

Northumbrian Idyll

Text & Photographs: *Ian Johnson*

The recent difficulties in financing a full restoration to working order of Class J21 0-6-0 65033 reminded me of its last working days in 1961 at South Blyth shed. Originally designated Class C by the North Eastern Railway (NER), a total of 201 of these 0-6-0s were built to the design of T. W. (Tommy) Worsdell. Because of his interest in compounding, a total of 171 locomotives were built as 2-cylinder compounds on the Worsdell/von-Borries principle. Later under his brother Wilson Worsdell, all the compounds were rebuilt as simples. 65033 was one of the original compounds built at Gateshead in 1889 as 876 with Joy's valve gear. It was later rebuilt in 1908 as a simple with 19in piston valves and Stephenson valve gear to be classed as J21 under the LNER classification. These 0-6-0s were to be found all over the North Eastern area, and because of their light axle load were regular performers on the cross Pennine trains that had to negotiate Belah and Deepdale viaducts on the Darlington to Penrith workings, both of which had tight weight restrictions. In the fifties and sixties, with the introduction of the BR Standard 3MT 77xxx & 76xxx 2-6-0s the ageing 0-6-0s were rapidly withdrawn in favour of the modern motive power. So it was that at least two J21s found their way to South Blyth, and ultimately 65033, the last survivor found a home in this corner of Northumberland. But, a shed that was renowned for its sturdy J27s hauling coal trains all over south-east Northumberland did have one working that was ideal for a retired old lady, and that was the twice weekly pick-up goods over a remote branch line that had once been the North British Railway's (NBR) challenge to the NER and its East Coast main line. That working was over the former Wansbeck Valley line between Morpeth and Reedsmouth, and on to Bellingham on the rump of the Border Counties line.



The Northumberland fells stretch out as J21 65033 halts to open the crossing gates at Buteland Crossing, August 1961.

The Wansbeck Valley Railway had been proposed by the local landowner, Sir William Trevelyan, with the backing of the North British Railway, and the plans were deposited late in 1858. The NBR with their Waverley route formed an alliance with the proposed Border Counties Railway (BCR) who were planning to connect at Hexham on the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway,

thus giving the NBR another route to Newcastle but, when the Wansbeck Valley scheme came along connecting Reedsmouth on the BCR to Morpeth, another route directly into Newcastle via the Blyth & Tyne Railway (BTR) became available to the North British. By absorbing the Border Counties line in 1860 and the Wansbeck Valley Railway in 1863, the NBR forced its way into Northumberland. The NBR lost no time in putting pressure on the North Eastern for more favourable terms for the revenue on its east coast services. In response to these moves the NER were to absorb the BTR in 1874, to fight off the competition. Construction of the Wansbeck Valley line began in 1860 and reached Scotsgap (11½miles) in 1863 and the whole of the railway was completed in May 1865. The Wansbeck Valley line traversed a sparsely populated area following the river valley over the wild Northumbrian fells. Principal stations were at Scotsgap, a junction for the Rothbury branch, Knowesgate and Woodburn before reaching Reedsmouth in a wide horseshoe curve. There were sheds at Reedsmouth and Rothbury, and since LNER days South Blyth had always provided motive power for the Wansbeck and Rothbury lines. For the latter a G5 0-4-4T was allocated to the passenger service, and made the weekly journey from its sub shed down to South Blyth for a wash-out and examination.



J21 0-6-0 65033 stands at Scotsgap station with the twice weekly pick-up goods over the Wansbeck Valley line. On the footplate Raymond Woods stands next to Jimmy Hedley the driver, August 1961.

Although regular passenger services between Morpeth and Reedsmouth had been withdrawn from 13 September 1952, there was still the annual North Tyneside Agricultural Show at Bellingham held in September, as well as the weekly cattle market. The final passenger train for the Agricultural Show ran on 22 September 1962 as a DMU excursion. Freight continued over the line until November 1963, principally with traffic for the military ranges at Otterburn (nearest railhead was Woodburn) and the line was lifted in 1965.

On an August day in 1961 Jimmy Hedley and his fireman Raymond Woods invited me to join them on a trip that could only be described as into a rural idyll. When I arrived at the shed, Jimmy was fussing round 65033, by then the only J21 at Blyth and Raymond Woods was nursing the fire until the safely valves were sizzling gently at 160psi. Around 9.30am we trundled off

