

SR MAUNSELL CLASS U 2-6-0 No. 31806

31806 was built originally by Southern Railway (SR) Brighton Works as a K class 2-6-4 tank engine. It entered traffic on 26th October 1926 numbered No A806 and named "River Torridge". The naming was after a decision by SR's Publicity Department to name all passenger locos and K Class locos were named after rivers in the SR region. Incidentally, the boilers for this batch were built by the North British Locomotive Ltd at their works in Glasgow.

After running-in trials on various lines around Brighton it was assigned to SR's Eastern section. The K class or 'River Class' were designed by Richard Maunsell as a fast passenger tank counterpart to the N class 2-6-0 engines. They were designed together and a standardisation policy dictated they use the same boilers, cylinders, motion and as many other parts as possible. In fact, the weight limitation of the K class with its side tanks dictated the maximum size of the boiler on the N class which otherwise could have been larger.

After a couple of months A806 went into Brighton Works for a Non-classified Repair and re-entered service on 23rd December 1926. It received another Non-classified between 4th and 7th March 1927.

The K class 6' diameter wheels gave them extra speed but limited water capacity of side tanks restricted their use on longer routes. It also gave them a higher centre of gravity producing a tendency to roll heavily on poor quality track of those days. They gained the nickname 'Rolling Rivers' after the lyrics of 'Ol' Man River' which was used in the 1936 musical 'Showboat'.

A number derailments occurred culminating on 27th August 1927 when No A800 'River Cray' was involved in a tragic incident. Approaching Sevenoaks at nearly 60 mph it started to roll on poor track. The front coupled driving wheels rode over the left hand rail and, alerted by the sound of wheels running on rail chairs, the driver immediately closed the regulator but before the train could be slowed it burst through a set of trailing catch points causing complete derailment of the loco and all 8 coaches.

As it travelled under Shoreham Road bridge, leaning to one side, the loco and wooden bodied coaches struck the bridge abutment causing the train to split. The loco and front three coaches continued a further 100 yards finishing on its side. Coach 5 was (heavy) Pullman Car "*Carmen*" which crushed coach 4 against the bridge. "*Carmen*" was built in 1896 by the Gilbert Car Manufacturing Co. of Troy, New York for the South Eastern Railway although it had been modified in 1919. The rest of the train telescoped into the back of the Pullman Car. Thirteen people died, and the entire class of 20 K Class locos were withdrawn immediately from service.

Although the inquiry was inconclusive, the 'River Class' received a lot of bad publicity and the recommendations included reconsidering the necessity to use side tanks. Independently, designs for a tender U Class loco had been completed already and, in early 1928, it was decided that all twenty K class tank engines should be rebuilt as U class tender locos. The rear pony truck, side tanks and coal bunker were removed to be set aside for future use. The back of the frames and cab were cut back with a drag-box inserted to enable a tender to be coupled to it.

This additional work came on top of another batch of fifty Ks which had been ordered before the accident. They were also now being built as U's so the order for seventy 3,500 gallon tenders was outsourced to Sir W G Armstrong Whitworth & Co Ltd at their Scotswood Works in Newcastle. Number A806 entered Brighton Works on 26th March 1928, for conversion to a U class as well as having a General Repair at the same time. It had run for 22,027 miles since construction. On 21st June 1928, A806 re-entered service but the 'River Torridge' nameplates were not re-fixed.

Of the four U class locos surviving in preservation, 31806 is the only one from the twenty K class rebuilds. If you know where to look you can still see the evidence of its earlier life in another form. The differences include the twin spectacle windows in the cab, a lower running plate (to accommodate the side tanks) and a scallop in the rear frames under the cab where the rear bogie once was.

When the final batch of U's were built between 1932 and 1934 the class numbering was rationalized so that the 'A' prefix was dropped and replaced with a '1'. A806 left Ashford Works paint shop on 1st September 1932 now numbered 1806. It's first allocation is uncertain but was known to be at Nine Elms shed from 21st March 1933 where it remained for a number of years. By December 1934, 1806 had acquired distinctive 'half height' smoke deflectors.

