

Colonel Stephens and the Maxitrak connection.

By Andy Probyn

Readers may be interested to know that there is a somewhat tenuous link between the railways of Colonel Stephens and Maxitrak.

Colonel Stephens was a light railway entrepreneur starting with the Paddock Wood to Hawkhurst line in 1892 and going on to run such well known lines as the Kent and East Sussex, the Festiniog and Welsh Highland Railways, and the East Kent railway. In addition he also took under his wing such diverse lines as the Ashover light railway, the Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Railway and the Rye and Camber tramway to name just a few.

These light railways were a good idea at the end of the Victorian era but the advent of the motorcar, and competition for passengers and freight from buses and lorries soon changed the picture. From the outset these lines were never great money spinners and when competition hotted up after the first war they struggled to survive. It was only by careful management that the lines survived as long as they did. Nothing was wasted, engines were kept in running order by any means possible and when they eventually expired they were put on one side to be repaired and often lay about derelict or in parts for years. The Colonel was enthusiastic about rail cars and was an early user of what has now evolved in to the diesel multiple unit. Many lines were only kept going by the Colonel dipping his hand in to his pocket, some of the rail car sets were his personal property bought by him to keep a particular line going.

These lines have proved an inspiration to modellers as both standard gauge and narrow gauge have a similar run down make do and mend look about them. Many of the engines were old when they started with the Colonel, he used ex contractors engines, locomotives no longer needed by the main lines and a few bought new, mainly from Hawthorn Leslie. Coaching stock was an equally eclectic collection including everything from LCC horse tramcars to royal saloons dating back to the 1840's.

In Staplehurst we at Maxitrak are at the heart of Colonel Stephens country, one stop down the line at Headcorn the Kent and East Sussex had its northern terminus. Two stops up the line at Paddock Wood his first branch line started on its way to Hawkhurst and three stops up the line at Tonbridge was the head office from where all the diverse lines were run. His second in command was W H Austen who ran the Tonbridge office and took over responsibility for the lines when the Colonel died in 1931. He was assisted by his son also W (Bill) Austen, a keen model engineer.

When I joined the Tonbridge Model Engineering Society in 1976 Bill was still an active member. Many were the yarns Bill told of the various different lines, such as the Colonels command that if a railway had two working engines they were each to be used on alternative days so as to prolong their active lives for as long as possible.

Another tale concerned the tiny standard gauge loco "Gazelle" being used to race full size engines where the Shropshire and Montgomeryshire rails ran beside the main line. A visit to the Tenterden museum will show you just how small this engine is though she obviously still had a good turn of speed.

He must have been at this time the last person to have personal recollections of all the lines in the colonel's railway empire, as he was head office staff and used to make visits to different lines as required.

At the cub he usually ran his 5" gauge Lion but he had also built a model of the second Kent and East Sussex loco "Northiam" in 5" gauge. As this was a very small engine in full size most of the parts for the model were from the 3 ½" gauge Juliet

design. This model is now in the Kent and East Sussex museum in Tenterden. The original was scrapped but can still be seen in the Will Hay film Oh, Mr Porter. My first photo shows Bill driving his Lion at Tonbridge, while the second shows him on the far right giving the first Maxitrak steam loco "Ruby" a critical look over. I took both of these photos in about 1980. I also helped Bill laying the last section of track he was responsible for, a carriage siding at the club track. This was all done with the original theodolite and level used by the Colonel in his railway construction and was, as far as I know, the last time this equipment was used before also going to the K & E. S. museum. I was roped in on this as being the "least dilatory" of all the available people at the club!

One time I was asking Bill about the Ford rail cars, he told me there was still a body from one of these in existence, unfortunately he did not tell me where. They were very lightly constructed and I doubt that it would be possible to restore at this stage any way. Both he and his father were not keen on the railcars as they were unreliable. This has to be taken in context though as they were already well used by the mid thirties and were never destined to have the same life span as heavily built conventional railway equipment.

