

SR MAUNSELL CLASS U 2-6-0 No. 31625

31625 is the youngest of the three Maunsell Moguls at the Swanage Railway. Unlike 31806 it was built as a Class U but it still owes its existence to the problems experienced by the K Class. The U class was designed after the N & K classes as a replacement for several elderly 4-4-0 classes from the former SECR. It was an extension of Maunsell's standardisation programme and essentially a tender variant of the K Class tank. Alternatively, it might be considered to be a passenger version of the N class but with 6' driving wheels.

The U class design had been completed before the fatal K Class Sevenoaks Crash in August 1927 but none had been ordered. At the time of the accident, construction had just started on a further twenty K Class tanks ordered the previous year. Ten each were being built in Brighton and Ashford Works. The K class design was implicated, perhaps unfairly, as contributing to the accident and as a result, work on the batch of twenty K's was put on hold immediately.

In 1928 the decision was taken to change the order to the U class tender engines and work restarted with 3,500 gallon tenders built by Sir W G Armstrong Whitworth & Co Ltd at their Scotswood Works in Newcastle. There were some minor differences between the 'as built' U's and the 'converted' U's. The running plate over the driving wheels was higher, allowing better access, whereas it had to be kept low on the K Class to accommodate side tanks. The cab windows were a different style and the dome top was flatter.

A625 was built at Brighton Works and entered traffic on 5th March 1929 with a boiler constructed by the North British Locomotive Co at their works in Glasgow. The final batch built later in 1933 had left hand drive but A625 retained the right hand drive in common with 31806 and 31874. A625 emerged from Ashford Works in March 1929, seven months after its stable mate, A806 (31806), had been rebuilt as a U in Brighton Works.

The 'A' prefix was a carry over from the 1923 grouping when a large number of smaller railways were combined, by Act of Parliament, to form 'The Big 4'. The South East & Chatham Railway, Ashford Works and Richard Maunsell (SECR's CME) were absorbed into the Southern Railway. The 'A' stood for Ashford and was added to all the locos originating from 'Ashford Design' hence the N's, K's and U's all initially carried it including locos built at Brighton under Southern Railway. When the second batch of U class locos (or third batch if you count the K rebuilds) were built between 1932 and 1934 the whole class was renumbered and the prefix dropped so that A625 became 1625 and around the same time gained its distinctive smoke deflectors.

Records on shed allocations differ and its first allocation is officially 'unknown' but it is believed to have been Nine Elms shed and, in the period ended 15th June 1935, it was re-allocated to Salisbury shed having left Ashford Works with a new 4,000 gallon tender. These were wider and had the coal plates turned inwards. The 3,500 gallon tenders were transferred to Q class 0-6-0 locos. In February 1944, 1625 moved to Basingstoke and then, in the period ended 19th April 1947, it reached Bournemouth shed. It did not remain for long as on Christmas Day 25th December 1947 it was sent to Exmouth Junction.

Between 12th September and 4th December 1947 it was converted to oil firing at Ashford Works necessitating a change back to the 3,500 gallon flat side type of tender, due to having to keep within the loading gauge, and this is how it spent the first year of Nationalisation.

The oil firing experiment was part of a government scheme to ease post war coal shortages which had led to a severe fuel crisis the previous winter. Between 18th and 21st February 1948 it was fitted with 'electric lighting apparatus', at Eastleigh Works. This was similar to that fitted to Bullied Pacifics.

During May 1948 it was sent for a brief visit to Fratton shed but, during September, it moved back to Nine Elms shed. Before the year was out, however, the oil firing trial was abandoned due to a lack of foreign currency and difficulty obtaining supplies. From 16th November to 10th December 1948, having covered around 28,000 miles with oil firing, it was converted back to coal firing and received its BR number of 31625. At the same time it was painted in mixed traffic lined BR Black livery with power classification 4P 3F on the cab side under the new number. It retained the electric lighting and the same 3,500 gallon tender for another few years.

On 10th May 1951 it appears to have been reallocated to Guildford shed where, apart from a 5 week loan to Eastleigh shed in August and September 1953, it remained until withdrawal. It went for General Repair at Ashford Works in May 1956 and, whilst there, it was fitted with a 9 mm Exhaust Injector.

Between 6th November 1958 and 9th January 1959 it returned to Ashford Works to be fitted with new cylinders (with outside steam pipes), improved draughting, new design 9 mm Injectors and a BR standard chimney. This modification was applied to a number of U's and N's including both its stable mates and it was usual to replace the front section of the frames at the same time but in this case the whole frames were completely replaced, probably due to cracking, which was reasonably common in the lightweight frames. At the same time it also had its exhaust injector removed and two live steam injectors fitted to the left hand side.

