

Mike Bowes Visit

Transcript of conversation with Mike Bowes at Poppleton Community Railway Nursery, 22 November 2017.

MB Mike Bowes

NB Nick Beilby

TE Tim Elsworth

BB Bob Brook

JS Jonathan Stockwell

GC Graham Collett

Nick Beilby: Well, I'm Nick Beilby, railwayman, and I've brought with me Mike Bowes, who is the last LNER trained tinsmith and he's in his 90th year and he has some recollections of Poppleton Nursery. And I think you came here as a young lad, didn't you?

Mike Bowes: I came here with my father; he was a very enthusiastic gardener and a friend of Harry's and odd times we would come up here when we were swapping plants, you know.

NB: Who was Harry, Mike?

MB: He was head gardener here, wasn't he? Harry Hoyle.

NB: How do you spell his name?

MB: H-O-Y-L-E

Bob Brook: That's right; that's what we thought.

Tim Elsworth: What was Harry Hoyle in the 1940s?

MB: I couldn't remember that, er. . .

BB: My understanding is he came from Leeman Road with the nursery, so we assumed he was, but we don't know.

TE: Maybe not in a senior capacity.

MB: I get the feeling it could be after the war when Harry started.

TE: This nursery was started in 1941.

MB: '41? So, during the war. But it wasn't done for flowers?

TE: No, they were going to grow fruit and vegetables.

MB: Exactly that's what everybody did during the war, isn't it? Anybody had a bit of land and turned it into an allotment. Well, like they did on Leeman Road, opposite the museum.

NB: So did you come here with your Dad before you started work?

MB: No.

NB: You'd already started with the LNER?

MB: Yes.

BB: So was that during the wartime or after?

MB: Probably just after; I came out of the

forces in '48 and went back to the engineers and me Dad was the driver for the chief engineer. Chief works inspector, sorry. A man called Mitchison.

TE: Was that a road vehicle or rail — engine driver?

MB: Oh no, road vehicle. He was an ex-chauffeur. . . well, it was a big van he had and him and the chief works inspector went from various places, checking jobs out, I would think.

NB: And Poppleton Nursery would have come under them for maintenance, wouldn't it?

MB: Absolutely, yeah. I'm sure I can remember Harry Hoyle coming down to the workshops wanting watering cans made and repaired.

BB: Where were your workshops then?

MB: Leeman Road. You come down Leeman Road and it sweeps to the left — to the right — and under the bridge, well the workshops were just on the left hand side.

BB: S&T workshops, was it?

MB: Signals and Telegraph? No, that was the stores. The Signals and Telegraph stores were there. You got the actual store for the North Eastern Railway, it got a direct hit and it was rebuilt within I would think, 3 months. It was so important and when they built that wall, they thought it was moving, so somebody took a brick out and placed a piece of glass in. Does that make sense to you? To see if it was moving and if the glass split, they knew it was moving. But that's all been knocked down now, hasn't it?

NB: It has, yes.

MB: The old workshop. . . when you went in through the gate, our workshop was right at the top. The next place beyond there was the wagon works which during the war, the Italian prisoners of

war were working there knocking the defunct wagons to pieces. And they were very good craftsmen actually. They'd make anything. Cigarette lighters — anything that required a deft touch, they could do it.

Jonathan Stockwell: If I could possibly add something here — the Italian prisoners of war did some permanent way work on the Derwent Valley during the second World War and I've interviewed one of the people who remember the Italian prisoners of war and she said they were excellent tinsmiths and in fact, one of the Italian POWs made her a cigarette box, cigarette case, which I've actually seen and photographed, so I think they were jolly prolific workers.

MB: They were very good at that sort of thing, yeah. And very amiable lads as well.

JS: They'd walk miles, because they were billeted further shield where they were originally staying and they would think nothing of getting up an hour earlier and walking rather than missing the work.

