

One has only to see the brilliant British Transport film made in 1955 called *Snowdrift at Bleath Gill* to have a fascination for snowploughs and how they can blast through a 15-foot high snowdrift at over 40mph. The film cameras capture the extraordinary human efforts over a five-day period to dig out a stranded goods train hauled by Standard 2-6-0 No 78018 stuck in snowdrifts close to the 1670 foot summit of Stainmore high on the Pennines between Darlington and Penrith.

Having seen this film I never thought I would one day see for myself a blocked railway line with snow so deep. It is often not the depth of snow that falls that causes the problem but the wind that blows it into a drift of enormous height.

This is exactly what happened in the winter of 1963. The whole country had severe weather and sub zero temperatures but the North East had got off lightly until 6 February when the whole area had heavy snow and gale force winds. Many lines were affected with snowdrifts and blockages from York to the Scottish Borders. One line blocked, right on my doorstep, was the Esk Valley branch from Middlesbrough to Battersby and Whitby, today used by the NYMR.

Whitby still had services to Scarborough and Malton and it is believed the Esk Valley was totally blocked for the first time in its history. Prior to the blockage, the ploughs had been over the full length of the line every morning, the normal formation being two Darlington WD 2-8-0s coupled tender to tender with ploughs Nos 18 and 20 at either end. These two ploughs were the last wooden North Eastern Railway ploughs still in use on BR, both built at York works in 1909. The North Eastern Railway diagram shows their method of construction.

During an initial cold spell in January 1963, the two WDs and ploughs had been over the line many times, the only problem being frozen injectors on one locomotive. However, this all changed on the night of 6 February that dawned with the Middlesbrough to Guisborough and Whitby branches blocked by drifts due to the overnight winds. The blockages occurred between Great Ayton and Battersby Junction

# Ploughs to the rescue!

Recent snowfalls across the country have frequently been claimed to have been the worst for 40 years. That may well be so but in 2010 it would have been so much worse had the snowfall been accompanied by gale force winds as **Maurice Burns** witnessed in 1963. His local Esk Valley branch, now used by the NYMR, was the subject of a huge snowdrift 250 foot long and 15 foot deep that blocked the line and it was six steam locomotives and the last remaining NER wooden snowploughs that came to the rescue.

and between the junction and Kildale with three huge snowdrifts, the worst of which the wind had whipped up to 15ft high for a distance of 250 feet. Trains services were cancelled for two days and all the roads were blocked to the Esk Valley villages of Comondale, Castleton, Danby, Lealholm, Glaisdale, Egton and Grosmont, which were all effectively cut off from the outside world.

In the end it took gangs of men working from both directions and using six steam locomotives and four ploughs over a 48-hour period to clear the snowdrifts. Early in the morning of 6 February, the two WDs Nos 90479 and 90593 tackled the Guisborough branch first, clearing it by lunchtime. The ploughs then turned their attention to the section between Great Ayton and Battersby. Anyone who has travelled ☺



Standard 2-6-0 No 78018 became famous in 1955 for getting stuck in a snowdrift at Bleath Gill whilst climbing up to Stainmore Summit on a Kirkby Stephen to Darlington freight. Its subsequent rescue became the film *Snowdrift at Bleath Gill*. By a stroke of fate the engine was preserved and is now under restoration by the Darlington Railway Preservation Society. Details can be found on [drps@gmx.co.uk](mailto:drps@gmx.co.uk). KEN HOOLE COLLECTION



Snow is blown high into the air as two South Blyth J27's with regulator full open charge the drift at 35mph on the Rothbury branch in February 1963. JIM PRINGLE



With the nose of the plough just visible and the two J27's from South Blyth shed well and truly stuck in a wall of snow on the Rothbury branch the crew of the leading engine walk round the plough in this remarkable picture taken in February 1963. JIM PRINGLE

over this line will know the sharp right-hand curve approaching Battersby station and the overbridge that spans a cutting. It was here that the huge drift had occurred.

