

DIAMOND DAYS *in Wales*

This month, the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway celebrates 60 years of preservation services, and 60 more of existence – it's been quite a journey.

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On April 6 1963 a smartly dressed man stood on a bogie wagon, surveyed a sea of mainly young faces crammed into the cramped station yard of the small Mid-Wales town of Llanfair Caereinion and welcomed them to the reopening of the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway. Sir Thomas Salt, first chairman of the still young W&LLR preservation company, then introduced the Earl of Powis, through whose estate much of the line ran, and he commented how nice it was to be asked to open a line mere days after Dr Beeching's infamous

report had advocated the closure of so many.

Some 60 years and two days earlier, the pomp had been rather grander as dignitaries marked the official opening of the W&LLR. Welshpool residents had more to celebrate than their counterparts nine miles west – had the good people of Llanfair had their way, the line built would have been the Llanfair & Meifod Valley Light Railway, heading northeast from Llanfair to meet the branches leading from Oswestry. It would likely have been standard gauge and, like most of the Oswestry lines, probably would not have survived into preservation. But an enquiry

BELOW Accelerating away from Sylfaen, *Countess* heads the popular vintage train. MIKE HEATH

inspector ruled in favour of Welshpool and 2ft 6in gauge rails headed east from Llanfair.

The W&LLR would produce far more headlines in preservation than it ever did during its working years. After the pomp of the opening, it settled down to a very quiet life, operated firstly by the Cambrian Railway, later the Great Western and finally by British Railways. Its Welshpool terminus was never more than a siding in the car park of the standard gauge station, and it never required more than the two Beyer, Peacock 0-6-0Ts *The Earl* and *The Countess* and three Pickering bogie carriages supplied for its opening.

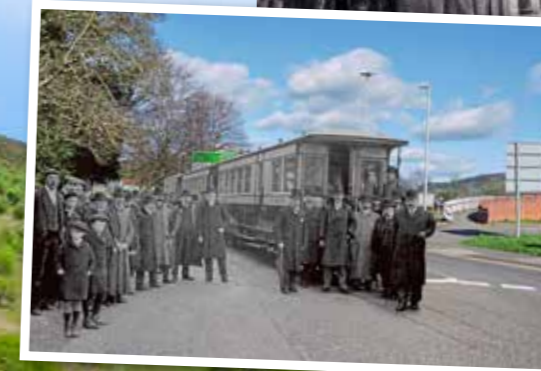
The first suggestion of closure came as early as 1926, shortly after the GWR takeover, and in 1931 the passenger service ended, the three carriages taken to Swindon and scrapped. Thereafter the W&LLR was a freight-only line, carrying mainly produce from the farms of the district to Welshpool livestock market, which was alongside the line's tiny motive power depot, and the standard gauge interchange. The cattle docks, with their mixed gauge track, are the only element of the original Welshpool terminus that survives today.

Immediately after British Railways assumed control in 1948, plans for closure ramped up. Local users objected and not until November 1956 did the last train run, a sold-out special for

INSET RIGHT W&L member Tim Abbott composed this interesting montage showing how the W&L's original Welshpool station is today lost under a roundabout. W&LLR ARCHIVE



On April 4 1903 dignitaries gather as the first W&LLR waits to depart from Welshpool, the train comprising all three Pickering carriages owned by the line. W&LLR ARCHIVE



the Stephenson Locomotive Society with enthusiasts travelling in open wagons, sitting on platform benches borrowed from the main-line station. At least one observer commented that if so many people had used the line regularly there would not have been a last train.

The protracted closure was probably fortunate as, by then, railway preservation was a thing – preserving the W&LLR was first mooted in 1952 and, by the time the last train ran, the Talylyn Railway, 35 miles west of Llanfair, had been operated by volunteers for five years, while further north the Ffestiniog revival was getting into its stride. Even as the Newtown Silver Band played the mournful tones of the Last Post, enthusiasts were plotting a W&LLR revival.

The two locomotives were taken to the former Cambrian works at Oswestry. Recent information has revealed that there was interest from the Bowaters Paper system in Sittingbourne, Kent, in buying them. Had this happened then the articulated Bagnall *Monarch* – the last narrow gauge steam locomotive built for UK industrial service, at Bowaters – might never have been ordered. Thankfully, the interest abated and



the Oswestry works manager, knowing that W&LLR revival efforts were under way, stored the engines in a corner well away from prying eyes of management looking for stuff to scrap. Ironically, *Monarch* was the first steam locomotive acquired by the preservation company and is a static exhibit at Welshpool today.

