

A Great Central Start to 2022

By Ken Chitty

Madness comes in many forms and booking three UK charters in January, February, March 2022 hoping for sunshine must surely confirm a diagnosis of madness.

Timeline Events (www.timelineevents.org) run by Neil Cave assisted by David Williams advertised three charters proposed for January, February, March 2022 so with nothing to lose bookings were duly made. Fortunately, sufficient bookings were received for the charters to run.

The three charters were as follows: -

- Wednesday 12th January 2022 – Ivatt 2-6-0 46521 and Hawkesworth 6990 Witherslack Hall.
- Tuesday 01 February 2022 – Bulleid Un-rebuilt Pacific 34072 257 Squadron.
- Tuesday 08 March 2022 – Robert Riddles Standard 2-6-4 Tank 80080.

As will be seen later in the article all four locomotives have something in common.

So, what was / is the Great Central?

A Brief History

The Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway changed its name to the Great Central in 1897 in anticipation of the opening in 1899 of the extension to London. The entry into London was achieved by agreement with the Metropolitan Railway to run jointly between Quainton Road ¹ to Canfield Place (near Finchley Road) and onwards to the terminus at Marylebone. Owing to a dispute between the two companies the GCR decided to build an “Alternative Main Line” between Aylesbury and Neasden which opened in 1906 by which time the original dispute had been resolved.

The line was designed as a fast link and was promoted in 1903 as “Sheffield without a Stop” services covering 163 miles (263km) in 3 hours, average speed 55mph.

It was the last main line railway to be opened in the UK until 2003 when High Speed 1 opened between the Channel Tunnel and Waterloo.

In addition to operating the railway in common with other railway companies the GCR had extensive dock operations at Immingham and Grimsby – once the largest fishing port in the world coupled with a shipping fleet.

The Great Central was placed in the London North Eastern Railway at the grouping in 1923 and the into the Eastern Region of British Railways at the 1948 Nationalisation transferring to London Midland Region in 1958. This effectively sealed its fate since the Great Central had been the Midland Railways competitor.

In British Railways days 2 axle wagon mineral trains operated on the section between Annesley and Woodford Halse at express train speeds. These workings were known as “The Annesley Cutters” or “Windcutters” ²

Matters changed dramatically with the Beeching Report.

Fast trains were withdrawn in 1960 – up to this point there was a named train The Master Cutler serving Sheffield. The section between Aylesbury to Rugby closed on 3rd September 1966. The end of the Great Central dream had concluded. Some communities along the route which were railway towns were badly affected, as an example look at the extensive operation at Woodford Halse in effect a small village.

A distinctive feature of Great Central intermediate stations which reduced construction costs was to locate stations where roads crossed the railway at right angles and the road could go under or over the railway. This allowed a single island platform with stairs to / from the road greatly reducing the construction required. Loughborough, Quorn & Woodhouse and Rothley perfectly illustrate this feature.

The major stations served were: -

- Manchester London Road (renamed Piccadilly in 1960) still very much in use.
- Nottingham Victoria closed on 4th September 1967 and demolished with only the clock tower incorporated into the development.
- Sheffield Victoria closed on 05 January 1970 with station buildings being demolished in 1989.
- Leicester Central closed on 5th May 1969 and whilst the approach viaducts were demolished the station building remained in commercial use and in 2020 it was restored and remains in commercial use. It is located appropriately on Great Central Street near the Novotel proudly displaying its Great Central Heritage. On one of the rear walls someone has written the prophetic words “Tired of Leicester, Tired of Life”.
- London Marylebone opened on 15th March 1899 becoming London’s smallest terminus. Local services continued to Aylesbury and Princes Risborough until in 1983 British Railways commissioned a report into conversion to a High-Speed Busway utilising dedicated road on the former track bed. Formal closure was announced for 15th March 1984, this met with much objection. The bus proposal proved unworkable due to physical clearance issues and both the bus plan and closure were quietly dropped. Following this period of threat things improved to the point where new services to Birmingham and new rolling stock appeared. Today Marylebone is a bustling operation by Chiltern Railways. Other events of note at Marylebone included (i) A visit by three Beatles on 5th April 1964 filming ‘A Hard Days Night’ (ii) From the mid to end 1980’s regular steam trips operated at weekends to Stratford upon Avon, a turntable was even installed at Marylebone (iii) Opposite the station was the headquarters of the British Railways Board at 222 Marylebone Road known to some as “The Kremlin”. In the early period of dieselisation locomotives would be brought to Marylebone for inspection by “The Great & Good”. Originally built as the Great Central Hotel in July 1899 it was purchased by the London North Eastern Railway in 1945, transferred to British Transport Commission then to British Railways Board. It is now returned to a hotel called the Landmark.