### Derailed

Snowdrift clearance was dangerous work as the crew of the two WDs found out. As they charged the 12ft high drift at 30mph on full regulator, the tender of the leading locomotive No 90479 became derailed by the snow at the worst point possible near the bridge. Tool vans were immediately called from Middlesbrough but were unable to get through because the snow had drifted behind the stranded steam locomotives and even the efforts of a large gang of men working until 3am were not sufficient to open a way through. With water getting low, the decision was made to throw the fires out of the two locomotives which spent the night unattended in the snowbound cutting.

This was not the only problem as from the opposite direction York shed had sent two B1 4-6-0s Nos 61273 and 61158 and ploughs to attack the biggest 250-foot drift between Kildale and Battersby - the line from Malton to Grosmont still being in use. However in charging the drift, the whole train became jammed. Although not derailed it was thought the various sets of B1 wheels were not in contact with the rails, being supported instead on grooves cut in the ice! Hard work by the gangs managed to free off No 61158 which retired back to York leaving No 61273 stuck in the drift and almost within sight of the stuck WD 2-8-0s on the Middlesbrough line.

### A concerted effort

Such news naturally made all the local papers whose photographers were sent out in search of the unusual pictures. Two days after the work on clearing the lines started, a concerted effort was made starting at 5am to free all the engines and finally clear the line. By 10am a gang from Thornaby finally reached the two stranded WDs and uncoupled the nearest plough and towed it back to Nunthorpe. A second trip freed No 90479 which was still on the rails and this then enabled the jacks brought in the tool van to be used to put the tender of 90593 back on the rails and be



Three Kirkby Stepen BR Standard 2-6-0's and North Eastern Railway snowploughs No 18 and 20 all covered in snow battle through a snowdrift near Merrygill between Kirkby Stepen and Stainmore Summit in 1955. KEN HOOLE COLLECTION

towed with the second plough to Middlesbrough.

Meanwhile York shed had sent two more WD 2-8-0s Nos 90654 and 90091 fitted with ploughs to Kildale via Malton and Grosmont where they reversed up the Esk Valley branch. Once at Kildale, the York gang freed off the stranded No 61273 and plough and pulled them clear of the drift.

Over a quarter of a mile of track still remained blocked with snow up to 15ft deep. The late Peter Semmens who I knew very well and who travelled to see the drifts, wrote at the time in quite dramatic terms about what happened next.

"Shortly before dusk the scene was set to clear the last blockage as the two WDs with ploughs thundered down the bank towards Battersby. The momentum of 400 tons of train travelling at 40mph on a 1-in-87 falling gradient supplemented by the thrust of four 19 x 28in cylinders and backed by two 225psi boilers was concentrated behind the point of the one plough. With two columns of fire and smoke rising into the darkened sky this battering ram dived into the drift flinging snow 20 feet on each side of the line. With

snow deadening all other sounds, only the gradually slowing down of two exhaust beats was to be heard. To the relief of all concerned, one charge was enough and the cavalcade emerged snow-covered and triumphant"

The huge task of clearing the line was complete by 8pm after the large gang of men had worked for over 15 hours and the next morning normal passenger and freight

services recommenced to Whitby.

The next day I decided to cycle to the area, with extreme difficulty as many roads were totally blocked, and catch the train from Great Ayton to have a close look at the areas of blockage that trapped Nos 90479 and 90593 and take photographs. I caught the 12.50pm Middlesbrough to Scarborough train consisting of two Metro-Cammell units where I joined Peter Semmens again. As we set off to Battersby, the guard walked down the train saying the drifts were as high as the top of the train windows and we must not put our heads out of the windows as there was only some two-inch clearance between the vertical wall of compact snow and the carriage window. Nevertheless, while being very careful, I took several pictures, one of which is reproduced for this article and shows drifts of 15-20ft as the train rounded the curve into Battersby station where the sun came out to produce a dazzling scene. Here the snow had built up on the southern platform behind which several coal wagons were totally buried in snow.

