

Flying Visits!

An impromptu SCSC Tech Trip



Paul Hampton and Dewi Daniels report on their experiences being pulled by the iconic "Flying Scotsman" locomotive, now over 100 years old, but still going strong!

West Somerset Railway (WSR) operate a heritage line between Bishops Lydeard and Minehead. This is a 20-mile stretch in beautiful Somerset countryside and includes a coastal stretch with views across the Bristol Channel to Wales. When I heard WSR were offering passenger trips on the line with the Flying Scotsman, I thought it would be a rare opportunity to see the almost 100 tonne locomotive in action.

Static museum exhibitions of vehicles are of course interesting and worthwhile, but to see, hear (and smell!) such a large vehicle in operation brings another dimension of emotional engagement. I was not alone in this ambition and it also appealed to Dewi Daniels who travelled on a separate day so we have a sort of impromptu SCSC Tech Trip to report on!

The Flying Scotsman was designed by Sir Nigel Gresley and built in Doncaster in 1923, the first locomotive of the newly formed London and North Eastern Railway (LNER). In the next year, after an appearance at the British Empire Exhibition in London, it was given the name "Flying Scotsman" after the daily London to Edinburgh rail service. In 1928 it was given a new type of tender (the carriage hauled immediately behind the loco carrying the coal) with corridors so new crew could reach the engine without stopping the train. May that year then saw the first non-stop London to Edinburgh service with a journey time of eight hours.

In 1934 it reached a record-breaking speed of 100 mph on a special test run and 15 years later, following the nationalisation of Britain's railways, it was given its now famous 60103 designation.

After travelling more than 2 million miles in almost 40 years of service, the loco was at risk of being scrapped but was saved through its purchase by railway enthusiast Alan Pegler. After restoration, Pegler continued to run services and in 1969 the loco embarked on its remarkable international career, running services in the US, Canada and even Australia. Its future has never been certain with its many owners over the years facing financial difficulties and various campaigns and appeals have been required to pay for expensive overhauls. It is a testament to its enduring appeal that despite these setbacks, it has survived and is still running today.

The Journey



Our days both started at Bishops Lydeard. Having picked up our commemorative tickets, we waited to board the outbound locomotives. We had both opted to go out in a standard loco and have the return journey in the Flying Scotsman. Both days were incredibly hot with 28°C for me on 30th June and a sweltering 32°C for Dewi on the 12th July! My trip out was a treat in its own right, being pulled by the "Erlestoke Manor".

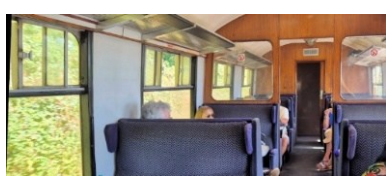
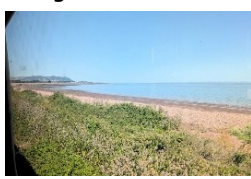
Dewi's trip out was on a diesel; we think this was to reduce the risk of trackside fires due to the extraordinary temperature that day.

The SWR heritage line has a speed restriction of 25 mph and so the journeys out and back took around 1 hour, quite sedate compared to



what the vehicles were actually capable of. This however gave plenty of time to take in the experience, enjoy the scenery and stand by the door for the breeze to keep cool! The carriages themselves were heritage of course and clearly designed more for heating rather than cooling!

The train worked its way up through the Somerset countryside passing places such as Watchet and Dunster before arriving at Minehead.



After a well-earned ice cream there was a short wait at the station watching the ground crew spray water on the coal to be used to refuel the Flying Scotsman prior to its return trip. The station master said that as the Flying Scotsman would be running in reverse on the return journey, the coal dust would otherwise be blown into the driver's eyes. He also explained that the imported coal, which is the only coal that is available nowadays, is dustier and doesn't burn as well as the Welsh anthracite coal that was used in the heyday of steam locomotives.

The Main Event!

We were then treated to the main event of the day as the Flying Scotsman pulled in slowly from its previous leg coming up from Bishops Lydeard. This was a hugely exciting part of the whole experience with amazing sounds of venting steam and the majestic movements of the pistons and wheels as the driver brought 100 tonnes of steam and metal into the buffers.

I was amazed however that the final moments of manoeuvring the immense engine had the driver with his head stuck out of the window and twisting a small knob so hot he needed a rag to protect his hand!

In this modern era where driver assist sensors are commonplace in vehicles, it's a stark reminder as to how much skill and touch would be required to operate these locomotives. This was starkly illustrated in 2023 when the loco collided with a stationary train during shunting operation at Aviemore station.

As mentioned earlier, for the return trip, the engine was simply moved to the rear of the set of carriages and then operated in reverse all the way back to Bishops Lydeard. The visibility for the driver must have been severely limited by the tender.



Overall, a hugely enjoyable experience albeit on a rather uncomfortably hot day.

It really is a delight to see this 100-year marvel of engineering still operating in its full glory and hopefully its national treasure status will let it continue to do so to enthral many future generations to come.

Many thanks to the WSR for hosting the event and thanks to Dewi for sharing his experiences and pictures of his day.

Report by Paul Hampton and Dewi Daniels

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