So, in a nutshell the Great Central was the last main line to reach London and the first, in fact only one to leave.

The Preservation Era

As is often the case in preservation a small group of enthusiasts felt the memory of the Great Central should survive and set about purchasing a section of line between Loughborough and Leicester. Loughborough Station was leased from British Railways in 1970 and at this time all the track was still in place. From September 1973 trains ventured out towards Quorn.

As previous fund raising attempts to purchase the line had failed 1976 saw the Great Central Railway (1976) Ltd formed to raise funds via the sale of shares to purchase the line. This effort was partially successful and allowed a single track from Loughborough to Rothley to be purchased from British Railways. British Railways then lifted the second track between Loughborough and Rothley plus the double track from Rothley to Belgrave & Birstall. All was not lost however as the local Charnwood Borough Council purchased all the land between Loughborough and Belgrave & Birstall and leased it to the Great Central on a 99-year lease.

Over the following years great progress has been made and on 1st June 2000 the Loughborough to Rothley section returned to double track – at 5.25miles (8.45km) the longest section of double track on any preserved railway. Swithland Sidings loops completed in May 2012 with the single track relaid from Rothley to Belgrave just outside Leicester in spring 1988 completing an overall distance from Loughborough of 8.25 miles (13.28km). On 15th November 1990 the section was opened when appropriately Butler Henderson³ hauled a special train on invited guests from Loughborough to Rothley where guests changed into a push – pull service onto Belgrave. Official opening occurred on 05 July 1991. Unfortunately, the site of Leicester North has been subject to vandalism this slowing progress on completing buildings.

Looking at the map it can be seen that other sections of line exist, these indicate exciting plans for the future.

The first is a short branch of 1.25miles (2km) from Swithland Sidings known as the Mountsorrel Railway Project. Details can be found at www.heritage-centre.co.uk

Next is the Nottingham Heritage Railway (www.gcrn.co.uk) which runs from the Ruddington Fields Heritage Centre on the outskirts of Nottingham to Loughborough and is single track. At the Loughborough end there is a connection to Network Rail but no connection to the Great Central – at the moment.

From the map the aim of the two railways is to be connected and the bridge over the Midland Main Line has already been replaced during Network Rail engineering works. Next to be replaced is Bridge 326 over the A60 road and this work should commence during 2022. Once completed there are embankments and other minor bridges to repair, but the dream of reinstatement Nottingham to Leicester is well on the way to fruition.

The Charters

Yes, finally the title of the article is reached and so to 12th January 2022. About three years ago preserved railways made the decision not to issue lineside passes anymore nor to run any charters. Although lineside passes show no sign of being reintroduced a number of railways have

relaxed regarding charters, the Great Central being one. Once booked the requirement of participants are simply a reasonable degree of fitness and mobility, a hi-viz vest and suitable clothing. A small set of steps is allowed but ladders are banned. A charter will typically cost anything from ~£60 to £120 per day. In general there are no refunds for non-attendance.

Charter 1 - 12th January 2022.

The weather during the early part of 2022 had not been encouraging but they say hope springs eternal and the golden rule of photography “Be There” must be adhered to.

