

On Track for the Next 50

Andrew Charman celebrates a Golden Anniversary at Alan Keef Ltd, and discovers the firm is about more than people might think...



Recent years have seen a big jump in the number of companies offering specialist engineering services to the narrow gauge, newcomers including the likes of Statfold, North Bay and the Vale of Rheidol Railway. But through all this one veteran company name has not only endured but flourished – Alan Keef Ltd.

As the turnout among enthusiasts to the recent 50th anniversary open day at the company's headquarters on the English/Welsh border showed, Alan Keef Ltd has for decades been a lynchpin of the heritage railway industry, particularly on the narrow gauge. But visiting a few weeks after the open day for a chat with brother and sister management team Patrick Keef and Alice Basey, the first surprising fact I learn is that the heritage rail side is not only just a part of the business, but also by no means the most significant part.

Simplex start

First a brief history – the seed for what became a life in rail engineering was planted in the late 1960s when Alan Keef built a short 2ft gauge line to move food around his pig farm in Cote, Oxfordshire. Doing up derelict locos and selling them soon became a business and Alan Keef Ltd was formed in 1972, initially as a used rail equipment dealer.

An early contract secured was to maintain the various lines at Butlins holiday camps, which soon led to manufacturing items such as carriage bogies and other equipment – more orders duly followed from lines both inside and outside the UK.

Above: The many enthusiasts at the Open Day thought they knew Alan Keef Ltd – but the company is about much more than was on display. Photo: Lawrie Rose

Below: Alice Basey and Patrick Keef – at the helm of a very busy engineers. Photo: Andrew Charman

The first of so far close to 120 locomotives wearing Alan Keef works plates was an oddity, as the 0-4-0ST 'Trixie', featured in *NGW* 117, was built by Trevor Barber with specialist help from Alan. AK2 set the trend for the future, a diesel built for Carlisle-based peat extractor Richardsons, and the first of a standard design that soon saw Alan Keef Ltd competing in the industrial loco market against such established names as Motor Rail.

In 1986 the company moved to its present home of Lea Line, close to Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire. By now regularly winning industrial loco

contracts, Alan Keef Ltd started building locos under sub-contract for Motor Rail and when in 1987 the latter decided to get out of loco building, Alan Keef Ltd acquired Simplex Mechanical Handling Ltd and the rights to build Simplex locos. "Father views this as a key turning point in the business," Patrick comments. "It put us on the world stage as a serious player – the Simplex name went a very long way back."

The industrial roots of the company, however, now play a much smaller role in today's business. "There are virtually no Simplexes left »



Projects on the go...

Visitors to the Alan Keef Ltd Open Day on 24th September were able to view progress on just a small variety of the work carried out by the company...



'G H Wood'

The Isle of Man Steam Railway's 1905-built Beyer, Peacock 2-4-0T is under heavy overhaul, following a similar rebuild carried out on sister 'Maitland' between 2019 and 2021. The work, expected to take around 18 months, includes adding a new front end to the frames, replacing the cylinders, horn guides and axleboxes and overhauling all the motion.



Corris Railway No.10

This is the latest new-build completed by Alan Keef Ltd, other notable examples including the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway's Baldwin 2-4-2T 'Lyn'. The 0-4-2ST recreates Corris Railway nos 1 to 3, built in 1878 by the Hughes Locomotive Company – no 3 runs today on the Tallylyn Railway. Erected at Ross-on-Wye with many components made by Corris members, the loco made its debut at the open day, but with several jobs still to be done before it moves to mid-Wales.



Coferna diesel

Owned by a private collector, this French-built 600mm gauge machine is undergoing a major rebuild including substantial frame modifications and fitting of a new hydrostatic driveline. It will also have a new bonnet and cab made for it.



working commercially worldwide and our business is largely servicing the heritage market – we still do a small amount, a consignment of spares has just gone to Guyana for example, but it's not now a significant part of the business."

