



Perennial attraction

In the first of a series marking significant anniversaries, *Andrew Charman* describes how a Norfolk nursery became one of the first 'Hunslet homes'.

This year and next, three UK narrow gauge railways celebrate significant anniversaries, a trio of lines connected in two ways – they were each created purely as pleasure routes and they have all relied on the ubiquitous quarry Hunslet to provide the mainstay of their motive power.

Next month we will describe the early years of the Llanberis Lake Railway, passing its 50th anniversary in 2021 seemingly without noticing. And in *NGW162* we will look forward to the 50th birthday of the Bala Lake Railway in 2022, at a time of great excitement for this line.

We begin with a line that is a little older. Bressingham Steam Museum celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, and while its now 1ft 11½-inch gauge Nursery Railway is a mere 55 years old, it will play a central role in a celebration Gala in September.

Alan Bloom was a horticulturist who purchased Bressingham Hall and Farm, near Diss in Norfolk, in 1946 and turned it into a world-renowned nursery. Famed for his Alpines, he sent plants across the globe and later established a network of Blooms of Bressingham garden centres.

Lifelong passion

Alan was a lifelong steam enthusiast, and in 1947 bought his first traction engine, ostensibly to work at the farm but principally because he wanted a steam engine. He was livid on his return from an ill-starred two years in Canada between 1948 and '50, to discover that one of the many failings

Above: Alan Bloom, creator of Bressingham, in his favourite place, on the footplate of 'Bronwilyd' about to start another circuit of the Nursery Line.

Below: This very early view shows 'George Sholto' on the first Nursery Line, the Penrhyn quarrymen's carriages still in virtually original condition as used in north Wales.

All uncredited photos from the Bressingham archive collection

of the manager left in charge of Bressingham had been to send the engine for scrap. Alan vowed to buy another as soon as he had put his run-down business back into shape.

This took longer than planned but in early 1961 a traction engine was again resident at Bressingham, and Alan needed no excuse to steam it when in that year he began Sunday openings of the gardens he had built. By the end of that year he owned seven road engines and a steam lorry...

Alan also had a talent for writing, and used the payments he earned from horticultural articles as his steam engine purchase fund. The growth of the collection is very well told in his book *Steam Engines at Bressingham*, first published in 1970.

In 1964 he acquired a 7¼-inch gauge railway locomotive, followed quickly by a 9½-inch gauge 'Princess' Pacific and 100 yards of track, which

was laid on part of the site leading to the gardens. This line quickly began to bring in revenue from giving rides to visitors and by the Autumn of 1965 Alan was thinking of a larger line. This could run through the nursery, out of bounds to visitors, and be of use for farm work in the winter. Especially as he had heard that the Welsh slate quarries of Penrhyn and Dinorwic were selling off swathes of redundant 2ft gauge rail equipment...

A boat almost missed

The problem was, he was really a year too late. A visit to Penrhyn in late November 1965 revealed that the best locos had been snapped up by enthusiasts and Transatlantic investors a year earlier.

He was tempted by Large Quarry-class Hunslet 'Hugh Napier' (855/1904) but it was reserved for an industrial museum in Penrhyn Castle. »





So he paid £100 for class-mate 'George Sholto' (994/1909) and also bought five of the open and very spartan quarrymen's carriages.

Finally he spent £30 on the chassis of Hudswell-Clarke 0-6-0WT 'Bronwlyd' (1643/1930). This loco had donated its boiler to Hunslet 'Pamela' but Alan, intrigued by its Walschaerts' motion, thought it could be restored with another boiler, such as that on the remains of Kerr Stuart 0-4-2ST 'Stanhope', which he agreed terms for – well he thought he did...

A route for what was to become the Nursery Railway was laid out and the track for it also came from Penrhyn. Alan agreed a price of £22 a ton with the scrap merchant lifting the system, knowing he could have had it for £10 a ton a year earlier. But when the scrap merchant's secretary phoned to say that the agreed and marked 18 tons of rails would be delivered three days later, the price quoted had jumped to £28 a ton (equivalent to around £550 today).

Somewhat annoyed, Alan agreed the new rate, fearful that if he argued the rails would not be delivered. They were duly off-loaded in an untidy heap at Bressingham and when the bill arrived a cheque was sent back – at the price of £22 a ton...

Work on the new line could not begin until June 1966, after the usual Spring plant rush. The Penrhyn rail was laid on British Railways sleepers cut in half, in a circuit of around half a mile, through the nursery on a maximum gradient of about 1 in 40.

