

The LMS "Ro-Railer"

I have been researching and lecturing on the Stratford upon Avon and Midland Junction Railway for over forty years. It is incredible how many times I am asked about the "Ro-Railer". This vehicle only served in revenue service for a few weeks. It has taken on almost mythical status and although it deserves a place in history its main contribution to Stratford is that it put the station at Old Town and the LMS railway as an alternative route clearly in front of a much wider public than it had ever previously enjoyed. Not since the days of the "Harvard" special trains in the pre Great War era did so many people crowd onto the "other" Stratford station as on the morning of 23rd April 1932. I estimate that more photos were taken of the Ro-Railer (and certainly more survive) than of any other ex SMJR line subject. If only the unique Fairlie engine had enjoyed similar status! This short volume has been edited over the years as new data has come to light. It draws together information that appears in many sources elsewhere. A complete list of my Stratford area railway references is published in my main railway volume.

The Stratford upon Avon and Midland Junction Railway and the LMS Railway that took it over in 1923 made various attempts over the years to offer a through connection between Stratford and London. The rival GWR route with a change at Leamington Spa was longer than either the Stratford - Marylebone or Stratford - Euston possibilities that existed using the SMJ route. In the early 1900's a through service was provided by a coach that was worked over the SMJ line before being attached to a Great Central Railway London service at Woodford. This involved the coach being "trip worked" from Byfield to Woodford and back. Its progress over the SMJ line to Stratford was slow because it was attached to a normal all stations stopping train. The Railway "grouping" of 1923 put the Great Central Railway in the LNER camp with the SMJ becoming part of the LMSR. This really ended any future cooperation on through coaches via Woodford. The "gateway" from the SMJ line to London had always been via Woodford because when the GCR London extension was built the need to generate traffic was paramount and the layout at Woodford took account of interchange traffic with the SMJR. The LMS could direct traffic to its West Coast Main Line at either Blisworth or Roade. The connection at Roade had never been fully utilized even for freight but the interchange at Blisworth was one of the better used parts of the ex SMJ system and although passengers would need to walk through to the main platforms a reasonable connection to the capital could be achieved. The authors of the various books on the SMJ have never effectively explored why the Roade connection was not developed for passenger through traffic. In mileage terms it was very attractive but the most plausible explanation is that the LMS (and LNWR before it) did not want to stop express trains at a relatively unimportant station to attach/detach through coaches of dubious commercial benefit to them. Some authors have suggested that the track layout at Roade dating from the 1840's and the lack of a shunting engine at all times were also considerations.

During the 1920's competition from road transport was becoming a big problem for all of the railway companies and they explored ways of cutting costs and developing new traffic on loss making lines. The LMS were aware that Stratford upon Avon was an increasingly important destination with the attractions of the "new" theatre and their own investment in the Welcombe Hotel. Ways of providing a passenger service of reasonable journey time were considered and it was decided to trial a new concept of vehicle that could run on both rail and road. If successful this would have great potential to win traffic for lightly used lines. In the case of the Stratford service it would be possible to convey passengers and their luggage directly to and from the Welcombe Hotel via the SMJ line as far as Blisworth where with just one change of train they would be conveyed directly to Euston. The journey time would be enhanced by the vehicle running non-stop from Blisworth to Stratford although the constraints of a difficult single track line often meant waits at Towcester and Kineton.

The LMS Ro-Railer UR7924 was ordered by the LMS carriage division at Wolverton in Feb 1931. The supplier Karrier Motors of Huddersfield was a surprise to some as they were running down their bus production having earned a poor reputation for reliability in the 1920's. The chassis was a standard Karrier Chaser powered by a 6 cyl engine with a max rating of 120hp. The Chaser was the last serious bus design by Karrier. The body was built by Cravens to their B26C design and

featured 14 front facing seats in the forward vestibule and 12 longitudinal seats in the rear smoking saloon. Luggage space was provided on the roof or by folding up some of the seats in the rear vestibule. It weighed 7tons 2cwt and was fitted with railway sanding gear, lamp irons and emergency drawgear for locomotive haulage. Loco haulage was limited to 20mph although apart from the presumed rescue on its demise there is no record of loco haulage taking place. The pneumatic road wheels and traditional flanged rail wheels were mounted on a manually set eccentric arrangement and could be switched from road to rail in under five minutes by one man whilst the vehicle stood over a sleepere crossing. The technical arrangements are dealt with fairly comprehensively in most of the books that have been published about the ex SMJR line.

After delivery and acceptance at Wolverton it was put on trial on the Hemel Hemstead – Harpenden branch where it was photographed in late 1931 by H C Casserley. In an attempt to gain publicity the LMS decided to allocate this first experimental vehicle to the ex SMJ section and the service was launched at Stratford upon Avon on 23rd April 1932. This is an important day for the town as it is the birthday of William Shakespeare and there would be many influential people and pressmen around on the day. As previously mentioned the LMS had converted a mansion at Welcombe into a Hotel and the Ro-Railer was charged with conveying passengers directly to it without the need to transfer themselves or their luggage at the railway station. There was a minor skirmish with an omnibus company who held the local carriage license and objected to the LMS in effect providing a service on their territory although they did not offer a route from Stratford LMS to the Welcombe hotel! This was resolved by the LMS agreeing to charge a flat rate fare of sixpence (6d) for any intermediate fare stage if passengers were picked up in the town. There were few takers.

The Ro-Railer suffered from the same problems as many early road bus conversions to rail in that it was too light for efficient rail adhesion particularly on a line like the ex SMJ which had the gradient profile of a switchback. It struggled to maintain progress uphill and was then driven hard on the downhill to compensate. (The author experienced a very similar vehicle still in use in Chile in 1993 and the ride qualities were not for the faint hearted!) The lack of effective suspension and springing meant that the hammer blow from rail joints and crossings was transmitted to both machinery and occupants. Early failure of some vital part was inevitable and after a few weeks of operation the Ro-Railer broke a front axle component whilst in service near Byfield. It was removed to Wolverton and never used again as a rail vehicle although the fact that its road registration was renewed for a number of years after suggests disposal for use as a road vehicle. The LMS did have plans to order more including goods/passenger convertible versions for branch line use. These plans were abandoned by virtue of a short minute at an LMS board meeting in late 1932.

In view of its novelty and the launch on 23rd April there is a wealth of photographic material of the vehicle. In addition to the railway coverage the odd shot of it on the streets of Stratford keeps coming to light as residents come forward with a photo taken by a relative of this “unusual vehicle” as the local paper had described it. Apart from Casserley's efforts not too many photos of it exist outside of the Stratford area or in any other SMJ line station. The launch of the service drew a large gathering of contemporary railway enthusiasts many of who can be seen in the photographs that have been well published over the years. Some cine films of the vehicle have survived and at least one copy is held in the archive collection administered by Rob Foxon of Leicester.

One Ro-Railer story that has recently surfaced was that it was alleged to have been sent out to substitute for an unavailable loco and coach on the Stratford - Broom Junc scheduled service one day. The turntable at Broom was unavailable (the East to West connection forming a triangle was 10 years in the future) so the Ro-Railer returned backwards!

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