

Leeds Association of Engineers

You might be confused by the name of Whistlestop Valley. Earlier this year the facilities offered at both Clayton West and the other terminus, Shelley, were grouped together and rebranded Whistlestop Valley. Apart from special events, parties and groups, customers now pay for the whole attraction, which does, or does not include a train ride on the Kirklees Light Railway, as the customer chooses. Introduction of new logos.

The story of the Clayton West Branch line started approximately 250 million years ago with the cyclic growth and destruction of huge forests of fern like trees. Layers of fallen trees. The major if not the only reason for the building of the line was **COAL**.

The Clayton West Branch line had been opened by the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway in 1879. There had been various schemes to build a railway in the area by the time of the L&YR's branch line act of 1866 which finally gave the act of parliament to build the railway there had been over 20 different proposals for a railway through or to Clayton West!

The lure was essentially the coal traffic from the mines at Clayton West and Skelmanthorpe. The L&YR did not begin construction of the railway until 1872 and it took 7 years to construct the three and half mile railway, far longer than anticipated, partly due to complications with building Shelley Woodhouse tunnel **and the locals of Skelmanthorpe!** "The Skelmanthorpe War". The railway was inspected by Major Manindin Her Majesty's Inspector of Railways on 30th July 1879 and opened for business on 1st September 1879.

After which is led a relatively dull life, it did exactly what it was intended to do. Move goods and passengers from the villages to Huddersfield and beyond. Traffic was good and it survived the Beaching cuts of the British Railways Modernisation Plan in 1960s.

Brief description of the line, see slides of:

1. Clayton West Junction
2. Shelley Woodhouse Tunnel
3. Skelmanthorpe Station and Sidings
4. Clayton West Station and Sidings

By the late 1970s, the coal traffic had declined significantly much of the product from Park Mill and Emley Moor collieries travelling by road.

Passenger trains continued to run with minimal loadings and were heavily subsidised before British Rail announced closure of the railway at a time when many of the

secondary lines in the area were under threat. The final train ran in January 1983 and must have carried 1000s of passengers and had 100s of drivers as a lot of visitors to the railway today seem to have travelled on it.

The track was lifted in 1986.

INTRODUCING BRIAN AND DOREEN TAYLOR, THE FOUNDERS OF THE KIRKLEES LIGHT RAILWAY

The story of the Kirklees Light Railway really starts with a shipwreck. The railway's founders Brian and Doreen Taylor were operating a charter yacht business. Whilst in the process of repositioning the yacht from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean it came to grief on the Cape Verde Archipelago.

Returning to Brian's native West Yorkshire, Doreen went to work for the local authority whilst Brian went into his shed and began to create things. The first thing he created was a Great Northern Railway Atlantic locomotive based on drawings by the famous Model Engineering Writer Curly "LBSC" Lawrence. (*London, Brighton and South Coast Railway*).

Once finished Brian wasn't quite sure what to do with the locomotive but encouraged by his family he began to explore possibilities of setting up a commercial miniature railway. Through various negotiations a railway was eventually established at Shibden Park in Halifax. The railway quickly became a well-loved institution in the park and continues to operate today.

Spurred on by the success of the railway at Shibden, Brian began to look for something bigger to get his teeth into. The search began for a suitable site and after many failed attempts to reopen several former railways, in the Kirklees area the former Clayton West branch line became the home of the Kirklees Light Railway.

After negotiations with Kirklees Council, support from local councillors and advice from other heritage railways, Brian and Kirklees Council applied to parliament for a light railway order to reopen the branch line as a narrow-gauge tourist railway. An order was granted under the Light Railways Act of 1896.

Whilst the negotiations had been taking place Brian had acquired some second-hand equipment and began building brand new locomotives and carriages to historic designs. Construction of the railway began in 1989 and the first mile was passed as fit to use by the railway inspectorate in September 1991. Trains began running in October that year over a mile of track to Cuckoo's Nest station near Scissett.

The old station site at Skelmanthorpe was reached in 1992 and there things had to wait. Brian had been fortunate in that one of the earlier volunteers had been a surveyor at Denby Grange Colliery. This had enabled Brian to buy surplus rail at scrap prices as well as acquiring all manner of other useful bits and pieces. By this point this supply of rail had all been used up.

Help came from Europe and REHCAR (Reconversion de Bassins Char bonniers) coal fields regeneration grant was successfully applied for which enable the railway to be extend close to the former junction with the Penistone line. Staff were taken on to help with the construction and brand new rail was rolled by British Steel at their plant in Workington.

Construction on this section of line was harder, it had become heavily overgrown in the 10 years since the big railway had been lifted. But it was finally completed in May 1997. Literally minutes before the grand opening train arrived, were the finishing touches applied.

Locomotives

To operate the railway Brian built a number of locomotives.

Fox was completed in 1987 and is based on a locomotive that was constructed by the Hunslet Engine Company in Leeds. The original locomotive was exported to India and Fox is approximately half size, although a little longer than it should be to accommodate a full size driver. Fox is currently having a major rebuild.as in 20 years of use it has probably covered near to 100,000 miles!

