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PHEW! Buying a pair of ploughing engines

By Peter & Sandra Ware

On Saturday, October 11, 1986, my wife Sandra and I went to Len Crane's rally at the Black Country Museum. We were looking after Jim Coombes road loco "ATLAS" for the heavy haulage display. At about mid-day I drove Atlas out of the museum grounds to a scrap yard just across the road, where we coupled to Len's front bogie trailer on which were three, twelve ton weights, making 50 tons in all. It was decided not to go straight back to the museum but to do a tour of Dudley first so off we set with Jim Sarney driving, myself steering and a Scamell tractor as trace horse.

The trip was successful and without incident, but on our return we were told that the roads in the area are unsafe for heavy loads due to mining subsidence....!

Now, I had better come to the point of this tale and its connection with steam ploughing. Later that afternoon I met John Mayes and in passing, mentioned that I was looking for an engine of my own. On the Sunday Steve Arrowsmith told me John had decided to sell his two ploughing engines 14381 and 14382 Excalibur and Excelsior, plus some tackle.

Sunday the 19 October saw Sandra, myself, Alec Ibbott and Michael Maskell heading up the M1 to Staffordshire. John had sent us a map and instructions, but we still got lost! I blame the wife of course. Despite this we arrived on the dot, met John, and Steve who showed us over the engines and tackle. John had last used them about 5 years ago (mole draining on his farm) since when they had lain idle – this and the hard life they had led previously, had left them needing a considerable amount of restoration....

The tackle consisted of a 4 furrow plough with deep digger bodies set rather square on (we think for Fenland use); a mole drainer that had seen a lot of use and a harrow. John said I could also have a roller water cart that stood in the same field.

We left for home about 4.15, but just after leaving John's farm we saw signs "TO THE STEAM ENGINES". So naturally we had to investigate. It turned out to be Mill Meece Pumping Station, which used to supply water to the potteries. The two engines were not in steam, so we just had a look round and a natter and resolved to return next year and see the beautifully kept engines working.

Having decided to buy the ploughing engines the next thing was to get them home... So Sunday the 2 November, saw us once again in Staffordshire, this time with two low-loaders, Len Crane's and Ray Crawley's. This caused some problems in the narrow lane where they had to be loaded but fortunately being Sunday it was fairly quiet.

The engines were to be extracted from the field by two neighbours of John's, one with a Matador, the other with a County 4WD tractor. Len's low-loader has a hydraulic winch, ideal for this kind of work. It took the combined efforts of the Matador and the County to persuade the engine on to the other low-loader, but being longer we were able to get the water cart and the wings of the harrow on as well. This low-loader collected the rest of the tackle the following weekend. The engines were unloaded in Maskells Yard and pushed into a field where restoration was to start –by this time it was dark!

Before any really serious start was made to strip the first engine, I gave Michael a hand to strip Fowler 14012, a 6 or 7 NHP (sprung) agricultural of his own that he is restoring. With help from my daughter's boyfriend, Martin, a neighbour, Peter Parmer, (who is very keen), Alec Ibbott and, of course, Michael's expertise with the heavy stuff, (by the end of the Christmas and New Year holiday) all that remained of 14381 to be removed (before it is turned over for a start to be made cutting out the box) were the front wheels and

axle and a few boiler tubes. Special mention must be made of the help, support and encouragement given by my wife who, complete with overalls and new "Toetector" boots, has endured rain, mud, dirt and grease in various combinations and then come home and cooked the dinner!

Well, we have made a start. There is a long way to go, but from time to time I shall keep the newsletter informed of the progress and no doubt the setbacks....

6.2.87

Note: These engines were passed c1994 to Mick Smith of Hurst, Berks and the restoration continued with 14381 *Excelsior* completed. The pair, including unrestored 14382 *Excalibur*, were acquired by Museo Civiltà di Bologna, Bentivoglio, Italy in about 1996 and finally worked together in 1999.

Many Fowler sets were exported to Italy including the 30 hp Superbas, Fowler's finest, but the wartime scrap drives took their toll.

Reference Steam Plough Times 130 September 2000.

John Billard
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