Even at this stage Alan envisaged that the railway would grow in length and he knew one engine would not be sufficient, so he followed up a lead on Barclay 0-6-0T 'The Doll' (1641/1919). This former Oxfordshire ironstone quarry servant had been preserved on a private railway near Kenilworth in Warwickshire. But the line was short-lived and in early 1966 the owning group agreed to release The Doll to Bressingham.

However this then led to acrimony later that summer when Alan was apparently told "by a man from the Midlands," that The Doll had been sold without permission of the legal owner and that legal proceedings could ensue. "Such an approach put my back up immediately," he later wrote, and his true ownership of the engine was soon confirmed. But the incident would leave an aftertaste that would involve Bronwlyd, as described in the panel on page 32.

Your author never officially met Alan Bloom, though when looking

"I felt we had to have a second locomotive and dare not let it go despite the feeling my arm was being twisted..."

Above: The other Hunslet acquired for the line was 'Gwynedd' but it required much work before entering service in 1967. It is pictured at the Nursery Line station in the 1970s. Photo: Peter Johnson collection



through old photos of a teenage visit to Bressingham with my parents in the 1970s I realised that the driver of our train that day, his long white hair flowing in the wind, had been Mr Bloom. Reading *Steam Engines at Bressingham* one gets the impression that he could be pretty stubborn when he felt it necessary, as with the rail above. He also admits in the book that; "for the whole of my life I have suffered from excessive enthusiasm when following up what I felt was a worthwhile notion or project..."

This excess of enthusiasm over knowledge and experience (Alan repeatedly stated he was a gardener, not an engineer...) several times got the better of him, as two incidents involving the narrow gauge line quickly showed.

The first occurred when the initial trials took place on the Nursery Line, which as George Sholto was under restoration, involved The Doll. The runs started well but then one of the Penrhyn carriages left the rails on a curve, and investigation revealed that the rail spikes had worked loose.

Suspicion fell on the six-coupled wheelbase of the loco trying to 'straighten out' the curves, so the flanges of the centre wheels were cut away. But the following weekend saw another derailment, the spikes again pulled out.

What is 2ft?

The cause was in fact far more basic and due to a great extent to the Bressingham team believing '2ft gauge' was the same for all, and building their line based on the measurements of the Penrhyn loco they had. But the Penrhyn rails were actually 1ft 10¾in apart, while The Doll really was built to 2ft gauge...

Luckily, two weeks later George Sholto was ready for use and the line opened in July 1966, proving an immediate success. The Doll was relegated to a siding and would be sold in 1969, ending up at the Leighton Buzzard Railway where it still lives today as simply 'Doll'.

With extension plans in mind Alan knew he sorely needed another loco and Penrhyn Port Class Hunslet 'Gwynedd' (316/1883) was on offer. It had been sold two years earlier from the quarry, and Alan was told by the owner's agent that it could not be inspected – but if his offer was high enough it would be accepted.

"Obviously there was something queer," Alan wrote later, "but with The Doll having to be laid off, I felt we had to have a second locomotive and dare not let it go despite the feeling my arm was being twisted."

The owner reputedly wanted £100, Alan was eventually pushed by

the agent to £160, and was made to pay the fee before collection. But when Gwynedd arrived in Norfolk it was clearly in need of a great deal of work, with a hole in the boiler, a weak firebox and several missing components. The owner, who had been unaware of the sale tactics by his agent, was horrified when told and refunded £25 of the purchase price.

Expanding ideas

By the end of 1966 Alan was keen to put his plans for a longer run into operation, using a combination of rail acquired from Port Penrhyn and Claydon cement works, 20 miles from Bressingham. Starting again after the Spring rush in May 1967, a larger circle was laid outside the existing line to produce a run of 1½ miles.

Alan envisaged visitors having two lines to ride on, George Sholto working one and Gwynedd the other, but until the extensive work on the latter was completed initial outside-line services were operated by a Ruston diesel acquired for £10 from the cement works. It hauled carriages consisting of toastrack bodies on cement works bogies but Alan made his thoughts about the Ruston very clear in his book; "I found no pleasure whatsoever in driving the smelly, noisy thing..."

On the first weekend that both routes were used by far the majority of visitors opted for the longer run, despite diesel haulage, and very quickly the inner route fell out of use. Gwynedd finally entered service for the 1967 Bank Holiday Steam Gala.

The longer Nursery/Fen line was a major hit, beginning a tumultuous period for Bressingham. Within a year a large exhibition hall would be built and in it housed three standard-gauge locos, including a Beyer Garratt and Britannia class 'Oliver Cromwell', hauler of the last official steam working on British Railways.

