

EXCELSIOR

New Information On an Enigmatic Steam Locomotive



Photo: Collection G S Chadwick

UNTIL RECENTLY, NO PHOTOGRAPHS WERE BELIEVED TO EXIST showing the early days of the Kerry Tramway in Wales. The line's first steam locomotive 'EXCELSIOR,' likewise is only revealed to us in her later guises, on other railways. Because of this and the lack of recorded information the loco has become, to some of us at least, a 'Holy Grail' – enigmatic and infuriatingly difficult to define or pin down. Now, with the help of the late Mr Chadwick, Phil Copleston and Roy C Link attempt to draw back the curtains that continue to conceal this little gem a mite further.

THE DISCOVERY – PHIL COPLESTON

I came across this photo whilst working in Mid Wales nearly three years ago. A professional archaeological colleague had visited a lady in the Kerry area whilst doing background research for a heritage management scheme we were working on and returned to the office one day mentioning that he had seen papers and photos relating to a little forestry railway near Kerry – was I interested? Being a long-term serious fan of the Kerry Tramway, of course I was interested!

Within a week I was able to make a return visit to the landowner, a Mrs J Chadwick of Kerry, Powys, who kindly showed me the

research papers of her late husband Mr G S Chadwick. Amongst his notes and correspondence from the 1970s and 80s was a rather small, postcard-sized, muddy photographic print showing a small 0-4-0 tank engine surrounded by some agricultural workers. Where had this come from? Apparently, Mr Chadwick had obtained this copy many years before, from the archives of the now defunct Severn Press of Newtown, Powys. Unfortunately, it has not been possible, subsequently, to locate where these archives now reside. Anyway, I could see it was indeed 'Excelsior' and this was a previously unpublished view but it was still a few minutes before the significance of what the picture showed sank in. Then I just

EXCELSIOR as she is most often remembered, with a stovepipe chimney and crude cab back sheeting. This photo, taken while the loco was working on the L&B contract, is the only one known that shows the right hand side of the loco in any detail. All other close ups favour the left elevation.

Points of interest are: the bent front buffer beam, injector piping and sloping control rod, tool box (bearing the works number) and the lack of obvious cylinder drain cocks on this side. A bucket is wedged between the sandboxes at the front and the tip of a re-railing bar protrudes from the top of the LH tank. The chimney appears to utilise the cast base of the original spark arresting stack.



Photo: Collection R C Link

stared and stared! THIS view showed Excelsior as an 0–4–0 on very light track and the dress of the workers suggested a Victorian date, perhaps in the 1880s? This photo clearly predated all other known views of Excelsior – a truly revelatory find!

The photo is on bromide paper, slightly browning with a reddish blemish in one corner – clearly not a contemporary print, but probably a fairly recent copy of a copy, maybe dating from the 1950s or 60s. Unless this is a clever hoax, the photo clearly shows Excelsior complete with name plates and the distinctive Bagnall works plate. Close, very detailed physical examination of the print, and a careful inspection of a huge blow up of the scanned image for any internal discrepancies suggests that this photo is indeed genuine, albeit a copy.

I determined then that this photo should have a wider audience and be brought to the attention of students and aficionados of Excelsior and the Kerry Tramway. Who better to contact than a certain Mr Roy C Link, well known authority on such matters and publisher and owner of just the right vehicle for its dissemination! I obtained a rough scanned print of the poor original and sent it to Roy who was bowled over by what he saw in the photo. This changed much of what had been assumed about Excelsior, particularly her early years. He felt this discovery justified a fuller article and a redrawing of his earlier attempts to accurately portray Excelsior, the results of which accompany this article. Later, I was able to borrow the original print and get Roy to make a better, very high resolution scan from it, clean it up and the result is what you see on page 191.

