



Brazil in the Premier League

Andrew Charman heads to Kent for the long-awaited and yet brief reunion between three sister locomotives.

It was as I accepted the invitation to climb onto the footplate of the Sittingbourne & Kemsley Light Railway's Hudson Hunslet diesel workhorse 'Victor' (4182/1953) that I realised that never had I previously ridden a heritage railway train so early in the morning – even on my home Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway.

It was Saturday 21st May at Sittingbourne Viaduct terminus in the town on the north Kent coast, and I was meeting the 7.30am train to Kemsley Down as one of the early visitors for a very special event. While many railways celebrate the return of a locomotive to steam after a long restoration, Kerr, Stuart 0-4-2ST 'Premier' was not only entering service for the first time in more than

quarter of a century, it was sharing duties with its two almost identical sisters 'Leader' and 'Melior'.

And this was indeed an event not likely to be repeated for many years. For as Premier made its return, Leader was working its last weekend before its boiler ticket expired – with the loco being third in the S&KLR's current overhaul queue it won't be back in action any time soon.

Premier has been restored to an appearance it would have presented when built in 1905 under works number 886. Appropriate – as one of the earliest examples of the Kerr, Stuart Brazil class, the locomotive became fleet number one of the brand-new 2ft 6in gauge railway built by Edward Lloyd to serve his equally

Above: The sister Brazils raise steam on the Saturday morning of the anniversary event. Left to right are 'Melior', 'Leader' and star of the show 'Premier'.

Below: The rebuild of Premier resulted in an appearance recalling its early days working on the paper mill line.

Photos by Andrew Charman except where stated, taken on Saturday 21st May.

new paper mill at Sittingbourne. Sister Kerr, Stuart Leader (926) arrived shortly after.

Doubling the fleet

The railway grew over the years as the paper complex expanded and in 1948 became part of the Bowaters Group. By the time a switch to road transport resulted in closure of the railway in the Autumn of 1969 there were two more Brazils in the fleet. 'Excelsior' (1049) had arrived in 1908 and 'Melior' (4219) in 1924 – the latter an improved version of the design with Hackworth motion.

By the time of closure efforts were already underway to preserve the southern section of the railway and the Sittingbourne & Kemsley Light Railway opened in 1970, initially operated by members of the Locomotive Club of Great Britain.

All four Brazils were preserved – Premier, Leader and Melior remained at Sittingbourne, while Excelsior was among four Bowaters locomotives sold to the Pleasurerail operation which was planning to build new lines at stately homes and other attractions. The four went to a line that was under construction at Whipsnade zoo in Bedfordshire, and three of them, including Excelsior, remain there today.

Back at Sittingbourne, Premier had remained in working order right up to the end of Bowaters operation and was heavily used in the early years of preservation, alongside the

Bagnall 0-6-2Ts 'Superb' and 'Triumph'. Leader, withdrawn in 1969, was acquired by a consortium of S&KLR members who restored the loco, while Melior, working but in poor condition at the end of the Bowaters era, needed heavy repairs and did not enter service on the preserved line until the mid 1980s.

Premier last steamed on the S&KLR in 1996. A decision was made in 2005 to try and seek a Heritage Lottery grant for an overhaul and the railway wrote to the local Swale Borough Council in the hope of getting a letter of support to aid the lottery bid. Instead the council sent a £10,000 donation. "That paid for the new saddle tank and effectively kick-started the restoration," S&KLR chairman Liz Fuller told *NGW*. Unsurprisingly the current Mayor of Swale, councillor Simon Clark, was among Saturday guests to the Three Brazils Weekend.

The railway was unsuccessful in its lottery bid and eventually raised the entire cost of the restoration, estimated at around £115,000, itself. Two major benefactors proved a big help, as did a pair of specific appeals made among the membership for 'Premier Stays' and 'Premier Parts'.

The most extensive work necessary was to the boiler, carried out by the standard-gauge North Norfolk Railway and including a new inner firebox and smokebox, and a complete retube. The bottom end also needed substantial attention including re-turning the wheels.

Much studying of photos in the railway's museum was carried out in an effort to return the loco to its appearance on arrival in Sittingbourne in 1905 – it now carries a deep green livery quite unlike the more familiar apple green of S&K locos today worn by Melior, and with heavy lining and its name in a large serif font on the saddle tank. Weather protection for the crew is spartan too, the sides and rear of the cab open to the elements.

Visiting workers

The celebration weekend was held in two parts, starting with an event for members and friends of the S&KLR on Saturday. Crews on the locos included members of other railways, among them the Kent & East Sussex, Bluebell and even the Welshpool & Llanfair, the two 2ft 6in gauge lines having struck up a strong relationship since Sittingbourne Bagnall 0-6-2T 'Superb' appeared at the Welsh line's Steam Gala in 2017 and 2018.

Sunday was a public day and a very successful one. On both days an intensive timetable saw 11 steam services from Kemsley Down and 10 from Sittingbourne Viaduct, with



Kerr, Stuart's standards...

Kerr, Stuart & Co was founded in Glasgow in 1881 but moved to Stoke-on-Trent in 1892, with all its locomotives being built in the Staffordshire town.

The firm became well known for its standard locomotive designs, the classes that boasted trailing trucks allowing the use of large fireboxes becoming a trademark feature of Kerr, Stuart products. The Tattoo and Brazil 0-4-2 saddle tank narrow gauge locos, both of which appeared at the start of the 20th century, were typical of these designs, with inside or outside frames depending on the gauge they were ordered for.

