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A Hands On Experience by George Hawkswell

On Saturday 25th August 2012, my dad and I set off from North Yorkshire to Michael Davies' farm near Avon Dassett for the 13th 'Hands On'. As we drove down, the view out of the car window was torrential rain. I had never done any steam ploughing before and my experience of engines consisted of driving a traction engine or lorry around a parade ring, and attending the NTET's driver training courses. Nothing so far had allowed me to drive an engine with a real work load. Therefore, if nothing else, the weekend would give me a small taste of what a ploughing engine driver's life was like.

Upon arriving at the farm, we found two sets of engines and tackle, as well as some sunshine for a nice change. The sets comprised of Fowler BB1s 15182/3, Achilles and Ajax, which were new in 1918, and Fowlers 15670/3 new to the Sena Sugar Estates in 1922. This set of engines were part of the group of six engines brought back in the 70s, and which is documented in the film, Mozambique Adventure. The engines were already in steam and having had a chance to meet the other participants on the course (there were 11 of us in total), we were given an introduction and safety talk by Simon Fisher and Dick Eastwood. Following this, Michael Davies gave us a talk on the implements; first explaining about the two ploughs and the press, then the cultivator, and finally the mole drainer. All of this tackle was to be taken to the fields behind the engines that afternoon. However, due to the soggy conditions, and late harvest we had to take everything round by road instead of across the fields. (It was decided later that because of the very wet ground we should not use the cultivator or the mole drainer).

We were split into two groups and having been assigned our set of tackle (mine was the **BB1's** for Saturday and Sunday, and the **Z7's** for **Monday**), we oiled around the engine that I was assigned to, (Ajax). We hooked up to the cultivator, and set off. However, within five minutes we had stopped and Peter, our instructor, went on ahead to discover that the Z7 in front had had to stop due to water from the boiler leaking back through the pump clack, getting into the tender, over heating the water and stopping the injector from working.

Naturally, with no possibility of moving off soon and the driver ½ mile down the road, the heavens decided to open with a mixture of, heavy thundery showers and hail. With no cab, the crew members had to scramble for any cover they could: under trees, under the rear wheel of the engine, or under the running boards. However, we had soon given up any pretences of staying dry and we resigned ourselves to the weather. Once the rain had cleared up, Peter returned and we completed the remainder of the journey on the main roads reasonably quickly.

After we got off the main roads and onto the farm track leading to the fields, Ash and I jumped off the cultivator, and were given the chance to drive the engine to the field. I took the steering while Ash drove. The first 100 yds on hard standing were just about bearable, but once we got onto the potholed section, it was a nightmare. I was told that the BB1s are a joy to steer but then I suppose I am only used to trundling around slowly on a large open field without the worry of running in to the verge or the steering wheel constantly snatching and trying to throw you off the toolbox you have for a footplate. Having arrived at the ploughing site, we discovered one of the Z7s stuck. This was sorted out the following day with Mr Davies' crawler but for the time being, we sheeted up the engine and headed off home to dry out and have our meal.

We arrived at the field on the Sunday morning at 8.30am, and we were each allocated our engines and instructors; I was put with Achilles, Jason was our instructor, and Ash who travelled with me on the cultivator on the Saturday was with us on the same engine. We all had the unenviable task of trying to light up a set of engines surrounded on all sides by 6 inches of muddy water! Having raised steam, we moved forward to drop off the mole drainer attached to Achilles, I was driving and as we got into the other field, the flywheel was still moving but we did not seem to be going forwards: we were stuck! Half an hour later, and Michaels crawler finally got us out and we returned to the ploughing. For the first couple of pulls, Jason was in charge of the engine and we observed what he was doing, and then it was our turn. I went first and was certainly a little nervous in case something went wrong but things worked out alright and I began to get the hang of it.

Ash and I shared the driving, doing a few pulls each. After this he went onto the plough leaving me on the engine. The pattern of pulls continued with me attempting to build up a fire while

the other engine was pulling. Unfortunately I have not yet mastered the art of keeping the engine near the working pressure of 180 and we had to struggle on 140 for most of the day. When Ash had finished on the plough, I had a go under the supervision of Roger Luck. While I was probably not very good as a plough man (tending to make any wavy furrows even wavier rather than getting them straight) I had a great time and it is amazing when you're in the middle of the field, can't really hear either engine, and just listen to the plough shares cutting through the earth. After this I got a few more pulls with the engine and then we packed up for the evening.

The next morning, I was with the Z7s. In comparison with these, the BB1s could almost be described as small. I was on the right hand engine along with Ash and this time Rick, who had been on Ajax the previous day. We got a fire lit, under the guidance of Colin and Andy, I our instructors for the day. This time the engines were already set up and having walked over to the other engine to get some cylinder oil, we were able to oil up and very shortly had enough steam. Rick had a go first, followed by Ash, and then me. The procedure was the same as on the BB1s although the Z7s have the option of two speed ploughing gear and the physical size of them made them feel so much more powerful. Rick then went on to steer the plough, leaving me and Ash to alternate on the engine. We were told we had to pack up at 3:00 and realising there was little time left, I volunteered to go on the plough and managed to get a couple of pulls in before we finished!

Having finished work, the first job was to attach the plough to the engine. It sounds easy but actually took around half an hour messing around reversing the engine and then pulling the plough out of the ground. Having done this I returned to the other engine where they were struggling to get the cultivator out of the field. I had hoped for a ride back on the cultivator but it was decided to take this back with a tractor and so I was left with the option of walking the 2 miles back to the yard behind the engine along with Colin. I was actually quite glad, as I didn't fancy steering the Z7 with its wide wheels trying to go down the very narrow road in Fenny Compton. The looks on the faces of the drivers coming in the opposite direction were priceless! Eventually we got back to the yard (not before we had got soaking wet again) and the engines were parked in the shed. This took some time as there was only just enough room for the engines.

This event was well covered in contemporary Steam Plough Times issues but George's account gives a personal and vivid account of the weekend. Whatever the knowledge and experience of the old steam plough gangs of the past, the weather was always there to be dealt with.

John Billard

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