



Meteor I at Buxton.

The Meteors

Stuart Madgin

Meteor locomotives have become a feature of miniature railways in Britain since their production during the brief period 1968-1971. They came into being as a result of the 'rent-a-train' concept developed by the Ian Allan organisation at that time. This was to provide standardised, functional miniature railway equipment and installations, mainly at seaside amusement sites. All of this grew largely out of Ian Allan's personal involvement with the 7¼-inch gauge Great Cockcrow railway at Chertsey, Surrey. Here, technical and operational lessons were learnt for later application on the 10¼ inch gauge; indeed, by the mid-1970s when the railway enterprise ceased, the company had been connected in some way with the development of about 10 different railways, several of which still exist in some form or another.

Two 7¼ inch gauge locos were designed by Mr Alistair McLeod, a railwayman at Euston, and Mr Alf Pitfield, who produced them at his Shepperton Metal Products engineering works. This 4wDM design was called the Thunderbolt, and Thunderbolts I and II were built in 1968 with 3hp Petter AA1 engines. Both were new to the Beaulieu Gardens MR at Bognor Regis. No. I went to Great Cockcrow in 1970, was sold to Ruislip Lido Railway in 1981, and on to a private owner in Bucks. in 1986. II went to Great Cockcrow c. 1981, then to Mr D Scarrott in 1985. It was acquired by Jeff Price in 1985 and regauged to 10¼-inch. Loaned to Paradise Park, Broxbourne, Herts. in 1989-90, 'Derek' as she was now named, returned to Watford MR, then Vanstone Woodland Railway in Herts. in 1991, and to Fritton Lake, Norfolk in 1996.

This 7¼inch gauge design was then developed into the standard 2-4w-2DM 10¼-inch Meteor loco, of which 10 were built, all at Shepperton Metal Products. (one was 18 inches shorter and called a Comet).

These Meteors were 9ft long x 2ft, and of simple, utility design with two chain-driven central axles, powered by Petter diesel engines. The later models were more powerful, with a modified transmission arrangement. The main departure was No. V, which was fitted experimentally with a petrol engine. The variations are as follows:

I - IV: Petter AB1 4.5 BHP engines, Albion multi-plate dry clutch, Albion gearbox

V: Reliant Regal 700cc engine, 4-speed gearbox and reverse box

VI: Petter 4.5 BHP engine, four speed gearbox and reverse box

VII - IX: Petter ACI 6.5 BHP engine, four speed gearbox and reverse box.

Comet: Petter AB1 4.5 BHP engine, Albion type clutch and gearbox

(The locos were originally fitted with Roman numerals as numbers; some were later fitted with brass nameplates).

The Hotham Park railway which opened at Bognor Regis in 1969 was often used as the testing ground for the new Meteor locomotives, priced at £1350 each ex-Shepperton works. The Alexandra Park railway built at Hastings in 1970 served the same purpose, and surplus locos were stored at both sites at various times. The engines have all been extensively used and sometimes worked in tandem, but their movements over the years have been difficult to unravel. However, whilst the Ian Allan organisation remained engaged in railway operating, they tended to circulate within certain established sites such as Bognor, Hastings, and Skegness, although unidentified locos were tried out on the Wells & Walsingham, and Weymouth Bay railways. Since about 1975, the Meteors have been dispersed around the country. In certain cases, such as No. I they worked the same railway for years; or they may have been unused and become derelict. It is remarkable, however, that in 30 years only No. VII has been completely dismembered. The following is as accurate a picture of the Meteors' individual histories that we can compile.



Meteor IV at a temporary portable railway at Waterhall Farm, Herts.



Comet 'Sandown Castle' at Vanstone Park

Meteor I. Built in 1968, this loco featured in Ian Allan's 'rent-a-train' brochure, and had trials at the Hastings seafront railway. It was supplied to the Whitby Railway, and possibly Hotham Park before returning to Shepperton for alterations. It then moved to the Pavilion Gardens Railway at Buxton and, named 'Borough of Buxton', operated there until 1998 when it was sold in June per Alan Keef Ltd. to the Wensleydale Railway at Leeming Bar, North Yorkshire.

Meteor II. Built in 1969 and worked at the short-lived Eirias Park railway at Colwyn Bay before moving to Hotham Park and replacing Meteor I at Whitby. Sold to Severn-Lamb in 1982, it moved to the Watford railway in 1983, where it remains in operation.

