

Yours for £500...

In the 1960s if you wanted your own steam locomotive it was easy to buy one. *Andrew Charman* traces the varied stories of the many locos that departed the Dinorwic Quarry.

The short but no less fascinating letter that heads this feature was sent by the Dinorwic Quarry in May 1963 to Robert Fysh. Today Robert gets his live steam fix from 16mm scale modelling in the garden, but in the early 1960s he was one of a growing number of young enthusiasts, buoyed by the success of the new preservation scene typified by the Talylyn and then-Festiniog Railways, who realised they could actually own their own narrow gauge steam locomotive.

The first place to ask was at one of the two great slate quarries of Wales, Dinorwic, and its neighbour over the mountain at Penrhyn. Both had fleets of small Hunslet 0-4-OSTs, in fact they were so prolific a user that the locos would become forever known as the Quarry Hunslets.

Waste not...

Thankfully, the quarry policies of never scrapping withdrawn equipment, in case it could find a later use, ensured that virtually all of the locos survived to be available for preservation. At Dinorwic, for example, worn-out components would see locos being withdrawn and left on the level they had worked, only to be brought back into use perhaps a couple of years later when the component needed, for example a boiler (!), became available from another loco. It's fair to say that almost all of the Dinorwic Hunslets that survive today are in fact hybrids with parts shared between them...

Robert's bid to become a steam locomotive owner floundered, not on the £500 asking price (equivalent to around £8,000 today, or when

"Almost all the Dinorwic Hunslets that survive today are hybrids..."

comparing average earnings nearer £18,000), but apparently on the reaction of his mother when she looked out of her window one morning to find the driver of a Pickford's low-loader carefully measuring the gap between the gateposts in her driveway...

Others were more successful however, and throughout the 1960s a steady stream of locos left Dinorwic for new lives elsewhere. Of the 22 Hunslets that worked at the quarry just four did not survive into preservation. This statistic becomes remarkable when you consider that within two years of Robert's enquiry the asking price for some locos had doubled to £1,000, despite several needing a lot of work from their new owners before being able to work reliably. Over the mountain at Penrhyn locos were in some cases snapped up for just £100 – Nigel Bowman, who created the Launceston Steam Railway in Cornwall, was reputedly told in 1965 that because 'Lilian' had a copper firebox, he would have to pay £60 for it...

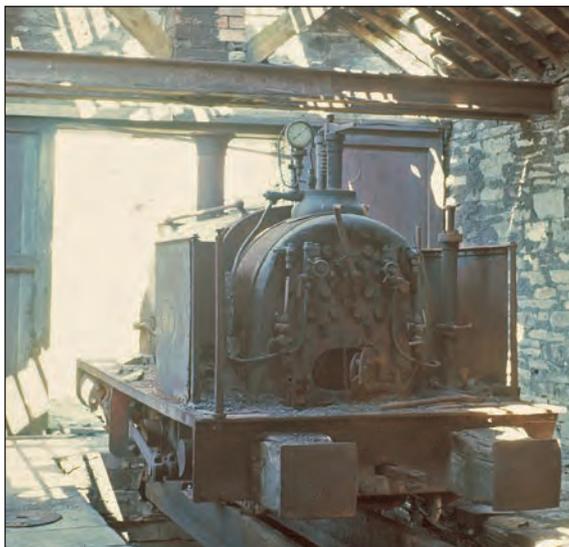
Early casualties

Three of the four Dinorwic engines that never made it were the earliest built for the quarry – delivered in 1870 were Hunslet's first narrow gauge loco 'Dinorwic' (later renamed 'Charlie'), and 'George' (later renamed 'Minstrel Park'). The smaller 'Louisa' followed in 1877. All appear to have been scrapped before 1945, though there is no hard evidence of the ultimate fate of Louisa.