Alan is now retired, though keeping a fatherly eye on things with a home adjacent to the works. Patrick joined his father's company from school and became a shareholder on his 21st birthday, being appointed managing director in the early 2000s, and the company has continued to flourish with he and his sister Alice at the helm. Joining the family firm in 1999, Alice's official title is finance director and general manager but she tells me her speciality is trackwork.

While Keef's 'raison d'être', the

small industrial locomotive market, may have all but disappeared, it has not been entirely replaced by heritage railway work. Today this forms an important part of the business, but by far the most important is the leisure market – building and maintaining lines in country parks, tourist attractions and other venues across the world.

Complete package

Patrick describes today's firm as light railway engineers and loco builders, supplying customers in the heritage, leisure and pleasure, industrial and materials handling sectors; "from cutting the first sod to selling the first ticket – the only thing we don't get involved in is buildings, civil engineering is a different market."



Above: Projects such as restoration of the Welsh Highland Railway Hunslet 'Russell' are familiar to NGW readers. Photo: WHHR

Left: Built for the Cotswold Wildlife Park were the first steam-outline i/c locos – photographed in 1989 by NGW's Editor, on his honeymoon!

Facing page: Trackwork varies from closing an A-road on the Seaton Tramway to maintaining Mail Rail under the streets of London! Photos: Alan Keef Ltd

Below: Typical Alan Keef Ltd motive power, these three locomotives all built for the 15-inch gauge line at Longleat. Photo: Alan Keef Ltd



He adds that yes, as the industrial market declined the heritage market expanded and burgeoned out of all recognition from the early days. "But the one thread that has developed and grown the whole way though is leisure and pleasure, park railways, which I think in the mainstream railway scene goes unnoticed. People forget that there are lines dismissed by observers as 'only a park railway' carrying hundreds of thousands of people each year, much bigger numbers than in the heritage sector."

These lines are operated by semi-skilled staff with fairly limited maintenance facilities, if any; "Some places we go to you struggle to find a bench and a vice." This market has grown out of all proportion, Patrick says, and Alice concurs; "Those that operate park railways have realised they can do serious business and earn serious money. At Longleat (a 15-inch gauge line at the Wiltshire Safari Park that has run for almost five decades) there is always a major flap if the railway's not operating as the revenue goes down with a lot of disgruntled people in the park – they are expecting that ride."

"We built two new seven-carriage trains for the 10¼-inch gauge Audley End Miniature Railway three years ago; their Christmas trains start on November weekends and run through



December – 800 train movements and they sell out. Last year they carried 154,000 passengers – is there a heritage railway doing that?"

Skill shortage

While this market has expanded, both Patrick and Alice admit it has also become more challenging, due not to the actual railways themselves but a reduction in specialist skills among those running them. "Our customers, especially in the park market, are less and less able to commit staff capable of taking responsibility for operating railways," Alice says.

"These days we are commissioned to sort the simplest things that in the past the on-site fitter who dealt with the Land Rovers and the tractors would have done, because technically those and locos are not very different. "Now work that used to be accomplished in a day trip takes longer, and you need more servicing staff, so you are either overstuffed 60 per cent of the year or you have to disrupt staff from other projects to go and carry out jobs such as changing brake blocks, which we never used to do – it's a greater challenge matching staff numbers to workload."

Patrick adds that if anything the situation appears to have got worse since the Covid pandemic; "General engineering and fitting skills seem to



Tallylyn Railway BEVs

The Tallylyn recently acquired a pair of 1960s-built battery electric locos and sent them to Alan Keef Ltd to establish whether they could be practical subjects for rebuilding, and successfully regauging from 2ft to 2ft 3in gauge. The company has established that both aims are possible and is now awaiting the TR's next move.



Darjeeling loco and carriages

This 10¼-inch gauge version of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Sharp Stewart 0-4-0ST was built in 2014 (not by Alan Keef) for the Ferry Meadows Railway in Peterborough. It is now in private ownership and is set to run on a railway being built at its owner's home. Alan Keef Ltd has carried out various general repairs and modifications to it along with a repaint.