From 28th July to 9th September 1961, 31625 entered Works for a Heavy Intermediate overhaul where it was fitted with AWS, with the battery box sited on the right hand side running plate. A different type of spark arrestor was also replaced in the smokebox. It finished its working life at Guildford shed on Sunday 12th January 1964 being withdrawn from Capital Stock. Five months later, 31625 was hauled to Woodham Brothers scrapyard at Barry in South Wales.

It remained in Barry until 1980 becoming the 111th loco to leave the yard. By this time Woodhams had begun scrapping tender tanks and selling off the chassis for conversion to Ingot Carriers for various steel works and 31625's tender was a victim of this. It had also lost a lot of its motion.

After arrival at the Mid-Hants Railway a long storage period ensued. 31625 steamed for the first time in preservation in 1996 using 31874's boiler. It also borrowed the motion, tender and a few other bits from 31806 which was out of traffic at the time. The overhaul had, in fact, taken just 18 months which was a huge achievement with the facilities available at the time.

31625 became the first U class to run on the main line in preservation when it successfully completed a mainline test run on 20 February 1997. After a string of cancelled tours, due

to fire risk or insufficient bookings, it finally worked 'The Severn Venturer' on Saturday 13th September for Daylight Railtours hauling the Mid-Hants Green Train of MkI and MkII coaches. Details of the routing appear to have been Waterloo – Ascot – Reading – Westbury and Bristol returning via Newbury – Ealing – Kensington and Waterloo.

This was followed by 'The Pines Express' to Crewe with Class 33 D6593 inside 31625 on 22nd November 1997. 31625 hauled the train from Guildford, through Didcot to a water stop at Banbury. It came off the train so that it could visit Tyseley for turning and servicing. This left D6593 to take sole charge all the way to Crewe. At Crewe Black Five 44767 hauled the train back to Tyseley where 31625 joined to double-head the tour back to the Mid-Hants.

31625 was again unlucky with postponements and cancellations in 1998 but it hauled the "West London Explorer" for Daylight Railtours on 9th January 1999. As usual it was formed of the Mid-Hants Green set of coaches from Alton to Guildford via Aldershot which involved tender-first running. After running round the train at Guildford it then did a big loop travelling to Woking; Chertsey; Staines; Feltham; Brentford; Acton Wells Junction; Kensington Olympia; Balham; Crystal Palace; East Croydon; Redhill; Deepdene; Shalford and Guildford before returning to MHR metals.

31625 hauled the Capital Explorer for Daylight Railtours on 30th January 1999 with D6593 topping and tailing the nine coaches. 31625 took the first leg from Alton to London Bridge via Guildford; Redhill; East Croydon and Sydenham. D6593 hauled the train from London Bridge through Peckham Rye; Clapham High Street and Vauxhall to London Waterloo. 31625 then took over again along the main line through Wimbledon; Surbiton; Woking and Guildford before D6593 took the whole consist back to Alton.

London Underground Metropolitan Line operated "Steam on the Met" between Amersham and Watford on 22nd/23rd plus 29th/30th/31st May 1999. 31625 was in the pool of steam locos operating these trains. Other tours were planned for 2000 but boiler problems curtailed its main line career. Later it was repainted as "James the Red Engine" and continued working on the Mid-Hants but hauled its last train in 2001 when further boiler problems caused it to be withdrawn early and stored.

In 2014, 31625 moved to Swanage Railway and awaits its turn for overhaul. It visited the 2015 Great Dorset Steam Fair where it launched the Swanage Moguls Appeal. It continues to help raise awareness by being displayed from time to time on the Swanage Railway with the Swanage Moguls banner. The chassis is thought to be in reasonably good condition having only worked 5 years in preservation and it still carries the boiler swapped with 31874 but, as this is the 13th boiler carried during its life, there is no rush to swap them back for the sake of authenticity.

It had been hoped to remove boiler tubes during 2016 to allow a full assessment. A partly built tender is available which has been constructed using an ex 'Schools' class chassis that BR converted to a Snowplough. It had also been planned for 31625 to enter Herston Works in 2017 once 31874's overhaul had been completed. Unfortunately various problems have caused serious delays to that schedule but this has allowed further funds to be raised ready for the time work starts in earnest.

Fundraising details are available at:

<http://swanagemoguls.com/aboutthelocos/u-class-31625-bio/>

Information compiled by Peter Sykes 29th January 2024