MB: I don't know where they were billeted because they used to come to Poppleton, they would swim in the river, but they were swimming from the other side, so that would be Overton, wouldn't it? Would there be a POW camp somewhere up there?

TE: I don't know whether there was.

MB: 'Cos the POW camp was at Eden Camp. And the other one was on the racecourse. The Germans were put on the racecourse for a while.

TE: There was a ferry at Poppleton, a foot ferry. They've just been doing the pub in Nether [The Lord Nelson], trying to buy it out and in the promotional material it said that airmen from places like Newton on Ouse would use the ferry to come and drink at the pub in Poppleton. So that's probably how they got across.

MB: The ferry would be at the pub, wouldn't it? The Fox?

BB: Yes, it was virtually at the pub.

MB: From the pub itself down to the river was a fair walk. I'm talking about maybe 70–80 yards before you got to the water and I think the ferry was at the bottom — on the river.

TE: And there's still a cottage in Nether opposite the Lord Nelson which is called Ferry Cottage. That would be where the

ferry keeper would live.

MB: Yeah. But those Italians, they swam, I'm sure somebody told me this — they were only allowed to swim in the middle of the river, not to come across to Poppleton for some reason. [Laughter]

NB: So you've no knowledge of them actually working here at all at the Nursery?

MB: No, no, no. The only place I remember them working was the wagon works where they were breaking old wagons up. They used to come in a big van, a 3-ton lorry and they stayed all day. And they all had these uniforms on with markings on the back which identified them as POWs.

NB: So when you came here with your Dad then, what was the purpose of that? Did your Dad come for some plants?

MB: No, just a social visit. He might have been coming up here to pick some plants up to take to an outlandish [outlying] station somewhere. I don't really know. He could have been swapping plants with Harry. You see, he was a keen gardener, me Dad. He could have been a professional gardener and I would think that they did get together and swap together, you know what I mean? If Harry wanted something that me Dad had he would get it and vice versa.

NB: So some of the plants in your garden would have come from here then?

MB: Possibly. . . [Laughter]

NB: What was your Dad's name?

MB: Walter Bowes. He was a Fulford lad.

BB: Did he work for the engineers all his life or did he. . .

MB: No, I think he came to the railway about 1930 and eventually got a job as like a chauffeur for the chief works inspector and he kept that job till he retired in round about 1970, I think.

NB: So what other memories do you have of coming here, because when we were travelling here, you said: 'I always remember the narrow gauge railway'.

MB: Yeah. Someone — was it you? — was showing me where the engines are. But they used the narrow gauge for moving stuff around, didn't they? On site?

BB: Yes, and of course, they did have the engineers' workshop and narrow gauge railway down there as well, didn't they and narrow gauge wagons down there. The track is still there. Both the S&T