Above: Final days at Dinorwic – in this shot taken on 15th June 1967 'Holy War', by then the last working steam loco, sits by one of the inclines. Photo: Michael Bishop



Left: 'George B' working in the quarry on 19th August 1959, six years before departing for a short preservation life before beginning an overhaul that has lasted to this day. Photo: Tony Travis



The fourth 'victim' was the only secondhand Hunslet loco to work at Dinorwic. 'Lady Madcap' was built as 'Sextus' in 1896 for a granite quarry in Leicestershire and arrived at Dinorwic, via a return to Hunslet, in 1910. It was withdrawn in 1952 and soon stripped of parts, the frames finally disappearing at the end of the 1960s. But as our later panel shows, the tale didn't end there...

The stories of the 18 survivors are highly varied – some have not turned a wheel since leaving the quarry, some have seen several new environments as new lines appeared and disappeared. Some of the earliest departees travelled by far the furthest, some of the last hardly went anywhere at all...

First of many

Robert's enquiry was actually quite pioneering – while the first sale of a Dinorwic loco was made in August 1962, the clearout did not really gather pace until 1965. That first to go was 'Cloister', built in 1891 and like most of her sisters a member of the 'Alice' class.

Withdrawn from duties in 1959, Cloister was bought by R.C.U. Corbett, President of the Hampshire Narrow Gauge Society and donated to the society. After a rebuild and re-gauging (the Dinorwic engines were 1ft 10¾in gauge whereas most lines they have since worked on have been 1ft 11½in) Cloister ran on the Society's line at Durley until an overhaul was required. This started in 1978 but lasted 20 years, during which the loco was moved to run on a new line, then operated by the Hampshire society, at Kew Bridge Steam Museum by the River Thames. Cloister ran there for many years, and visited several other lines including the Ffestiniog and Bala Lake. Recently, with another overhaul due, the loco has moved to Amberley museum in Sussex.

"An overhaul started in 1978 and lasted 20 years..."

Above: In 1967 'Alice' was marooned in her shed and slowly being cannibalised to keep her sisters running.

Above right: Another shot of Holy War, within months of steam working in the quarry ending. Both photos: Michael Bishop

Right: 'Maid Marian' returns to Dinorwic in 1971 to work on the then new Llanberis Lake Railway. Photo courtesy Llanberis Lake Railway



Next to go from Dinorwic, in December 1964, was 'Covertcoat' of 1898, an example of the earlier of two 'Port Dinorwic' classes. These were so named because they were built for duties at the quarry's final transshipment point, on the Menai Straits at the other end of the 4ft gauge Padarn Railway. Covertcoat worked there until 1923 when the loco was transferred to the quarry, finally being withdrawn in 1959.

The purchaser was a John Butler of Ripley in Surrey, but by 1984 the engine had been sold again, to Nigel Bowman's Launceston Steam Railway. It has worked there since in close-to-quarry condition, apart from gaining a replica cab and a tender. Covertcoat is also among the many Dinorwic engines to have visited the Ffestiniog.

Launceston also proved to be the ultimate destination of the next loco to go, Alice class 'Velinheli' of 1886. Sold to Armstrong Evans on 11th May 1965, it did not leave Dinorwic until 1969 to run on his private line in Cornwall. When this line was closed in 1986 the loco transferred to Launceston where it remains today. It is now owned by Mr Evans' son,

James Evans, better known today as the man who initiated the project to create Lynton & Barnstaple replica locomotive 'Lyd'. And yes, Velinheli has made not one but several visits to the Ffestiniog...

Transatlantic travels

Within a month of Velinheli's sale two more locos were on their way, travelling by far the furthest and into a life of mystery. 'King of the Scarlets' was built in 1889, a member of the Alice class and in its early years called 'Alice'. The much-younger 'Michael' of 1932 was one of the later Port Dinorwic engines though just to confuse matters never worked at the port, only in the quarry – the theory is that Hunslet was confused by the Dinorwic order and sent the wrong type of loco! Coincidentally it also was the last steam engine built for a North Wales slate quarry.

Both were purchased by a Canadian, Charles Matthews, and together with several Penrhyn locos, shipped across the Atlantic. They joined several others stored in a barn in Langstaffe, Ontario, and while much of the collection was later ➤





purchased by Ontario's science centre, the Dinorwic pair have remained in the ownership of the Matthews family, and away from public view in the barn, in exactly the condition in which they left the quarry. Several attempts to buy them have been met with flat refusals. Today, King of the Scarlets and Michael remain a frustrating enigma...

