

Submitted by:- Peter Kearon

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[The Britannias ~ A class that just slipped away ~ By Peter Kearon](#)

Having been raised and trained in the unchallenged ways of the Great Western Railway and seen the introduction in 1951 of British Railways' Britannia class, the author puts forward some unbiased memories and personal experiences of BR's first standard series.

My courting and college days in the early and mid 1950's repeatedly took me to Stratford (East) station, well served by the Underground's Central Line. Instead I chose always to travel from Liverpool Street by the so-speedy newly introduced 1500 volt dc electrics which gave the added bonus of a walk through that station's smoky and sulphur-laden atmosphere. Engines were everywhere although by then the once-numerous Great Eastern N7 radial tanks had been displaced on the main line by the electrics; only the Enfield service still ran steam hauled.

There was no doubt that pride of place was held by the new pacifics. Names such as "Alfred the Great" and "Lord Hurcomb" are still remembered but all were turned out in spotless condition and were manned by interested footplate men who were plainly pleased to see an admiring face, to the extent of occasionally inviting such enthusiasts onto the footplate.

But what had previously been in charge of the express services? Pre-first world war inside cylinder 4-6-0s some still with a Victorian-era lattice covering much of the coupled wheels; under-boilered, under-pressured Sandringhams, those that were built not up to quality but down to shortness. Shame on you Nigel. Or 10-year-old mixed-traffic B1s. No wonder the new Britannias were welcomed at Norwich, Ipswich and Stratford with so much enthusiasm and in consequence produced such reliable, speedy running as had never before been seen on the Great Eastern main line. Railway politics insisted that all regions should enjoy the excellence of this new class, a design optimistically described as state-of-the-art which, it was falsely said, incorporated best features taken from all the regions. The result was claimed to be a design which would replace outdated pre-war and even post-war classes such as Royal Scots, Castles, A3's and West Country Pacifics. Needless to say Stanier, Churchward and successors, Gresley and Bulleid were not to be outdone so easily.

A batch of engines, condescendingly named after stars was inflicted on the GWR and, of course, shedded at Old Oak Common. They were tried out on the named expresses but their lack of power soon showed up; photographs taken at that time when working the Cornish Riviera revealed that they were commonly double-heading a King or Castle which rather spoilt the effect. Soon these new engines were relegated to lesser duties hauling Oxford and Weymouth expresses or stopping trains to Bristol.

Not to be thwarted, Euston, the ruling power, decreed that all should be transferred to Cardiff (Canton) shed and to remove any choice Cardiff's fleet of Castle (unwanted Kings had not then appeared) was transferred away. Britannias, to Canton drivers, were an anathema. Brought up to be accustomed to the doorless spartan cabs of Castles it could perhaps be thought that the enclosed cabs of the newcomers would be welcome but they were soon labelled as draughty, dust-filled spaces which scooped up icy blasts from beneath the suspended floor which was positioned above a forward extension of the tender framing.

As my single experience of riding in the cab of a Britannia was to rumble from the turntable at the bottom of Canton shed to the water towers at the other end I can hardly offer an opinion of cab

comfort. But I well remember the driver's gloomy offering that the high-pitched cab looked like a so-and-so hen house on wheels, a remark doubtless contrary to general opinion.

There was, however, a much more basic failing in this new design - the regulator and its control function. Open the regulator of a Castle and the engine moves forward. Try the same operation on a Britannia and so often the result is wheels flying at 500 rpm but no forward movement. It was said by Cardiff drivers, true or false, that 100% steam flow was achieved by 5% regulator opening and hence frantic slipping. It should perhaps be remembered that Canton drivers had no experience of pacifics since the demise of "The Great Bear" some 30 years earlier (and how unlikely that even the most senior driver at Canton had ever even fired that locomotive) and had no knowledge of the propensity of all pacifics on starting to settle back on the rear wheels and thus take the weight off the leading and driving coupled wheels just when adhesion is most needed.

Remember the pitiful starts of A3s and Merchant Navy Engines? By necessity Britannias took over the prime London expresses. This arrangement coincided with regular visits I made to Pontypool (Crane Street) not to be confused with better known Pontypool Road. On paper this could be achieved by taking the 8am Capital United Express and hence, with time to spare, the 8.20 Newport-Blaenavon 6400-powered push-me, pull-you auto train to my destination.

(Funny things GWR auto trains. The driver spent half his time in a compartment at the far end of a two-coach set controlling a linked regulator handle and the vacuum brake handle. To allow the fireman the facility of linking up a slide valve locomotive without suffering injury from an open regulator the GWR built a series of screw-reverse engines comprising 5400 and 6400 but not 7400 classes along with 4800 class but not 5800 class sister engines. Prairie tanks with piston valves were safely notched up with the pole reverser. In practice the awkward regulator linkage was often unofficially disconnected allowing the fireman to be driver except for brake operation.)

