

My Diesel Driver Experience - by Andy Royal

On what was a very wet Saturday 26th October 2019, the West Somerset Railway operated the last of the six Diesel Driver Experience Courses (DDECs) of the 2019 season. This last course was advertised as a "Stage 2" and instead of the Class 33



'Crompton' that would typically be used on a "Stage 1" course, the booked locomotive was to be either Class 47 D1661 "NORTH STAR" or Class 14 'Teddy Bear' D9526.

The concept of stages follows the WSR offering of Steam Driver Experience Courses where they have been offering six stages, the first being a "Taster" to provide the basics, then additional stages for those

who want to continue to develop their skills, building up to higher and higher levels of competence on both freight and passenger workings. Some of the stages are two days' duration, involving building the fire and raising steam through to hauling trains then dropping the fire at the end of the second day. Such is the difference between the operation of steam and diesel traction.

The stages of the DDECs were a little different, with the stage 1 course being based around the versatile Class 33 hauling the Heritage freight train and the Stage 2 taking a step up in complexity of driving technique in the case of the Class 14 or a step up in power and weight in the case of the Class 47. To qualify for a Stage 2 course, the candidate either had to have completed a Stage 1 course or had to have other relevant and acceptable experience on the locomotives or on the WSR.

Because the booked traction choices were not readily available (or permissible in the case of the '47' due to the weight restriction that was in force) on the day of my course, the DEPG decided to use recently restored Class 35 'Hymek' D7018 instead, and the load was going to be the "Quantock Belle" (QB) dining set of four Mark 1 coaches, in place of the usual Heritage freight train. This was my lucky day because, long before I even knew that the 'Hymek' was going to be used on the DDEC, I had made a booking with the WSR and I was going to be one of the four "rookies" that would be alternating in the roles of driver, secondman and brake van passenger on the 60-mile round trip, starting and ending at Williton.

The use of a 'Hymek' and a rake of Mark 1 coaches changed the nature of the course because the QB stock is normally stabled at Bishops Lydeard (BL) whereas the Heritage freight train is normally stabled at Minehead (MD). The booked loco runs "Light Engine" (LE) from Williton (WN) to pick up its train, and normally leaves WN in the direction of MD, but in this case, the loco would be running in the opposite direction. The usual arrangement for the four participants on a DDEC is to place two in the cab of the loco, one driving and the other secondman, both under instruction from the DEPG crew, and the other two ride in the Guard's van and learn about the WSR Guard's duties until the changeover point where the four participants change places – but because we were going to be hauling coaches, we didn't have a Guard's van that day, so a different arrangement had to be made.

It is not permissible in the rule book for anyone other than a travelling fitter to travel in the trailing cab of a locomotive, so "dead heading" in the rear cab was not an option. Given that there were to be four participants on the course plus the loco crew and the 'Hymek' would be LE from WN to BL, it was going to be impractical (and against the rule book) to fit six people in the cab of the 'Hymek', so I took the option of joining the loco when it arrived at BL.

When I arrived at BL station, the weather was awful, with heavy rain and blustery winds. Not a great start, but my orange hi-vis overcoat (formerly orange but now dirty blackened patchy orange) kept me both warm and dry while I waited under partial cover on the platform for the 'Hymek' to appear – which it did at the



booked time – but arriving at Platform 1 whereas I was waiting on Platform 2 – so a lengthy walk to the MD end of Platform 2 to cross the tracks then a walk back toward the Taunton end of Platform 1 made sure that I was now quite wet!

Climbing into the cab of D7018, and meeting crew member and fellow DEPG volunteer Graham Perry who was sitting in the driving seat, I was surprised to find that I was the only other person on board. Secondman

and DEPG Chairman Martin Howard had gone to the signalbox to confirm the instructions for shunting the coaching stock and the two people that were supposed to join the loco at WN had cancelled, so my day suddenly brightened up even more because my cab mileage had just doubled! One man's loss is another

man's gain, as the saying goes. Hopefully those two people will be able to re-book on another DDEC at some time in the future.



The "fourth person" had also arranged to join at BL and he was waiting on Platform 2 when we eventually arrived there with the coaching stock, after waiting for the GWR Class 150 "Taunton Shuttle" service to clear the platform and take up a temporary position in the carriage sidings. With Graham at the controls, we withdrew the QB set from the bay platform and ran around to

haul the set into Platform 2 to await our booked departure time. After a safety briefing from the DEPG crew, our duties were assigned and mine was to act as secondman on the journey from BL to MD and then to switch to the driving role for the return journey. The DEPG crew retained the responsibility for the delegated roles so they were keenly checking to make sure that their trainees were paying attention and getting the feel of the job.

