

The Ineptitude of a Corona Captive.

I have recently developed great empathy with Basil Fawlty. Remember the scene where Basil beats the uncooperative Morris 1100 with a sapling and announces, "You vicious brute!" The relevance of this will become obvious in about 430 words time!

Along with the other inhabitants of the world, I am in isolation for the foreseeable future. Mercifully I have a workshop and a list of jobs, some of which I have been avoiding for years.

Many years ago Ian and I decided to get our Dad's 3.5" gauge A3, "Spearmint", certified for use at Eggborough. Tony Wall agreed to test the boiler, and insisted on a twice working-pressure hydraulic test. Regrettably the boiler - built to L.B.S.C's instructions with screwed and nutted stays caulked with soft solder - developed a leak at the foundation ring. This proved impossible to remedy, owing to the aforementioned method of construction. Obviously, a new boiler was the order of the day, and Cheddar Valley Steam produced one. Now the cladding would have to be transferred from the original boiler to the replacement. I removed the assembly then realised - I've got to reinstall this! I was 15 when "Spearmint" was being completed; one evening my Dad appeared at my bedroom door with the request, "Just come and hold the cladding in place while I solder it shut." - Just! Dad had made the front conical section from the dome to the fire box by fitting a crinoline at the barrel/ fire box junction, wrapping the cladding around the boiler, overlapping it underneath and soldering it shut! Like a good boy I came and helped. Injunctions such as, "Hold it tighter, I'm nearly done," were bandied about, and I remember the experience as painful, protracted and - most of all - hot. Transfer that from one boiler to another ON MY OWN - I should cocoa! Response: put all of it in a box and ignore for 10 years.

Corona virus arrived and, deciding to tidy my workshop, I found myself looking at "Spearmint's" box thinking that I could try to fit that cladding and reassemble the engine. I hypothesised that I could hold the cladding shut with cable ties, thus avoiding scorching my fingers for a second time. Having prepared the joint I tightened the cable ties and, when I was sure that nothing could go wrong, applied the heat: whereupon the cable ties melted. I tried more and tighter ties - repeatedly - and eventually made the joint. WOW! All on my own! Joyously I removed the binding to find that it had been nowhere near tight enough: a coach and pair could have been driven between the edge of the cladding and the barrel. Enter Basil Fawlty - "You vicious brute!" I removed the cladding and sulked. Looking absentmindedly into "Spearmint's" box I noticed the boiler bands and thought, "I'll try these." More preparation of the joint followed and I installed the boiler bands, which I cranked up good and proper. Magically the cladding just knuckled its metaphorical forehead and basically said, "Oh, that's what you want me to do!" and I made the joint. No burned fingers, no histrionics, no Basil Fawlty. I then reassembled the engine that, apart from understandably needing a boiler repaint looks once more like the thoroughbred we know and love. Hopefully, when the new track is built, Ian and I will introduce you to a thoroughly worthwhile, if ancient, loco.

With "Spearmint" in one piece again - although I won't do the repaint before confirming that all systems work - I opened the other box in the workshop. This contained another long-term project, a 3.5" gauge "Heilan' Lassie". Dad had started the project but dropped it like a hot potato when Clarkson's put plans for the A3 on the market: as a Gresley man he never really wanted to build a Thompson A1! Once "Spearmint" was complete, he wheeled "Lassie's" chassis (read that aloud!) across the bench and said, "There you are, my boy, you finish that!" At this point the project stood at frames, wheels and centre-cylinder-with-valve-gear. I duly made a start, then went to college, married, became a father, taught and retired. Occasionally I made a piece and put it in the box. Four years ago I had reached the stage where I could time the valves and try to run the chassis on compressed air. To my amazement the left and centre engines ran, but the right set had a mind of its own! The best that it would do was half a revolution forwards, followed by half a cycle backwards!! For a long time I tried to rectify this problem by valve adjustment, but to no avail, so registered my puzzlement and frustration by parking the whole project on a shelf and glaring at it. "Spearmint" now reassembled, I unaccountably found myself putting "Great Northern" on the bench and recommencing hostilities. A further fruitless day's fiddling ensued, during which I concluded that the right hand cylinder was opening both inlet ports almost simultaneously - so the valve must be the wrong length. Bill Holland agreed with my diagnosis, and a lesson in measuring valve movement was given by John Simon. This involved measuring from where the valve began to crack open, (and the rest!) Since the engine has piston valves I found this

to be a frustrating procedure. I recall a fit of enthusiasm in which by fettling the half-made expansion link I erased all the setting out, including the trunnion locating mark. My subsequent teenage guestimate has resulted in a difference between left and right cylinder valve travels of 2.1 mm. I thought of making an adjustable temporary valve, which would involve adding shims to each end until a workable dimension had been reached. When I mentioned this to Ian he hit the nail right on the head by saying, "No, cut the valve in two, and put the shims in the middle!" (GENIUS. Why didn't I think of that?) I followed his advice, and was eventually rewarded by having three cylinders that work. CRIKEY! Encouraged by this I have unearthed all the other pieces, and am now trying to make sense of the jigsaw. I return to Dad's comment of 53 years ago, "There you are, my boy, you finish that!" Hey ho! Time (further time) will tell.

