10-0 and the Garratt, which recently finally passed to the museum's ownership.

On the narrow gauge, the most notable departure has been Bronllwyd, sold by the museum's owning Trust in 2010 to the Statfold Barn Railway, which has since restored it to original Surrey County Council condition and livery. Your editor has seen it at Statfold and it certainly looks good, but you get the impression that its departure from Norfolk was not totally supported by the regulars...

Old faces and new

Services on the Nursery Railway today are maintained by George Sholto and 0-4-0 'Bevan', built at the museum in 2010 – Bressingham's workshops are not lacking in their capability. And this capability is currently being expended on Gwynedd – on my visit the rolling chassis was in the shed, the boiler in the workshop under an overhaul shared with the revived Penrhyn Railway. When complete the loco will work at Bressingham while regularly visiting north Wales.

One change that the museum could not have prevented is in its scenery – the Blooms garden centre was taken over some time ago, and the nurseries have gone. Currently the line runs past empty greenhouses as the site reverts to nature, which



will eventually provide just as attractive a ride, if different to the old days. But for a narrow gauge enthusiast the Nursery line offers a lot, because it is so very typically narrow gauge – the rails, mostly still original Penrhyn, are not dead straight, the sleepers only just visible, just like a proper narrow gauge line should be. It rides very well, and indeed is fully checked for safety at very regular intervals, while providing rather more than the sanitised train ride one finds at certain locations.

Parallel running

During its 2.5-mile trip the Nursery line crosses the 15-inch line, now known as the Waveney Valley Railway, twice, the second time seeing the two different-sized trains running alongside each other and passengers waving to each other. This also encourages a trip on the other line – an equally enjoyable but also different experience as it wends its way through woodlands, eventually paralleling the short standard gauge track on which on busy summer days footplate rides are still offered.

Motive power for the 15-inch gauge is these days provided by 'St Christopher', a 2-6-2T built by the Exmoor Steam Railway in 2001. Both of the German Pacifics are still at Bressingham, but sadly not in working order. 'Mannertreu' remains sheeted up in the shed, while 'Rosenkavalier' has for some years been displayed in the main museum building after unaccountably failing just three years into its boiler certificate. Geoff adds that with the water treatment regime today used by the museum such a thing could not happen again, and he would clearly like to see the loco returned to service, but this is an expense the museum cannot currently contemplate.

Bressingham is clearly in a period of transition, changing with the times. While many of the original attractions remain, not just the railways but such favourites as the steam fairground gallopers, there have been mostly positive additions too. The main museum building, which once merely housed a row of restored traction engines, has now created a wartime street scene, modelled as 'Warmington-on-Sea High Street' from the TV series *Dad's Army*. This was mainly filmed locally and forms an interesting exhibition of its own. In this environment the road locos are displayed much more effectively alongside recent acquisitions such as a vintage fire engine collection.

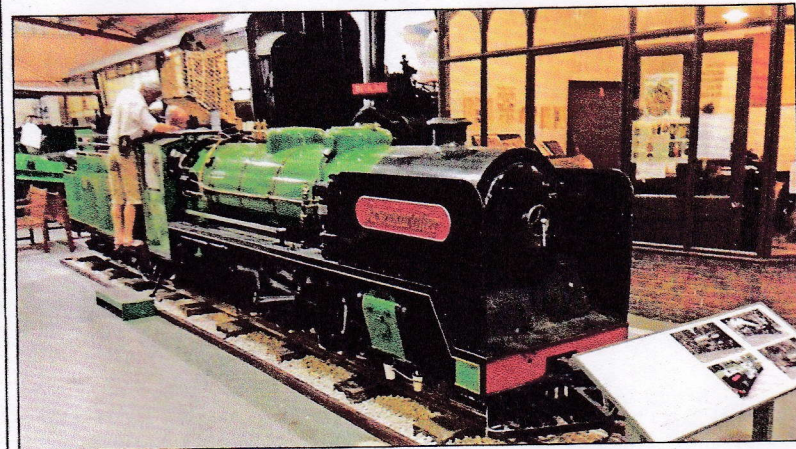
A dedicated team of volunteers help keep the museum running and Geoff readily agrees that more would be welcome. There is always plenty to



Above: A wait for St Christopher as George Sholto heads away onto the Nursery Line.

Right: The Krupp Pacific 4-6-2 'Rosenkavalier' is currently on static display in the well-thought out museum hall.

Below: Nearing the end of another journey, George Sholto squeezes between the greenery and spare passenger rolling stock.



do as the collection seeks to not only continue but advance in the future.

I greatly enjoyed my afternoon at Bressingham. For any collection surviving in today's environment is a challenge, let alone progressing, but you get the impression that the team at the museum are confident in their

task. And there is still plenty to see at a narrow gauge outpost that is well worth a visit **NGW**

More Information

www.bressingham.co.uk – includes opening days and times and contact details for potential volunteers.