

LEISTON: GAINING TRACTION

Preservation's newest (and currently shortest) standard gauge heritage railway – the Leiston Works Railway – celebrates the special relationship between steam on rails and steam on the road. *Steam Railway* finds out more.

WORDS: THOMAS BRIGHT



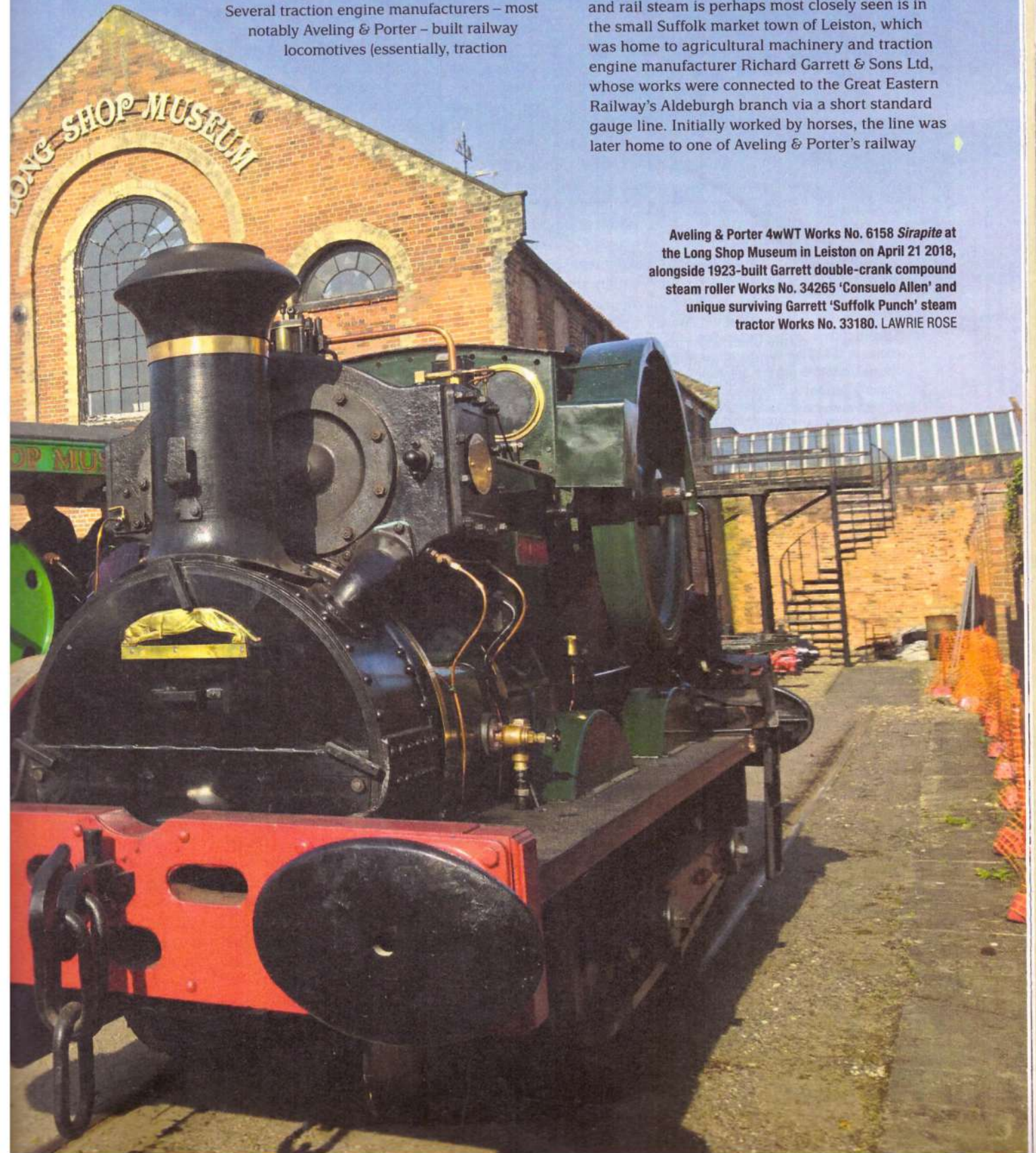
It always surprises your author at how little crossover there is between the rail and road steam fraternities. Ostensibly, they have much in common; Richard Trevithick's trail-blazing Pen-y-Darren locomotive was born out of his earlier experimental road steamers, and his final railway engine – 1808's *Catch Me Who Can* – was very similar to his first full-size locomotive, the ill-fated *Puffing Devil* road engine of 1801.