I have often wondered how the transmission was arranged on these railcars as they were run as a twin set back to back. I assume the rear engine was out of use as the forward and reverse speeds of the two would not match.

As the owner of a couple of model Ts I know that they do not like to be towed. Neutral is held through an all-metal clutch, the engine oils this when it is running but not when it is stationary. According to the Ford book you have to disconnect the transmission to tow the car or you can leave it in top gear and take the spark plugs out! I can't imagine either idea being practical for the rail car sets so assume they had some sort of transfer reversing box. Several rail cars survive and at least one is being recreated at the moment so it should not be too hard to find out. There were so many conversions available for the Ford to turn it in to anything from a tractor to an articulated truck I am sure there was something commercially available at the time. Not all the rail cars used were Fords, the first was a Wolseley Siddeley and subsequent manufacturers included Shefflex and Drewry. Before these the K & E. S. had a steam rail motor, like a small coach with a vertical boiler in one end. It is typical of the line that this stood out of use for twenty years before being broken up and its chassis used to support the water tower at Tenterden.

Unfortunately Bill died in the early 1980's and there was a sale of his workshop equipment at the club as is usual in these situations. I purchased two items, a five pint blowlamp used to make model boilers and a tray of assorted small tools.

I have never had the nerve to fire up the blowlamp which looked as though it could do a good impersonation of a Saturn rocket going in to orbit.

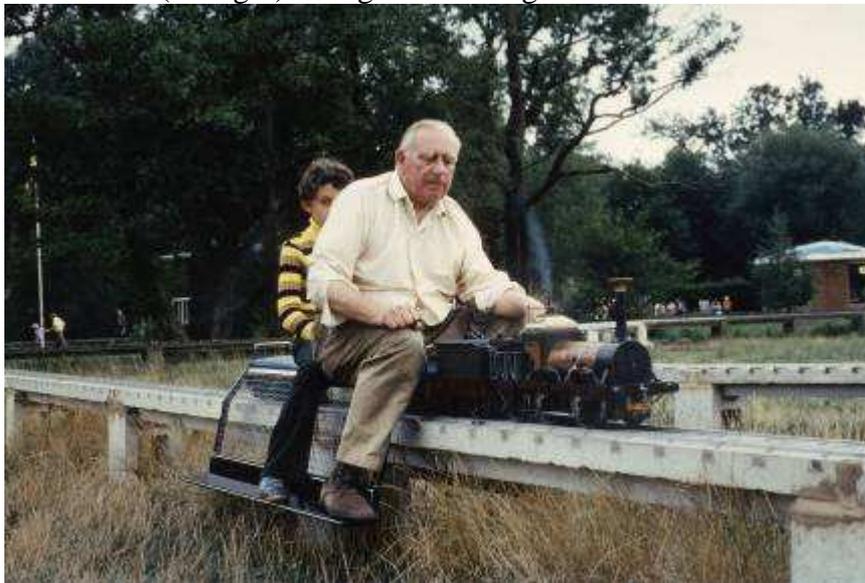
The only tool in the tray of any note was a fine pair of dividers, made from brass and steel with an adjustable centre for scaling from one end to the other. As we had no such thing in the workshop I used them for marking out sheet metal etc.

It was only when I was showing them to a friend and relating the story of their acquisition that we noticed H.F.S. engraved on them. That is Holman F. Stephens he said in amazement, and sure enough it was as there are some similar drawing instruments belonging to the colonel in the museum at Tenterden.

I must admit to continuing to use them in the manufacture of Maxitrak engines for quite a number of years though they are now in honourable retirement with my model collection. So if you have a Maxitrak engine manufactured over the last twenty five years or so there is a good chance it was marked out using the Colonels own dividers.



Bill Austen (far right) taking a discerning look at the first Maxitrak steamer Ruby



Bill driving his 5" Lion at Tonbridge



Colonel Stephens dividers.