While the Talylyn had never actually closed and the Ffestiniog had run its first trains within weeks of the preservation takeover, reviving the W&LLR was a different matter, as the preservationists would be leasing the line from the British Railways, with all of the bureaucracy that entailed. Working parties began clearing encroaching vegetation in 1959 and *The Earl* arrived back in 1961 followed a year later by its sister *Countess* (which had lost its 'The' in GWR ownership in order to fit its nameplate on the cab side – the hacksaw marks are still visible on the plates today). But not until that day in 1963 was the new company cleared to run passenger trains and collect some much-needed revenue, passengers travelling in very basic toastrack carriages acquired from the Upnor & Lodge Hill naval railway in Kent.

The new regime had an immediate significant problem. Welshpool Town Council backed the revival but not trains continuing to cross the town over several roads, potentially stalling plans for a bypass of the town centre with increasing road traffic threatening gridlock. At a stroke, the new W&LLR company was deprived of its Welshpool terminus and, crucially, its depot, forcing it to base operations at the other end of the line in Llanfair Caereinion – not for several years would

those struggling to maintain the locomotives have adequate covered facilities in which to work.

Losing the town section rankled with some members for many years – in the event, the bypass never happened and, close to half a century later, the same town council proposed a feasibility study to bring the line back through the town, perhaps inspired by the Welsh Highland Railway running through the streets of Porthmadog. The W&L maintained a dignified silence, having by then established an all-new station at Raven Square on the western edge of the town, and the idea soon went away.

Preservation of the W&LLR was, for a long time, a shoestring effort – for many years services only operated over half of the line from Llanfair to Castle Caereinion, as that was all the company felt able to maintain. Tales from the early days of having whip-rounds among members to finance the next bag of coal remain in the line's folklore today, and when, in December 1964, heavy rain caused the partial collapse of the line's most significant piece of civil engineering, the bridge over the Banwy river, the omens were not good and the talk ranged to abandoning the line and preserving the two locomotives as static exhibits. Thankfully, Sir Thomas Salt used his military connections and the bridge was rebuilt as an exercise by the Royal Engineers.

Personalities have very much shaped the preservation story of the W&LLR, a significant example being early director Frederick Mayman. He had connections with the Zillertalbahn, a 762mm gauge line in Austria, which in 1968

BELOW Early days at Llanfair Caereinion when the line was operated by the Cambrian Railways – *The Earl* has arrived with a typical mixed train. W&LLR ARCHIVE

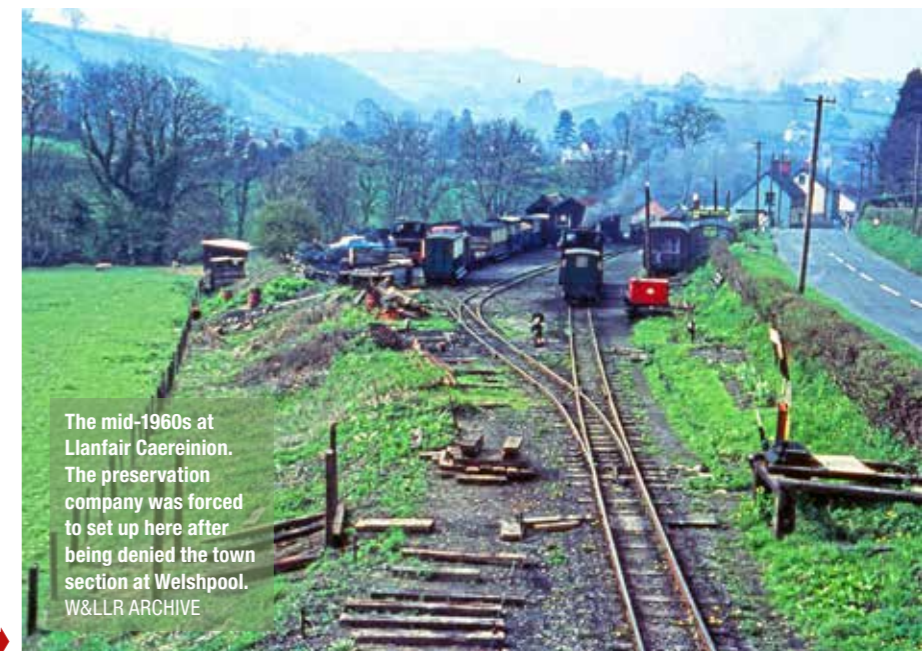


The final day and the Newtown Silver Band plays as what would be a packed Stephenson Locomotive Society waits to leave Welshpool. W&LLR ARCHIVE

gifted the W&L with a quartet of four-wheeled carriages, with open end balconies. Suddenly the line had a unique selling point – nowhere else in the UK could passengers travel while looking over the footplate crew's shoulder, or on the back balcony watching the line stretch away behind the train. End balconies became a major part of the W&L's appeal and when, years later, two large-windowed Hungarian State Railway bogie carriages were acquired, they were modified with balconies added.

