

Chertsey's

GREAT LITTLE RAILWAY

Chertsey's best-kept secret, the Great Cockcrow Railway steams into a half-century this month, Robin Evans pays a visit.

PHOTOS: Robin Evans

RIGHT: Driver Steve and his Black 5 engine await their signal to depart

BELOW: The ticket office at Great Cockcrow Railway

Pausing at a red signal, our driver scoops a handful of chestnuts into the firebox of his little engine. With a wink at my small son he says: "You'll understand when we reach the tunnel." We do: with a toot of his whistle he swirls the darkness with the sweet aroma of chestnut steam.

It's touches like these that define the multi-generational, yet childlike appeal of the Great Cockcrow Railway (GCR). I was introduced as a child and have recently started returning the favour to my own. Driving this pilgrimage was the rediscovery of a forgotten memento:

my family made it onto an official GCR postcard from 1990.

Three decades (and generations) from my first visit and now cocooned by mature woodland, it still feels both public treat and well-tended secret. There are around 40 miniature railways in Britain, but what makes the GCR so special and how did it start?

Half century of steam

In 1946, Walton-on-Thames resident John Samuel began work on an unusual garden project. His realistic, ¾ mile, labour of love in miniature was known as the Greywood Central Railway. Upon his death in 1962, the project resonated with Ian Allan, who as a 20-year-old railway clerk in 1942, published his ABC of Southern Locomotives. The one-shilling guide capitalised upon our post-war steam fascination, fuelling the Ian Allan Publishing group.

Both group and guide survive to this day, Allan receiving the OBE in 1995. With the help of Samuel's original team, some of whom still remain aboard, Allan rebuilt the railway on a larger site at Cockcrow Hill on the outskirts of Chertsey.

The acronym GCR remained, becoming the Great





‘In 1946, Walton-on-Thames resident John Samuel began work on an unusual garden project. His realistic, ¾ mile, labour of love in miniature was known as the Greywood Central Railway’

Cockcrow Railway. In tribute, the aforementioned tunnel is named the ‘Greywood Tunnel’. There are further historical clues too: the highest point, Piggery Summit, alludes to the former use of the site. This month marks the 50th anniversary of the reopening of the station in September 1968 and six years ago, on his 90th birthday, Allan opened the new station building that serves as our entrance back to the heady heyday of 1950s steam.

General Manager Richard Mallett helps humorously direct the operation. A volunteer for 12 years, he juggles a fleet of engines that carry thousands of visitors annually. He coordinates his team with a nod towards the junior travellers: “I always talk to the kids,” he says “I enjoy the banter.” Indicating the next engine to depart, he jokes: “It’ll be the cleanest we’ve had, the amount of polishing it’s getting.”

I show him my postcard, explaining that the third generation of my family (who periodically and excitably interrupt) are returning to Cockcrow. “That’s a fabulous, timeless thing,” he declares. Steam seems to be a potent force and Richard gives a surprising example: he recognises our driver from that day in 1990. “That’s Jamie Lester, one of our longest-serving members. He was selected as the fireman on Winston Churchill’s funeral engine in 1965.”

Richard explains that this history extends beyond the staff: “We have a few of the original Greywood engines, some easily over 75 years old.” They’re painstakingly handcrafted: “It could take 10 years to build one of these engines in spare time, a huge commitment.” It isn’t purely a male preserve either. “Our oldest engine we can date back to ▶

NEED TO KNOW

The Great Cockcrow Railway,
Chertsey, Sat Nav: KT16 OAD
Tel: 01932 565474
Web: cockcrow.co.uk

Open Sundays from May to October
plus Wednesdays in August.



Tooting the whistle: a lesson for junior passengers Isabella and Lewis Evans from driver David Grant

1913 from picture evidence of the time. It's just been repainted and is owned by one of our female drivers."

Some first saw these engines in the pages of Allan's initial ABC guide; Richard considers this proof of the enduring legacy of steam. "For those from that era, there's something special, a romance and adventure about it – and they look and smell wonderful," he says. As diesel engines pushed their predecessors onto the sidings, miniature rail became an outlet for the skills and enthusiasm. He explains: "Cockcrow was always constituted as a British Railway of the 1950s. The engines are faithful replicas of mainline engines of the time and all our procedures and signalling are still in period style."

The site has been carefully managed, with only subtle additions over the last few decades. Two different, mile-and-a-quarter loops mean you might spend more time riding than waiting. This allows the GCR to retain an unhurried character. "We don't advertise and we're all about the quality of the experience," says Richard.

Small scale, big character

The engines run on a 7¼in rail, an eighth of the 4ft 8½in standard devised by George Stephenson. This makes children universally delighted; everything



A friendly wave from the signaller at Cockcrow Hill

is their size. Driver David Grant, in oily blue coverall and battered leather cap, strolls down the platform to greet his passengers: "Are you ready team?" There's some cheeky platform banter: "It's the best engine...and the grimmest driver," some say. Puffing along to the click-clack of rails, even the engine seems to be enjoying itself.

The signaller appears from his box to wave: children, big and small, reply in kind. A field away is the buzz of the M25, disconnected drivers unaware of our slow-time travel. David shows us his miniature cab with tiny levers operated by fingertip. He pushes diddy lumps of coal into the firebox on a long-handled spoon. A small space behind his seat serves as a shelf for the tools that sustain driver and engine: an oilcan and sooty mug.

The GCR is seasonal prior to opening in May and the volunteer

team works through a winter maintenance programme to keep the engines at their best. This year, the 50th anniversary event (held in summer) expanded beyond the site for the occasion, visitors brought in by vintage bus and entertained by period sideshows then this month it's the September Gala featuring visiting engines. The next speciality is the annual Halloween Evening, with trains driven after dusk by devilish drivers. Says Richard: "It's completely different, even to us, in darkness lit by headlamps. Many attend in fancy-dress, it's a really nice way to sign off the season." He adds with a chuckle: "Hopefully all will have a good time and then I might retire...for the second time."

The trains aren't delayed but aging seems to be, such is the pulling power of the little engine. All aboard! ♦