shed, running light engine up to Newsham and reversing, heading off over Bedlington viaduct, passing the occasional coal train worked by a J27, before reaching Morpeth. Here our train of four wagons and a guards van stood in the yard awaiting our arrival. After coupling up and chatting to the guard we pulled out of the yard and were held at the station to await an Edinburgh bound train hauled by a diesel to clear the cross over. After picking up the tablet from the signalman we headed over the main line and up the single line towards Scotsgap, our first call. Jimmy gently pushed over the regulator (no 'bull-horns' on these engines) and the old lady gently tackled the 1 in 100 climb, cut off was varied using the notched reversing quadrant on this right hand drive engine. The first station, Meldon (6miles), lay through pleasant woods and fields, and Jimmy coaxed a bit more out of 65033 as we tackled the 1 in 67 climb between Angerton and Scotsgap. Firing the diminutive 17sq ft narrow grate was quite a contrast to the 50sq ft wide grate of a 'Duchess' but nevertheless, it could be tricky and Raymond Woods kept a fatherly eye on my efforts. In 1914, 65033 had been fitted with a superheated boiler but she reverted to a saturated boiler in 1956. Progress was steady up to Scotsgap with the wide Northumbrian landscape opening out in front of us. Rabbits scurried into their burrows and sheep gazed at our passing, and we even raised the occasional cock pheasant.



With J21 0-6-0 65033 on the turntable at Reedsmouth, Jimmy Hedley checks that the tender wheels are clear before turning the engine for its return, August 1961.

The crew regaled me with stories of rabbiting and blackberrying on some of these trips, all of which did not surprise me. Scotsgap (11½ miles from Morpeth) was the nearest station for the large house of Sir William Trevelyan, and boasted a substantial building. The line to Rothbury made a junction here running parallel for about a mile before veering off to the right through a gap in the hills towards Longwhitton and Ewesley. The guard unloaded a few parcels from the van which formed part of the train, and after a short chat with the crew, and a wave, we continued the climb through Knowesgate (15miles) up the 1 in 71 to the summit, 18¾ miles from Morpeth. The views across the heather clad fells of Northumberland were breathtaking, and the weather was glorious. To be on the footplate of this old lady, with friends on such a leisurely trip was a joy. With steam shut off we trundled down the next three miles to Woodburn where a couple of

station staff awaited our arrival. We shunted a couple of wagons, probably with material for the military ranges, where Armstrong Whitworth used to proof test some of their armaments. After exchanging the tablets we continued down and round the horseshoe curve, towards Reedsmouth, halting briefly at Buteland Crossing to allow the fireman to get down and open the crossing gates, then stopping to let him climb back up, before we trundled into Reedsmouth. A deft piece of shunting left the van standing on the line, whilst Jimmy took the engine forward and onto the turntable to turn for our return. After this the guard let the two vans roll down onto the engine and we pulled up at the curved platform of this NBR island junction station with platforms for the Border Counties line on one side and the Wansbeck line on the other. In happier days the passenger service had consisted of a single coach hauled by a Class J21 0-6-0. The last service train had been hauled by J21 65042 on 13 September 1952. The passenger service on the Border Counties line from Riccarton Junction had been the haunt of NBR 'Scott' Class D29 4-4-0s, with such names as *Dandie Dinmont*, *Dirk Hatteraick*, and *Meg Dodds* and which I had recorded at Newcastle Central in my younger years. Severe flooding of the North Tyne in 1948 had affected a bridge near Hexham, and although temporary repairs had been effected, the line closed to passengers on 15 October 1956. Freight did continue for while until September 1958 when lifting of the line began. This stopped short to allow a rump to Bellingham to remain, worked via the Wansbeck Valley line.



With a solitary van, the pick-up goods hauled by J21 65033, stands in the overgrown goods yard at Bellingham on the former Border Counties line, before returning to Morpeth, August 1961.

Having inspected the huge signal box which had once controlled a whole series of sidings and the junction station at Reedsmouth, I joined Jimmy and Raymond for the short run up to Bellingham, past the engine shed which was now a store for a local farmer, but which had been used to house exhibits from York Railway Museum during World War II. We drew into Bellingham around lunch time and whilst a local agent dealt with the parcels, the guard joined us for a welcome cup of tea and some 'bait'. We talked of the busier times and the winters when the snow shelters near the summit would be lost in drifts, and the benefits at such times of the large Worsdell cabs for the footplate men. Eventually, Jimmy said 'Well I suppose we'd better get back....' And so we gently pulled out of the remote village in North Tynedale to retrace our

tracks. First stop was Woodburn where two loaded wagons waited to be coupled up, and then began the 1 in 100 climb up to the summit cottages (7 miles) leaving the line to lapse back into quietness and solitude. From there it was all down hill as they say, with diminutive 65033 rocking and bucking, with the occasional stop to open a level crossing gate. As we approached Morpeth, Raymond the fireman summed it all up as he said regretfully, 'Here we are back to civilisation...' The main line was clear as we rumbled on over it to draw to a halt in the yard where we left our wagons, before heading back to the shed. As the fireman raked out the fire I little realised that in just over six months, 65033 would finally be cold in the scrap line at Darlington: et in Arcadia ego! - I too lived in Arcadia!

Postscript

By a happy coincidence 65033, although having been condemned in November 1939 and again in 1962, was saved from scrapping and could be seen at Beamish Open Air Museum. Today there is scheme to restore her once again to full working order. Contact the Friends of Beamish Museum for details.