- works and the way works.
- MB:** I don't remember a narrow gauge railway at the P-Way yard.
- NB:** There was — I remember the remains of it and the joiners' shop had some little narrow gauge wagons and we used to put timber on them and wheel them in and out of the sawmill.
- BB:** It all came down here when it closed. The couple [of wagons] we're using today came from the S&T shops. I think they came from the S&T shops on the P-Way.
- MB:** Well, there was no S&T where I worked, that was further down Leeman Road.
- BB:** It was at the level crossing.
- MB:** Was it? The S&T was... as you come down Leeman Road coming into town before you get through the tunnel, the Marble Arch and it was on the left hand side, wasn't it? Signal and Telegraph. The signal stores was on the site of the P-Way yard and it was the last building. And that, during the war, was full of women.
- BB:** You were in your element, were you?
- MB:** No, it was 1942. I was only 14 — no, I'd be 16. But there were several women working in the signal stores there. All wore overalls. Some were as rough as they come.
- NB:** So do you have any other memories of Harry Hoyle and your Dad?
- MB:** Not really, Nick, other than we knew him as a very pleasant man to talk to and easy to get on with and if you wanted anything. Harry would always oblige you. But other than that, I mean, I don't know where he lived.
- TE:** No, we don't know that either. It might be in the diaries; we haven't gone that far [back].
- BB:** Have you got Harry Hoyle's diaries? Do you have all the diaries of the nursery?
- TE:** The diaries start in 1959, so Harry Hoyle must have been here then. He may be in the first one. Some of the diaries do have the staff's addresses in.
- MB:** You think he was still here in '59 then?
- TE:** Well, this article here is 1960 and he was here then so he would have been here in '59.
- MB:** See, I left the railway in 1960, I left yes, so Harry would still be here then.
- TE:** Yes, and I'm not sure of the overlap when Harry Hoyle finished and Graham [Warner] started.
- MB:** I couldn't elaborate on that for you. As I say, after '60, I wasn't here, I wasn't at the railway.
- JS:** Do you know what sort of plants etc. were grown here.
- MB:** Everything! Anything and everything, I would think. For railway use.
- TE:** I am transcribing the diaries and I started in 2004 and at the moment I am working my way back and just started 1982 yesterday, but they have details of what they're doing with all the plants, what they're growing — all that sort of thing. Building the narrow gauge railway and we have details of that and I finished a book earlier on last week which has details from 1988–90 and it gives details of all the floral decorations for special events.
- BB:** Did they have special events and the red carpet here in the era you remember?
- MB:** The thing I remember mainly is they supplied all the outlying stations with plants in the spring, you know, you put bedding plants down, they supplied all that.
- BB:** In those days, the station [staff] would have come in and got the stuff, wouldn't they?
- MB:** Probably, yes. But that was one of the things that they grew and I think they grew tomatoes. I don't know if they sold tomatoes.
- TE:** In the years that I've been transcribing, they grew tomatoes and take them round to the offices and they also sell pot plants.
- NB:** Hanging baskets were the classic. We used to get staff rates on those. That was good. Just as an aside, when I worked in the divisional civil engineers we didn't get too involved, but the technical guy who looked after here and the red carpet was called Derek Wordsworth. Derek was the man that did that — he wouldn't let the rest of us near it. We didn't want to — we wanted to do bridges and buildings. Derek loved the red carpet.
- BB:** Is he still around?
- NB:** No, Derek died about two years ago. He would have been well in his 80s, because when I was in my late teens, he was 50-odd.
- TE:** When I was working at the chemistry department [at the University of York], we

used to have a person [Derek Smith] who was at the training school and Graham [Warner] used to ring them up and say can you make me 50 hanging baskets and only had to make them out of signalling wire which is nasty to work with.

MB: Copper? So where were the hanging baskets made then?

TE: In the training school.

MB: On Poppleton Road then?

NB: And they had a vast amount of backwards and forwards between the two. The engine for the narrow gauge was restored down there and the trucks were, and on the [Training School] Open Days, they would take flowers round to display on the training school Open Days.

MB: So who made the baskets then?

TE: Presumably the trainees.

MB: 'Cos when I worked at Rowntrees we had wire workers there and they made hanging baskets out of galvanised wire.

TE: Were they for Rowntrees use or for railway use?

MB: Private use, I think. [Laughter]

TE: My next door neighbour used to come down here when it was in railway use and they used to get hanging baskets.

NB: So did they sell to the general public as well then?

TE: Not officially. Say no more.

BB: And I think, once they got the bedding plants out, they obviously grew too many for their borders, but they kept them up here for special events. Anything spare just got disposed of, shall we say, rather than wasted.

MB: Of course, yes.

NB: From my memory, which was limited, they were always a good bunch.

JS: Was that flowers?

NB: Well, as I said, we got hanging baskets at staff rates. And they were lovely ones, they really were.

MB: Well, you go to a garden centre now and buy a hanging basket, say first week in June, you're talking about 30–40 quid, aren't you? They do not come cheap.