### Snow as high as the roof

We then set off uphill in the direction of Whitby to see the point where the two B1s Nos 61273 and 61158 became stuck. The worst area was near the level crossing about one mile out of the station, now automatic, but then manually controlled. Here was a crossing keeper's house with snow as high as the roof. Remarkably, although the vertical sides of

"this battering ram dived into the drift flinging snow 20 feet on each side of the line."

snow were only inches from the DMU coach body, there was no reduction in speed, with 48mph being reached. Several photographers got off at Comondale to catch a returning train - the 11.45am Scarborough to Middlesbrough. The railway was the lifeline to the community and we saw the postman putting mail on the DMU and earlier in the day milk churns had been carried. The train driver had even brought his wife to see the snowdrifts!

Upon recollecting my cycle at Great Ayton, I made my way under the Middlesbrough Battersby line not far from the station. Here the drifts were as high as the underside of the road bridge, such had been the force of the winds. At the crossing keeper's house I learnt that the woman in charge of the crossing and her children were for a time trapped in their house because the doors were outward opening with 12ft of snow built up against them and the gangers had had to dig them out.

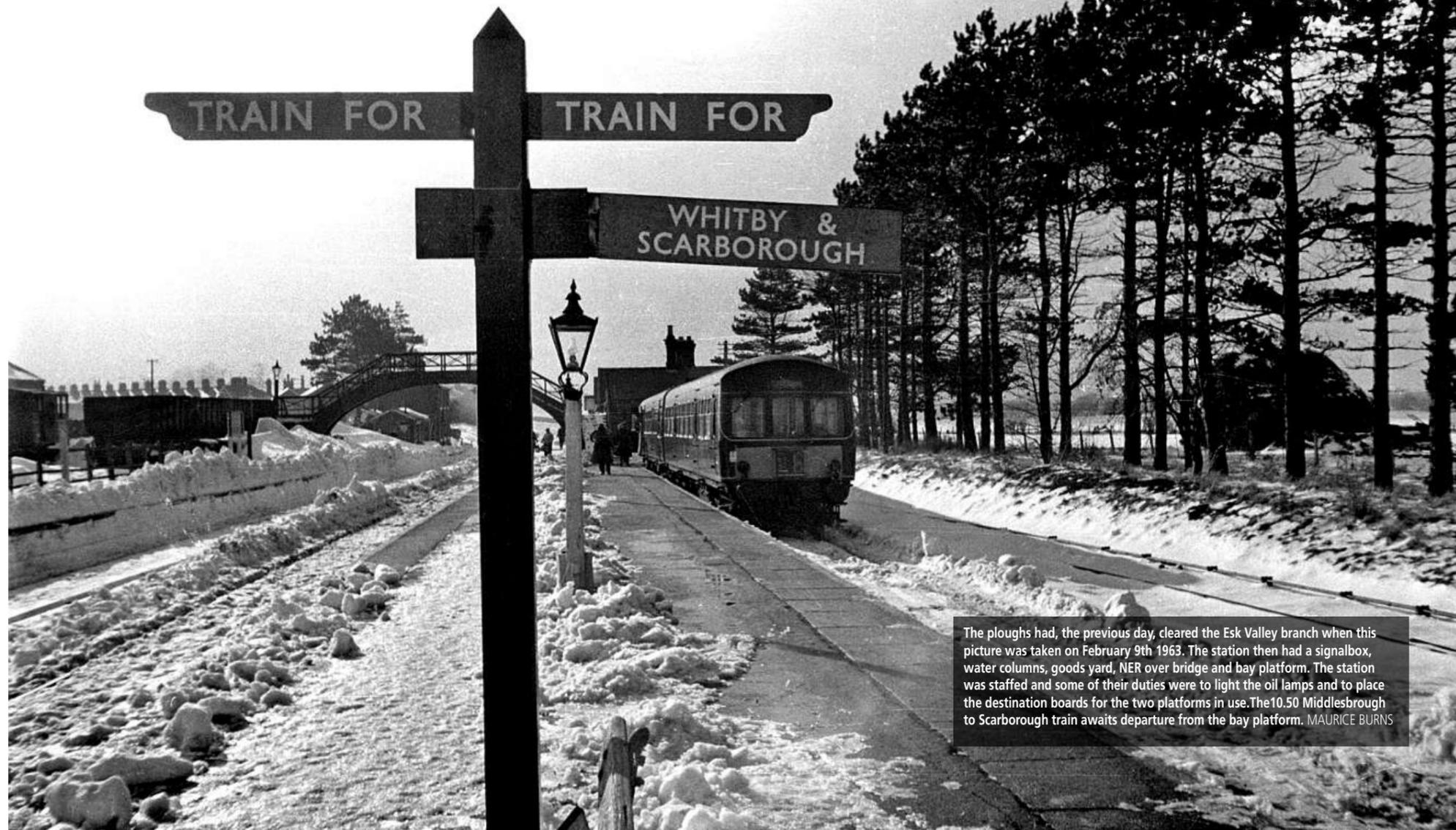
The Esk Valley line was not the only one affected by blockages and in researching this article I found that further north two independent enthusiasts were taking unofficial rides on the footplates of J27s and ploughs that were being used to clear the Woodburn and