Back in 1965 American buyers were also homing in on the Welsh engines and UK enthusiasts were spurred into action, resulting in the saving of possibly the best-known Quarry Hunslet. The Maid Marian Locomotive Fund was formed to target a 1903 Alice-class Hunslet thought to be in the best condition of three locos on sale, and destined, it seemed for export to the USA. A £500 payment ended that plan, and after a two-year overhaul at the quarry Maid Marian passed into the ownership of the fund.

Initially 'Marian' worked on the line Alan Bloom had laid around his nursery at Bressingham in Norfolk, but by 1971 the arrival of two Penrhyn engines rendered her surplus

to requirements and she returned to Dinorwic to run on the Llanberis Lake Railway, more of which later.

Another move took place in 1975, to the then-new Bala Lake Railway, and Marian lives there today, still in the ownership and care of the Fund.

The longest overhaul

'George B', another of the 1898 Alice-class intake, was sold in October 1965 to Alan White, who used it for a time on a line run by the Dowty Railway Preservation Society at Ashchurch in Gloucestershire. In 1968 the loco was stripped down for an overhaul, and the work has been going on ever since! In the ensuing four decades the components have moved from Ashchurch, to Toddington, to the owner's home in South Wales, and finally to the Bala Lake Railway, where progress has stepped up somewhat. There is now real hope that George B will be back in service before too long.

The two largest Quarry Hunslets at Dinorwic were 'Jerry M' (initially called 'Vaenol') and 'Cackler', supplied in 1895 and 1898

Above: Nigel Bowman has done much to preserve the Quarry Hunslet line on his Launceston Steam Railway in Cornwall. 'Covertcoat' is pictured here in 1998, with 'Velinheli' peeking out of the shed. Photo: Andrew Charman

Below: Port Dinorwic class 'Dolbadarn' is one of the least-travelled of the locos, today working on the Llanberis Lake Railway. This shot was taken in the early 1990s. Photo: Andrew Charman



respectively to work the bottom mills and the tramroad that ran to the Padarn Railway loading point at Gilfach Ddu, Llanberis. Unusually these two engines retained their own identities, with none of the component swapping that went on with the quarry locos.

Cackler was the first to go, on 29th March 1966, seven years after hauling its last Dinorwic train. D C Potter bought the loco, reputedly for £1,000. He ran it on a short length of track in a builder's yard in Dereham, Norfolk, and later at a five-eighths of a mile line called the Yaxham Park Railway. Auctioned in 1971 Cackler passed through two more owners without being used, then joining the traction engine collection of George Cushing at Thursford, Norfolk.

A line of almost a mile was laid for the loco to run on and indeed the author recalls traveling behind it in the late '70s. Sadly, however, several factors, notably increasing health and safety requirements, brought an end to the train rides and for almost 20 years now Cackler has been a static exhibit at Thursford, looking, it has to be said, slightly sad...

Sister Jerry M was not left behind for long. Out of use not long after Cackler, in April 1967 the loco was sold for use at the then newly-built line at the Hollycombe Steam Collection in Liss, Hampshire. The price was only £450 but on arrival Jerry M failed a boiler inspection...

A major rebuild was thus put in place, and yet again it was one for the patient, Jerry M finally entering service at Hollycombe in 1984. Since then it has been the mainstay of the centre's 1.5-mile Quarry Railway, for many years carrying a smart blue livery but in 2007 being given a repaint into Dinorwic lined red.

Scarce pickings

By the time Jerry M left Wales steam loco operation at Dinorwic was virtually finished, with only 1902-built 'Holy War' still in regular use. For those wanting to buy the options were getting fewer – there were still locos available but generally in poor condition and in some cases partially dismantled.

At least 'Bernstein', which left the quarry in July 1967, was in working order – just not very good working order. Delivered in 1898 as the first of the early Port engines, and initially imaginatively called 'The First', it worked at Port Dinorwic until 1923, then spending the next 33 years on just one level at the quarry, the 1,500ft-high Pen Garret.

Bernstein's new owner was noted enthusiast Jim Morris and its new home Lytham Motive Power Museum

What's in a name?