THOUGHTS ON THE CONTENT OF THE PHOTO

Obviously, this photo shows that much of the earlier assumed history of Excelsior is wrong and that she had not in fact been built as an 0–4–2 tank. Clearly, she started out as a shorter 0–4–0, but when was she rebuilt? Obviously, this must have happened sometime between the date of this photo and the next known view of her on Collard Bridge or Rolle Quay, Barnstaple as an 0–4–2 during the

construction of the L&B in 1896-97. Frankly, we don't know for sure but presumably she had proved to have too small a water capacity and was fitted with a 'back-tank' over a rear extension. This would have extended her range and altered her balance, possibly for the better. But was this alteration carried out whilst still working the Kerry Tramway or had she been rebuilt and improve her saleability to an industrial buyer or contractor prior to eventual sale to Edmund Nuttalls, contractor to the L&B? I wonder who carried out this work; it looks a very neat job – Bagnalls perhaps? Excelsior originally built as an 0–4–0 makes much more sense of the apparent light weight of just 3tons 15cwt in working order, as stated by Cozens.

This new photo shows she carried a very fetching spark arrester in her early years (the same one as in the later L&B Collard Bridge view, page opposite), a whistle projecting through the cab roof, and a cab rear lower sheet curved to meet the rear roof pillars. You can also just make out a rectangular access hole in this rear sheet to give access to cleaning the fire or give a bit more space to swing the fireman's shovel. The light and shadows under the cab give no indication of a trailing truck. Unfortunately, the details of the very front of the loco are obscured by the men standing around her. On the original, you can also make out lining on the cab and tank sides.

It is reasonable to conclude that this early view shows her on the Kerry Tramway itself. If this is true, then this is the ONLY known view. From this we can see that the tramway (or at least this portion of it) is laid with very light rails and rough sleepers hewn from logs (what the Americans call appropriately 'pole ties'). What you might expect from such a line of the period. But – was the track the reason why Excelsior was ordered as such a small machine, or the other way round?

Surrounding Excelsior you can make out eight individuals: on the right there is one man in the cab wearing a cap (presumably the fireman/driver), an old white bearded gaffer with his hand on the cab pillar (seems to be standing on a pile of logs or something just out of shot); on the left, four men are standing on the front of the loco or at the same height as the footplate (are they on a flat

wagon?); whilst on the ground in front is another man obscuring the detail of Excelsior's front end. In the right-hand foreground are two draught horses; you can just make out another person's outstretched arm holding the traces of the front horse. With the exception of the presumed driver, are these estate or forestry workers? They certainly look dressed for manual work, and in the style of dress appropriate for the 1880s (and certainly no later than the 1890s).

Both Roy and I have made digital copies of this image, and we have both had a go at removing the specks, blemishes and scratches. Once these visual distractions have been taken away, we both found that what faintly emerges (and hopefully you can see in the published version here), is a background of trees, specifically fir or spruce trees – just the plantation species you would expect as a backdrop for a forestry estate railway! The horses are probably hitched to a cart or trolley for hauling logs from the cutting area to a convenient point on the tramway, as they are positioned and harnessed for two-aside haulage. To my mind this is further confirming evidence that we are looking at some location on the Kerry Tramway, possibly a loading area near the switchbacks in LLwyn-y-Rhwd Dingle. The light and slope of the ground in relation to the direction of the loco would seem to preclude this being in the Rhos Dingle. Other Kerry experts please comment via the Editor!

Lastly, one fact I have not heard discussed anywhere, is why this loco is called 'Excelsior'? Apart from the obviously very Victorian aspirational and uplifting nature of the name, what connection would such a name have, if any, with the tramway, the locality or the Naylor's? Just a thought. Any suggestions?

In fact, this new photo doesn't answer many of the questions we have long held about Excelsior and raises a few new ones but, at least, it has rumbled a serious mis-assumption about how she originally looked, and gives us a snatched view of a part or the original tramway. Quite exciting really, for us Kerry Tramway fans!

