



One of the Little Trains

The Little Trains of Chilmark

“For nearly forty years what must be one of the most efficient train services in the country has been operating in South Wiltshire. However, these trains carry no passengers and would-be visitors are discouraged by a high wire fence

Chilmark is a little village in the Vale of Wardour a few miles to the west of Salisbury. Nestling against the nearby Grovely Ridge, and set in a landscape that appears to come straight from a Constable painting, lies a Royal Air Force storage depot that takes its name from the village.

In 1937 it was decided to utilise the old disused limestone quarries – whence, in the dim and distant past, came the stone to build Salisbury Cathedral – for RAF equipment and materials. The location of the caves among woods and hills made them ideal for the purpose, especially as they were deep underground yet were accessible from the valley floor.

The surrounding countryside, wooded and hilly, inaccessible except on foot and well off the beaten track, provided further space for expansion of the unit. There are several separate sites so it was decided to connect them with a narrow-gauge railway which could be constructed and operated in the area efficiently and cheaply. It was then that the Chilmark-Ham Cross-Dinton system came into being.

A spur of standard-gauge track was laid from the nearby London-Exeter main line at Dinton into Ham Cross and along this the stores are brought, in both military and BR wagons, to the large sheds where they are transferred to narrow-gauge wagons for transporting to all corners of the 350 acre site. Altogether there are 2½ miles of standard-gauge and more than 9 miles of 2ft-gauge tracks serving the three main sites.

Although an RAF station, the service personnel element at Chilmark is small and the railway is run wholly by civilians, many of whom have worked there since the war. It is sad that the same cannot be said of all the locomotives, the changeover to new stock on the narrow-gauge having taken place only a couple of years ago.

There are three standard-gauge locomotives. One, Andrew Barclay Sons & Co. No. 482 built at Kilmarnock in 1963, has a Rolls Royce, Series 2104-2, “C” Range oil engine. The second, John Fowler No. 22604, built originally in 1939 in Leeds, was refitted in 1961 with a 165hp McLaren engine with Simms injector, thus doing away with the need for the donkey starting engine. AMW No 154, it was registered with the British Transport Commission in 1964, No 3057. The third, on loan from the Army Freight Organisation, is of 150hp and built by the Drewry Car Co Ltd in 1941, type 623, and series number 2158.

These locomotives draw the stores from the main line into the large transfer sheds, where they are reloaded onto a variety of wagons, mostly custom-built on Hudson running gear and dating from 1940. In all there are 95 pieces of rolling stock, including nine which are named "Chilmark" flats, as they were built especially for their function at Chilmark. There is also a bogie coach used to convey official visitors around the site.

Because of the unlikely, but real possibility, of a rock fall underground there are six mines rescue wagons always at the ready, as well as two fire tender wagons, although firefighting is now mainly dealt with by motorised vehicles.

To keep the permanent way in perfect condition there are four p. w. wagons which regularly patrol the whole length of the track, making it probably one of the best maintained railways in the country.

This multiplicity of narrow-gauge rolling stock is drawn by a mixture of modern diesel and battery-electric locomotives, the latter being used inside the underground storage areas, where diesel fumes would be an unacceptable hazard to health and safety.

There are four Baguley-Drewry 65hp 0-4-0 diesels built in 1973, serial numbers 3698, 3699, 3700 and 3701. The electric locomotives are also Baguley-Drewry make, type EB, powered by Kathanode LKC 27-type cells which have 546 ampere-hours capacity and produce 50hp at the five-hour rate of discharge. Serial numbers are 3702, 3703 and 3704.

Most of the earlier locomotives have been disposed of, but there are still three Ruston & Hornsby 44hp four-cylinder diesels built at Lincoln in 1940. Their AMW serial numbers are 165, 189 and 194. No 165 has spent its life as the "fire engine", now retired in favour of the modern firefighting vehicles. Painted red and with a highly-polished fire bell it could reach the far corners of the area very swiftly, pulling a wagon with equipment suitable for the emergency in hand. These Ruston & Hornsby locomotives – capable of pulling 200 tons on the level and 36 tons up a 1 in 30 slope – are no longer used and await a decision regarding their fate.

So ends this chapter of the Chilmark story. No doubt, even if the BR network is drastically reduced, the Wiltshire countryside will still echo to the rattle and clang of the little engines as they wind their way alongside fields of grazing cows, over slowly running streams and around what must be the most beautiful RAF station in the country.

I should add that this article has been written as a result of numerous enquiries and requests to RAF Chilmark for information by enthusiasts. Many of the writers ask for permission to visit the railway but this is extremely difficult to arrange, because of the disruption of routine work that accompanies such visits."

RAF Chilmark was officially closed in 1995.

Photos may be found in the gallery on the parish page:

- 1 One of the nine "Chilmark Flats", four-wheel braked wagons specially built for moving materials on the narrow-gauge system at the depot
- 2 Andrew Barclay 0-4-0 diesel locomotive No 482 of 1963, one of three standard-gauge engines used for freight transfer work at Chilmark
- 3 Bogie coach of 2 tons 12cwt tare weight, used to carry official visitors. Behind it are some side-tip skip wagons
- 4 Baguley-Drewry 65bhp 0-4-0 narrow-gauge diesel, one of the four similar 1973-built units on the system
- 5 One of the three four-wheel 50bhp Baguley-Drewry electric locomotives used in the underground storage areas

- 6 Now retired in favour of non-rail fire-fighting equipment, Ruston & Hornsby 44hp diesel, AMW No 165 still carries its gleaming red paint and polished fire bell, though no longer called-on to speed to the site of any emergency

This is a transcript of an article in the Railway Magazine of March 1976.