

## Riding the Khyber Rails

Kevin Patience

In 1982 I was based in Bahrain and had the opportunity to travel on the last British India Line passenger ship *Dwarka*, affectionately known as the *Queen of the Gulf*. She was one of four sister ships built for service to the Persian Gulf from the Indian sub continent in the late 1940s. By the early 1980s she was the last of the four as air travel had gradually seen an end to these unique icons of a previous era. We sailed from Bahrain to Doha and on to Dubai. It was a delightful voyage with a few first class passengers as well as hundreds of Indian and Pakistani deck passengers returning home at the end of their contracts. After calling at Muscat we docked at Karachi where I flew to Peshawar. I had always wanted to see the Khyber Pass and travel on the once a week train service from Peshawar to Landi Kotal some 2,500 feet higher up in the hills close to the Afghan border. The 32 mile railway was opened in 1925 to enable British troops to be moved to the border region in case of invasion and passes through 34 tunnels and crosses 92 bridges and culverts.



RMS Dwarka alongside at Bahrain

I arrived at Clark's Hotel in Peshawar where I discovered I was an alcoholic. In fact if I wasn't and did not sign a chit then I could not obtain a beer. The following day was Friday and the weekly train trip. Alongside the platform were two cream and green carriages and two goods wagons. Shortly after there were a couple of whistles and along came a pair of 0-6-0 SGS Class tender locomotives, Nos 2437 and 2471. SGS standing for Standard Goods Superheated. These two broad gauge locomotives had been built by Vulcan Foundry in Manchester, among others, for Indian Railways and part of a large consignment of around 1,500 locomotives introduced in 1905 as unsuperheated and later converted. In 1947 the class was split between India and Pakistan at Independence. Seventy years later many were still hard at work. The former 2437 was coupled to the goods wagons as the lead engine while the latter was coupled back to back as the trailing engine. While taking a photograph of the latter I was asked by the fireman to join him on the engine for a cuppa, actually it was an old beaten up tin mug of tea or chai, that tasted good even though it was made with boiler water and condensed milk.



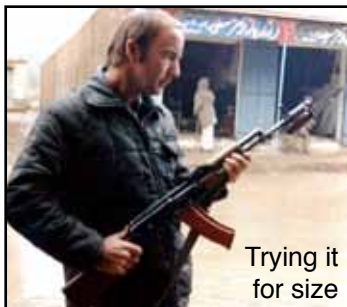
2471 about to leave Peshawar

We set off up the slope out of Peshawar with both locos working hard towards the hills in the distance. As the loco was oil fired there was no coal dust blowing around. We slowed to a halt at the edge of the international airport awaiting clearance from the tower. One of the few places in the world where a railway crosses the main runway. 2471 was showing its age as it rattled and jumped on the uneven track. Looking at the boiler pressure I said to the driver it seems a little low at 120 psi. I thought it should be around 180 psi. He laughed and said it had been like that for a while. Curiosity getting the better of me I indicated I was going out along the boiler running plate to have a look at the smoke box. One of the causes of lack of pressure was a problem with the smoke box vacuum. When riding Garratts in Kenya there was a similar problem with one loco due to a misalignment of the blast pipe with the petticoat on the funnel by about half an inch. Sorted out with a sledge hammer. Sure enough with the loco working hard I stood by the smoke box and could hear air whistling around the edge of the smoke box plate on to which the door was bolted. It was apparent that all the bolts around the plate were loose. Returning to the cab I explained the problem to the driver to which he said it will have to wait until we stopped. I told him we could fix it while running so taking the fireman with spanners, we tightened the nuts and by the time we got back to the footplate the pressure was up to 170 psi. It eventually got to 180 psi and the loco was doing its bit of backward pushing.



Shagai Fort

The track wound its way past the imposing Fort Jamrud and continued into the hills. Before long we had dozens of armed Pathan tribesmen hanging on to the train and riding shotgun on the loco. We watered at Shagai overlooked by another imposing fort built in the 20s before an endless crawl in and out of tunnels and across steel girder bridges and a number of reverses to gain height. This really was an incredible piece of railway engineering officially opened by Mrs Bayley driving the first train into Landi Kotal on 4 November 1925. Apparently it had been decided that Victor Bayley, the engineer in charge would drive the train but he died three months before completion so it fell to his wife to do the honours.



Trying it  
for size

Arriving in Landi Kotal the driver, fireman and I made our way into the square surrounded by small shops selling chai, goat meat samosas, chapatis and AK47 rifles. I was the only European in this extraordinary place and was left with the fireman to have a lunch of chai and samosas while given an AK47 to try for size. Everyone was carrying a rifle of some sort. There were shotguns and antiquated British .303s and the ubiquitous AK47 and for the grand sum of \$200 I could have an AK47 and two magazines of 7.62 mm ammunition. I declined as it could cause problems at home...

Twenty minutes later the driver returned accompanied by a wizened old man bent over carrying a small heavy wooden case on his back using a hessian sack. We returned to the loco where the box was dumped on the footplate. It was at this point while sitting in the drivers seat that Ahmed the driver indicated I could drive the loco back down the pass. He pointed out the steam brake for the loco and the train brake and accompanied by loud whistling we set off. The line drops away as it leaves the station and it's on with the train brake to keep the loco in control. While I was watching the track the driver and fireman set about opening the wooden box. Inside were dozens of Chinese made padlocks that



Exiting a tunnel on to a reverse

had come across the border to be sold in Peshawar for a profit. The spoils were divided into three, with two sacks being stowed in the tender while the third was hidden under the foot plate. All went well and we traversed our way down the pass back to Fort Jamrud and finally on to the plain leading to Peshawar. It was on this run I heard a clang followed by another and another at which point the driver slammed the regulator shut and applied the brakes and we ground to halt in a shower of sparks. The sack had split and the driver's padlocks were falling on to the track. In seconds he was off the footplate and scurrying around under the train looking for his precious padlocks, assisted by numerous tribesmen who were pocketing them as fast as they could. Some ten minutes later we resumed our journey back to town. He had recovered some which he added to a new sack. As we approached the outskirts of town we slowed down to see two men standing by the track. The three sacks were dropped off as we passed and they hurriedly collected the contraband and disappeared. We rolled slowly into Peshawar and I climbed down with the prime thought of an ice cold beer. It had been a hot extremely memorable day on a steam loco entirely unexpected as I had booked a ticket in one of the carriages, but they were so full of tribesmen and others that the invitation to ride the footplate turned out to be one of those great railway journeys.....



Riding shotgun

2437 at Landi Kotal



## Society Baseball Hats

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See John at the track or contact him by e-mail [sales@bearbiz.co.uk](mailto:sales@bearbiz.co.uk) or telephone 023 8086 6002 or 07831 442250. There is a price list on the notice board in the Engine Shed.