SUMMARY OF KNOWN EXCELSIOR PHOTOS

To summarise the photographic evidence for this loco: we know of eight different photos of this engine throughout her life. There are three views of her at Portland in the early 20th century working the stone rubbish tramway, one published only for the first time in the recent Oakwood Press book on the Isle of Portland Railways, Volume 1; four views of her on the Edmund Nuttall contract to build the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway 1894-97, three of which are well

known and the fourth recently republished in this very magazine from a contemporary trade journal; and now we have this new view of her on (presumably) the Kerry Tramway sometime during the 1880s or early 90s, probably the earlier date. This is quite a remarkable number of photos of a relatively obscure engine. She obviously was as visually appealing then as she seems to us now!

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Although Roy has done a remarkably job in obtaining a reasonable reproduction from a very poor quality print, I would dearly love to find a better version of this photo. So much more could be gleaned if we could but see some of the fine detail better. I can't help but feel there must be a clearer and larger copy or the original negative out there somewhere? Further research and leads are being undertaken to find the Severn Press archives, as well as searches elsewhere, and I will bring any further discoveries to the attention of readers of this magazine.

Mention should also be made that the Naylor's owned at least three estates in Wales, all of which had railways of some sort: at Brynllwarch near Kerry they built the Kerry Tramway to 'improve' the efficiency of removing forestry and agricultural products from their estate to the nearest Cambrian Railways railhead at Glan Mule; at Leighton on the east bank of the Severn near Welshpool they constructed a horse and cable worked 'slurry railway' (a quite remarkable affair that hauled manure from the model farm up an incline to slurry tanks high on the hillside, which was then fed down underground pipes to fertilise the surrounding fields (make a model of this!); and in the Clwyd valley in Denbighshire I understand they owned a standard gauge spur off the LNWR to serve their estate in that county (I'm still researching the details of this one).

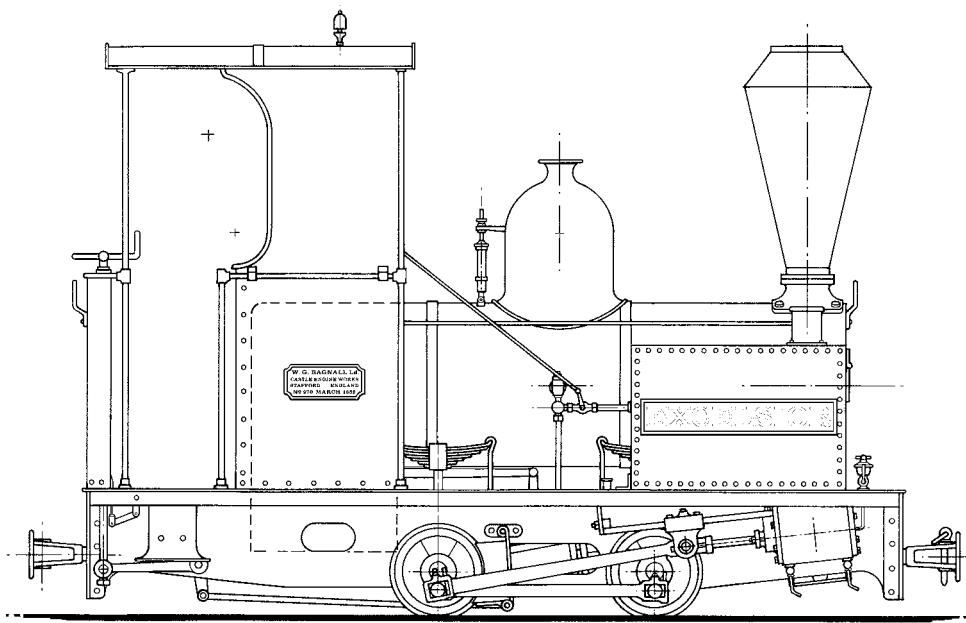
I got hooked on the Kerry Tramway back in the 1970s and 'discovered' the other Naylor Estate railways whilst working on an archaeological project as a student in the 1980s, subsequently becoming a part-author on a technical report on the Leighton Estate and its tramway in 1988. I have trawled both local and national archives and explored and recorded the surviving physical remains of the Kerry Tramway but very little comes to light. Every so often, though, some new fact appears or a new photo turns up, like this photo here. I know of at least one other unpublished view of a loco and log train on the second incarnation of the Kerry Tramway during the Great War years. I am still working on this project (on and off, whenever I can) and hope to publish some of my findings on both the Kerry Tramway and the railway connections of the Naylor Estates at a later date. In the mean time, if any reader has further unpublished information or can suggest new leads for research into the tramway or the Naylor Estates I would be most grateful to hear from them, via the Editor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