Several traction engine manufacturers – most notably Aveling & Porter – built railway locomotives (essentially, traction

engines fitted with flanged wheels to enable them to work on rails) and the respective rail and road steam preservation movements both started in the early 1950s. Today, numerous heritage lines hold road steam events, and a locomotive may also occasionally act as a hefty payload for one or more traction engines at a steam rally. But there the relationship pretty much ends.

The place where the crossover between road and rail steam is perhaps most closely seen is in the small Suffolk market town of Leiston, which was home to agricultural machinery and traction engine manufacturer Richard Garrett & Sons Ltd, whose works were connected to the Great Eastern Railway's Aldeburgh branch via a short standard gauge line. Initially worked by horses, the line was later home to one of Aveling & Porter's railway

Aveling & Porter 4wWT Works No. 6158 *Sirapite* at the Long Shop Museum in Leiston on April 21 2018, alongside 1923-built Garrett double-crank compound steam roller Works No. 34265 '*Consuelo Allen*' and unique surviving Garrett '*Suffolk Punch*' steam tractor Works No. 33180. LAWRIE ROSE



traction engines, *Sirapite*, which shuttled up and down this branch until retirement in 1962.

Today, Leiston is home to Britain's newest and shortest standard gauge preserved line – the Leiston Works Railway – which, when it opens to passengers, will celebrate the special relationship between rail and road steam.

Richard the Third

The story of the Leiston Works Railway is inextricably tied to Richard Garrett & Sons Ltd. The works were founded in 1778 by Richard Garrett to make chaff cutters, scythes and sickles, and were subsequently expanded by his son – also called Richard.

The surviving works as we know them today were the brainchild of Richard Garrett III, grandson of the firm's founder. In 1851, Garrett exhibited the company's wares at the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace and was impressed by the streamlined manufacturing processes pioneered by one of his fellow exhibitors – American firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt – used to mass-produce revolvers and other weapons. Garrett realised the principles Colt employed could be utilised to build larger machinery, particularly portable steam engines – the use of which was rapidly gaining traction (pun intended) on farms across Britain.

This led to the creation of what was known as the Long Shop. Inspired by Colt's use of workers each having a specific role in the gun-making process, completed portable engine boilers mounted on wheels would enter at one end of the Long Shop; as they progressed through the building, components would be added from the adjacent bays. Larger components, such as flywheels, crankshafts and cylinders, were manufactured in the ground floor bays, while smaller components were made in the first-floor bays and lowered down to the engines via a gantry crane. By this embryonic form of assembly line, completed engines would exit the Long Shop at the opposite end, ready for despatch. American motoring giant Henry Ford would employ a similar process (albeit on a refined and much larger scale) when building the pioneering Model T Ford, the first motor car to achieve unqualified worldwide success.

This innovative building – described by the

workers as a cathedral owing to its great height, vast interior, and big windows – was started in 1852 and opened in 1853. This became the core of what was known as the Town Works, with further buildings added during the 1860s.

Branching out

Despite these innovations, the Garrett factory was isolated in the middle of rural Suffolk, making it difficult to bring in raw materials for the firm's products. Unsurprisingly, Garrett was a staunch supporter of proposals to bring the growing national railway network to Leiston.

