

## Notification of Deaths – The DG Replies

By Tim Rollinson

In the December issue Richard Toleman wrote a piece about how disappointed the FCA was that the Forestry Commission had to stop providing information on the death of employees. I am responding in this short article.

Following FCA concerns to me over this issue, I invited Richard and other FCA representatives to Silvan House to discuss the matter. In advance of the meeting we sought a definitive opinion from the Commissioner of Information about what we could and could not do. The COI told us that it was now contrary to both the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts for us to supply names to a third party about the deaths of our pensioners. The reason we were given was that there was a duty of care to anyone still living who could be harmed in any way by the release of such information. This was a new position. Clearly, none of us knows what harm may be caused by releasing such information and - while we may feel that any such effect will not be great - we are now required to stop the practice. I passed this information to the meeting.

The Forestry Commission is a close-knit organisation and members of the retired community equally stay in close contact with one another. We are assured that there is no problem with personal networks informing each other of news about changes in the personal details of former colleagues, and we shall encourage the FCA to use its contacts to gather the information and maintain the networks.

When talking with the COI it also became apparent that our practice of notifying the FCA of the names and addresses of retiring employees was also a contravention of the legislation and, we were told, must cease

immediately. We are now discussing how we may help the FCA to make retiring employees aware of the Association and of the value of joining.

Since the FCA was established, there have been significant alterations in legislation. So we must change our previously acceptable practices. I want to assure members that this is not a policy change by the Forestry Commission, and we are not aiming to make life difficult for the Association. We must, however, ensure that we do not fall foul of current legislation.

The changes are unfortunate. The FCA provides a valuable link for retired employees with the Commission, for which many worked for most of their career, and provides an excellent opportunity for people to stay in touch with old colleagues.

### Oh to be a Warrener

Les Purver, now retired to Newark, sent me a short note about his life in the early days of the FC. I am publishing it because it encapsulates those gentle years before we became target obsessive and initiative driven. Les is 88 and his wife 90.

*I was a gamekeeper, like my father. When I was called up for the War, I served in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. It was very hard going. I entered as A1, but was downgraded and put in the Artillery. After I was demobbed I went back to game keeping. Later I joined the FC as a warrener, finally being graded to Sn. Ranger 1 Conservation.*

*In 1978 my doctor said I should retire on the grounds of poor health. I knew he was right. So from 61 my life has been limited. I used to visit local woodlands and observe wildlife. From then on it was a case of birds, butterflies and bees: they are all different. Even the trees to me are majestic. Yes – I have enjoyed my retirement, and still do, in a limited way. There is so much to observe with those eyes to see.*

### Events 2006

**Dean FTS Reunion Dinner** Speech House, Saturday October 14th. Contact: Bart Venner, e-mail: [barten@swea1.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:barten@swea1.fsnet.co.uk)

**AGM & Tour** Tues/Wed. May 16/17th. Contact: Local Group Secs. or David Hughes 01874 610121

### From the Editor

After the retirement of Anne Craig at Silvan House, who used to type the FCA Today draft, the lack of replacement has resulted in HR being unable to offer typing facilities for future issues. I am no typist, and could never tackle the typing of a full issue. Will all contributors in the future please send items as a WORD DOCUMENT ATTACHMENT TO AN E-MAIL or a straight e-mail. I'll do the editing on my computer, and e-mail it to Communications Branch for publication. If you don't have access to a computer, ask a friend or family. However, I don't want to exclude those without such access, so if an e-mail is impossible, send it anyway, and I'll do my best to include it.

My e-mail address is: [toleman@onetel.com](mailto:toleman@onetel.com)

### Membership News

Readers will know that the FCA will no longer be notified of the deaths of members, nor of new retirees. While the former may cause embarrassment and confusion, the latter could result in lack of recruitment, with dire results. Human Resources has offered to advise retirees of the existence of the FCA, and to include in the retirement pack any letter we may prepare giving Group names and contacts. Although we cannot contact retirees directly, this passive solution is the best available. This decision is the result of the interpretation of the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act. Although I believe that the drafters of the Acts did not have such targets as retirement associations in mind, the law of unintended consequences invariably operates. So when you do hear of the names of deceased members or new retirees, please let your Group Secretary know. You should still send obituaries to me for publication, preferably by e-mail. My e-mail address is: [toleman@onetel.com](mailto:toleman@onetel.com)