More large standard-gauge locos followed, but the narrow gauge story was not complete. The following winter saw another extension to the Fen line – eventually it would reach the 2½-mile length it is today.

Through 1969 construction began on a second 2ft gauge railway – it ran

Metre gauge at Bressingham

Generally lost in the mists of time is the fact that for a short time the museum had a metre-gauge line. It was only 150 yards long and on it ran Peckett 0-6-0ST (1870/1934), 'Banshee', acquired in 1966 from ironstone quarries near Wellingborough.

The arrival of the standard gauge demonstration line relegated the loco to a static exhibit and by 1976 it had moved to the Emsay & Bolton Abbey Railway. Today it is at Irchester Narrow Gauge Railway Museum, close to its former workplace.



"I found no pleasure whatsoever in driving the smelly, noisy thing..."

Facing page, below: Gwynedd in later form is on the final part of the Nursery Line, passing the rows of growing plants previously out of bounds to visitors.

Above: Not all of the Bressingham locomotives were Hunslets – this Schwartzkopff spent eight years in Norfolk in the 1970s, seen here shortly after its arrival in 1971. Photo: Peter Johnson collection

Right: Hunslet 'Maid Marian' was also a three-year resident between 1968 and 1971, here in the sylvan setting of the Woodland Line.

from behind the new museum building down to a river and back, and opened in 1970. It was a different and attractive route, but was never as popular as the Fen line. Just three years later its route was incorporated into the Waverney Valley Railway, a 15-inch gauge line built initially for a pair of Krauss Pacifics acquired from Cologne in Germany – this line still operates today.

More locos

The brief expansion in 2ft gauge required still more motive power. First to arrive was a loco that connects all three of our 'Hunslet Homes'. Dinorwic Port Class 'Maid Marian' (822/1903) had been preserved by a private group, the Maid Marian Locomotive Fund, which still cares for it today. Keen to find somewhere to run their loco they reached agreement with Alan Bloom and the Maid joined the Nursery Line roster in 1968 – it stayed until 1971, returning to Wales following the return to service of Bronwlyd. But that is for next time...

Alan also acquired what he described as "a rather ugly, heavy Orenstein & Koppel," in Bremen in

1970, and again once it arrived in Norfolk it was found to have numerous defects. The 1936-built 0-4-0WT (no 12722) was seldom used and in 1973 was exchanged for a smaller O&K, 'Eigiau' (5668/1912) being another Penrhyn veteran.

In 1971 the fleet was bolstered by Schwartzkopff 0-4-0 'Bronhilde' (9124/1927) – this had been imported from Hamburg where it previously worked in a copper smelting works. It was bought unseen and yet again required a fair amount of work. Eight years on it was sold on to become the first steam loco at the Bredgar & Wormshill Railway in Kent, where it stayed until last year when it moved a few miles to the private Richmond Light Railway.

Eigiau remained at Bressingham until 1995 when it joined Bronhilde at Bredgar. Also there by then was the "ugly, heavy O&K" now named 'Helga'. Back in Norfolk George Sholto, Gwynedd and Bronwlyd, which had returned to service in 1970, continued to provide Bressingham's principal 2ft gauge motive power through the final quarter of the 20th century, a period when Alan Bloom's creation was





regarded as the finest live-steam museum in the UK.

Alan remained a 'hands-on' owner, liking nothing more than to be driving Bronwlyd on the Nursery line – he opens *Steam Engines at Bressingham* with an anecdote about a coach driver who engaged him in conversation one day, saying he'd never previously heard of the museum and musing that the owner "must be a millionaire or summat." Little did he know he was speaking to the owner, who of course never let on...

Tough times

Alan Bloom died in 2005 – shortly before his passing he was able to achieve his long-held aim to set up a charitable Trust and protect the future of the museum. But many organisations can struggle following the loss of a very prominent figurehead, and it's probably fair to say that in the immediate following years this happened to Bressingham.

The 'celebrity' standard gauge

locos left for new haunts, Oliver Cromwell returning to main-line action, as the museum carried on with not really enough volunteers to properly sustain it. While never publicly stated it was clear some of the decisions made by the Trust rankled with those regular volunteers, not least the sale of Bronwlyd to the Statfold Narrow Gauge Trust. The Staffordshire collection, another owing its existence to the enthusiasm of one man in Graham Lee, has since restored the loco to its original Surrey County Council appearance before it went to the Penrhyn quarry.

In 2014 I visited Bressingham for the first time in very many years, compiling a feature that appeared in *NGW98*. I gained the impression that the place felt a little tired, an enthusiastic but too-small mainly volunteer team working to keep things going with some of the major attractions departed.