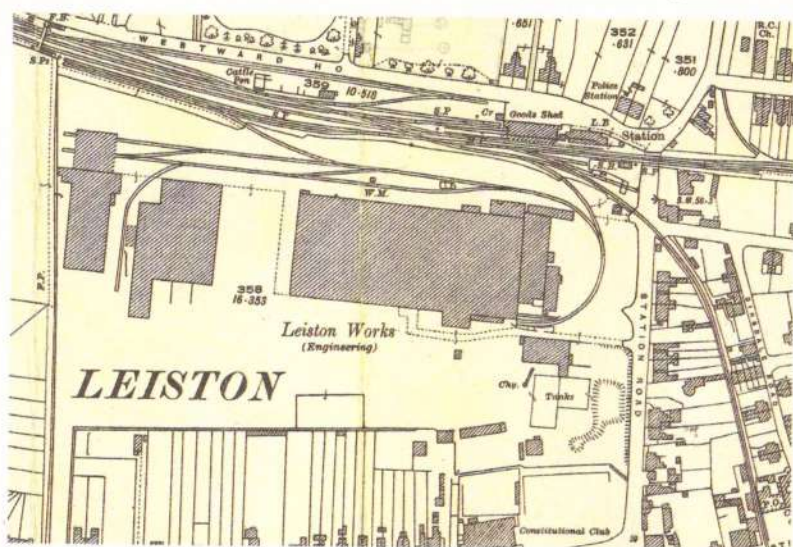
His wishes were realised on June 1 1859, when the East Suffolk Railway's Leiston branch opened, on the same day as the company's main Ipswich-Yarmouth route, as well as another branch line to Framlingham, and a short, goods-only line to Snape. Diverging from the main line at Saxmundham, the 4½-mile Leiston branch was extended by a further four miles to Aldeburgh the following year, opening on August 12 1860, with Aldeburgh's modest single-platform terminus boasting an overall roof. The line was subsequently taken over by the Great Eastern Railway in 1862.

Garrett's works were served from the branch's opening by a short spur line, which diverted from the branch at Leiston, enabling the company to receive parts and raw materials and despatch its wares, by rail for the first time. From opening, the works' branch was operated using Suffolk Punch horses. By 1912, the line also connected to the firm's new Top Works, which were situated opposite Leiston station on the Aldeburgh branch itself. The defining aspect of this railway was the section from the crossing over Main Street, just outside the Town Works, to the level crossing over the intersection between Buller Road and Station Road, where it entered the Top Works and the exchange sidings; the line threaded its way along a narrow gap between houses, with garden walls being inches from the sleeper ends.

On July 29 1914, just days before the start of the First World War, the Aldeburgh branch gained a third station – Thorpeness Halt, which consisted of little more than a platform and three grounded wooden coach bodies. The halt was built to serve the nearby seaside resort, which had been developed by Glencairn Stuart Ogilvie, a Scottish barrister and architect, whose family made its fortune building railways in Russia and South America, and had just inherited the Sizewell estate.

Steam, typically in the form of 'F6' 2-4-2Ts or 'J15' 0-6-0s, continued to serve the Aldeburgh branch until June 10 1956, when diesel multiple units took over. Goods services were withdrawn on November 30 1959 and Thorpeness was downgraded to an unstaffed halt in 1962. The entire branch was earmarked for closure under Dr Beeching's 1963 *The Reshaping of British Railways* report; however, the construction of the nearby Sizewell A nuclear power station – for which the branch was used to transport building materials – delayed the withdrawal of passenger services until September 12 1966, three days before the plant's Unit 2 reactor started commercial operation. Most of

BELOW An Ordnance Survey map showing the Richard Garrett & Sons works, the Leiston Works Railway, and Leiston station on the Aldeburgh branch. VIA LWRT





ABOVE A well-known and apparently posed shot of *Sirapite* alongside 'J15' No. 65447 at Leiston on June 9 1956, the last day of steam-hauled passenger services on the Aldeburgh branch. The Worsell 0-6-0 was withdrawn in April 1959 and subsequently scrapped. VIA LWRT



LEFT *Sirapite* shunts wagons in the exchange sidings at Leiston station. VIA LWRT



BELOW *Sirapite* at work on the Leiston Works Railway, showing just how narrow the formation is. VIA LWRT

the Leiston-Aldeburgh section was subsequently ripped up, although a siding and crane were installed one mile east of Leiston to enable spent nuclear fuel to be removed for reprocessing. The track from here west through Leiston to Saxmundham remains in situ for this purpose, albeit to serve Sizewell B following Sizewell A's shutdown in 2006, and the branch also sees the occasional railtour. It is also expected to service the proposed Sizewell C reactor.