When the loco returns to its owner it will be accompanied by two bespoke-design bogie carriages built at Ross-on-Wye. Displayed as 'kits of parts' at the open day, by the time NGW returned a few weeks later one had been erected and was being painted.





Cotswold Wildlife Park no 4 'Bella'

Alan Keef Ltd supplied its first steam-outline locomotives to Cotswold Wildlife Park in 1985 and has to this day remained responsible for the current two working locos, four carriages and track. 'Bella' is currently in the Ross-on-Wye works for upgrading and modernising with a new engine and transmission.



Dalmunzie carriages

These two carriages were built in 1921 by the Motor Rail & Tramcar Co Ltd in Bedford, later to transfer its railway business to Alan Keef Ltd. They were to the order of the Dalmunzie Estate in Perthshire, Scotland, and intended to carry shooting party guests along a 2-mile long line from the house, today the Dalmunzie Hotel, to a shooting lodge at Glenlochsie.

Patrick Keef acquired the two vehicles, in virtually derelict condition, from the hotel in 2016, dubbing their restoration his "midlife crisis project"...

Restoration of the bodywork was carried out entirely by Patrick's father, proving an interesting project for Keef senior to get his teeth into while he was 'confined to barracks' during the Covid lockdowns. The two made their debut at the Open Day, and as can be seen from the pictures are both unique and dissimilar – the open-sided vehicle has basic seats while occupants of the closed carriage relax in leather armchairs.

Patrick intends to recreate the entire Dalmunzie 'train set'. Work has started on a third, replica carriage while the original Motor Rail loco that hauled them, 'Dalmunzie', is stored off-site awaiting restoration.



be in very short supply these days."

Alan Keef Ltd is doing its bit – a new apprentice who started over the summer is showing great potential, and another young new recruit is also flourishing; "there is potential out there – harnessing it and giving young people the all-round potential to know what to do is the challenge."

The two newcomers take the entire Alan Keef Ltd team to 17 people, working for a company with an annual turnover of just over £2 million. And contrary to what many believe, they are not all confined to the Lea Line works. "We have a unit, taken on 'temporarily' 20 years ago to produce carriages for the Welsh Highland Railway, and today used for storage," Alice says. "And we have a works in Mitcheldean, two miles from here, about half the size of this site and used for specific projects, predominantly those involving wood – our carpentry shop is there."

The customer list is very wide indeed – leisure lines built and/or supplied with stock by Alan Keef Ltd, for example, can be found all over the UK, in the USA, the Caribbean, Denmark, Belgium, Lithuania...

Permanent way

Then there is the trackwork, a major part of the business, overseen by

Alice. Many *NGW* readers likely noted that it was Alan Keef Ltd that recently built the Leighton Buzzard Railway's new deviation, while not realising that the company also carries out trackwork on such lines as the Seaton Tramway, the Perrygrove and Eaton Hall Railways, even 'Mail Rail', the 2ft gauge line deep under London streets and one of Alice's favourites.

"Trackwork has been a constant from day one," she says. "It used to be seasonal, but we are now doing work that heritage lines in the past would have done themselves – once we go in it becomes a regular contract."

"We started at Woburn Safari Park today and we will be there until Christmas, then after Christmas at Audley End, then Longleat, Perrygrove... We have a team of trackworkers we can call on – we commission them and they provide the gang needed from their numbers."

Is there anything Alan Keef Ltd doesn't do? "We don't do boilerwork," Patrick says. "There are plenty of specialist people able to do such work far better than us. And we don't do castings and foundry work."

"Otherwise we can do most of what we need to. If it's broadly between 10¼ inches and occasionally straying into standard gauge, from 12hp to 150hp and powered by



whatever you fancy, we can do it."

