

The Awdry Connection with the Talyllyn Railway.

The Rev. Wilbert Awdry inherited an interest in railways from his father, the Rev. Vere Awdry, and together with his brother George, became a keen railway modeller. His first book in what was to become "The Railway Series" had been published in 1945, and by 1951 he had written four more. In February that year, someone knowing his interests, sent him an article which had appeared in the Birmingham Mail entitled

"EIGHT MILES OF RAILWAY TO PLAY WITH –
AND REAL TRAINS - FOR £1 A YEAR".

That railway was the Talyllyn Railway, and Wilbert's interest was aroused sufficiently to apply for membership of the newly formed Preservation Society: his receipt was numbered 79. Coincidentally, Wilbert had a distant cousin Frank who lived in Tywyn. They had never met, but Wilbert and George had visited Frank's sisters in Clevedon, Somerset, and had heard stories about the '*somewhat wayward little railway*' in Tywyn.

In August 1952 Wilbert, together with his wife Margaret, son Christopher and daughters Veronica and Hilary, visited the Talyllyn Railway for the first time. On arrival, Wilbert and Christopher went straight to Wharf Station to introduce themselves to Tom Rolt, the General Manager. Wilbert volunteered to do duty as a Guard during the second week of his holiday. The most memorable incident of the week was when he left the Refreshment Lady behind in the Booking Office at Abergynolwyn – the first of many events that Wilbert was to enshrine in future books.

It was almost inevitable that, having become a regular visitor and volunteer on the Talyllyn Railway, Wilbert should find a way to write about it in his books. For his tenth book in the Railway Series, *Four Little Engines*, he "discovered" a narrow-gauge railway on the Island of Sodor called the Skarloey Railway. By some coincidence, the engines on this railway all had "twins" on the Talyllyn: Skarloey & Talyllyn, Rheneas & Dolgoch, Sir Handel & Sir Haydn, Peter Sam & Edward Thomas. This book included the story about the Refreshment Lady, but the blame was given to Peter Sam rather than the Guard! No.5 Rusty and No.6 Duncan were also introduced in later books as alter egos for T.R. locomotives Midlander and Douglas.

Wilbert wrote four further books about the Skarloey Railway: *The Little Old Engine* (1959), *Gallant Old Engine* (1962), *Very Old Engines* (1965), and *Duke the Lost Engine* (1970). (Duke is not based on a Talyllyn engine at all, but on Prince from the Ffestiniog Railway).

Some time after Wilbert had given up writing railway stories, his son Christopher took over and wrote two further books about the Skarloey Railway: Great Little Engines (1985) and New Little Engine (1996). The latter introduced the Talyllyn Railway's newest steam engine, Tom Rolt, in the guise of Ivo Hugh, the name Wilbert had given to the Chief Engineer of the Skarloey Railway.

By this time, Christopher, his wife Diana, and son Richard, had all become Talyllyn volunteers themselves, carrying on the family tradition. In 1982 the Talyllyn "borrowed" Sir Handel from the Skarloey Railway as an attraction for children; this was so popular that there has been a Skarloey engine in service regularly ever since: Peter Sam and Duncan have both visited, and in 2009-2011 it was Sir Handel's turn again.



The Rev Awdry sat on the front of "Peter Sam" on 14th May 1988, marking the start of its "loan" from the Skarloey Railway to the Talyllyn Railway.

Photo D J Mitchell.

Wilbert Awdry died in 1997; his ashes are buried in Stroud near his last home, appropriately named Sodor. A rowan tree planted opposite Brynglas blockpost serves as a memorial to his contribution to the Talyllyn Railway. When the Narrow Gauge Railway Museum was built as part of the new Wharf Station, part of his study was reconstructed there as a tribute to the man whose books had given so much pleasure to railway enthusiasts both young and old. Many of Wilbert's possessions, such as his desk, typewriter and hundreds of books have been included in the display to make it as authentic as possible. His model of the Ffarquhar Railway, which was originally in one of the bedrooms in Sodor, can also be seen in the study.



Acknowledgements:

This article could not have been written without reference to two books: "The Thomas the Tank Engine Man" by Brian Sibley, and "The Island of Sodor" by Wilbert & George Awdry. The latter is out of print, but "The Thomas the Tank Engine Man" was updated by the author and re-published in 2015. Copies are for sale in the Gift Shop. The above photos have been provided by David Mitchell.

Diana Awdry

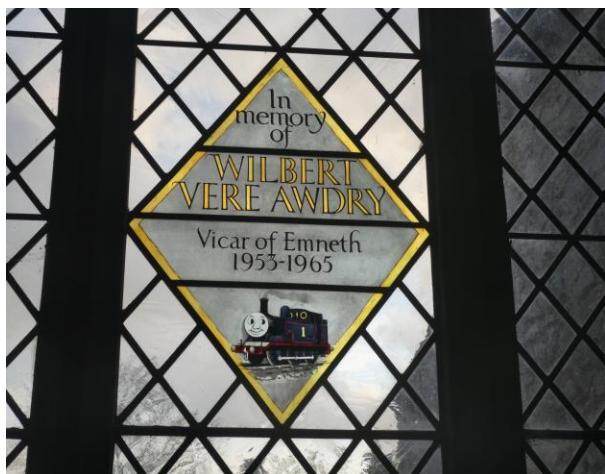
As with the story of Peter Sam and the refreshment lady referred to above, there was often a real event behind many of the stories, as the following report illustrates:-

"I was astonished two days ago by particulars of a catch. Guard Wm. Warman approached me with something in his hand and coat-sleeve. It was a perch which had passed down the pipe from the water crane at Cambridge into the tender of engine 1890, working the 6.27am train Wisbech to Liverpool Street. Driver Mony discovered it. Evidently the fish – which was 11 inches long and weighed 12oz – had grown up in the tank. I am told that similar cases have occurred before where engine water has been obtained from a stream."

Great Eastern Journal issue 167 July 2016 page 46 quoting from Great Eastern Railway Magazine, September 1916 page 233

I wonder if this was where the Vicar of Emneth got the idea from for 'Thomas goes fishing', that appeared in Tank Engine Thomas again (1949)

Emneth is close to Wisbech; it was the Wisbech and Upwell Tramway which provided the material for Toby the Tram Engine, although passenger services were withdrawn in 1928, freight traffic lasted until 1966.



The memorial window in Emneth Church and a "tram engine" on the Wisbech & Upwell Tramway; Y6 No. 7136 leaves Outwell Village depot with a train for Upwell in 1931.



In Narrow Gauge Album, former TRPS Secretary P.B. Whitehouse writes:-

"The [Cork &] Muskerry Tram made history in 1927, for on September 6th of that year, the 7.45 a.m. passenger train from Donoughmore was proceeding peacefully along the side of the Carrigrohane Road on its own right of way, when it either ran into or was run into by a steam roller. The driver claimed that he blew his whistle when within forty yards of the steam roller and again when nearer to it, but on the other hand, the roller driver claimed that he signalled to the train to stop. The matter was never satisfactorily explained, but the story that the two were having a race took a long time to live down."

There can be little doubt that the Rev Awdry knew of this story and made use of it in a story about "Sir Handel" that appeared in *Gallant Old Engines* (1962).



The 3 Irish photos appear courtesy of the Irish Examiner Archive.