Rothbury branches west of Morpeth on a line that once went to Riccarton Junction on the Waverley Route. One of these enthusiasts was Jim Pringle, a work colleague at Davy International. He was from a very large railway family with his father Jim and his brother Walter both steam drivers at South Blyth, and an uncle, Tommy Hancock, the shed foreman at North Blyth, and a brother-in-law, Roly Rutter, a driver at North Blyth. With all these connections it is little wonder the young Jim Pringle managed so many footplate rides! These included travelling with the snowploughs with his dad driving one of the J27s during snowdrift clearance on the Rothbury Branch that enabled him to take such incredible colour pictures of the ploughs blasting into the snowdrifts.

The other enthusiast was Ian Storey and he too travelled on the J27 footplates and snowploughs this time clearing the Woodburn branch. ☺



On the second day of snow clearance on the Esk Valley branch Darlington WD's 2-8-0's 90479 and 90593 using North Eastern Railway snowploughs No 18 and 20 clear the line between Battersby and Kildale on 8 February 1963. MAURICE BURNS COLLECTION

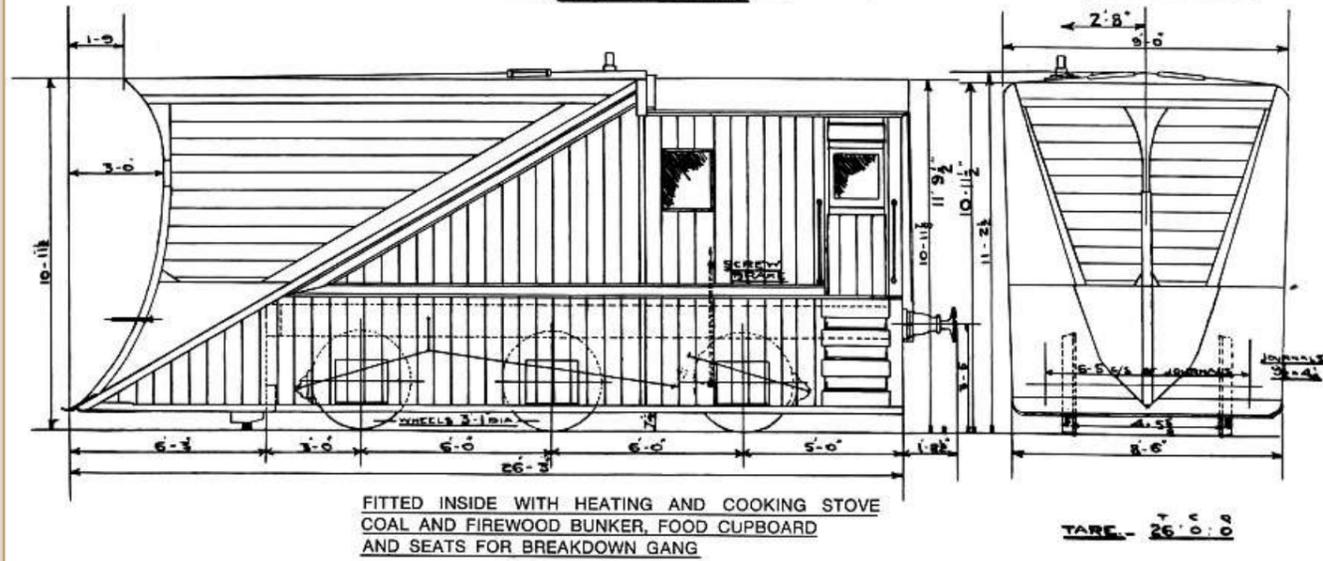


The ploughs had, the previous day, cleared the Esk Valley branch when this picture was taken on February 9th 1963. The station then had a signalbox, water columns, goods yard, NER over bridge and bay platform. The station was staffed and some of their duties were to light the oil lamps and to place the destination boards for the two platforms in use. The 10.50 Middlesbrough to Scarborough train awaits departure from the bay platform. MAURICE BURNS

# WOOD SNOW PLOUGH (Nos 18, 19 & 20)

(BUILT AT YORK)

BUILT 1909



## North Eastern Railway snowploughs in preservation

The North Eastern Railway with its vast network of railways over hilly areas had a total of 24 snowploughs of which 20 were of wooden construction and four were made of steel. Remarkably of these 24 ploughs, three survive today. From 1957 with the introduction of the BR-built steel ploughs, many of the NER timber ploughs were withdrawn leaving six NER ploughs still in service and one stored, number 12.

The six ploughs in service were numbers 18 and 20 Timber and four steel-bodied ploughs numbered 21 to 24.

The believed distribution in 1958 showing where the ploughs were allocated is shown below:

