



Fairbourne footplate

Andrew Charman continues his steam locomotive education with a first outing on a smaller engine than what he's been used to....

Regular readers of *NGW* will be aware that your editor undertakes several roles on the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway including on the footplate, as described in two previous features *First-time Fireman* (*NGW*147) and *Adventures on the Austrian* in *NGW*143.

For a while, however, I've been a frustrated fireman, having not seen a W&LLR footplate since 2019. While the line started running post-Covid trains from the middle of 2020, it was justifiably mandatory to wear face masks on the footplate.

Trouble is, I'm an asthmatic – thankfully it's much milder these days than when I was younger. But with big engines and a constantly changing stiff gradient profile, the W&LLR is one of the most demanding UK narrow-gauge lines for a footplate

Above: Editor Charman, at the controls of 'Sherpa' and demonstrating his innate ability to get grimy anytime he goes anywhere near a steam loco.

Below: As Sherpa comes to life on shed, Fairbourne general manager Murray Dods wonders if letting our man on his engines is really a good idea...

All photos by Andrew Charman and Harry Billmore

crew both mentally and particularly physically, and restricting my breathing on a hot, stuffy footplate was not a good idea for my sake or the railway's (not much good if the fireman stops working halfway through a trip...). So I've forced myself to stay off the roster.

Meantime I've been spending a few days each month helping my daughter Megan's partner Harry Billmore in the workshop of the Fairbourne Railway (as described in *NGW*153). Harry was appointed engineer of the 12¼-inch gauge line in September 2020.

On the regulator

It was not long before I started thinking about the possibilities of having a go on Fairbourne engines – there were several potential plus points, not least the opportunity to drive. I've always wanted to drive steam engines but I've never quite been right for what is an intensive training regime at the W&LLR. And I admit, after a year of lockdowns and working days mostly sat at a computer and putting on a few pounds, the Fairbourne locos looked a little more manageable. Not that they'd prove any less mentally demanding, as I'd soon find out...

It soon transpired that Fairbourne general manager Murray Dods had similar ideas. Like most railway management Murray has been facing the Covid-resultant issue of reduced volunteer availability, especially loco crew, and quite liked the idea of having another person who with experience shouldn't take too long to train. Time on a loco with Harry was pencilled in for a future date...

I kept thinking about it, without doing anything – eventually Murray decided he had to move things along and I got a phone call; "I'm short next week, I'm going to pull Harry out of the workshop to drive on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, which days are you joining him?" So on Thursday 16th September I found myself signing on at Fairbourne shed for my first day of driver training.

First plus over W&LLR footplate life – an 8.30am start is rather more agreeable than 6am, even considering Fairbourne is an hour's car drive from home and Llanfair shed a 20-minute walk... And this was for a cold engine, Harry deciding that with good weather promised we would be on the line's open-cabbed Darjeeling-style 0-4-0 'Sherpa', built in 1978 by Milner Engineering.

It goes without saying that matters 12¼-inch gauge are smaller-scale than 2ft 6in. While initial duties on both sizes of loco are the same, such as checking water gauges and that the fusible plugs are dry, a W&LLR day starts with a work-out as you remove the ashes of the previous working's fire from the firebox, mainly by bashing it through the firebars into the ashpan. Doing this I've always got very dirty, with resultant mickey-taking from family and friends.

On the Fairbourne the most physical job is sweeping the boiler tubes with a brush on a pole as long as the boiler, which you poke through each tube in turn. Most are done from the smokebox end but a couple have to be done from the firebox end due to such bits as the blastpipe being in the way up front. Moving from front to back you need to remember



which ones you still need to sweep.

Then you remove the resultant char from the smokebox and the remains of the previous fire from the firebox. No bashing though, this is a one-handed job, lifting it out through the firehole door with a shovel no bigger than one might find in the fireplace of a traditional house.

In fact one of my first difficulties was dealing with the very small size of Sherpa's firehole – you can't simply chuck coal in like on a W&L Beyer – much more precision is called for. Weirdly though, doing all the cleaning out I still got just as dirty...

Then it was time to light the fire – connect the air line to a valve on the front end, chuck in some wood, coal and some lit rags soaked in diesel, shut the door and leave it to cook. Simple, time for another cuppa...

Plenty to do

Of course the major difference of Fairbourne footplate life compared to Welshpool is that on a normal day, the driver and fireman are the same person, so there is a lot to do as the loco comes round. Various bits of the motion need to be greased through a series of points around the loco, while the axlebox horns need oiling – these points must all be memorised as the tasks will be repeated at various times during the day.

The mechanical and steam brake lubricators need filling with steam oil, the axlebox one with lube oil. And when that's all done there is of course the cleaning. As is typical of heritage railways the Fairbourne likes to present its locos in as pristine a condition as possible so there are rods, brass and plating to tend with various forms of polish – more so on Sherpa which has a tender.

At this point it's prudent to say a word about the Fairbourne's Covid precautions, which have been as safe and as carefully thought-out as other railways. Single manning helps, no driver and fireman in extended close proximity to each other. You can see why – with Harry and myself occupying Sherpa's driving seat for training purposes it's certainly cosy, but seeing as Harry and Megan lived for a while at Charman Towers after he first got the Fairbourne job, he's

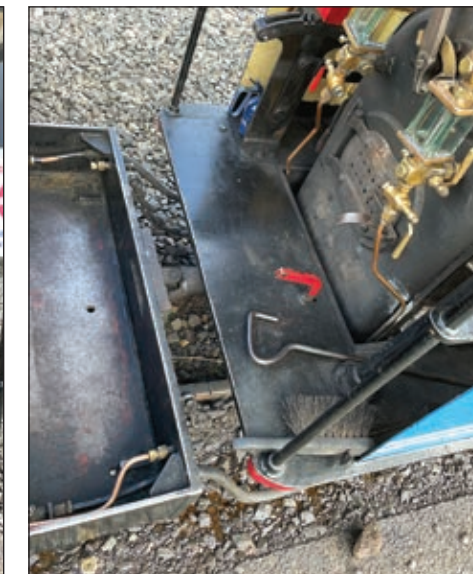


Above left: No matter what the size of locomotive, cleaning remains all-important...