# Santon Downham's Narrow-Gauge Railway

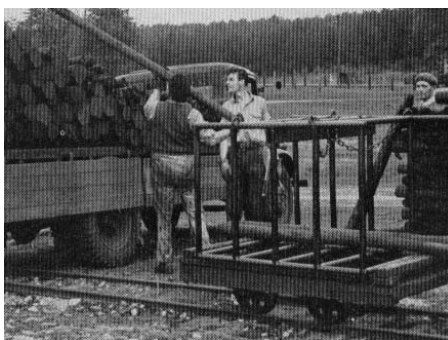
By Barry Griggs

Bill Wittering's comments in FC Today No. 26 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.

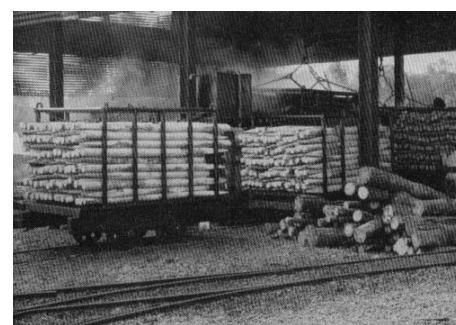
The creosote plant was closed in 1970 due to increasing age and tree size, resulting in much reduced production of material suitable, both in size and quality, for fencing products. Conversion of "smallwood poles" and long tops continued at BCD, while some stake lengths were still converted at rack or 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.



# Alistair Scott: An Appreciation

Alistair died in December. These are the musings of some of his friends.

**RON MARNIE:** To be with him was a constant joy of pleasure and involvement. I always found conversations with him to be challenging and never trite. He was a deeply serious man with a great sense of fun and humour. He was a very pawky man, and often one would have to work pretty hard to stay with him, but it was always worth it.

I shared an office in Fochabers with Alistair for several years and it was enjoyable to work alongside him. He was a huge lover of things natural, and I well remember one evening standing together in the vast rookery in Mosstodloch, silent under the pole stage pines, waiting for the thousands of rooks to settle in their roost for the night. Another occasion was at Loch Spynie watching the vast numbers of wild duck coming into spend the night on the loch.

I have happy recollections of many journeys shared on the way to Aberdeen for the monthly meetings. On one of those we stopped at the top of the Tyrebagger Brae to see the new thing – an orienteering course. Sandy Greig was Alistair's assistant in those days, and the three of us stood reading the instructions at the start of the course. Sandy galloped off into the forest, to return a few moments later bearing the first of the huge wooden posts with the symbol on top, which he had uprooted. He laid this at Alistair's feet - much as a puppy would bring a stick to his master - and asked Alistair what to do next! It took the three of us all the way to the Aberdeen office to sober up. I shall miss him a lot.

**ANDY NEUSTEIN:** For Alistair, nature (now unpoetically defined as biodiversity) and its

trees, singly and in their various assemblies, were a vocation. Like others in the Commission, he had postings of romance and prosaic regulatory administration, but throughout, his singular joie de vivre never failed to surface to the delight of his friends.

At his retirement party he retold the classic anecdotes of the 'Old Firm' in order to sustain its oral heritage - a merry precursor of his later joy in assembling and publishing anthologies and historical collections. He was a pioneer in celebrating heritage trees, but his palette stretched further. Perhaps a quotation from his "15 Ways of Listening to a Blackbird" says much.

*"I value my garden more for being full of blackbirds than of cherries, and very frankly give them fruit for their song." (Joseph Addison)*

**SANDY GREIG:** I first met Alistair in October 1976, when I joined the FC in Fochabers. He was my first boss. My life since then has been hugely enriched through knowing him.

After Moray he was in charge of Forest Management in Wales, and then to Edinburgh as Head of Private Forestry and Environment. While very much an individual, he saw the need to work with the grain of the FC, and was very influential in the move in the '80s and '90s to enhance the environmental acceptability of forestry in Great Britain. He was a good listener and a fine naturalist, and he understood the environmental arguments. He was a great believer in the ICF, and many meetings benefited from his thoughtful contributions.