■ Most of the variety of names given to the Dinorwic locomotives have a singular source – race horses. Charles Garden Duff who inherited the quarry from his brother in 1904 was a keen horse owner and Grand National winner, and from then until his death in 1914 most of the applied names came from horses, in some cases replacing those of family members, Charles reputedly not getting on with his family...

There were exceptions, mostly gaining geographical names, such as 'Velinheli' (from Felin Heli, the Welsh name for Port Dinorwic) and 'Dolbadarn' (a castle overlooked by the quarry).

Then there is 'Red Damsel', thought to be named after a horse, but also reputed to refer to a woman of lesser repute... When the loco was saved for the Llanberis Lake Railway, it was renamed 'Elidir' after the mountain that contains the quarry and a name previously carried by an Avonside loco at Dinorwic. The official reason was because the Red Damsel nameplates were missing...

The imposter

■ Following the auction of the quarry the county council turned the former workshops, where the Hunslets had been maintained, into the Welsh Slate Museum, a superb attraction well worth a visit today. The presence among the exhibits of a Quarry Hunslet was thought essential, and in 1977 'Una' built in 1905, arrived at the museum.

The irony, however, is that Una never worked at Dinorwic. Until withdrawn in 1960 the loco was employed at the Pen-yr-Orsedd quarry near Nantlle.

The Phoenix?

■ As related in the main text 'Lady Madcap' was one of few locos scrapped at Dinorwic – but not entirely... Several parts remained, including the wheelsets, and these were eventually collected together by enthusiasts Dave Rushton and Andy Blackwell, with the aim of recreating an original-style engine.

Lady Madcap's cylinders were eventually found in store at the Llanberis Lake Railway and used parts bought as they were replaced on other locos, the idea being to renovate the originals for re-use.

Eventually a start was made on the rebuild as a private project at the Porthmadog-based Welsh Highland Railway, where both men were volunteers. New frames have been cut and the project continues – it's taken many years already and will likely take many more...



"The price was only £450 but on arrival Jerry M failed a boiler inspection..."

near Blackpool. An overhaul took until 1972 and the loco gained its third name, 'Jonathan' after the son of the museum owner. It worked at Lytham until 1979 when a Bala Lake Railway team, doing some repair work, discovered several issues including a firebox needing replacing, so they reached an agreement to do the work in their workshops and then to have the loco on loan for five years.

Unfortunately Quarry Hunslet overhaul disease struck and the remedial work took up the entire five years. The engine finally made a starring appearance at the Bala gala in 1986, then that September Jim Morris sold it to the West Lancashire Light Railway at Hesketh Bank, where it has performed well since.

There was 'The First' and there was also a 'No 1', the first of the later Port Dinorwic engines built in 1922. However the name didn't last long, changed to 'Lady Joan' in the mid 1930s. However when the loco left Dinorwic in February 1968 it was again No 1, having reverted to the name 20 years earlier.

The new owner was Trevor Barber,

and No 1 embarked on a complex post-quarry history. Compared to some of its stablemates only light work was needed for a return to service, and by Easter 1968 No 1 was hauling trains on a park line at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire.

This lasted only a season, followed by two years on the Overstone Solarium Light Railway at Sywell in Northamptonshire – another pleasure line that has passed into history.

No 1 was then sold to Pleasurerail Ltd, a company then owned by Sir William McAlpine and best known for the line at Whipsnade zoo. Pleasurerail also built the line at Knebworth House in Hertfordshire, and No 1 was dispatched there. On this line's closure in 1982 the loco gained a new owner, John Crosskey, who used it on his private Surrey Light Railway for 15 years.

In 1997 No 1 reached her present home, the Bredgar & Wormshill Light Railway in Kent, where she has operated ever since – and since 1998 under the name 'Lady Joan'!

By 1968 Dinorwic Quarry was on borrowed time and the rush to »

Above: 'Holy War' in preservation guise, today working on the Bala Lake Railway, a prime spotting place for Quarry Hunslets. Photo: Tim Gregson

Right: The engine that was reborn – 'Alice' pictured after its most recent overhaul at Bala, with proud new owner Julian Birley. Photo courtesy Julian Birley