Decline and rise

The Garrett works branch lingered on until 1968, when it finally closed. This was another step towards the works' eventual closure. The gradual decline in Richard Garrett & Sons' business started in June 1919 when, through the influence of Thomas Lake Aveling – of the famous Aveling & Porter – the company joined the ill-fated Agricultural & General Engineers combine. The combine, which consisted of several British engineering firms (including other traction engine manufacturers Charles Burrell & Sons and Davey, Paxman & Co.), was designed to improve efficiency, reduce competition within the group, and create a business large enough to compete with the American market. Alas, it proved unsuccessful, and the AGE was liquidated in 1932.

Richard Garrett & Sons was bought by Beyer, Peacock & Co., which allowed the company to live on under the name Richard Garrett Engineering Works Ltd. During the 1950s, the factory diversified away from heavy engineering towards consumer goods, including electric irons and washing machines – a far cry from the impressive traction engines it had produced only decades earlier. Shortly after the works branch's closure, the site of the Town Works was cleared for possible redevelopment. Although Garrett's celebrated its 200th anniversary in 1978, the writing was on the wall. The parent company collapsed in 1980 after it was taken over by National Chemical Industries Ltd and the remaining Garrett works closed in 1981. Happily, plans were already in place to save the Long Shop and perpetuate the Garrett legacy.

Following the closure of the Town Works, the Long Shop building stood derelict, under the threat

RIGHT Great Eastern Railway four-wheel Third No. 514 undergoes restoration at the Leiston Works Railway Trust's workshop. LWRT



BELOW Lawrie Rose's Ruston & Hornsby '48DS' 0-4-0 diesel No. 294266 became the first locomotive to run on the revived Leiston Works Railway on May 30 2019. LAWRIE ROSE

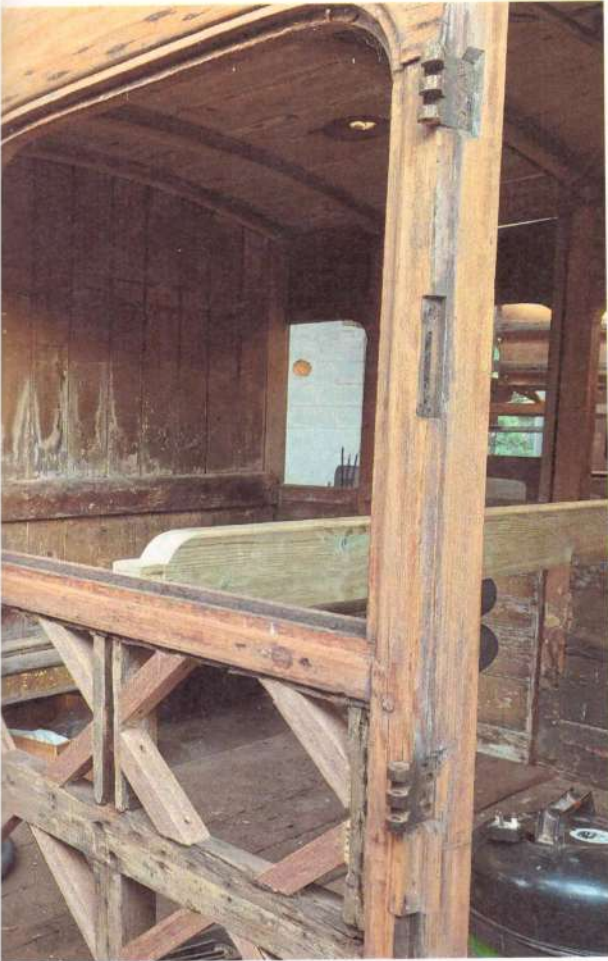


of demolition by plans to redevelop the site for housing. Realising the threat and the importance of the surviving works buildings, Suffolk county archivist W.R. Serjeant called a meeting on July 1 1976 to discuss what should be done. The Long Shop was granted Grade II* listed status in October 1976 and, the following year, the local planning authorities formed a working group to decide what should be done with the buildings.