The breadth of his interests and enthusiasms was huge. He had a restless

imagination and great curiosity. He was a wonderful conversationalist, imaginative and interesting. It was great fun to be in his company. I remember a car journey from Elgin to Edinburgh, the discussion ranging from landscapes to rugby, to Scottish country dancing, to philosophy. Jon Westlake recalled an interview for a conservation forester job in Wales, most of the time spent on the works of Walt Whitman. Some found Alistair difficult to follow: I found him enormously stimulating and enjoyable company.

Alistair was, if anything, invigorated by retirement. He set off with the intention of growing all the (76?) native umbellifers in his garden in the Grange. I recall a great day scouring the chalk pits near Cambridge for seeds. He produced a variety of leaflets and books, including 'A Pleasure in Scottish Trees', 'A Recollection of Birds' and 'Trees of the Grange'. I remember his saying that the great benefit from his knowledge of trees was that it allowed him to peer over the high walls of the Grange, identify some unusual specimen, and thereby engage the owners in conversation that led, almost inevitably, to privileged entry. How many acquaintances did he make by this simple ruse?

My favourite is 'Delights', written while Alistair was undergoing chemotherapy in the Western General in 2002. 'The test of a delight', he writes, 'is simple but absolute. Can it, whatever it is, be relied upon invariably?' He starts with Digging Potatoes and works through Late Night Bookshops, Garden Tools ('should preferably be inherited or, if bought, bought from a junk shop or among the last lots in a rump or auction'), Skeins of Geese, Bonfires, Parrots, Peregrines, Punting, Dorset Place Names, New Socks, Snowball Fights, French Onion Soup....

I have a number of postcards (idiosyncratic) and short letters from Alistair, always amusing, off-beat, observant. After a visit to Cambridge:

'There are many trees of interest in the Botanic Gardens, but to my mind, only 1 knockdown and drag-out: the wonderful Black Walnut – difficult to imagine a better tree anywhere. Surprising to find a piper in the centre of Cambridge. Disconcerting to hear him play Blue Bonnets over the Border, but he was wearing mittens.'

He was a wonderful man, and a fine friend. I shall delight in the memory of you Alistair, invariably.

**WILLIE SHERIDAN:** When Alistair took up the post of Director Private Forestry & Environment, he held the view that environmental aspects should be an opportunity for woodlands, not a burden. The major changes in the forestry tax regime & grant schemes gave him the opportunity to put this into practice. "Open space is not wasted space" was his motto.

## O Tempora, O Mores !

The Christmas Lunch at the Edinburgh Zoo of the Edinburgh & S. Scotland Group was the usual merry family affair. Although one could have shouted "BINGO!" with 3 ex-DG's aligned, the main talking point in the nostalgic post-prandial mingling centred on the less than humane decision of the mis-named Human Resources Division, viz. neither retiral nor death of FCA resources can now be notified to the FCA. Perhaps there could be a box to tick in the HR database. i.e. I would like my ex-colleagues to be informed of my death, so that my partner does not get inappropriate Christmas cards from old friends.

It does not appear possible to persuade FC to turn away from this high-octane political correctness.(bio-die-versity?) However, the mood, was as up-beat as ever, and some memorabilia comments are remembered:

*Beyond belief!*

*Mair to be pitied than laughed at!*

*We had esprit de corps once. (pun unintended).*

*They weren't shy of calling me half-dead at my appraisal interview.*

*If I recited a list of the deceased outside HQ, would I get arrested as a terrorist?*

*I would rather FC wasn't told of my death than the converse, - for financial reasons!*

*PC gone mad!*

*All in all, a great party.*

*Anon.*

## OBITUARIES

Geoffrey Hutton writes of **JIMMY FLETCHER**, who died in November. He retired as Road Foreman in 1993 after 42 years' service.

Jimmy was born in Carradale in 1928 and spent his early working years as a trawler fisherman, interrupted only by military service. He joined the FC as a trapper in 1951, and later transferred to the road squad. Well known locally, Jimmy would chat to anybody, anywhere, at any time. He listed his hobbies as fishing, firewood, his Collie dog and caravan touring. He was also interested in politics and church activities. He was devoted to his wife, Alice, and had been looking after her during her illness before she pre-deceased him. Alice had also worked in the FC squad, and her journalist father founded the Argyll Advertiser.

Paul Barwick and Andrew Powers remember **AUSTEN GALE**, who died in July.