BB: Not that much. We do them for a lot less. Not as much as that. Half as much as that.

MB: Well, I suppose it depends how many plants are in the basket.

BB: And the cost of the basket. These days people say they want these fancy material plain ones and some you can screw on the wall.

NB: So have we dredged your memory bank totally on here, do you think or here there any other little things that come to mind?

MB: The only other thing I remember is either repairing or making watering cans for Harry but they reckon now that the watering cans here are all plastic.

NB: No good to a tinsmith, is it?

MB: No. They should have been made in copper, shouldn't they? [Laughter]

NB: Do you remember what they look like out of interest?

MB: Yes, a horse pattern — what they call a horse pattern.

BB: One with a long spout?

MB: Yes, a long spout and an oval hole at the top.

BB: Yes, you get a plastic ones like it nowadays. The metal ones cost a fortune.

TE: Yes, like this one.

MB: Yes, that's it. That is a horse pattern, yes.

NB: What were they made of, Mike? You said they should have been copper?

MB: Tin plate.

NB: Tin plate and then you painted them?

MB: But I mean they should have been made in copper then they would have lasted.

NB: What colour did you paint them?

MB: Green. I haven't got one. The one I had has long gone and now I'm into plastic. [Laughter]. The only thing I retrieved from it was the rose that sticks at the top. I'll show you when I get home.

NB: Was that officially owned by the LNER then, the rose?

MB: It was owned officially by me. [Laughter]. It was made at the railway.

NB: Different life in those days, wasn't it?

MB: Yes, we had a good going on there. If you wanted something, you made it. It was a simple as that.

NB: It worked for lots of reasons. If you knew people, you knew how to get things. And I tell people it wasn't all above board, but it wasn't all that bad and things got done because people knew someone who got something and it was dealt with. You weren't spending an arm and a leg and certainly my memories here of the early '80s when I was coming to the end of my time as divisional engineer at Leeds was, Graham the gardener at the time was very proactive because he realised he

- needed to expand and get business elsewhere and we stopped restricting him to the Leeds patch, which was good. But he was quite imaginative bloke for his time.
- BB:** Unfortunately we tried to get him to write his memoirs and work down here one day and having him questioned and answers. I did ask him if he knew Mike but he had no knowledge.
- NB:** Well, I didn't have a lot to do with him but people who did and others who knew of him actually had a lot of time for him, because this place had got run down a little bit and he really put an effort into picking it up. And we used to drop stuff off for him on occasion — I was technical staff, but we used to carry materials and that — and we often used to drop stuff off for him, for him to get on with something, instead of getting our blokes to do it. Because he would.
- BB:** I'd forgotten that.
- TE:** I found something else about those who lived in York and it's probably true; there's a place there used to be a sort of model railway on the Christmas tree at the station, and the Signal and Telegraph used to make all the fancy bits of machinery. That came out of that floral decoration.
- MB:** Yes, well that's just what I mean. You're talking about the Christmas decorations, one of the things we had to do, they built a castle and one of the things I was asked to do was, where you put your penny, your money at the top, it had to go: Bump, bump, bump as though it's going into the cellar and it hit a piece of galvanised tin plate and bounced off onto the next one so it was like I just told you: Bump, bump.
- TE:** I seem to remember there was like a sort of hole you had to get your coin through.
- MB:** And it sounded as though it was going into a cellar. I did that bit.
- NB:** And of course, the civil engineers used to put the Christmas tree up around and *[unintelligible]* provided the model railway. And I remember as a little boy being very disappointed, they had a Hornby 00 [gauge] A4 and they hadn't got a tender for it so they tied the next coach to it with a piece of string. And I was desperate for a Hornby 00 [gauge] A4 but now I've got quite a few. I re-
- member that. And certainly there were a lot of plants provided round the tree that came from here.
- TE:** I do know that from the '80s and '90s they used to do [the trees] here, Leeds and Doncaster and the outlying trees, the plants were collected. I think the Leeds one was done by the civil engineering in Leeds and the York tree was actually put up by the staff here.
- Graham Collett:** Whereabouts was it at the station?
- TE:** It was in the outer concourse. You know where the signal is? Sort of in the corner. Though I can remember it when I was a child, it being in the inner concourse, in the corner near where the big coffee shop is now, underneath where the displays were.
- NB:** That's where I remember it.
- MB:** I remember there'd been street lamp made for the Christmas decorations and it was made in wood and the chief engineer's wife or sister took a fancy to it, so when it came into January, it sort of disappeared and was never seen again. I'm assuming she took it to make into a standard lamp. *[Laughter]*
Well I'm sorry I can't enlighten you lads on anything else I know about other than what I've told you.
- BB:** The Leeman Road site, did you actually go there? When it was a nursery, before...
- MB:** No, the garden was so close to the footpath, I mean the fence. You could put your hands on the railings and the garden was there.
- BB:** Was that the railway garden or were they allotments by that time?
- MB:** Well, it was, I'm not sure now. Weren't both of them there, the allotments and the garden?
- BB:** Yes, that's right. Until they moved it.
- MB:** But during the war you see, they stopped growing flowers and grew vegetables.
- BB:** But when you looked at it, was it flowers before the war in the railway area?
- MB:** During the war it was vegetables.
- TE:** Were the allotments owned by the railway company?
- MB:** It was railway land, wasn't it?
- TE:** So presumably when they were allotments, they were for railway workers or was it for a wider audience?