1806 was noted based at Basingstoke at the start of the Second World War. The last depot on the loco's record card was pencilled-in showing Redhill and it is assumed this was the last shed when the report card was completed around 1944. On 21st April 1945, 1806 was transferred to Guildford shed where it was recorded as having minor repairs. It remained there following Nationalisation on the 1st January 1948.

The locomotive was renumbered as 31806 on leaving the paint shop on 1st April 1949 painted in BR Mixed Traffic lined Black. During the fortnight ended 12th August 1949, it moved to Stewarts Lane shed before moving, on 29th October 1949, to Faversham for around five years as noted by sightings of Stephenson Loco Society members.

31806 went to Ashford Works on 5th December 1949 for a Heavy Casual repair. Whilst there it had 525 copper and 705 steel firebox stays renewed along with a complete replacement of all the small tubes and repairs to some large (superheater) tubes. 31806 re-entered traffic on 6th January 1950. Further extensive work to its boiler occurred between 24th July and 21st August 1951 as well as between 13th April and 7th May 1953. This appears to show that hard water in the south of England was causing much work for Ashford's boiler shop.

On 4th March 1953 its tender was swapped for a new 4,000 gallon type and the loco re-allocated back to Nine Elms shed during the period ended 6th November 1954 followed by a move to Basingstoke shed from Tuesday 21st June 1955.

On Sunday 11th September 1955, 31806 was noted double heading, with Class N15X 4-6-0 No 32329 *Stephenson* also based at Basingstoke at that time, the 14 coach "Farnborough Flyer" rail tour between Basingstoke and Farnborough and return. The train was chartered by Alan Pegler to enable people from Leeds, Doncaster and other stations en-route to attend the final day of the Society of British Aircraft Constructors' Farnborough International Air Show that year. Stock used was described as '*a composite sleeping car at the front and, at the rear, one of the beaver-tail observation cars*'. '*In between were the eight "day cars" of tourist open stock, two kitchen cars, a buffet car, and one of the two long-bar lounge cars*

of the Eastern Region'. The observation car was removed (by a diesel-electric shunter) on arrival at Basingstoke - so it could be turned on the loco shed's turntable for the return journey. Beyond Farnborough it is reported '*after depositing its passengers, the train continued to Woking, and in the course of turning end for end, visited Ascot and Virginia Water'*.

During the fifties, 31806 was photographed on the Swanage Branch several times on summer specials. By the late 1950's a number of the class were suffering from worn out cylinders and cracks in their light weight frames. On Thursday 26th September 1957, having run nearly 836,000 miles from new, 31806 went to Ashford Works to receive a 'new front end' comprising BR Standard Class 4 cylinder blocks, chimney and blast pipe. BR design cylinders had an outside steam pipe, and different mounting holes, requiring the front section of the frames to be changed as well.

The Davies & Metcalfe Exhaust injector was removed from the left hand side and, instead, two live steam injectors were fitted instead. The 4,000 gallon tender was swapped again back to the same 3,500 gallon tender it was given when converted originally from a K class returning to traffic on Friday 1st November 1957.

On 2nd May 1960, 31806 went into Works again for a General Overhaul. Whilst there it was also fitted with BR Automatic Warning System equipment and was returned to traffic on Saturday 28th May 1960. 31806 had it's last Light Casual repair at Eastleigh Works between 24th October and 15th November 1962. It was re-allocated back to Guildford from Monday 1st April 1963.

After withdrawal from traffic at Guildford shed on Sunday 5th January 1964, having covered 970,103 miles. 31806 was stored at Fratton shed before being towed to Woodham Brothers scrapyards at Barry arriving in June 1964 and staying for around twelve years. Like many other locos in Barry, 31806 lost her tender, probably for use as an ingot carrier at Briton Ferry steel works.

