

Last Whistle in the Valley

The Rhiw Valley Light Railway held the final open day of its half-century history on 2nd October and *Andrew Charman* was there.



You could argue that its survival for so long was a surprise. Jack Woodroffe built the Rhiw Valley Light Railway, just a couple of miles from the mid-Wales village of Manafon, as a retirement plaything in the early 1970s – as we reported last month he ‘upsized’ his plans from 10¼ to 15-inch gauge once he saw a locomotive in the larger scale being built by Severn Lamb Ltd.

Jack found a Welsh farm with two large fields to lay the line around and by 1973 was enjoying his personal line, as well as opening it for the odd enthusiast day.

The RVLR’s history could, however, have been quite short, as sadly Jack died in 1990. But thereafter his widow Helena decided the line should continue, aided by their son Mike. For a while there was just the one open day a year, held on the same weekend as the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway Gala just a couple of miles away.

As we moved into the new millennium, however, Mike, aided by a small team of volunteers, was able to open the line once a month over the summer half of the year. There were plans for improvement too – such as extending the route beyond its existing length of around three quarters of a mile and remodelling the station track layout to provide two platforms and a turntable.

Dreams unfulfilled

There were even for a short time dreams of adding a third steam locomotive alongside the original Severn Lamb 0-6-2T ‘Powys’, built in 1973 and ‘Jack’, a 0-4-0 tender

Above: End of the line – ‘Jack’ and ‘Powys’ double-head the Rhiw Valley’s final train out of the station, ahead of multiple laps of the circuit.

Below: The final day saw all three resident locos in action, and lots of visitors riding behind them.

All photos by Andrew Charman, 2nd October 2022

design started by Jack and completed by TMA Engineering in 2003. Mike wanted a 15-inch version of a Lynton & Barnstaple Manning Wardle 2-6-2T – “my favourite locos,” he told the author at the final open day, “but when I had the energy to build the loco I had no money, now I have the money but no energy...”

Funding was a factor slowing any plans, and then the Covid pandemic put everything on hold. Helena always heavily subsidised the open days and on her death recently at the age of 93 the financial burden fell upon Mike, who also had to travel from his home in the Midlands to deal with anything railway related.

It was about more than money,

however. “Mike said that since his mother’s death the railway activities had ‘not been the same’”, one of the small team of volunteers told *NGW* – and the size of that team was another major factor. Not only were there not very many volunteers, they were also not getting any younger.

Faced with all that, it really should have come as no surprise when at this year’s September open day Mike announced that the next one, on 2nd October, would be the last. But certainly those who have grown used to the Rhiw Valley ‘just being there’ were shocked into action, and more than 200 visitors headed into mid Wales for the finale, far outstripping the numbers that had attended any »





Above: The open nature of the line makes for an attractive ride.

Left: Owner Mike Woodroffe busies himself organising the final train...

Below: ...but he chose not to ride it but instead to get some final pictures for the family album.



previous open day, and the dozen volunteers were kept very busy.

Both ways round

All three resident locomotives were in action throughout the day, Powys and Jack alternating on passenger services with the petrol-driven freelance-design 0-4-0T 'Monty' taking an occasional double-headed turn with one of the steamers, driven by Mike. Trains also ran in both directions around the kidney-shaped out-and-back route.

Your editor took a last chance to have a ride and grabbed a spot in one of the line's five tiny wooden carriages – all hand built at the RVL R, the first by Jack and the later ones by Mike and his team.

The line has just one station, in what is effectively the garden of the farmhouse and it then traverses a triangular junction before setting off around the route which circumnavigates the two fields. It's an attractive journey, the scenery open and framed by the River Rhiw on one side and hills rising on the other.

In a brief word with *NGW*, Mike admitted that the last day was as relieving as it was sad, before going off to organise the very final train, which of course had to be something special. Jack and Powys were coupled up together for a trip that consisted of two laps of the circuit, after which they were uncoupled, run through the triangular junction and attached to the other end of the train for a further two laps in the opposite direction – the train's owner choosing not to ride it but to photograph it from the lineside.



Then it was all over. The volunteers will stay together for a few months to assist Mike in dismantling the line. What is to become of the three locomotives and the stock is yet to be decided, but you can be sure Mike will be determined to find good homes for them.

Long-lasting

The Rhiw Valley was never a major line, it never wrote headlines. But it did give pleasure to its owners, the volunteers that worked with them and many visitors over the years.

In the process it carved out a history that stretched over more years than much more famous lines such as the original Lynton & Barnstaple Railway, the North Wales Narrow Gauge. Now it passes into history too – as Mike wrote in a final blog post on the line's website; "the trains have now been put away for the last time. So a big thank you to all our visitors, supporters and volunteers over the years. That's all folks!" *NGW*



Above: Powys completes a circuit as Jack awaits its turn.

Right: Powys is centre of attention in the RVL R's garden station.

Below: Finale – the two locos set out on the last lap of the line that's been their home for so long.