So it was that an early start was made and leaving Kenilworth under a clear sky raised the spirits. As the journey along the M69 progressed an area of thick fog was encountered but most unusually this cleared on the approach to Loughborough revealing clear sky. The meeting place was Kinchley Lane for 07:30 and so it was that around 30 hopeful photographers had gathered. After a short safety briefing and checking of negative Covid test results the group made their way on foot to Rabbit Bridge where Ivatt 2-6-0 46521 was ready and waiting. 46521 was built in Swindon Works entering service on 19th February 1953 and being withdrawn 29th October 1966 before ending up in Woodham Brothers Scrapyard⁴ in Barry Island, South Wales by March 1967. Purchased in July 1970 and leaving Woodhams in March 1971 by rail.

Great anticipation ensued on the lineside since not only was it cold with the sun rising but there was virtually no wind. Collective breaths were held. The use of the turntable at Quorn and Woodhouse ensured the locomotive was facing north.

The first run commenced with 46521 hauling two coaches, typical of stopping trains, as the first run-by finished everyone knew that not only were they there but they were there at the perfect time. In early January the sun rise is at the perfect angle for back lit shots.

As is well known one run past is not sufficient so more quickly followed with the enthusiastic crew ensuring memory cards were rapidly filled.

Following such success one could have gone home well satisfied but in general when it comes to getting pictures the enthusiast generally applies another rule – enough is never enough or as my wife often says “nothing in Moderation”. And so it was the group proceeded to Quorn and Woodhouse station where the buffet was open for breakfast, the sustenance required for the coming excitement.

The railway suggested we travel to Swithland Sidings on the train to avoid driving so duly delivered to Swithland and decamped to the lineside more action awaited.

Another locomotive and train was positioned in the form of 4-6-0 GWR Modified Hall 6990 Witherslack Hall on the rake of 4 wheel vans. 6990 was designed by F.W.Hawkesworth but actually built by BR Swindon in April 1948, withdrawn on 17th December 1965 and delivered to Woodhams in February 1966 leaving in November 1975.

And so the fun commenced with both 6990 and 46521 performing passing shots whilst three re-enactors performed permanent way staff duties. And before you ask – yes, the sun was still shining with little or no wind. More happy bunnies!

But we were not finished yet as things then moved to Kinchley Lane where more passing shots were produced for the cameras. Whilst the “standard” shot of Kinchley Lane is very good and easily accessed without a charter if one is prepared to look beyond the obvious there are side on options with a very distinctive tree framing the picture, the choice is yours Mr Photographer,

With passing shot’s one must be patient since things never go smoothly. It was W.C.Fields who coined the phrase “Never work with animals or children” because of their unpredictable nature, well add passing trains. Clearly one seeks the “perfect” passing place, but one train will fail to move off in time, another will accelerate too quickly, one will shut off. However one must persevere, success will be delivered.

All things must pass and with the sun falling below the horizon we returned to Quorn & Woodhouse all well satisfied with the day’s proceedings. The journey back to Kenilworth was passed thinking about the days results, hopefully the photographs say more than words ever can.

Charter 2 – 1st February 2022. It is said lightning does not strike twice so it was with some excitement arrival in Loughborough was in sun. The meeting point this time was Loughborough Station for a 09:45 start with the obligatory safety briefing and check of negative covid tests. Awaiting our pleasure this time was 34072 257 Squadron facing south on a passenger rake. Pacific 34072 is a member of the Battle of Britain class built at Brighton Works in April 1948 to the design of Oliver Bulleid (Oliver Vaughan Snell Bulleid) Chief Mechanical Engineer for the Southern Railway (SR). Bulleid had been Gresley’s right hand man on the LNER prior to appointment at the SR. The design was unlike anything seen in the UK with its chain driven Walschaert valve gear enclosed in an oil bath, electric lighting, air operated Firehole doors, fully enclosed cabs and distinctive Bulleid Firth Brown wheels (Sometimes incorrectly referred to as Box Pok wheels) coupled with air smoothed casing. Some of these features were common in Europe and America but remember in the UK open cab locomotives remained in service into the end of steam traction. The visual appearance led to the class having the nick name “Spam Cans” and even today enthusiasts are divided on the appearance, personally they are superb but being an enthusiast of all things Southern I might be slightly biased.