1958	Darlington	15	16	18	20
	Percy Main	17			
	Holbeck	21	22		
	Healey Mills	23	24		
	Tweedmouth	10	19	12 (Stored)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>				
	York	2	6		

During 1958 the new BR-built steel ploughs replaced Nos 2, 6, 10, 15, 16 and 19 so by late 1958 the last remaining wooden ploughs were at Darlington, No 18 and 20 with No 12 presumably earmarked for the reserve collection of the NRM. By 1967 the ploughs were distributed as follows:

1967	Darlington	18	20
	Holbeck	21	22
	Mirfield /H Mills	23	24
	Tyne yard	981 982 983 984	
	Gateshead	985 986 987 988	
	Thornaby	989 990	
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>		
	York	991 992	

With No 12 preserved by the NRM, it could have meant the end for Nos 18 and 20, the two ploughs that featured on the British Transport film *Snowdrift at Bleath Gill* on the Darlington to

Penrith line. Luckily a young Ian Storey by pure chance happened to be driving through Gateshead in 1973 and then involved heavily with NELPG, spotted between some buildings the ploughs No 18 and 20 in Bowrans scrapyards. He immediately made enquiries and quickly negotiated the purchase for himself of No 18 for £200 before it was shortly to be scrapped. Fortunately Beamish Museum then secured No 20 in a similar manner. Ian Storey's No 18 was then towed from Gateshead to the NYMR but on arrival was facing north - the wrong way - so went all the way back to Teesside to turn! In later years the plough was sold to NYMR member Ian Varty who in 2004 sold it to fellow NYMR member Bryan Blundell.

So today we have very fortunately three North Eastern Railway snowploughs preserved as follows:-

■ No 12 built in Gateshead in 1891 and at the NRM Locomotion at Shildon in restored condition.

■ No 18 built at York in 1909 and now on the NYMR at New Bridge under restoration by Bryan Blundell.

■ No 20 built at York in 1909 and now at Beamish untouched since withdrawn and in the reserve collection store.

With regard to NYMR resident snowplough No 18, owner Bryan Blundell has, over the past five years, spent a considerable effort and money in restoring this vehicle, replacing in particular many rotten major frame timbers.

Pictures of just one area of work on the rear bufferbeam illustrates the tasks being undertaken.