Badger is something of a mongrel! It is loosely based on a locomotive type that was developed to go out to the battlefields of world war one, but really found favour as a contractors' locomotive throughout the world. Loosely based is probably a bit generous as it has more wheels than it should have and the proportions are definitely not quite right. Badger was completed in 1991.

After the railway extended to Shelley it was found bigger locomotives were needed. Brian had always liked the locomotives that had worked of the Vivarais Railway in France and decided that he wanted something similar. Through looking through the Hunslet archive at Armley Mills museum he found a drawing for a locomotive built by Andrew Barclay & Son of Kilmarnock which was called "Kakavos" and had been exported to the Anglo Greek Magnetite company in Chile. Brian used this as a basis for Hawk which was completed in the workshops at Clayton West in 1998.

Hawk was the start of Brian's unusual engine theme. Owl which followed in 2000 took this to a new level. Brian found an engraving of a Heisler locomotive called Twin which had been built by the Avonside Engine Company in Bristol in the 1920s. The Avonside Heislars were actually developments of early and unreliable internal combustion locomotives that had been built for work in Africa. When the client grumbled about lack power and reliability issues, Avonside returned to the technology it new best, steam. Eventually similar locomotives were built under licence by Hunslet in Leeds. Owl was just a little too novel at first and required a lot of work to make it a reliable member of the fleet. It now carries Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway black livery as a nod to the history of the railway.

The railway also has two diesel locomotives which are used nearly everyday somebody is on site. These are Jay and our Tram engine which is very popular with children.

Change of Ownership of the Kirklees Light Railway in 2005

In 2003 Brian announced he would like to retire and the railway was put on the market. There were a number of interested parties, including a South African businessman, The Thompson family who own Blackpool Pleasure Beach. But ultimately it was sold to the Hurd family from South Wales, whose Family business, Stately Albion are one of the leading manufacturers of park homes.

It is not unfair to say that in the Taylor's ownership, KLR was a hobby business which was in decline and would not have survived without a large investment of capital. In 2005 the railway had attracted just 21,000 visitors a year. By comparison in 2019 the railway carried approximately 65,000.

Stately invested heavily into the railway. The Clayton West station was redecorated and brought up to a standard that visitors expected. A show centre for the Stately Albion was developed and the children's play area was made less "interesting" but importantly, safe!

A DMU carriage was obtained and located at Clayton West where it was converted into a "Party Carriage".

Shelley station was very basic and lacked serious amenities, there was very little purpose for passengers to actually ride the trains.

A new children's play area was developed, picnic areas were added and the site was cleared of overgrowth and landscaped. In 2009, a tea room was built and currently plans have been drawn up to enlarge these facilities further.

The KLR was looking for an additional locomotive. In 2015 the railway was in the position to purchase outright a new engine; actually a 60 year old one. I think that Katie could be the subject of a lecture on its own. It had been built, in 1956, for Dudley Zoo before being purchased by an eccentric racing driver and pilot who nearly exported it to the Bahamas. It is best known for its time on the Fairbourne Railway in Wales. Katie has been restored for use at a railway near Southport, but really was too big for that line. Its owner offered to sell it to the KLR and it was launched into use via live broadcast with BBC Look North with presenter Tom Ingall.

The sister locomotive to Katie, Siân is on loan from the "Siân Project Group" who regularly attend to drive and maintain the loco. Like Katie, the locomotive has a very chequered history. Built by Guest Engineering & Maintenance Co Ltd at their works in Stourbridge, West Midlands in 1963, it was delivered to the Fairbourne Railway in 1964.

Special Events

The Taylors had always operated Special Events and the railway has continued to do so.

One of the most popular is the Day Out with Thomas which now draws in visitors from as far afield as Australia, Netherlands and Oldham!

Santa Specials are key to the railways current success. Prior to 2006 these were a rather crude affair with very little consideration for the visitor. In 2016 the railway carried over 10,000 passengers in 4 weekends. The event is a sell out with tickets on sale from the 1st August each year. Good presents, good grotto and the "REAL" Father Christmas have all helped this event become the success it is today.

The railway has always run Halloween events. Unlike a lot of the Pumpkin festivals we do not pull any punches with the event which although done slightly tong in cheek and something of a cross between a Hammer Horror and a Carry-on Film. It is scary but great fun.

The railway also offers Driver Experience Courses where members of the public can pay to drive one of our engines.

One thing the current management has tried to do is build links with the community. The railway works with a number of local charities and supports local events.

- At Christmas a great deal of work is done with the Forget Me Not Hospice in Huddersfield.
- Earlier this year we provided sponsorship for the Denby Dale Lions beer festival.
- One of the more popular events is the Denby Dale Travellers "Race the Train event." Runners attempt to Beat Badger between Shelley and Clayton West with proceeds going to Cancer Research UK. In the last 10 years, the train has only won the race twice!

The railway could not survive without the support of its volunteers of which there are over 70. They undertake all manner of tasks from empty dustbins to driving the trains. Each September, as a thank you for helping the railway out, the volunteers organise and stage a gala weekend where they get to "play trains". This event is as much about the people as it is the railway and with visiting engine and vintage vehicle displays it has become an established event in the National Railway Calendar.