As "secondman", my role was to make sure that we had the 'token' for the section of line upon which we were travelling and to keep a lookout for the road ahead and make sure that the signals were being read by the "driver". With the weather being so dull and wet, it did limit the number of people who would normally wait with their cameras at vantage points along the line, but it was still necessary to keep a good lookout at the many foot crossings and farm crossings along the route. Another of my duties was to sound the horn when the lineside boards required it, but the "driver" seemed to have that task fully under his control, so I just made sure that none were missed.

On the four-mile-long climb from BL to Crowcombe Heathfield (CH), there are four crossing places to watch out for along the (mostly) 1 in 80 gradient before arrival at CH where our token was exchanged at the signalbox to allow us to proceed toward Williton (WN). Being 'out of season', there was no need to wait to cross another train at CH because the timetable only required us to cross other services at WN and Blue Anchor (BA). The six-mile descent to WN includes 12 crossing places, so vigilance was maintained!

At WN, undeterred by the weather, the DEPG volunteers gathered in the yard to witness the rare sight of a Hymek on a DDEC, and several of them braved a soaking

to watch our departure toward our next stop, which was Blue Anchor (BA). Although the gradient profile on this section of the line is not as dramatic as the CH section, it does involve some serious climbs of fairly short duration, such as 1 in 76 climbing out of Watchet (WT) and almost a mile of 1 in 74 on the climb to Washford (WD). From there to BA, the line descends at 1 in 65, so several touches on the brake were required to keep the speed within the section limits. Upon arrival at BA, the weather showed some signs of improvement as we waited for the steam-hauled service to clear the section from Minehead and surrender the token to the signalman. Before long, we were on our way and trundling along the level but picturesque coastal plain, then through Dunster and onwards to Minehead.

The DEPG crew took the controls for the run-round at Minehead (MD) and the opportunity was taken for a very quick bite of lunch before my opportunity to drive D7018 out of MD on the 20-mile return leg to BL. Immediately noticeable was how much quieter it was at the 'B' end of the locomotive, with the radiator compartment acting as a buffer zone to the noise of the engine room. With the starting signal in the 'off' position and the 'right away' from the Guard, I engaged



the forward direction, released the brake to the 'running' position and applied a touch of power to start us rolling towards the signalbox, where my "secondman" picked up the token for the section to BA. Once clear of the Seaward Way level crossing, I notched up the power to get a feel for what I was controlling, but it was immediately clear that the amount of power that was available from this almost 60-year-old machine was far in excess of what was needed for the light 4-coach train on level track, so careful attention had to be given to power and brakes, especially on this section of the line where there are several speed restrictions. Having cleared Blue Anchor, uphill gradients were

encountered and once clear of the speed restrictions, power was increased until the engine rev counter hit the 1,200 rpm mark. This gave plenty of power for the climb up Washford Bank and the handle soon had to be backed off again to reduce the engine speed to around 1,000 rpm for the remainder of the climb to Washford station, and then the continuous descent to Watchet allowed me to get a feel for the braking.

The control of the train vacuum brake was probably the hardest part to get right, because of the lag between making a train brake application and then getting a brake response. The braking effort increased significantly with time, so a blend of a light touch and some patience was necessary and it does take some practice to get it right. On one occasion, as I approached a signal stop, I applied the train brake and Martin said 'wait for it ...' but the signal was looming closer and closer and nothing seemed to be happening - so I applied more brake – and guess what, we stopped abruptly, short of the signal - and the guard probably let out a curse or two at the 'rookies' up front !

Upon departing Williton, the weather had improved so we had a larger audience of DEPG volunteers who had downed tools to watch and I felt the pressure as I tried to make an appropriate departure, showing enough restraint while producing the right amount of 'Maybach Music'. The climb to Crowcombe Heathfield is six miles at an average gradient of 1 in 100, but with only four coaches in tow, it was a breeze and the power setting was only enough to give a steady 1,000 rpm and that seemed to work for most of the time. Occasionally, power had to be cut until a crossing place could be properly sighted, but after that, the power just needed to be returned to the 1,000 rpm mark and the speed settled at 25 mph again (just like Martin said it would).



Dropping down towards Bishops Lydeard, it was all about braking and upon arriving at the platform, I managed to stop the train in the right place (approximately!) so that the 'real' crew could take over for the shunt and the return of the 'Quantock Belle' set to the bay platform.

Luckily for me, I was invited to continue as driver for the light engine run back to Williton, so I could then get a feel for the 'straight air brake' that applies the brake directly to the locomotive without the complexity of applying the vacuum brakes on the train as well. The 'straight' air brake is responsive and powerful, with almost no lag, but it is only used for a light engine move or when hauling an un-braked train with a brake van protecting the rear of the train. Even though the weather was so poor, I still had a fantastic day and I really felt that I had learned a whole lot of things in a very short space of time.

Would I want to do it all again ? **YES !**

Would I want to do it all again in a different loco ? **YES !**

Would I want to try hauling freight ? **YES !**

It's one of the best days out that I could possibly imagine and I literally can't wait to have another go at it!