The gift from Austria led directly to the acquisition of another steam locomotive – Franco Belge 0-8-0T 699.01 was built for the German military but had spent most of its working life in Austria. On arrival in Wales it proved an excellent heavy hauler and gained the name 'Sir Drefaldwyn', Welsh for the old county of Montgomeryshire that is the W&LLR's home.

The W&LLR became adept at repatriating examples of British steam export success. Kerr Stuart 0-6-2T 'Joan' arrived in 1971 from Antigua. ▶



The mid-1960s at Llanfair Caereinion. The preservation company was forced to set up here after being denied the town section at Welshpool. W&LLR ARCHIVE

Another W&L personality, Tony Thorndike, then a director and today in his final season in the operations department after a mere 55 years of service, found the locomotive while holidaying on the Caribbean island – again W&L folklore has it that before locals would break into the shed in which the locomotive lay, Tony had to promise to buy them a new lock and a bottle of rum...

Four years later, the railway repatriated an entire train – Hunslet 2-6-2T No. 85 and four bogie carriages built by the Gloucester Carriage & Wagon Co were acquired from the redundant Government Railway system in Sierra Leone. The SLR carriages, with their vacuum brakes, were essential to plans to return to Welshpool, descending the 1-in-29 Golfa Bank – for many years promoted as the steepest gradient in preservation.

W&L services were extended to the roadside halt of Sylfaen in 1972 and, in the following year, a decade of operation was celebrated by cutting back the undergrowth so that members' special trains could work to Welshpool Raven Square. This effectively started the Return to Welshpool appeal, though a more pressing fundraising exercise was the purchase of the line from British Railways. Helped by a large donation from Welshpool Council and a loan from the Welsh Tourist Board, eight miles of line and all associated items were secured in early 1974 for a price of £8,000 – equivalent today to just £107,000.

Returning to Welshpool was no simple matter – the most costly project the preservation company had ever attempted involved leasing extra land at Raven Square to provide sufficient space for a terminus and diverting a brook. But finally, on July 18 1981, the line once more provided passenger services between Welshpool & Llanfair.

Funds remained very tight and, when Raven



Square opened, there was no money to provide a station building, tickets being sold from the signal box while one of the SLR carriages served as a waiting room. But in the more than 40 years since that milestone, the W&L has steadily developed its operations to become the significant player on the UK's narrow gauge scene that it is today, while placing itself on a firm financial footing.

The line has always had modest ambitions – management of other railways still express surprise that annual passenger numbers only amount to around 25,000, but the W&L exists not in a tourist hot spot like other railways with a captive audience of holidaymakers, but on one of the less busy routes into Wales, with the line's main traffic being day trippers from the West Midlands.