Austen served for 27 years in Sherwood Forest District, and qualified as its elder statesman and repository of anything worth knowing about forest management. It is in this role that he is most fondly remembered, prefixing advice to younger foresters with a very Yorkshire "Youth" before imparting wisdom or admonishment for naïveté. In this respect, Austen was a no-frills forester with such a grasp of the basics that he was able to educate even senior staff when their green credentials derived from inexperience rather than the environment. And he managed to do so without causing argument or offence! Quite brilliant. He also had the knack of ignoring any instructions from headquarters considered to be of little practical merit.

Austen, curiously for an old-fashioned forester, was years ahead of his time. We may now consider recreational management a recently acquired part of our daily work. However, he was living and working in what still remains the busiest public woodland in the District, and had endless time and consideration for its local users, earning respect and making many friends - and still holds the record for the number of Christmas trees sold! His interest in the management of "his" beat extended beyond retirement, and he was a constant source of information and advice, keeping a succession of junior staff on the silvicultural rails.

Austen's personal interests were as varied as his experience was long. Since his school days in Yorkshire, he had an abiding interest in American Indians, on which subject he was an acknowledged expert and which took him to Oklahoma to meet and befriend the subjects of his hobby. He was also fond of opera, and there was a story, hotly denied, that he spent the greater part

of his National Service in the RAF at Covent Garden in order to hear Maria Callas sing! Undoubtedly apocryphal, but we prefer to believe it.

Local history was another passion, and he collected antiquarian books on Nottinghamshire and historic Sherwood, becoming something of an authority on the subject. He was also Chairman of the Mansfield branch of Headway: a charity dedicated to providing information, support and services to people with a brain injury and their families. He was a tireless worker for the Church that he attended in Southwell with his wife, Helen, after his retirement. He will be greatly missed.

Christine Mackay writes of her friend, **MARGARET GEBBIE**, who died in September. Margaret started with the FC in 1953, working as clerkess at Elibank and Glentress. Having seen it through its little idiosyncrasies in a thorough and conscientious fashion, she took early retirement in 1984 to nurse her mother. She was a life-long fundraiser for local and national charities, in particular Cancer Research. She will be greatly missed for her mischievous sense of humour, her kindness and generosity to people and animals, and especially her love of cats.

Val, **JIM COLLIN'S** wife, told me that he died last June. He trained at Benmore and Faskally and spent his early years in the Lakes at Thornthwaite, Ennerdale and Braithwaite. In 1976 he was promoted to Head Forester at Torrachilty. He was a keen gardener and enjoyed outdoor bowls, and was both member and green keeper at Nairn Bowling Club. He was also very interested in steam trains, right from the time when as a boy, he lived across the road from Bellingham station, and used to help load stock on to the wagons.

Jim Davidson and Ben Thompson, who both have family connections, recall **ROBERT (BOB) HOWARD**, who died in October.

Following a stint in Australia that included National Service in the Australian Army, Bob returned to this country, working in a Forestry Commission nursery in Wales before being offered a place at the Dean Forester Training School in 1952. On successfully completing the course, he joined North Scotland Conservancy, where he remained. Initially he was stationed in Oykel Forest on forest management. Later he was posted to Training Branch, based at Culloden, which involved enthusiastic participation in the Forest Worker Training Scheme. In September 1965 he married Elizabeth MacIntyre, the clerkess at Farigaig Forest. He returned to forest management

at Fort Augustus, but promotion saw a move to Strontian, his first post in charge. His final posting was Farigaig Forest, and for Elizabeth this completed the full circle. Bob retired early on medical grounds and remained at Inverfarigaig, having bought his FC house. Later they moved to a bungalow constructed on her family's neighbouring land, where they ran a thriving bed and breakfast business.

Bob was an enthusiastic and diligent forester, and his firm but fair management of staff and a sound practical approach gained respect. His presence was often first detected by a loud and distinctive voice, no doubt an asset, because others in the vicinity were usually well aware of him!

Outwith forestry he served as a member of the Highland Region's Children's Panel. Well read and articulate, it was a pleasure meeting him socially when he enjoyed serious discussion on a wide range of topics, not least the state of Welsh rugby, having been brought up in Wales. Any conversation with him was enlivened by a mischievous sense of humour and a raucous laugh. He always appreciated a glass of whisky too. Undoubtedly a memorable character in the FC.

Obituaries for Dallas Mithen & Alan Rae will appear in the next issue.

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Check with contacts for exact area covered.

