

'In our stable by the sea

five and twenty strong are we ...'

starts one of Robert Louis Stevenson's poems, about railway engines in America. It could almost sum up the achievement of John Burnie, born 1946, who organised the Scottish Railway Museum at Bo'ness Station, and died of a heart attack at home in Dunfermline on 20 November 2009.

John joined the Scottish Railway Preservation Society in 1964, not long after its foundation. His father Alf had been an engineer at Rolls-Royce and John took engineering at Strathclyde when it was still a profession with prospects in Scotland: the QE II was building at Clydebank, the first rigs were on the North Sea. John rose as high as you could as a chartered engineer, ending his career in 2002 as Shift Manager at Longannet Power station, the second-largest in Europe, and so the man capable of plunging the whole of Scotland into cold and dark, if he had not been up to the job.

But his real fascination was railway engineering, which in 1961 was sadly diminished by the death of the North British Locomotive Company and the impending closure of half the Scottish railway system at the hands of Dr Beeching. A popular agitation saved most of the long rural arteries under threat, with the exception of the Waverley line and most of the old Great North of Scotland Railway, but throughout the country the effective end of freight traffic would soon destroy the character of a railway system not much changed from Victorian times.

John turned up just as the SRPS acquired the first place at which it could keep full-sized exhibits like locomotives, wagons and carriages, the old transit shed at Falkirk Grahamston, at a cheap rent because the far end of the roof had caved in during a fire. I recollect him as a cheerful version of Kipling's MacAndrew, never wholly oil- or coal dust-free, emerging from inside or under engines or trucks, diagnosis to hand.

But John was much more than this. He was one of the main advocates of a move from Grahamston to Bo'ness, because his vision for the SRPS wasn't just operating its own branch-line – which after 1989 ran to Birkhill; a main-line connection at Manuel Junction came in 1991 – but far more ambitious: to make Bo'ness a centre for restoration, excursions, and exhibiting Scotland's railway past: how it all fitted together. By the time he finished his 'day-job' Bo'ness had a larger and more handsome station than most central-Scottish towns (largely composed of the long-disused train-shed from Edinburgh Haymarket) and sheds for locomotives, carriages and the Scottish Railway Museum collection: an investment running into millions. Once retired, he got himself a Museum Management diploma from St Andrews, and before his tragically early death he was contemplating new workshops and – with an eye on the railway renaissance he had always believed in – apprenticeships as a start in rebuilding the industry that had existed in his childhood.

His death at only sixty-three is a terrible blow to his wife Anne and his children Jenny and Andrew. Hundreds in and around Bo'ness who will mourn a kind and cultivated man whose interests in music and the classical world went far beyond Bo'ness and railways. But his monument is also a reborn railway, and the need he saw to re-learn engineering from the past, and apply it to an uncertain future. He was, as Rudyard Kipling once wrote, a true Son of Martha:

It is their care in all the ages,

To take the buffet and cushion the shock.

It is their care the gear engages;

It is their care the switches lock.

It is their care the wheels run truly;

It is their care to embark and entrain

Tally, transport and deliver duly

The sons of Mary by land and by main.