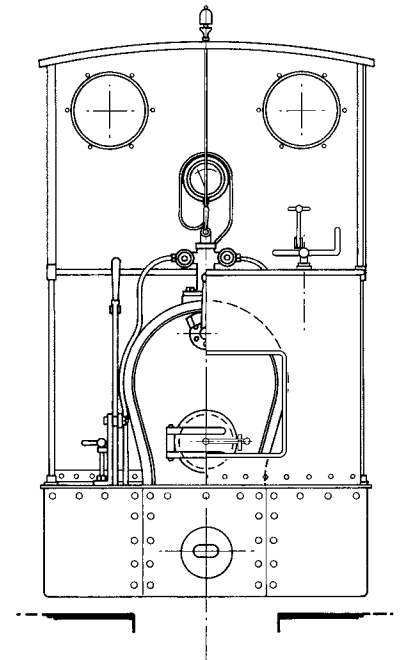
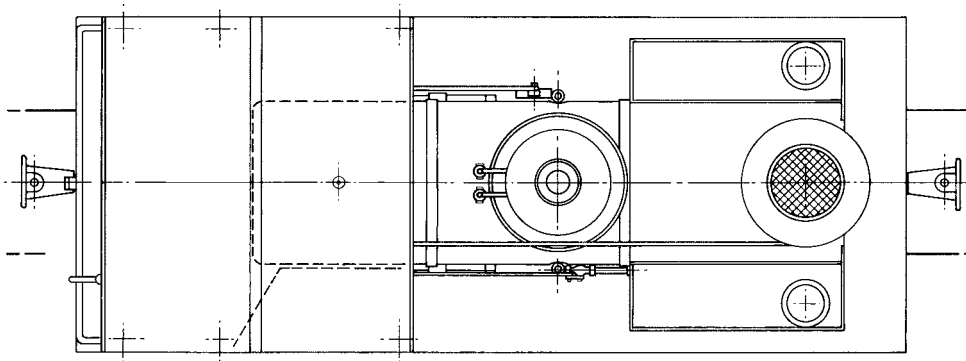
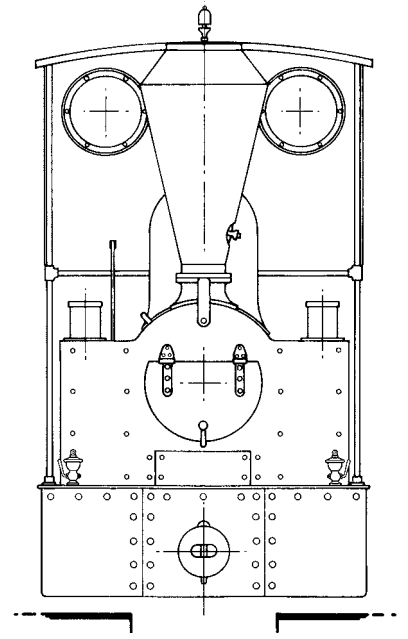
Finally, I would personally like to thank Mrs J Chadwick of Kerry for kindly making this photo available for publication and putting up with my frequent visits to study her late husbands papers. I hope this short article will stimulate further interest in this quite remarkable, endlessly fascinating and relatively obscure little line and its singular engine.



Photo: Collection R C Link



CONDITION AS BUILT — 1888



EXCELSIOR

W G BAGNALL
Works No.970 of 1888

See text for known
dimensions - all others conjectural.

©Roy C Link 2002 Scale — 1:32