As mentioned at the start, in recent years the challenge from younger engineering concerns has grown, and Patrick says he's more sanguine about such things these days than he once was. "The whole time we've been doing this someone out there has been happy to do it for less, do it quicker... You have to stick to your guns and accept you'll lose some work – there's no point fighting for every bit of business if you are going to lose money at it."

One market that did not exist when Alan Keef Ltd was formed but which has mushroomed in recent years is in new-build steam. "If anyone had said we were going to be making new-build steam locos even 25 years ago, they would not have been believed," Patrick says, Alice adding; "the only sadness for us is that we quite often end up as the house of correction – we will get undercut by someone else, they then do the job not very well and we end up putting it right. That happens with monotonous regularity."

Lion's share

So with such an extensive back catalogue, what are the Keef favourites? For Alice, Longleat is pretty special; "It's a not-too-long, very attractive railway with all the right features, and it's been there a long time so it has heritage."

"It's where my trackwork started and I've enjoyed helping to upgrade their track – the 0-6-0 we supplied there is one of my favourites, basically my design and quite a little Tonka Toy. The bo-bo locos we've done since, you can open them up and they seriously go."

Patrick admits that his favourite is not narrow gauge! "The replica early locos, the 'Steam Elephant' and 'Puffing Billy' we built for Beamish museum – to do one iconic engine was remarkable, but two... They were great projects carried out with really passionate people and they work every day just like they should do."



Above left: A new market in new builds. Baldwin 'Lyn' steams for the first time on 4th July 2017.

Below left: Not narrow gauge! The 'Steam Elephant' at Beamish is a favourite loco build for Patrick.

Both photos: Andrew Charman

Above: Metre gauge supply in Guadeloupe was fun despite the challenges.

Below: Longleat is Alice's favourite; "a very attractive railway with all the right features."

Below right: Paira Daiza in Belgium – "it's such a good railway," Patrick says, adding he is proud of the Keef role in this line.

Photos: Alan Keef Ltd

Pressed, he names two narrow gauge lines, both overseas. "The 600mm gauge line in Paira Daiza Park, Belgium – we built carriages for it, co-ordinated what the railway should be and it all works. I go once a year to do an annual inspection, I drive a train and it still gives me a buzz because it's such a good railway – I feel proud of our part in it."

He also has great memories of a metre-gauge tourist railway in Guadeloupe for which a diesel loco and three carriages were built. "That job had its challenges but because it was playing trains in the Caribbean, it stands out."

Finally he highlights a line the rest of us don't see, a private garden railway, "built for a gentleman in the Cotswolds, completely off the radar. It's 10¼-inch gauge and very special – the brief was to build effectively an Edwardian garden railway, and it's perfect in every way."

So what of the future? Alan Keef Ltd will continue to serve its ever-widening customer base, and expecting that the park railway market will continue to expand.

Electric avenue

The 'next big thing', however, appears to be electrification. "Battery-electric locos and stock will be a big new market, everyone seems to want that now," Alice says. "We have parks

running fairly new locos with not many miles on them but they want to replace them with a 'green' loco. Every other vehicle on their site is green so they need a battery loco to fit with the image."

Patrick adds that the heritage sector is beginning to see the same trend. "We are getting more and more enquiries for battery locos and we are fortunately well-placed to serve them, we've built them for our original industrial market and more recently 10¼ and 15-inch locos which have been hugely successful."

"What surprises people is that it is very simple, reliable technology," he adds. "You plug it in at night, go home and next morning you unplug it and off it goes. Such locos are really easy to live with operationally before you consider their green credentials."

Alice believes this trend can only accelerate. "The younger generation are being pushed green agendas every day – they will grow up and question the relevance of steam, and their grandparents will no longer be there to provide the nostalgia aspect."

Whichever way the future of narrow gauge rail goes, it's clear that Alan Keef Ltd will be a central part of it – moving confidently into its second half-century... **NGW**

More Information

Alan Keef Ltd; www.alankeef.co.uk