Above: Driver's office on Sherpa – familiar controls in basically similar places, just all a bit smaller.

Above right: New considerations include keeping one's foot away from a constantly changing gap between loco and tender...

Below: Coupled up to a (very long) train and ready for our first trip...



effectively in my 'bubble' anyway.

As part of its Covid measures the Fairbourne spent much of last winter making changes at Fairbourne station, enabling the line to run longer trains and effectively socially-distance visitors without having to swap carriage sets after each trip, as I described in *NGW*153. These longer sets produce their own challenges, however, as I will learn a bit later...

Gently does it

Sherpa comes to life in around 60 to 90 minutes – one needs to be off-shed at least half an hour before the first of four return trips along the two-mile line to Penrhyn Point at 11.10. Harry decides now is the time for my first experience on a Fairbourne regulator, which is unnerving because to access the station throat one exits the shed onto a sector plate, with at the other end a large lump of RSJ to hit. It does have a sprung buffer mounted on it, a relic from 15-inch gauge loco 'Sylvia'.

Gently and gingerly working the

regulator I stop in the right place and after a quick turn I move Sherpa into the station for watering, including the application of water treatment, and then onto the front of our carriage set, which on this day has been collected from the shed by staff member Kevin with the diesel 'Gwrl'.

Harry will drive the first trip, so he can describe the line to me, and I will fire. This is certainly a very different experience to the W&L, where you are lumping coal on for much of the trip – Harry admits that one could get away with loading the box before departure and then concentrating on driving, but it's better to add the black stuff when necessary while on the move.

I first travelled on a Fairbourne footplate in 2011, producing a feature for *NGW*75 and driven by then general manager Chris Price, long before he became a TV celebrity as manager of the North Yorkshire Moors Railway. I remember Chris saying "it's just a beach railway..."





He was basically referring to the grand and not-realised ambitions of previous owner John Ellerton when he converted the line from 15 to 12¼-inch gauge, but it is easy to get the idea that the line is basically flat and thus easy to drive. As I discover when firing and then for the remainder of our day driving under Harry's instruction, it's anything but.

Okay, this line does not offer the rollercoaster gradient profile of a W&L, but there are ups, downs and curves, which become all the more significant when combined with small locos and the heavy nine-carriage trains that can now be rostered.

As Harry instructs and I soon experience, it's all about knowing the

road and when one needs to use momentum to keep the train on the move, but equally to avoid the weight of said train overwhelming the loco – especially with a four-coupled loco such as Sherpa, a lack of smoothness under deceleration can lead to the wheels sliding under the weight of the train. This briefly happens to me later in the day though I need Harry to point it out to me.

There is lots of slowing and speeding up to do – for the three level crossings, where one has to keep a good look-out in all directions, and for the halfway passing loop. But as I get plenty of driving through the day I soon become used to the feel of the loco and such new experiences as

“Hiding the irritation in her voice as yet again she radios us to ask ‘Are you there yet?’”

Above left: On the regulator and heading back to Fairbourne, our man appears to be enjoying himself...

Left: At the Point, with the Barmouth viaduct, under repair at the time, in the background – we're not sure exactly what Harry is contemplating...

Below: When the sun is out Penrhyn Point is a nice place to be but Charman is not letting his concentration slip as he runs around.



sitting on a tender – having only crewed tank locos before, the controls moving about and the need to keep one's foot away from a gap constantly changing in size is novel...

Science of speed

My biggest challenge is accurately judging speed. Line speed is 8mph, slower over points, crossings and the like – the locos don't have speedometers (the correct 'feel' for one's rate of progress is more efficient than trying to make an accurately-reading dial at such speeds) and it takes experience to get it right. When Harry comments "I wouldn't have gone over that point any faster than that," his unspoken words indicate I have work to do on this aspect...

With more experience of the loco comes more confidence. For example having insisted Harry couple Sherpa up to the carriages at the start of our turn, later in the day I'm happily doing this job – not always getting it right first time, but feeling in control.

There are so many parts to the job to take in, however, and so much to remember, such as contacting Control by radio each time we reach the Point. I keep forgetting that one, and Sam in the office tries to hide the irritation in her voice as yet again she radios us to ask "Are you there yet?"

On our final trip to the Point we take coal – a novelty of the Fairbourne is that water is routinely taken at one end, coal at the other. As we arrive back in Fairbourne with our last train and dispose Sherpa (another set of defined tasks such as blowing down the boiler and then using remaining steam pressure through the injectors – very similar to an end-of-turn on the W&L in fact) I feel I've had an informative, but crucially fun, day.

Driving home to Llanfair, Harry concludes that I should not take too long to pass out as a Fairbourne driver, though I realise I need a lot more seat time and I still have much to learn, not least the whys and wherefores of the other two regular locos, Welsh Highland-style 2-6-4T 'Russell' and Lynton & Barnstaple 2-6-2T 'Yeo'.

While not as physical as on a W&L loco, my initial Fairbourne turn has certainly been a mentally exhausting day – but I'm looking forward to the next one as well as a hoped-for return to the W&L footplate early next season. Well they say variety is the spice of life... **NGW**

More Information

The Fairbourne Railway's 2021 season ends on 31st October – details of the 2022 season will be on the website at www.fairbournerrailway.com