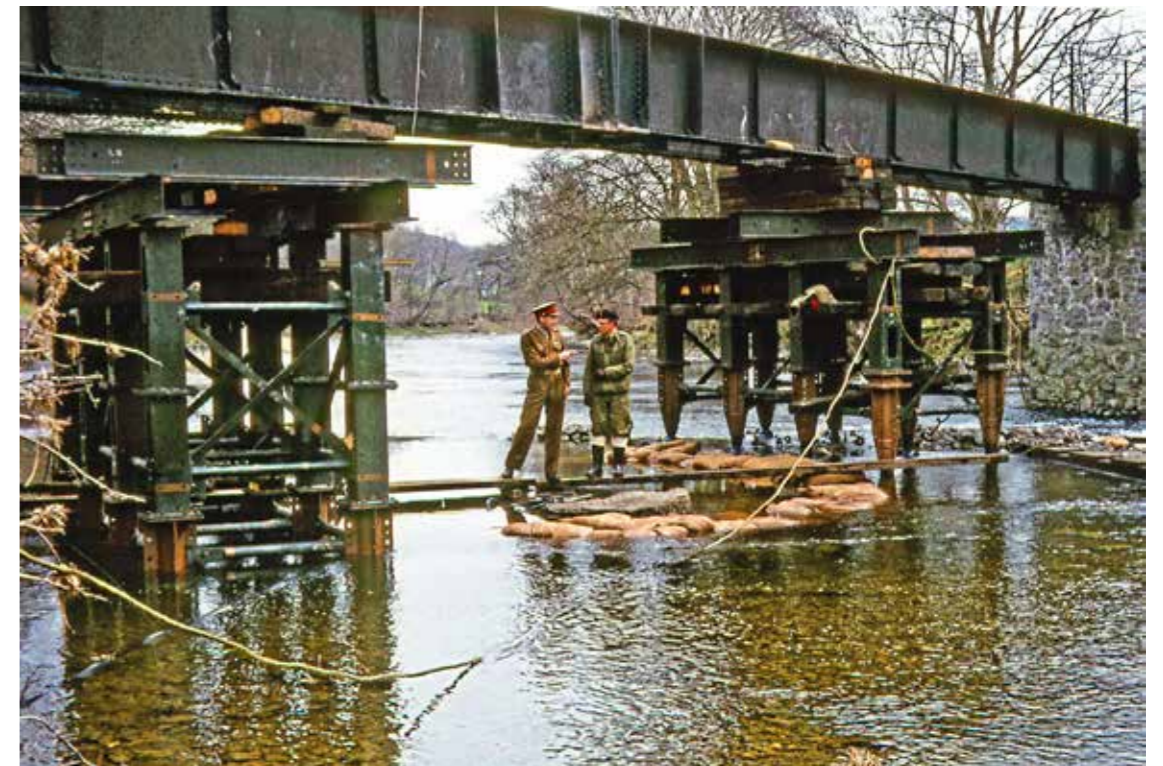
The railway has cut its cloth accordingly – the trustee board, on which the author has served for more than a decade, has always been prudent with its spending, refusing to seek loans for new and expensive projects and authorising them only when the money was either secure or pretty certain to be raised through an appeal. W&L members are used to being patient before new developments come to fruition. Such an approach has helped the line to survive the Covid years, the most challenging of its existence, and head into still challenging times with no debt – a status to which many other lines cannot lay claim.

The prudence has been accompanied by great success in attracting Grant Aid and donations to what is today a highly popular line among both the public and enthusiasts. Such funding has allowed many achievements over the years – Llanfair station was completely rebuilt, while Welshpool gained both stock sheds and an appropriate building in the form of the former Eardisley station in Herefordshire, transported plank by plank to

Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway Locomotives

| W&L No. | Other No. | Name | Builder | Type | Built | Acquired | Left | Notes |
|---------|-----------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|-------|----------|------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | 822 | <i>The Earl</i> | Beyer Peacock | 0-6-0T steam | 1902 | 1902 | | |
| 2 | 823 | <i>The Countess</i> | Beyer Peacock | 0-6-0T steam | 1902 | 1902 | | |
| 3 | | <i>Raven</i> | Ruston Hornsby | 4-whl diesel | 1934 | 1961 | 1974 | Privately preserved |
| 4 | | <i>Upnor Castle</i> | Hibberd | 4-whl diesel | 1954 | 1962 | 1968 | Now on Ffestiniog Railway |
| 5 | | <i>Nutty</i> | Sentinel | 0-4-0VBT steam | 1929 | 1964 | 1971 | At Leighton Buzzard |
| 6 | | <i>Monarch</i> | Bagnall | 0-4-4-0T steam | 1953 | 1966 | | From Bowaters, Sittingbourne |
| 7 | | <i>Chattenden</i> | Baguley-Drewry | 0-6-0 diesel | 1949 | 1968 | | From Upnor & Lodge Hill Railway |
| 8 | | <i>Dougal</i> | Andrew Barclay | 0-4-0T steam | 1946 | 1968 | | From Provan gasworks, Glasgow |
| 9 | | <i>Wynnstay</i> | Fowler | 0-6-0 diesel | 1951 | 1969 | 1972 | At Whipsnade Railway |
| 10 | 699.01 | 'Sir Drefaldwyn' | S Franco-Belge | 0-8-0T steam | 1944 | 1969 | | From Salzkammergut Lokalbahn, Austria |
| 11 | | <i>Ferrett</i> | Hunslet | 0-4-0 diesel | 1940 | 1971 | | |
| 12 | | 'Joan' | Kerr Stuart | 0-6-2T steam | 1929 | 1971 | | From Antigua Sugar Co, Caribbean |
| 14 | No. 85 | | Hunslet | 2-6-2T steam | 1954 | 1975 | | From Sierra Leone Government Railway |
| 15 | | <i>Orion</i> | Tubize | 2-6-2T steam | 1948 | 1983 | 2006 | At Jokoisten Railway |
| 16 | | <i>Scwbi</i> | Hunslet | 0-4-0 diesel | 1941 | 1992 | | Out of use |
| 17 | 175 | | Diema | 6-whl diesel | 1979 | 2004 | | From Taiwan Sugar Corporation |
| 18 | 764.423 | | Resita | 0-8-0T steam | 1957 | 2004 | 2016 | Unrestored |
| 19 | 764.425 | | Resita | 0-8-0T steam | 1957 | 2007 | 2016 | Now in Czech Republic |
| 20 | AD9150 | <i>The Wasp</i> | Baguley-Drewry | 4-whl railcar | 1976 | 2008 | | From MOD, Carlisle |
| 21 | ZB2 | <i>Zillertal</i> | Krauss | 0-6-2T steam | 1900 | 2019 | | On hire from Zillertalbahn |
| 22 | DL-34 | | Mitsubishi | Bo-Bo diesel | 1972 | 2023 | | On loan from Alishan Forest Railway |

