

FOWLER 0-4-0 DIESEL MECHANICAL LOCOMOTIVE No. 4210132 "MAY"

John Fowler & Co Engineers of Leathley Road, Hunslet, Leeds, West Yorkshire had been famous for well over a century. They produced traction engines, ploughing implements and related farming equipment as well as different types of railway equipment.

Until the late 1940's, Fowler Works Numbers were allocated in a single sequence. After the Second World War, their practice changed so that numbers denoted both the type and serial number of the equipment involved. Thus, this engine was the 132nd locomotive of the builder's type 421 shunter.

The loco weighs about 18 Tons and was one of a batch built by John Fowler & Co (Leeds) Ltd in 1957. It has a mechanical transmission and was one of the last to be constructed before the company changed to hydraulic transmissions. It is powered by a J & H McLaren Ltd M6 150bhp engine as Fowler's had earlier decided not to make their own. This engine was constructed in McLaren's nearby Midland Engine Works factory on Jack Lane in Hunslet.

Fowler loco 4210132 was supplied new to the British National Oil Corporation which had been formed originally as a nationalised body, under the provisions of the Petroleum & Submarine Pipe-lines Act 1975. Its main objective was to maintain adequate oil supply levels for the country.

This loco was purchased from John Fowler & Co by BNOC for use at their Bramhall Oil Terminal in Poynton, Cheshire. This terminal still remains Government owned but has been leased to ConocoPhillips UK since around 1980.

Most storage is in underground tanks but, for obvious reasons, no sparks could be caused in the terminal. Many safety features were incorporated by Fowler. It came with a water-filled silencer, fabric covered buffers, composition brake blocks and a low voltage electrical system. Locomotive air brakes were fitted from new but no train braking systems were installed as it's use was slow speed shunting within the terminal.

It was numbered "2" throughout it's long period of service in Poynton - from 1957 to early 1978. Eventually, the loco was put up for sale by BNOC and purchased by a supporter of the Swanage Railway.

It was impossible to use a crane in the depot, for fear of sparks from metal lifting chains, so 4210132 had to be towed to British Railway's nearby Newton Heath depot by a Class 47. Before movement, however, the loco's coupling rods were dismantled and strapped to the running plate. A crane was hired to lift the Fowler onto a semi-trailer of D J Hedgeman Ltd of Wool. All this work was undertaken during an archetypal Manchester downpour on Thursday 31st August 1978. A speedy journey on the 250 mile route south allowed arrival at Swanage on Friday 1st September. Unlike the inclement weather at Manchester, 4210132's unloading was accomplished in blazing sunshine just after lunch.

The loco had air brakes for itself and could not brake any vehicles it was hauling. With the

generous donation of equipment from Northey Engineering of Parkstone, the loco became capable of controlling vacuum braked trains. An additional pulley wheel was added enabling the belt driven vacuum pump to operate. A vacuum reservoir tank was installed as well as a driver's brake valve on either side of the cab and all necessary pipework. It was used extensively on works trains from the Autumn of 1978 and was the loco allocated to haul the early Swanage Railway passenger trains.

The first Swanage Railway fare-paying passenger train comprised "May" and Bulleid Brake coach No. S4365. It operated from a scaffolding 'platform' underneath Northbrook Road bridge, for a few hundred yards, to a point beside King George V Playing Fields. These first Swanage Railway trains commenced on Saturday 4th August 1979.

After this the loco had sporadic use but, as the restored heritage railway grew longer, it became somewhat out of its depth. Longer journeys with heavier trains required bigger engines to haul them. It was not too long before it required major work to keep it operational and was placed in store.

Towards the end of 2012, 'May' was moved over the pit at Swanage MPD where axles and brake gear were inspected, for the first time in years, to assess its current state and what needed to be refurbished.

Coming more up to date, in April 2014, 'May' was towed to Corfe Castle to be placed on display in readiness for that year's Diesel Gala weekend. It was near the experimental HST Power Car 41001 which the National Railway Museum had agreed a lease with the 125 Group in 2011 but it is now back on display at the NRM.

In July 2014, 'May' formed the backdrop for the presentation of long-service awards to several volunteers. This was part of the Railway's 35th anniversary of starting to operate trains which used 'May' for the initial summer season in 1979. In September 2014 a set of whistles, from a redundant London Underground 'C' stock vehicle, were purchased for use on 'May'.

In late 2014, the diesel fuel pump overhaul - which had been awaiting for some time - was started. However, the work soon stalled as one part was seized solid and Poole Diesel Ltd were unsure how to proceed. Massive thanks were due to volunteer Fraser White who took matters in hand. *"I took the camshaft home and put it in the freezer for a few hours, then plunged the stuck end into boiling water and squirted it with WD40, held it carefully in a vice and tapped the cam with a soft drift and hey presto!"* [Hopefully it was wrapped completely whilst in the freezer!]

The locomotive is currently being cosmetically restored by the Railway's Sygnets (junior volunteers) group and was towed to Swanage Goods Shed for some work to be accomplished undercover on 9th September 2015. The engine is reasonably complete and some parts have been overhauled or acquired, so an engine restart is a possibility one day.

However, one part of the drive train is currently missing, and there remains a great deal of work to do on mechanical, electrical and air systems - so there is no immediate prospect of a return to service. A replacement clutch was obtained from the Lincolnshire Wolds Railway, which has similar locos to 'May', which was the biggest single item on the 'to be obtained' list.

Some years ago, one of May's brass cab nameplates, thought to be lost forever, turned up in a wooden shed behind Swanage Loco Shed. It was then refurbished and repainted to be

held in safekeeping ready for eventual reinstatement.

In October 2020, the Sygnets' team leader Derek Tylden-Pattenson received a contact via Facebook telling him that they had the OTHER of the pair. He had rescued it some 15 or so years earlier, when he discovered it on the ground at Eldon's Siding, after metal thieves had prised it off the loco. It wasn't until June 2020 that Derek was able to meet up with Jason Warr and his family, at Swanage Station, for them to safely return the nameplate to the railway.

Since then, with a lot of Brasso and wire wool, the cab nameplate was restored to a condition suitable to be painted properly. It may be a little while before the plates are installed on the loco of course but, this time, with permanent fixings to thwart any future attempts at theft. Huge thanks to Jason for returning this little bit of May's history safe and sound.

Despite all the frustrations over many years it remains a wish to return 'May' to complete running order eventually.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ProjectMay/>

Swanage Railway Stock Book (various editions)

Information compiled 19th February 2024