

P Class: “Practice and Performance”!

By Tony Davies

Some years ago, I did a spot of writing for Bluebell News that contained the words “Thou shalt not use P class on express passenger work”!

This phrase arose from an occasion in February 1985 when, while waiting on the up platform at Sheffield Park, I witnessed the P class No. 323 “Bluebell” arriving on a 3-carriage load. The point being, the actual arrival was ever so slow ... obviously it had been “a rough trip”!

Railway members more local to the line are fully aware of the challenges that those 1 in 75 banks pose for the crews of the smaller engines. That “has to be said”, but there is the interest! And to gently mention the strange world of “train timing”, well “our Bluebell Line” is generously provided with quarter-mileposts, so we passengers have something to do! Even if, over the years, one does accumulate a vast collection of meaningless timing sheets, but every now and then, and given the time, one does have surprises!

As it happened, on that February day in 1985 I did return back up the line behind No. 323. And, in “the real steam days”, pre-1959 or 1961, how often could one ride behind a P class? These little 060T engines were more usually found on shunting tasks, etc. And one of them—“our” No. 178,—had a home at Bowaters Ltd., of Sittingbourne.

Moreover, and still with that same February day, “Bluebell” had quite a train, leaving Sheffield Park at 2:30, or was it 2:40 p.m.? Carriages were nos. 6575, 1309, and 1818 (buffet), and lunches were being served in No. 1309! So the crew of No. 323 were advised to take Freshfield Bank very slowly: “don’t spill the soup”! There was a stop, of a kind, at Freshfield Halt, and, from the start, the crew really “went for it” down the slope towards the Cockhaise Brook, attaining maximum line speed here. Any comment?! But, a P class needs to be humoured, and matters thereafter were very slow, even down to a stop on the final approach to Horsted Keynes.

The years go by, we move around, and sadly the Railway becomes ever harder to visit. We keep trying. But, one Saturday in May 2018—a red-letter day, even if the 270 bus drops me in Horsted Keynes proper! Never mind, thanks to a very kind lady who gave me a lift over the last mile, I am at HK station well before the first up train from Sheffield Park. From the roster, I am expecting either the H class or the S15. It is rather late! Suddenly, I am aware of a strange cacophony of sound from that direction, and there are huge clouds of steam and smoke to further confuse matters!

Then, the steam clears to reveal the familiar pagoda cab of the H class ... *no*, it is the P class No. 323! Matters look exceedingly breathless as the four-carriage train comes to a halt in Platform 3.

No way can I convey the thoughts of our gallant crew! But, from my seat in the leading carriage, and after a due pause before making a start, they were certainly “going some” up the 1 in 75 to West Hoathly. Again, mere figures scribbled quickly down can do no justice to some very vocal moments. Suffice to say, they were past Horsted House in just three minutes, which does compare well with

some earlier runs (when they were found!). And this was before a short p.w. slack, from which a most gallant and vocal assault was made on the final rise—with those short bits of 1 in 60, don't forget!—to the tunnel. And, on the early afternoon run, with a fresh crew no doubt, the time to Horsted House was a minute longer ... not much in it, but thank you!

Just to whet the appetite further, there was another well-remembered occasion. It was April 1994 when Driver Ian Wright decided to use the second valve on the C Class No. 592 on that same climb up past Horsted House. es, and some of us were lucky enough to see what *those* engines could do, when “out the line” in “the real steam days”—pre-1959 even! But, for today, in 2018, this remembrance just records, by chance, an isolated railway story ... “there's always something happening down at Bluebell”!