

Ilfracombe Adventure

The following article was originally written for inclusion in the DEPG newsletter in 1998 but was never published.

Written by Ian Robins and presented here unchanged it explains how Williton's first Crompton, 33 048/D6566, had a past association with the Exmoor area and is thankful to a past acquaintance for help following preservation:

Firstly, what is a former Class 50 basher is doing writing an article about a Class 33? After all, they often used to catch me out at the head of Waterloo-Exeter services which should have been "Hoover" hauled.

Having said that, although I regarded the class as "bowl-out" machines on the "mule", I did not object to 33 haulage on other routes and had plenty of runs behind them, mainly on Cardiff-Portsmouth and Bristol-Weymouth services. Certainly, one had to admire the reliability record of the class, better than my beloved 50's, although it gripes me to say so!

I think that's justification enough, so I was interested to hear during 1997 that a DEPG member had purchased a Class 33 and would be bringing it to West Somerset. Apart from being another loco to "play with" at Williton, the example concerned, 33 048, held a particular association for me as I had been on its last passenger working, Pathfinder's "Southern Serpent" railtour of December 1994. Paired with 33 052 it worked the Woking-Dollands Moor leg of the tour, both locos being stored the following month.

33 048 subsequently arrived at Williton in May 1997 and work commenced to return it to working order.

Shortly after its arrival, information came to light which revealed that the loco had previous connections with the Exmoor area. Whilst browsing through "Western Region Diesel Pictorial", published by John Vaughan c.1979, I discovered a picture of the loco on 30 August 1970 in its pre-TOPS identity, D6566, paired with an unidentifiable classmate at the North Devon terminus of Ilfracombe, the other side of Exmoor from Minehead. They were awaiting departure with the return "Atlantic Coast Limited" railtour to Worthing. Something immediately registered, and pulling the Bradford Barton book "Branch Lines around Britain in the Diesel Era" from the book shelf, I found another picture of the same tour crossing the rickety looking bridge over the River Taw between Barnstaple Junction and Town stations, but unfortunately the other loco was still not identifiable.

In the meantime, work had been continuing on 33 048 and it made its WSR passenger debut on 25 October 1997 giving a good account of itself, and I was travelling fitter for the day.

I showed the Ilfracombe pictures to various members of the Crompton fraternity during the day, most being surprised to learn that a 33 had actually visited there, but none could shed any light as to the identity of the second loco.

However, more recently the answer was found much closer to home. I mentioned the above to my next door neighbour and fellow WSR volunteer (at Bishops Lydeard) Mike Collins, and he came up trumps. All is revealed in the December 1970 edition of Railway World where he found an interesting article detailing the performance on the Salisbury to Exeter part of the tour penned by famous railway author, the late Cecil J. Allen, reproduced here:

“One of the modern British diesel-electric types which has not, I think, figured before in these columns is the Class 33 Bo-Bo 73-ton units of 1,550hp, all 96 of these are allocated to the Southern Region. Their duties are confined mainly to freight, and they are seldom seen on fast passenger work. At the end of August last, however, two of these diesels, Nos 6558 (latterly 33 040) and 6566 (our loco!), were detailed to work an “Atlantic Coast Limited” special, which very likely for the first time since the unhappy singling of the main line west of Salisbury, now in the Western Region, had a non-stop schedule over the 88.7 miles from Salisbury to Exeter St. Davids. It may be presumed, though the log does not so state, that the diesels were being worked multiple-unit; their combined hp was 3,100. The ten-coach formation of 343 tons tare and 370 tons gross was booked to make the run in 93 min, of which 89 min was the time allowed to for the 88.05 miles to passing Exeter Central. With a schedule of 71 min to Honiton, the equivalent stopping time to Sidmouth Junction would have been 76 min or well over the 72 min allowance of the “Atlantic Coast Express” in the last days of the Bulleid Pacifics.

The run was on a Sunday, and the special thus had an unusually clear road, the only delays being a 17mph permanent way slack at Wilton and a worse one, to 10mph between Sherborne and Yeovil Junction. The twins managed several maxima of just over 80mph and with 3,100hp available no fault was to be found with their hill climbing ability. Up the 1 in 270-145 from Tisbury to Semley, for example, speed only fell from 71 to 68mph; up the three miles at 1 in 80-100 past Templecombe from 74 to 53mph; up the 2.75 miles at 1 in 80 past Crewkerne from 82 to 56mph; while the best performance was up Seaton bank, with a fall from 72 to 68mph up the initial 1.5 miles at 1 in 100, from 68 to 52mph up the 4.5 miles at 1 in 80 to milepost 152.5, and a recovery to 59mph up the final mile at 1 in 132 through the tunnel. The time over the 7.2 mile climb from milepost 146.25 to milepost 153.5 was 6min 58sec, a creditable feat.

So 5min was gained from Salisbury to Exeter Central with a time of 84min 1sec start to pass, and 6min to St. Davids with 87min exactly. The 76.9 miles of this heavily graded line from Dinton to Pinhoe had been covered at an average speed of 66.5mph. The Wilton check cost about 1.5min and the Yeovil Junction at least 4.5min, leaving 78 and 81min net to Central and St. Davids respectively. The net time of 66.5min to passing Sidmouth Junction may be compared with the outstanding Merchant Navy 4-6-2 feats as 64min net with No 35012 hauling 10 coaches of 336/360 tons; the same engine’s 64.5min with 11 coaches of 367/390 tons; and No 35028’s 66.75min with 12 coaches of 399/430 tons, in all cases from start-to-stop but with much higher downhill speeds than those of the diesels.”

This then provides an interesting insight into a highlight of 33 048's BR career. The leg of the railtour between Barnstaple Junction and Ilfracombe proved to be the last Sunday train and the last double headed train over the line, noted for its severe gradients, which closed in October 1970. Obviously the loco must have enjoyed its visit to the bracing “Atlantic Coast” as it decided to move back there for its retirement, albeit a bit further East! It’s partner on the day, 33 040, was not so lucky, having been (mostly) scrapped. However, when 33 048 was purchased by its present owner, a number of the gauges in one cab were damaged so a complete instrument panel was obtained for spares from a loco which was being broken up. Guess which loco, only its old partner 33 040! So 33 048 now runs with parts of 33 040 fitted, bizarre isn’t it?



D6566 and D6558 at Ilfracombe 30th August 1970. A John Vaughan photograph.
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