ABOVE Hunslet 2-6-2T No. 85 came to the line from Sierra Leone, with a train of four carriages, here being steamed soon after arrival in 1975 alongside *The Earl*. W&LLR ARCHIVE



RIGHT The Banwy bridge collapse of December 1964 could have ended the W&L revival, had the Army not come to the rescue. W&LLR ARCHIVE



ABOVE The Tubize 2-6-2T Orion was the largest locomotive restored to run on the railway but was eventually considered too heavy and sold back to its original line in Finland. DAVID MARSH

Raven Square and re-erected. A £496,000 lottery grant enabled full restoration of the two original locomotives for the line's centenary in 2003, the first time they had steamed together since the earliest days of preservation. And members who had long advocated for the building of a replica of the line's lost Pickering bogie carriages were rewarded in time with not one, but the complete set of three.

There have been disappointments. Llanfair station building had to be rebuilt again after a fire in 1998, and not long after that the Banwy Bridge needed more expensive work to one of its piers. Notably, a large Tubize 2-6-2T displayed at Llanfair for many years was returned to service in 2000, only to be found too heavy for the line and appropriately sold back to its former home line, the Jokioisten Railway in Finland, in 2006. The funds raised enabled the purchase of a ready-overhauled Resita 0-8-0T from Romania which arrived in 2007. But while this fulfilled the heavy haulage capability the line needed with 699.01 out of service, it also proved to have serious reliability issues, including breaking both a crank and an axle on separate occasions. It headed back east in 2016 as an overhaul of 'Sir D' began.


The W&L has, however, navigated such challenges and found novel solutions. It has, in particular, developed strong relationships not only with traditional partners such as the Zillertalbahn – the Austrian line's 1900-built locomotive 'Zillertal' began an initial three-year hire period in Wales in 2019 and became the oldest engine on the W&L – but with new associates, notably in the Far East nation of Taiwan. The Alishan Forest Railway's powerful Mitsubishi diesel DL-34 arrived on loan in January of this year and while some W&L members might have dreamed of one of the Taiwanese line's iconic Shays ascending the Golfa, DL-34's presence will have a practical advantage, enabling both the existing W&L main line diesels

to be taken out of service for the major overhauls they have long deserved.

Covid and its aftermath has also helped to shape the railway's plans. Directly after the pandemic, success was found in running shorter, family-friendly one-hour round trips from Llanfair to Castle, but these also revealed that most considered the connection between Welshpool and Llanfair more important – in 2023 the majority of trains run over the full length of the line.

More long-lasting success has come from premium experiences – a recognition that today for many travellers a train ride is not enough. The 2023 timetable includes recent innovations that have proved popular – fish and chips and afternoon tea trains, and First class travel in an SLR carriage restored to its original specification with white-leather armchairs. But there are also new events – whisky and gin-tasting trains, a beer festival, an automotive weekend in conjunction with the Cloverlands Model Car Museum.

On June 17/18, the W&LLR will celebrate its history with a special 60th/120th event, headlined by the return to service of 'Sir Drefaldwyn' following its protracted overhaul. And while, in many ways, the line has changed fundamentally since the pioneer days of 1963, in many others it remains the same – the number of paid staff are still in single figures and the W&LLR is still a heritage railway owned and operated by its members.

As the W&LLR trustees complete the next ten-year business plan affected not only by Covid but a 2022 season that brought surprising challenges for the whole of the UK heritage rail industry, they and the members know there will be major challenges ahead. But they also known that the W&L is in rude health, well placed to meet those challenges, exceed them and continue to surprise and delight its visitors: 

● Details of the W&LLR's 60th/120th anniversary event can be found at www.wllr.org.uk