MB: I'm not sure. I think it would depend on availability. If there were some spare allotments that hadn't been used for five years or more.

TE: I wondered whether, when the war was on, the railway company thought it was in our interests, for a sort of morale point of view as well as we'll get the produce from it to start and they thought we'll take over one or two allotments for official use.

MB: I don't know.

TE: And then they thought, well, that's far too small and then they thought, well and Poppleton was the place.

MB: Probably, yes.

NB: I gather they did provide vegetables of course for the Station Hotel and for restaurants and canteens next to the allotments. When you think the staff canteen was full of engine drivers. I don't know how many hours a day they were open but the drivers were there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

MB: Well, they only had to cross the road from the MPD to the canteen. That was damaged during the war, wasn't it? If you are going down Leeman Road and the allotments were dead opposite the National Railway Museum. Just before there on the opposite side to the Railway Museum was the concrete yard and beyond the concrete yard, that's coming back to York, was the stables, which after it was bombed, it was turned into a canteen. And it's still there — the building is still there.

GC: Is it still used for something?

MB: I don't know.

BB: It's next to the Railway Museum and they've let it go derelict.

TE: That's the one at the end and it had asbestos in it.

GC: Is that still a hostel?

TE: I think so, yes.

GC: So we're not talking about then, we're talking about a building that's now empty a bit further from the very corner?

MB: When you come through the Marble Arch, the first building on the left hand side is [unintelligible] Brake company — isn't that right?

NB: It isn't now, it was then,

MB: Then after that, there was some open land and there was the building which

was the stables which was set on fire and a man got a commendation for rescuing the horses — pulled the horses out. I don't know how many horses there were in. They were the horses that were used for delivering goods.

GC: There's still some stables on the Museum site, isn't there?

MB: On the museum site?

GC: Yes, I believe so.

NB: That's the same one we are talking about opposite where the canteen was. Straight opposite the main entrance to the National Railway Museum.

TE: It's just been allowed to go derelict. That's right. It's owned by the Museum and they haven't got the money — that's part of the issue.

NB: And just past there into the concrete yard, it's where the allotments were.

BB: Was it beyond the concrete yard, further down Leeman Road, where the concrete was?

MB: The concrete works — you come in from town and you've got the building which I say was the stables, then the canteen — the next building was the concrete yard.

BB: And where was the nursery? Beyond that?