➤ Further help in this worthwhile restoration project or donations to pay for materials would be welcome. Bryan Blundell may be contacted directly via the NYMR York Area Group website at [www.yorkareagroup.co.uk](http://www.yorkareagroup.co.uk)

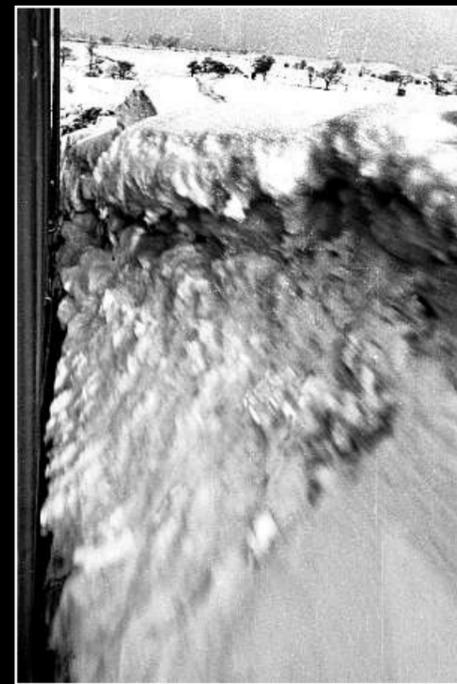


The bufferbeam of NER plough No 18 before rebuilding.

With climate change, who knows, the 100-year-old North Eastern Railway ploughs may one day see real use on the NYMR, with every photographer eager to join a photo charter to dream of!



The bufferbeam of NER plough No 18 after rebuilding. BOTH: BRYAN BRUNDELL



Left: The guard of the 10.50 Middlesbrough to Scarborough train warned all passengers not to put their heads out of the windows on the approach to Battersby due to only 2" clearance between the vertical walls of compact snow and the windows. In this remarkable picture a 15 foot snowdrift near the camera lens on February 9th 1963. MAURICE BURNS



A 25 foot snowdrift faced the photographer on the Easyby to Kildale road where it goes under the Middlesbrough to Battersby line not far from the junction. The effects of the gale force winds on February 9th 1963 are clear to see. MAURICE BURNS

Left centre: The drivers view. The 11.45 Scarborough to Middlesbrough train descends from Kildale to Battersby Station and approaches the snowdrifts and the crossing keepers house on February 9th 1963. MAURICE BURNS

This was only a freight line but with vans loaded with explosives for the Army Otterburn Ranges, there was a sense of urgency to move them from the centre of Morpeth. He recalls in February 1963 travelling up the Woodburn branch with two J27s and ploughs and getting stuck in snowdrifts five times and of these three times they had to be dug out by hand while another two J27s were sent out to assist in the rescue of the trapped engines. Many years later he became heavily involved

in the steam preservation movement with NELPG and his own locomotive LMS 'Black Five' No 44767 *George Stephenson* but he also, from these memorable experiences, had keen interest in the NER snowploughs and ensured that one is still with us today.

There is I feel one other great survivor of those snowdrifts of 1963. At that time Dr Beeching was reviewing all rural branch lines and these included the three lines from Whitby. He announced the total closure of the

Whitby to Malton and Whitby to Scarborough lines which subsequently closed in March 1965. The isolated communities of the Esk Valley line however used the very timely severe weather of 1963 and the snowdrift blockage of all roads in the valley and the battle to keep the railway open as a very weighty argument to save the line - and they won. It is the Esk Valley line itself that is perhaps the greatest survivor thanks to those huge snowdrifts of 1963. ■

Just east of Battersby station on the Whitby line is a road crossing to Battersby village. On February 9th 1963 this crossing was manually controlled by a lady who lived in the crossing keeper's house. The picture shows the effects of gale force winds and it was near here where the two York B1's became stuck. Remarkably the photographer reached this location to record the scene by bicycle!. MAURICE BURNS



### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dave Whitfield, Geoff Scurr, Bryan Brundell, Nick Carter, Jim Pringle, Ian Story and Leona White, curator of the Ken Hoole Study Centre, Darlington Railway Museum for help and contributions to this article.