It was decided to establish a museum and collect appropriate artefacts, with Richard Garratt Engineering Works agreeing to donate the Long Shop to a charitable trust. However, the company collapsed before the deal could be done, so Michael Hilton – the former managing director of RGEW – along with Lord Cranbrook set up the Long Shop Project Trust to raise the £25,000 to buy the site, restore it and create a museum dedicated to Richard Garrett & Sons. The Long Shop Museum opened in 1984, and it remains a popular attraction to this day.

Horses and lions

The totem of what was known as the Leiston Works Railway was its unusual railway traction engine, *Sirapite*. Ironically, this unusual locomotive hailed not from Garrett's themselves, but from one of the firm's chief rivals – the aforementioned Aveling & Porter. However, Garrett's firmly stamped its identity on the loco, replacing the brass Aveling & Porter prancing horse emblem on *Sirapite's* smokebox door with its own panther insignia – a bit like sticking a Ferrari badge on a Jaguar.



Sirapite was built as Works No. 6158 in 1906 as one of many railway traction engines constructed by the Rochester firm, and was ordered to serve Gypsum Mines Limited's gypsum mine in Mountfield, Sussex. It was named after Gypsum Mines' plaster of Paris product 'Parisite' which, for perhaps obvious reasons, was soon changed for the more pleasant-sounding anagram 'Sirapite'. It worked at the mine until 1929 when it was purchased by Garrett's to replace the Suffolk Punch horses employed on the works' railway. *Sirapite* then spent the next 33 years shuttling between the Leiston exchange sidings, the Top Works and Town Works until April 2 1962, when it was replaced by a 1927-built Electromobile battery-electric shunting locomotive (No. W247), which continued in *Sirapite's* role until the works railway closed in 1968.

Despite its Aveling & Porter origins, *Sirapite* is the enduring mascot of the Leiston Works Railway, and so it was only natural for the Long Shop Museum trustees to seek out the locomotive and revive it as the museum's flagship. The locomotive was stored for four years after its retirement until May 1966, when it was purchased by William – later Sir William – McAlpine for his private collection. According to The Oakwood Press' biography of McAlpine, *Sirapite* was first given a major overhaul before it arrived at Sir William's home at Fawley Hill in 1970, and it ran there until 1978, when it left for Steamtown, Carnforth, for some repair work. Some years later, *Sirapite* languished as a rusty hulk at Preston Services of Kent, until it was bought by the



ABOVE The restored Leiston Works Railway, showing how narrow the formation is. LWRT

museum's trustees in 2003 and returned to Leiston in March 2004. In August 2005, the trust was awarded a £50,000 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (then called the Heritage Lottery Fund) to help restore *Sirapite*, which returned to steam for the first time in decades in 2009.

In April 2019, *Sirapite* left Leiston for the first time since its restoration for a season at the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway, returning to Leiston in October 2020. Running up and down within the confines of the Long Shop Museum yard is all well and good, but wouldn't it be great to see *Sirapite* run on the former works railway itself? Fortunately, plans are well in hand to make such an ambition a reality.

Making tracks

After a public meeting of like-minded enthusiasts at Leiston Community Centre on July 3 2011, the Leiston Works Railway Trust was formed that September to buy the surviving trackbed of the Garrett works line and restore it, so *Sirapite* could return to the railway it had so dutifully served for over 30 years. The trust then set about clearing the trackbed of undergrowth and debris, and in March 2016, Suffolk Coastal District Council granted the trust planning permission to restore 660 feet of track between the Buller Road level crossing and the Engineers' Arms car park, close to where the line crossed Main Street and entered the Town Works. The trust also secured a large workshop outside Leiston, where it could restore the rolling stock it would need to make public trains a reality.

