

ANYONE FOR TENNIS?

By Don Townsley

Picture the scene in the Works' yard in the late autumn of 1952. Tea rationing had just that week come to an end and sweet rationing was to linger until March 1953. Seven years after the end of the war the country was still in the grip of austerity.

Cars were a luxury, so much so that the number parked in the environs of the works, despite its 550 employees, could be counted on the fingers of one hand and car parks were virtually unknown.

The Personnel Manager, quite an important and authoritative figure in those days and resplendent in smart suit, stiff white collar and sober tie, stood guard at his office window no doubt jealously contemplating the Managing Director's grey Bentley Standard Steel Saloon parked tantalisingly in solitary splendour nose first immediately in front of him.

He stiffened as a young engineer barely out of his apprenticeship, but apparently the proud possessor of one of the very few driving licences around, strode purposefully across the yard towards the Bentley, keys in hand.

As the key was inserted into the driver's door lock the onlooker could contain himself no longer. *"And what do you think you are doing with that car, young man?"* he barked from the now open window.

"I've been told to go up to the City Varieties to collect a stripper, two chorus girls and a dog" was the rather unconvincing reply. The effect on the inquisitor was explosive. His complexion took on a decidedly purple hue and with moustache aquiver he spluttered that never before had he experienced such insubordination and insolence and that he would personally ensure that this young upstart be dismissed immediately.

"Who are you working for?" was the next question and, when told it was the Sales Manager, *"I'll go see about this. Don't you move until I get back"*, he snapped, turning from the window to head off for the sales office.

The hapless engineer considered the options. With time pressing should he carry out the first instruction or should he obey the then all powerful Personnel Manager? He decided on the former and quickly manoeuvred the majestic vehicle out through the Work's gate into Jack Lane and thence up into Leeds city centre.

Some time later the Bentley returned to its original parking spot confronting the office window, attracting the



attention not only of the Personnel Manager again but also most of the drawing office staff on the floor above. The previously purple countenance switched to a bright pink as the forward opening front passenger door opened wide and out stepped a long legged vision of loveliness clutching a frisky dachshund. From the back of the car emerged two equally nubile young ladies and these new arrivals were quickly escorted by an effusive Sales Manager across the yard to where a most unusual diesel locomotive was slowly making its way up the test track.

The locomotive resembled a large desk on wheels and transversely across the top, amidships, was stretched a table tennis net. There followed what would now be called a photo call as the girls, and dog, struck various poses and hit one or two balls around in what for its day was a very risqué promotional exercise.



The Managing Director returning from London by train was unconcerned when he heard of the use of his car as an up market taxi but he did object to the photographs. *“Not our style at all, gives the wrong impression”* he grunted *“Not to be used”*, and the pictures never saw the light of day. Until now, that is.

The Works was of course the Hunslet Engine Works and the Leeds City Varieties was, and still is, a genuine Old Time Music Hall dating back to 1865, still in business and made even more famous over the years by the affectionately remembered BBC TV series ‘The Good Old Days’ which ran for thirty years from 1953.

Most readers of a certain age will already have realised that the ‘stripper’ was that morale boosting second war comic strip heroine Jane, of Daily Mirror fame, in the flesh, as it were, of Christabel Leighton-Porter. Jokingly dubbed by Winston

Churchill 'Britain's secret weapon' this supremely sexy lady was born at Eastleigh in 1919 and died in December 2000. She personified the Comic Strip for many years touring the Halls with her dog, Fritz of course, and supported by her girls in the chorus.

And what of the locomotive? An expensive disaster, unfortunately, and an object lesson to anyone with a hankering for market research. Measuring eighteen feet in length by seven feet in width, yet only three feet three inches high, it had been specially designed to break into the United States of America's burgeoning flameproof underground mining locomotive market.

Unlike British coal mines with narrow roadways but of reasonable height American mines had plenty of width but very little height. Hunslet reasoned that the American overhead wire electric trolley locomotives were a hazard from both an explosion and personal safety view and considered that the British diesel equivalent with what at that time was state of the art exhaust gas conditioning and flame proofing equipment would be a more attractive option.

As a sop to the American market it was fitted with an imported 170hp. USA built Cummins NH6 horizontal diesel engine, probably the very first application of a Cummins engine in Britain and pre-dating UK manufacture of the marque by some years. This NH6 engine was the base from which the Cummins railcar engine as typified by the NTA855R series in British Rail's class 158 and other multiple unit trains developed.

Bearing works number 4538 and painted in exhibition finish with chromium plated makers plates and controls the locomotive was despatched to the USA on 3 March 1953 and exhibited at the Cleveland Congress in Ohio from 11 May to 14 May. The leaflet distributed at the exhibition described it thus:

- **This is at once the largest and lowest fully-flameproof mines diesel locomotive in the world, designed especially to meet all the conditions of U.S. operators and mine workers. Use of the Cummins flat engine ensures adequate servicing and spares facilities throughout the States. Use of the HUNSLET four-speed transmission ensures no replacements needed over years of hard service.**

It went down like a lead balloon. Beaten by the antagonistic stance of the American trades unions and the protectionist 'Buy America' policy it did not find a single prospective buyer. After languishing for years it was shipped back to Hunslet where it lay hidden under a tarpaulin sheet for a few more years before being scrapped around 1966.

For the technically minded the major features are given below. Unfortunately I do not have a similar specification for Christabel Leighton-Porter.

Gauge of Railway	3 ft. 6 ins.
Dia. Of coupled wheels	2 ft. 0 ins.
Wheelbase	7 ft. 0 ins.
Height Overall	3 ft. 3 ins.
Width Overall	7 ft. 0 ins.
Length Overall without couplings	18 ft. 0 ins.
Maximum Power and Speed of Engine	170 hp. at 2100 rpm
Speed 1st. gear	5.5 miles per hour
“ 2 nd . “	7.5 “
“ 3 rd . “	10.0 “
“ 4 th . “	15.0 “
Fuel Capacity	30 gallons
Weight in Working Order	16 tons 12 cwts.
Maximum Axle Load	8 tons 8 cwts.
Maximum Tractive Effort	9,850 lbs.
Minimum Curve Radius	100 ft.



This article first appeared in 'Railway Bylines'
Copyright DHT/Irwell Press 26 August 2005