The Brazil, reputedly named because the first example was built for a customer in the South American country, was in many ways a larger version of the Tattoo, with 9 x 15in cylinders giving it a rating of 84hp compared to the 36hp of the 7 x 12in cylindered Tattoo. There was also a class between them, with 8 x 12in cylinders and named Darwin.

Some of the earliest Brazils were 'Premier' and 'Leader', built for the new 2ft 6in line at Sittingbourne paper mill and delivered in 1905. Sittingbourne had two more Brazils, 'Excelsior' in 1908 and when a new mill was opened in 1924, 'Melior'. This was different

to its sisters as Kerr, Stuart had updated its motion to the Hackworth design. All four engines survived to be preserved.

Other Brazils went to various customers across the globe, as did many examples of the smaller Tattoo class. Two Tattoos that saw service in the UK were 'Stanhope', built in 1917 for Rosyth dockyard, later employed at Penrhyn Quarry and today preserved at the Apedale Valley Railway, and the Corris Railway's no 4 supplied in 1921, which was later preserved at the Tallylyn Railway as no 4 'Edward Thomas'. The Corris has since built its own Tattoo locomotive, no 7, completed in 2005.

After Kerr, Stuart collapsed in 1930 the goodwill to its designs was bought by Hunslet and the very last steam locomotive built by the original Hunslet Engine Company, in 1971, was an improved version of the Brazil class. This was 'Trangkil No.4', a 2ft gauge example which ran on sugar lines in Indonesia. It was repatriated in 2005 for preservation at the Statfold Barn Railway, where it regularly operates today – Statfold today owns the rights to produce new Hunslet steam locomotives, and is custodian to the Hunslet and thus Kerr, Stuart archives.



Two stages in the life of Premier. In the picture above, taken by David Mitchell, the loco is pictured with Bagnall 0-6-2T 'Superb' in Bowaters service at Kemsley Mill on 21st September 1966.

Editor Andrew Charman took the shot at right on his first visit to the S&KLR in April 1986. Premier at left was with Melior, then under restoration.





locos swapped at Sittingbourne. Visitors made the most of the rare opportunity to see the three Brazils in steam together, one of *NGW*'s regular correspondents telling us that "the trains were rammed full!"

While Premier was the star of the weekend it did not quite take all the limelight – sister Leader was the centrepiece of a small ceremony on Sunday afternoon. As mentioned this loco has always been owned in preservation by a consortium of S&KLR members and the ceremony saw it officially handed over to the railway's ownership.

Above: They may be sisters but each has its own distinct profile.

Above right: Spot the track! Proper industrial narrow gauge as Premier approaches Kemsley Down.

Below: Premier is ready to head its train back to Sittingbourne as Melior arrives.

Having completed its final weekend of duties, Leader faces some time on the sidelines. Its overhaul is expected to cost at least £150,000 and won't begin until the completion of the 10-year overhaul of Bagnall 0-6-2T 'Superb', which last ran in 2018, and sister Bagnall 'Triumph' – currently stored in Kemsley yard but with a sign next to it stating that the loco is too under overhaul.

Enduring appeal

Your editor was born far too late to see the line in its Bowaters years (something I regret!). I made my first

visit to Sittingbourne in 1986 and have always enjoyed returning to the Kent line, even though having prior to 2007 been the closest narrow gauge railway to my Surrey home, it's now one of the furthest from *NGW* Towers in mid Wales.

The overall memory from that first visit some 36 years ago was of an authentic industrial railway, a rare thing by the 1980s though it had to be said that much of the surroundings of the line appeared to be a bit of a wasteland of disused industry – all rusting pipes and gantries.

Certainly when five years later I

took my then new wife on a day out to the line, she wasn't quite as impressed with the scenery compared to the railways ridden on our first holiday to Wales earlier that year...

We rode in the semi-open former Chattenden & Upnor Railways carriages, which had spent 17 years in Wales on the Welshpool & Llanfair before being bought by the S&K in 1978 to work just 12 miles away from their former home. I leant out to take photos of the loco literally parting the greenery growing on either side of the route – and as this was early in the season suffered severe hayfever as a result! That did not exactly help Rosemary's enthusiasm for the industrial narrow gauge...

The line's surroundings have changed over the years – much of the industrial desolation has made way for new building, Asda and Morrison's superstores, a new main road crossing over the railway, while the control of the lineside vegetation is rather better these days.

Challenges met

That the railway is here today becomes all the more impressive when you consider that it is run by one of the smaller groups in UK preservation and one that has faced many challenges, most notably almost two years with no trains in 2009-10 when the paper mill was closed and the land that was leased to the railway passed to new owners.

Not until 2012 did trains return to the full line, including the half-mile long concrete viaduct that



Above: It was a special weekend for Leader too, the loco working its last trains before expiry of its boiler ticket.

Below: Premier and train traverse the signature feature of the S&KLR, the concrete viaduct that runs for more than half a mile.

leads to Sittingbourne station. And this viaduct, a listed structure, has been a constant headache, with more than £100,000 invested in its upkeep over a 10-year period.

Despite this the railway has progressed, celebrating its 50th anniversary of preservation in 2019 while also managing, thankfully, to retain that industrial atmosphere. The trackwork, for example, is these days to the highest standards in the line's preservation history – in an age of close monitoring by authorities such as the Office of Rail and Road it has to be. Yet as the picture on the

facing page clearly demonstrates, Sittingbourne trains still make their way along two lines of rails snaking through a mainly green corridor – this is proper industrial narrow gauge, and long may it remain so. **NGW**

More Information

Sittingbourne & Kemsley Light Railway trains run on Sundays, as well as Wednesdays in August and the Summer Bank Holiday Monday, until the end of September when the line stages its traditional two-day end-of-season Gala. More details are on the website at www.sklr.net