MB: Beyond that and then beyond there, it was either King's laundry or Junk's laundry, I can't remember which was which. They became very good building company land — must be worth a fortune on that land. When you went down Leeman Road and stood where the National Railway Museum is you could look North, South, East and West and everything you looked at was railway, wasn't it? Everything. And now it's all what they call brown field site. It must be — I think I read some months ago that it's the most expensive piece of brown field land in Europe. It covers that many acres. When you think about it, it comes from Holgate Road where the carriageworks are, and then up Poppleton Road to where you are talking about where the apprentices' training school was, all that — it was all railway. Must be thousands of acres there.

NB: Have we exhausted you in the nicest possible way of everything?

MB: Well, it's been interesting actually talking to you as well, because we all sort of gel, don't we? I never was a railway-

man as such; I was always — what's the word, Nick?

NB: I hate to say. I don't know what to say.

MB: I never was a railwayman.

NB: You mean an enthusiast?

MB: No, I mean, I never was a driver, a fireman. . .

NB: You were a railwayman, you were a tradesman.

MB: But I never was a railway-man.

BB: You weren't actually involved on the railway?

MB: I was an engineer. There was a difference when I was there. If you didn't drive an engine, you weren't a railwayman.

NB: Well, that did change. I think we all viewed ourselves as railwayman first and whatever else second.

BB: Not nowadays.

NB: You kneeded to know that whatever job you did. You doubled whatever you are on the railway. Just to make trains run. That's your job.
Right, so shall we stop there? Thanks very much for coming. It's been really useful.

MB: Well, I've been very interested listening to you guys talking.

NB: I bet when we go back, you come up with something that you've forgotten about.

BB: Sorry we can't take you down to the potting shed. We can take a train ride, but come in the summer, it's a bit better.

MB: I'll get the wheelchair out.

BB: They had oil lamps. They also had a generator, a 110 watt [volt] generator which still had 110 volt bulbs in them and then also in the 1980s? '70s? '80s? They put gas tanks and Calor gas to heat the greenhouses. And they also put Calor gas lighting in some of the sheds. We've still got Calor gas lights up. We've still got some 110 watt [volt] bulbs and then they went to [mains] electricity in 1991, was it?

TE: 1990s, I think.

BB: 1991, and then went to electricity. So I did wonder when Mike worked for the civil engineers and you were a tinsmith whether you made any lamps for here?

MB: Can't remember, but a lot of the lamps that were repaired in that time were paraffin. Signal lamps.

NB: So did you do Tilly lamps as well, because they could have had those here.

MB: Tilly lamps, yes. Didn't I repair yours?

One of yours? I think I acquired a mantel — it must have been in my toolbox 50 years. Don't you remember?

NB: You need to show me again.

MB: Has it broken? If you touch it, you know, it disintegrates.

NB: Ah well, so really you could have provided us with some for here.

MB: Could have done, yes. All the lamping for the railway system were paraffin. The signal lamps. That was one of the big main jobs that we did — repaired and made. When you think about now, it's going back to the Dark Ages, isn't it, when you talk about using a paraffin lamp to let a steam locomotive go by.

TE: Do they still use paraffin lamps on preserved railways?

MB: Yes.

TE: I was a guard on the Worth Valley and it's only I stopped being a guard that I — when I first started, all the lamps were oil lamps and it was only after that they got electricity with solar panels.

NB: Right. Hope you enjoyed that. I think you have, haven't you?

MB: I've thoroughly enjoyed it. It's been very interesting.

BB: You're welcome and hope you can come and we interview you again? Maybe in the summer when we've got some plants for sale? When it's getting lighter? We'll take the train down to the end.

MB: Thanks very much. And I might be able to remember more things.

BB: We'll try and find the photographs we've got — we know where they are, it's just a case of putting them back together.

TE: I've got to do it in the next two weeks to three weeks as they've got to be back here for the 9th.

BB: Oh right, yes.