But the true schedule was not like that. For reasons which I never understood the 8 o'clock deadline from Cardiff was ignored while a group of officials including the guard held cabside discussions and it was rarely before 8.10 that we made a slippery, albeit downhill start on the 12 mile journey to Newport where our late arrival ensured that the Blaenavon train had already departed. The thought of holding this little train to meet up with passengers changing trains seems never to have entered the head of the Newport controller.

With the better part of an hour to wait I was in a perfect position to see Britannias at their very worst. The platforms at Newport, up and down, were offset from the through tracks such that leaving the station entailed an immediate double swing over points to regain the main line. (There was at one time a fine painting by Eric Bottomley showing "Tornado" at Newport with the front leading bogie wheels just inches away from the points.)

Taking these points was something that Britannias resolutely refused to do. Pyrotechnics, wheel speeds that wrecked Blue Peter and haggard drivers were commonplace as 10-15 minutes of regulator manipulation elapsed before a Britannia-hauled up Paddington train finally cleared the platform, time enough for a Castle to have taken 15 coaches from the same platform to beyond Severn Tunnel Junction.

In an effort to improve matters a team of 'inspectors' was brought in to supervise and assist. One would stand at the left-hand drive cabside to comfort and encourage the unhappy driver with such cries as "give it - the regulator - a bit more", "shut it quick" and finally "I think she's moving", I have removed the colourful expletives and endless blasphemous expressions. On the fireman's side of the engine an unfortunate junior inspector was positioned at the trackside with a supply of sand which he endeavoured to throw on to the rail in front of the three coupled wheels. He needed great courage to work in the proximity of flashing connecting and coupling rods and perhaps worse the wicked return crank. When the wheels exploded into a blur of motion the sand was ground into the finest dust such

that the engine -and unfortunate inspector - were subject to a Sahara like storm. Eventually, inch by inch, the engine fought its way over the points and onto the main line but even then the last coach was moving at little more than walking pace as it finally cleared the platform and made space for the following 8.15 am stopper to Paddington which in turn went through the same starting disaster. It must be said that when these engines got into their stride they were fast and free running such that on an easy schedule punctual arrivals at Paddington were achieved despite these unhappy starts. On the other hand the thought of restarting a heavy train on a wet, slippery Dainton or Rattery bank is not a pleasant one. From the bottom of the Severn Tunnel unthinkable. On the other hand drivers of Duchess pacifics faced this problem every wet day on Shap and Beattock and perhaps accepted that closing and opening the regulator 300 times was normal.

Something had to be done and it was clearly a case of improving the control of the steam flow. Canton-shedded engines were one by one taken into Swindon Works and the patented multi-valve regulator changed to a Swindonised double flat valve arrangement which had made GW starts virtually slip free. (Remember how Kings took the Cornish Riviera out of Paddington on what looked like half regulator but allowing for the lubricator linkage really on quarter regulator without a trace of slip). The BR external control linkage remained unchanged. How many engines were modified in this way and whether only the locomotives allocated to Cardiff remains unclear.

But unpopular engines remain forever unpopular. In 1955 the Cardiff driver of "Polar Star" failed to understand the daily notice board and nearing Didcot passed well-signposted signals (what's new?) swung from the up fast to the up slow line without reducing speed, derailed and finished up at the bottom of an embankment. Eleven passengers lost their lives. The driver's excuse was lack of forward vision which he blamed on the vertical handrail bolted to the side of the smoke deflector. A few engines had these offending handrails removed and replaced with brass-edged handholes. I believe only Canton-based engines were so treated; others remained unmodified.

By then even Euston, with lots of bright new diesels to play with, had to admit the cause to be lost and just as these engines arrived unannounced so they just slipped away. Electrification of the Great Eastern main line to Norfolk and the former Southern lines to Kent took away the work where Britannias were most valued. In the early 1960's I remember Kings Cross sending out one from Immingham shed on the less-than-glamorous most stations to Cleethorpes Express. A local Sulzer powered stopping train, leaving at the same time would generally have reached Finsbury Park or Harringay ahead of the main line train.

Camden's use of these engines I do not know (their handling of the three cylinder poppet valve version was pathetic because it was vying with well-established Stanier Duchesses) but finally all 50-odd engines drifted north to become absorbed into Black Five links where current photographs show black was really spelt filthy. Carlisle and other Lancashire sheds showed little interest in them; they were largely put to goods work as many sheds had no passenger links. Eventually all but two found their way to the scrapyards.

In truth Britannias were too few in numbers to have had any real impact on the rail system and the original hype and over rating did nothing to endear them when well-established classes were increasingly available. It is sad to think that these days a nicely polished Britannia nameplate at Mr Wright's auction can demand more money than the building cost of the entire locomotive.

Footnote - Unfortunate though these engines were, they did have a certain appeal and nowhere can this be better seen than in well-made models. The Editor's 3 ½ inch model often seen at our Club is a pleasure to watch and a slip free climber up the bank with passengers in tow.

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