Crucially, while the gardens remained as attractive as ever and the

The Bronwlyd affair

Former Penrhyn quarries Hudswell Clarke 0-6-0 'Bronwlyd' was very much Alan Bloom's favourite engine but also one involved in controversy.

As mentioned in the main text he bought the chassis of the loco from Penrhyn in 1965, with he thought the remains of Kerr Stuart 'Stanhope', intending to mount its boiler on the Hudswell. But Stanhope had been promised to leading enthusiast Colin Pealling, who also wanted part of it, the rear truck to put under his Penrhyn Kerr Stuart 0-6-0T 'Sgt. Murphy'.

The two men agreed to dismantle Stanhope and take the bits they needed, but confusion ensued with the entire remains being taken to Bressingham. At a time when travelling halfway across the country to pick up bits of locos was much less common than today, Colin did not appreciate being expected to collect parts he owned from the wilds of Norfolk.

Relations between the two then plummeted when the first edition of *Steam Engines at Bressingham* was published and Colin identified himself as the "man from the Midlands" who according to the text had acted in a threatening manner to Alan over 'The Doll'. As described by Phil Robinson in *The Story of Stanhope*, the two royally fell out, Colin not collecting his parts until 1984 and much bitterness remaining.

Both parties have passed away and we will likely never know the true story. But as Phil Robinson states, it appears neither side was completely right or wrong in the exchange, yet the bitter affair had a remarkably positive sequel. Due to a digger driver at Bressingham not dumping redundant Stanhope parts he was told to dump, they survived, to eventually be incorporated in the rebuilt loco that runs at Apedale today...

Above: 'Eigiau' was the second Orenstein & Koppel loco at Bressingham.

Below left: Alan Bloom at the helm of Gwynedd, the carriages now benefiting from basic roofs.

Facing page, top right: Changing times – the short-lived Woodland line made way for a 15-inch gauge route in 1973.

Centre right: The steam fleet outside the shed, George Sholto, Bronwlyd and Gwynedd behind.

Right: The museum looking vibrant in 2017 – George Sholto is piloted by visitor 'Hugh Napier', a loco Alan Bloom coveted before all his others. Photo: Andrew Charman

adjacent garden centre was doing good business (though under new ownership and no longer connected with the museum), the nurseries had ceased trading some years before. Where trains on the Fen Railway once passed among rows of plants, now there were overgrown greenhouses and smashed poly tunnels – resulting in this age of online reviews in the museum having to endure several critical comments from visitors.

Steering a revival

There was, however, no doubting the enthusiasm to improve matters, alongside a perennial appeal for more volunteers, and there has been much progress made since. While the former nursery site is not in museum ownership winters have been spent clearing as much of the dereliction as possible and encouraging reversion to nature with wild flowers, a process that itself takes several years.

The Bressingham workshops have returned Gwynedd to service on the Fen line, and restored Terrier 0-6-0T 'Martello', bringing steam back to the standard-gauge demonstration line. When I returned to Bressingham less than three years later for the launch of Gwynedd I felt the more positive atmosphere around.

Work is now underway on the restoration of 15-inch gauge Krupp

<http://www.narrow-gauge-world.co.uk>



Pacific 'Männertreu', withdrawn just three years into a boiler ticket in 2018 and alerting the museum to the inadequacies of its then water treatment regime. There are also plans for a heritage centre replacing the original and very life-expired narrow gauge loco shed.

The efforts of the volunteers were also recently boosted by Bressingham starring in a four-part fly-on-the-wall TV series *Inside the Steam Train Museum*, broadcast on Channel 5 in 2020 (and still available to watch at <https://www.my5.tv/inside-the-steam-train-museum/>).

So Bressingham will approach its anniversary Gala on 18th-19th September in optimistic mood. The event will feature plenty of typical steam gala activities with rail action on all gauges plus road and model steam. Without doubt, however, the star of the show will be Bronwlyd, Alan Bloom's favourite engine returning from Statfold to its former haunt and recalling a time when the hand on the loco's regulator was invariably that of the original Bloom of Bressingham. **NGW**

"The owner 'must be a millionaire or summat'..."

References and More Information

Steam engines at Bressingham, Alan Bloom, published in 1970, updated in 1976. Out of print but an online search usually reveals plentiful inexpensive used copies. *The Story of Stanhope*, Phil Robinson, Moseley Railway Trust, 2017, ISBN 978-0-9576789-3-4 Full information on Bressingham, including opening times and details of the September Gala, is at www.bressingham.co.uk – the site also includes links to the Channel 5 documentary series.