31806 was purchased in 1975 by John Bunch and left Barry in October 1976 moving to the Mid-Hants Railway (MHR) at Alresford where its restoration started in 1979. It was restored and returned to service in April 1981 with an ex-Barry tender number 851 from Class S15 No. 30499. 31806 ran on the MHR for a decade until the boiler certificate expired after which it remained out of service for many years. It finally returned to steam again on the MHR in 2011 and had a boiler certificate valid until 2021. Over the weekend of 22nd/23rd September 2012, 31806 visited the Severn Valley Railway for their Autumn Steam Gala.

In 2014 John Bunch moved it to the Swanage Railway, along with his other locos 31625 and 31874, after reaching agreement for a 25 year lease. 31806 arrived in time to start hauling trains at Swanage during August. It had earlier visited the line in the preservation era, most recently for the Swanage Railway's Spring Steam Gala in April 2014.

In 2015 it ventured to the North Yorkshire Moors Railway followed by a visit to the Great Central Railway in January 2016. It was on it's travels a few weeks later when it attended the North Norfolk Railway's Spring Steam Gala in March.

Subsequently, the loco underwent a bottom end overhaul at Herston Works with Southern Locomotives Ltd contracted to carry out an overhaul of the tender frames. This included modifications to the pipework to bring it in line with original drawings. The locomotive was fitted with main line electronic equipment with a view to the engine being

able to work into Wareham, and elsewhere on the national network, at some stage in the future.

On Friday 13th April 2018, 31806 hauled five Mk1 coaches plus Class 33 D6515 *Lt Jenny Lewis RN* at the rear from Swanage to Yeovil Junction and return as it's main line test run. Following receipt of it's main line certificate, 31806 hauled the Yeovil to Swanage segment of the Great Britain XI eleven coach rail tour in conjunction with Black Five 45212. This was its inaugural revenue earning main line running.

In May 2019, 31806 was lifted off its wheels at Herston works allowing the axle boxes to receive some attention. Late in December 2020 it was announced that a decision had been taken to fit the boiler from Class N number 31874 to 31806 rather than to 31874. The logic for this being that the boiler certificate for 31806 expired in April 2021 and the Swanage Railway needed one of the locomotives to be in service early in 2021. The work required to complete the overhaul of 31874 meant that it could not be in service within this timescale.

By fitting the boiler from 31874 onto 31806, in January 2021, the latter was in traffic on the Swanage Railway in time for the 2021 season. On 20th June 31806 ventured onto the main line again, this time topping and tailing a ten coach Steam Dreams rail tour with 61306 *Mayflower*, from Eastleigh to Portsmouth then to Brockenhurst before returning to Eastleigh.

In May 2023, 31806 was transported to the Gloucester & Warwickshire Steam Railway for use during their 'Cotswold Festival of Steam' gala. This was interesting in that 31806 reached Cheltenham on occasions during it's main line career. Southern Railway services reached Cheltenham via the former Midland & South Western Junction Railway from Andover via Swindon, Cirencester and Andoversford.

At Cheltenham, SR trains originally used the former Midland station at Cheltenham Spa (Lansdowne) but, from November 1958, Cheltenham Spa St. James station was their destination. SR locomotives were serviced and turned at the nearby Cheltenham Malvern Road depot which closed in September 1963.

31806 is the oldest of the four remaining Class U locos in existence and is the only 'River' class rebuild loco to survive.

CLASS DETAILS			
Wheel arrangement	2 – 6 - 0	Cylinders (2)	19 ins x 28 ins
Weight (including coal & water)	102 tons	Boiler Pressure	200 psi
BR Power Classification	4P 3F	Grate Area	25 sq ft
Driving Wheel dia.	6 ft 0 in	Tractive Effort	23,866 lbs ft

Various methods of donating money towards the upkeep and restoration fund of 31806 can be found on: <http://swanagemoguls.com/>

Information compiled by Peter Sykes 29th January 2024