

Santon Downham's Narrow-Gauge Railway

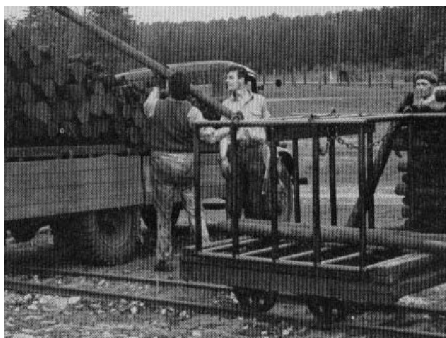
By Barry Griggs

Bill Wittering's comments in FC Today No. B26 regarding the Santon Downham narrow-gauge railway gave food for thought. Throughout my involvement at Brandon Central Depot (BCD), 1979 to 1988, significant amounts of track and rolling stock, believed to have originated from 1914-18, were in daily use.

I had not been able to find any "locals" who could recall the line of the original track bed, but my son knew of my interest and recently raised the question in Mundford Village Bowls Club. As a consequence Len Marsh suggested I contact Basil Branch. Both Len and Basil worked for the FC and lived in Santon Downham. A conversation with Basil revealed that a third life-long employee, Fred Newell, had told him a lot about the railway.

Fred Newell was born in 1911 and died in 1987, having lived within a few miles of Santon Downham. Fred was a man of very few words, a confirmed bachelor, a Norfolk County Bowls player, and greenkeeper to Mundford Village Bowls Club for many years. Basil Branch, also a member, used to join Fred for a pint after bowls matches when Fred would "open up" and chat at length, and the narrow-gauge railway figured in these conversations. Fred's sister married a Canadian soldier from the Timber Corps, which installed and operated the railway.

The sawmill, together with a siding, was situated just south-west of the main railway on the Thetford side of the level crossing, exactly where the old creosote plant was. The railway ran from the sawmill, across the current road bridge, which was supported by props inserted under the arch and bedded on large stones set in the bed of the Little Ouse River, and I am told they are still there. A turntable at the school cottage serviced a branch line, which ran eastwards along the river valley to Little Lodge Farm near Two Mile Bottom. The main line ran westwards through the village to Woodcock Cottage, where it turned due south, presumably using another turntable, giving a straight run to High Lodge on fairly level ground, thus avoiding the hill south west of the village. Presumably the use of the road bridge over the Little Ouse river, the road routes through the village, and the Thetford-to-Brandon B1107 crossing presented no major problems at that time. The main line from sawmill to High Lodge would have been about 2.2 miles, and the branch line to Little Lodge Farm 1.5. So the total was about 4 miles.



My interest stems from the narrow-gauge equipment used at the BCD, and the fact that it was known as Decaville Track. My son-in-law, who is a railway signals engineer and very keen collector of railway memorabilia, has done a little research on the internet and finds that Decaville narrow-gauge railways originated in France and have been used extensively worldwide.

In their book "Thetford Forest, Making a Landscape 1922-1997", Kate Skipper and Tom Williamson state that "...in relation to local great mansion houses, Downham Hall at Santon Downham was already in a fairly run-down state, having been taken over by the military during the First World War and subsequently used by Canadian Forestry Corps". The hall was demolished in 1927. This confirms that the railway was laid down by the Canadian Army Timber Corps during World War One, and that the sawmill site was west of the current main railway line and level crossing near Santon Downham, less than a mile from Downham Hall. The timber harvested during 1914-1918 would have been owned by the old estates, because the FC was not established until 1919.

In 1947 it was decided to establish a central creosoting plant on the old sawmill site to supply the great demand for creosoted pine fencing materials, which were being produced from large thinning programmes. Modifications and improvements continued, and in 1948 some buildings were erected to house a Coles Hurricane Post Peeler, a small, diesel-driven circular saw and three open-topped heated tanks equipped with ex-Royal Air Force gantry and girder systems from an old aircraft hangar (ref. FC Forest Record No.44, 1960). Small bogies running on a narrow-gauge Decaville track moved the stakes. This must have originated with the Canadian Timber Corps, whose sawmill and siding had been previous occupants of the site some 20 years earlier.

A recent conversation with Brian Greenacre resulted in a story from the early days in the creosote plant. Brian's father, Frank, who died in February 2004, worked for FC years ago and did a spell at the creosote plant. One morning his mates put him on one of the bogies and dispatched him down the line. Much to his dismay, further down the line a party came around the corner that included the Conservator,

presumably George Backhouse. With the bogie travelling at speed, jumping off was not an option, so Frank decided to stand to attention and salute. He was sacked on the spot! However, Bill Marsden, the forester in charge, re-installed him one hour later.

The creosote plant was closed in 1970 due to increasing age and tree size, resulting in much reduced production of material suitable, both in size and quality, for fencing products. Conversion of "smallwood poles" and long tops continued at BCD, while some stake lengths were still converted at rack or ride side using chainsaws. By 1975 cross-cutting on a push (liner) saw bench was prohibited, which prompted development of the Swing Sawline, a series of three treadle operated pendulum circular saws, linked by conveyor for sorting and stacking ready for loading. The top saw was linked to the stake peeling and pointing machines, using the creosote plant Decaville track, points, turntables and bogies. They remained in use until the massive run-down in the coal mining industry in the 80s. This resulted in the loss of the pitwood market and the subsequent closure of BCD.

On closure my instructions, as Manager, were to end up with a clear site, which was achieved by the end of April 1988. All the Decaville equipment, rails, points, turntables and bogies were sold to a jam making factory in Tiptree in Essex. So ends my attempt to plot the history of the Decaville equipment used at Santon Downham over its first 74 years.

A number of questions remain unanswered:

1. What was the motive power: steam, horse or man? The bogies were small and the turntables could only accommodate 1 at a time.
2. What products were transported? Not big timber, the equipment was not large enough to cope. Pit props perhaps, or similar, for use in the trenches on the Western front.
3. Basil Branch recalled large orders being dispatched from BCD to the Middle East during the Suez Crisis in the fifties. Were they for shoring up trenches or defences in the desert?
4. What remains of the old track bed, and where is it?

My son-in-law has this historical detail, which he is pursuing further on the internet. Who knows what might result? At least I trust the foregoing might serve to keep rail memories going a little longer.