Meteor III. Built in 1969, moved to Hotham Park in 1970 and then possibly to Alexandra Park, Hastings. If so, after the closure of this railway it moved with Meteor VII to Buckfastleigh, Devon, and then to Liverton. It was rebuilt in 1978 as a 4wDM, and supplied to the Exmouth Miniature Railway in 1993, where it is still in service.

Meteors III, VII and VIII were seen at the premises of a Mr Whittington, Old Bersted, Sussex in June 1975; presumably they were there for storage or repairs.

Meteor IV. Built in 1969, it was the first locomotive at the new Alexandra Park railway in Hastings, after trials at Bognor Regis and Weymouth. It has been suggested it worked at Skegness as well, until the end of 1975, and then moved to a private, and then a public railway, at Chapel St. Leonards, Lincolnshire. Purchased in 1988 by Vanstone/Knebworth Park Railways, it has operated at both sites, as well as the lines at Fritton Lake and Water Hall Farm.



Above – Meteor VIII with steam outline body, at Paradise Park Railway, Hoddesdon, Herts. Below - Meteor VII at the Watford Railway



Meteor V. Built in 1970, it was trialled at Bognor Regis and Fritton Lake before moving to Hastings. Thought to have been the construction loco at Prestatyn Railway in 1971/2, it then either returned to Hastings or was stored at Great Cockcrow and Shepperton, then to Hastings by 1974. It was purchased by the Watford Railway in 1981, then by Mr A Everett in 1996; renovated, it now operates at the Knebworth Park railway, having also run at Water Hall Farm and Fritton Lake.

Meteor VI. Delivered new to Skegness in 1970, and operated there until 1975 when it moved to the Hastings seafront railway. It was sold to the Watford Railway in 1985, moved to Knebworth in 1996 and is now at Vanstone Park.

Meteor VII. Built in 1971, it worked at Skegness from new, was transferred to Hotham Park in 1975, and moved, with Meteor III, to Devon in 1977. It was dismantled to be rebuilt as a diesel hydraulic but this project was not completed and the loco no longer exists.

Meteor VIII. Built in 1971, and after Hotham Park it moved to a new line at Queen's Park, Chesterfield via Cromar White in 1976, fitted with a BR diesel loco style body. It was sold via the Watford Railway to Paradise Park, Hoddesdon, Herts. in 1989, and later fitted with a steam outline body; it is still operating.

Meteor IX. Built in 1971 and supplied new to Tucktonia, at Christchurch in Dorset; by 1975 the loco had also been at Hastings and Prestatyn, and was then stored by Ian Allan Ltd. before being renovated and supplied to Oakhill Manor, Somerset, in 1978. It worked here until the railway closed in 1988 and was stored until 2002 when it was purchased and moved to Knebworth Park for renovation; now running at Vanstone Park.

Comet. This short version of the Meteors was built in 1969 specifically for Sandown railway on the Isle of Wight, which has tight radii. It operated there as 'Sandown Castle' until 1991 when the railway closed, and then moved to Vanstone Park, where it still runs.

Thanks are due to Dave Holroyde, A Everett, G Fairweather and G Kitchenside.



Sandown Castle, Meteor IV and Meteor VI at Vanstone Park

LETTERS

METEOR AMENDMENTS

Some amendments are needed to the article in TNG 181 page 22, on The Meteors.

Meteor II. The photograph at the foot of page 25 is of this loco at Watford, and not Meteor VII as stated. This loco was sold to a private owner in Gloucestershire in May 2003.

Meteor III. When this was rebuilt, the chassis was shortened, therefore abandoning the pony trucks, and it is believed the gearbox from Meteor VII was included in the rebuild.

Meteor IV. Although this loco went to Fritton Lake in 1996, it did not actually operate there as the curves in the woods were too tight.

Meteor V. This loco could not have been trialled at Fritton Lake, as the railway did not exist at the time the loco was tested.

Meteor VI. Was sold to the Bridge Foot Hill Locomotive Works, Fareham, Hants., and left the Vanstone Park Railway on January 28, 2004.

Meteor VII. It appears that several parts from this loco have survived, including the rear body work which was fitted to the loco 'Midget' at Knebworth House. The front bodywork, chassis members and side panels, along with the pony trucks, from Meteor III were sold to the Bridge Foot Hill Locomotive Works, Fareham, Hants., on January 28 2004.

Comet. This is in fact called 'Sandham Castle', and not 'Sandown Castle'.

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