During service as built members of the class suffered fires in the boiler lagging due to oil from the oil bath coating the lagging. A habit of slipping on starting was common but once running they flew.

However, they suffered poor fuel consumption and increased maintenance cost. The Battle of Britain and West Country were identical apart from names and originally shared physical appearance and features with the larger Merchant Navy class. Because of the issues noted it was decided the whole Merchant Navy class would be rebuilt as conventional locomotives retaining three cylinders and BFB wheels but removing the air smoothed casing and replacing the chain driven valve gear with conventional Walschaerts.

As this rebuilding proved successful it was decided 60 out of 90 Battle of Britain / West Country locomotives would be likewise rebuilt the cost being justified on the basis the locomotives would remain in service until 1987, in reality they were all withdrawn by 1967 ending their days along with Merchant Navy (rebuilt Merchant Navy 35003 Royal Mail was timed over 1 mile at 105.88mph) on the Waterloo to Bournemouth line that being the last steam operated main line in the UK.

34072 ended its service on 25th October 1964 having run 698,843 miles, moving to Woodham's on 18th February 1965. The stay at Woodhams was destined to be extended, 19 years in fact, 34072 finally leaving Woodhams in November 1984.

So having gathered the fun began again with the group walking to the Beeches Road bridge where there are some fine signals to include in the picture. So, there we were in a fine location, in full sun. The loco reversed ready for the first run by, anticipation is heightened. What can possibly go wrong? Well, the loco set off and passed the photo line with its drain cocks fully open producing a moving steam cloud. OK try again, loco reverses, comes forward – hells bell it's a moving steam cloud again. So, we had now snatched defeat from the jaws of victory – twice. One could feel the group frustration mounting. Attempt three and success! A couple of more runs were all likewise successful. With the first shots "In the bag" we walked back to Loughborough to board the train and set off for Rabbit Bridge. There was no need for any refreshment stops since the train had a griddle car providing food and drink.

Rabbit Bridge is on a nice sweeping curve and despite a couple of run by's being lost at the critical moment to passing cloud - everyone has been there, you stand in a location for an hour in full sun, no cloud to be seen. The train approaches and out of nowhere a cloud appears, scene goes into shadow at the critical moment, the shot lost forever but as the last vehicle of the train passes the sun comes out unhindered by cloud for the rest of the day, overall a successful session was enjoyed.

Train reboarded we proceeded to Swithland Sidings where further runby's took place all in sun. A final set of runs was performed at the ever popular Kinchley Lane the first run being in sun followed by a cat and mouse game with gathering cloud. Nobody could complain at the results from the day so train reboarded it was back to Loughborough and the drive to Kenilworth.

Having completed two charters in sun what was the chance of achieving a hat-trick?

Charter 3 – 8th March 2022. Having completed the charters on 12th January and 1st February in full sun and in the interim other charters having run in poor weather the level of weather expectation on leaving Kenilworth was low. The meeting time at Kinchley Lane was 06:15 and was greeted with the sun rising. No Covid test result was required this time as the Government had issued new rules so after the usual safety briefing the group walked to Rabbit Bridge where 80080 facing north awaited our presence on two suburban coaches.

80080 is a Standard 2-6-4 tank built at Brighton Works in March 1954 and withdrawn in July 1965 arriving at Woodham Brothers by January 1966 leaving on 4th November 1980. She represents a type of locomotive wheel arrangement common in the UK. The first thing people realised was that this was not going to be a repeat of 12th January 2022, not because the weather was not cold or clear but because the sun now rises much further to the east. Despite this and with an enthusiastic

crew many pictures were added to memory cards. Having had a productive session at Rabbit Bridge the group walked back to Kinchley Lane and drove to Quorn & Woodhouse. A short walk towards Loughborough along the track allowed a fine view of the double track coupled with the option to take side on pictures, needless to say more run-bys ensued.

A return to Quorn & Woodhouse allowed refreshments to be taken in the railway cafe, appropriately named "The Butler Henderson Cafe". A good selection of hot food is available.

Whilst the group was being refreshed 80080 was also being refreshed followed by going for a spin on the turntable. At first the table refused to turn but after some additional muscle was applied rotation was achieved and 80080 was now facing south. Not only facing south but with a new consist in the form of parcels stock.

Train duly turned and reformed a series of departure shots were taken before moving on. As we could not ride the train we drove to Swithland Sidings – the road is wide enough to able to park whilst allowing other road user to safely pass. As before a number of runs were performed before walking back to the road to take pictures across Swithland Reservoir. For me this does not work since the viaduct across the reservoir has high parapets so one merely sees a boiler running along the parapet with no wheels.

Time indicated we should drive to Kinchley Lane before the sun fell below the horizon so we duly complied rounding off another successful day on the Great Central.

At the start of this article it was mentioned all four locomotives had something in common so what is it? Well, they all spent time in Woodham Brothers Ltd scrap yard and escaped the cutters torch.

Visitor Information

The Great Central is accessible via public transport, Loughborough Station is ~15minutes walk to the Great Central station. This station has limited "On Street" parking, the stations at Quorn & Woodhouse and Rothley have on site car parking whilst on special event days nearby fields are utilised as overflow parking.

A fairly large diesel fleet also sees use proving popular with many enthusiasts.

All stations have cafes but Quorn & Woodhouse has the added attractions of (i) A turntable and (ii) Travelling Post Office (TPO) demonstration.

Access to the lineside is restricted since lineside passes are no longer issued but use of and Ordnance Survey maps (available online) or www.streetmap.co.uk (provides free access to OS 1:50000 and 1:25000 mapping) will reveal various footpaths accessing the line. The classic shot at Kinchley Lane is easily accessed by car, ignore the signs towards the end of the road indicating unsuitable for motor vehicles.

For those with interests outside the steam railway Loughborough is home to Brush the builders of many BR diesel locomotives, High Voltage Switchgear and Transformers whilst in the town centre is a Carillon Tower (www.carillontower.org.uk).

Notes

¹ Quainton Road is now the location for the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre (www.bucksrailcentre.org) which has sites either side of the operational Network Rail line. Both sites have short operational demonstration lines operating steam locomotives on Sundays and some Wednesdays.

² The magazine Steam Railway ran an appeal to purchase 39 two axle mineral wagon. The appeal was very successful, the wagons now reside on the Great Central and are known as the "Windcutter" rake. Following dispersal of some wagons 30 now remain of the GCR although not all operational at the same time.

³ Two examples of Great Central Railway motive power remain in the UK with others in Australia. The first is a classic 4-4-0 named Butler Henderson, this has seen operation in the preservation era on the Great Central. The other example is the 2-8-0 class 8K (LNER 04) BR number 63601 based on the Great Central Railway. Another 521 were built for the ROD with some subsequently being purchased for service in Australia on the J A Brown Richmond Vale Railway. Two of the J A Brown locomotive No 20 & 24 are preserved at the Dorrigo Steam & Railway Museum, this does not appear to be open for public access.

⁴ The preservation movement had much to thank Dai Woodham of Woodham Brothers Ltd. The scrapyards had contracts to scrap rail, wagons and locomotives, at the time better commercial returns were made from rail and wagons. It was fortunate that the supply of both wagons and rail was sufficient that locomotives were not scrapped. By August 1968 Woodhams had purchased a total of 297 locomotives of which 217 remained. Of this 213 were "rescued" by numerous preservation groups and many have been restored to service. Had the supply of wagons and rail dried up the story of preservation in the UK would be very different.

Timeline (www.timelineevents.org) run by Neil Cave organise a variety of photographic events in addition to those railway-based ones. The options are far reaching from boats to aircraft to re-enactment to models. All can be booked directly via the website. There is no need to be on any mailing lists although one can sign up for the regular emailed notification of upcoming events. Also advertised are charters organised by David Williams. Mention is also made of events organised by Don Bishop on the West Somerset Railway; details can be found at www.donbishop.co.uk