Tracklaying using several track panels recovered from Ipswich Docks began in March 2019, working northwards from the Engineers' Arms, and, by the time the trust planned to celebrate the line's 160th anniversary that June, approximately 200 feet had been laid. The trust had originally planned to have a railway traction engine on the line for the anniversary – but not *Sirapite*, as it was on loan to the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway (MSLR) at the time. Instead, the anniversary was supposed to have featured 1926-built Aveling & Porter 2-2-0WT Works No. 9449 'The Blue Circle' – the firm's last railway traction engine; however, that plan fell through owing to transport issues, and Andrew

Barclay 0-4-0ST Works No. 2157 'Fambridge' (now based at the Swindon & Cricklade Railway, but then based at Mangapps) was teed up instead. Alas, that too fell through and the first locomotive to run on the Leiston Works Railway since 1968 was MSLR-based Ruston & Hornsby '48DS' 0-4-0 diesel No. 294266 – also the first ever diesel to run on the line.

In late October 2019, Army unit 507 Specialist Team Royal Engineers, Railway Infrastructure, helped lay another 120ft of track and, in January 2023, the railway laid its final track panel, taking the line up to the Buller Road level crossing, thus completing Stage One of the LWR revival. The next stages are rather more ambitious. The first is to extend the line south over Main Street to link up with the Long Shop Museum; however, this is dependent on both getting permission to lay a level crossing over the road and securing a lease on the Engineers' Arms car park from the pub's owners. Trust spokesman Julian Warner says: "Negotiations regarding an access lease through the pub car park are ongoing at the moment. We have not actually had a conversation with the authorities yet regarding crossing the road to the Long Shop. However, the ORR (Office of Rail & Road) has carried out a provisional visit to our track and is aware of our long-term aims."

Another ambition is to extend the line northwards over Buller Road/Station Road to rejoin the existing Leiston branch line close to the old station – the platform and building of which still survive, as does the old goods shed, albeit both in private hands. If this can be achieved, the trust wants to run heritage trains on the surviving 4½-mile section of the branch from Leiston to Saxmundham, which would make the LWR Suffolk's longest heritage line.

Julian describes this vision as a "long-term aim", adding: "We are very optimistic about crossing over to the branch line. We have discussed the possibility of a heritage railway siding scheme with Network Rail. All of the original exchange sidings

BELOW The advertising hoarding, complete with vintage posters, promoting the presence of the Leiston Works Railway.

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Inside the Long Shop. Small wonder Garrett workers referred to it as a cathedral! ALAMY

land is still there and not in use, so it could be viewed as just reinstating and not laying new track.

“At present, EDF is responsible for the operation of the line, and we have contacted them regarding possible use of the track. For the building of the new power station at Sizewell, a new line is being built north of Leiston so the section in the centre of the town close to the works line will remain unused and ripe to become a heritage railway. Once the power station has been built, the line north of the town will be removed and the branch line will again be hardly used. Our dream is to perhaps share this line, maybe at weekends.”

Such a vision is quite audacious for a railway that has yet to run its first public trains; that does not yet have facilities on-site either for passengers nor its operating needs; and that does not yet have any operational, passenger-carrying rolling stock. Still, everyone has to start somewhere.

Vintage vehicles

However, it is making positive progress towards addressing that final point. In October 2015, the trust acquired an ex-LMS 20-ton brake van from Tilla Business Park in Wroxham, adjacent to the 15in gauge Bure Valley Railway (another brake van from the same site is now based at Whitwell & Reepham station). The vehicle is currently being restored at the trust’s workshop outside Leiston, and has been named ‘Jumbo’ in honour of works line shunter Jumbo Brightwell. When restored, the van will enable passengers to travel on the LWR. Three other goods wagons have also been acquired, one of which is allegedly the oldest private wagon surviving in the UK. These are being restored and will be painted in the liveries of local firms, including Carr Brothers of Leiston, a well-known local coal merchant.

In May 2018, the trust acquired, through its Friends of Leiston support group, its first proper carriage – 1869-built Great Eastern Railway four-wheel five-compartment Third No. 514. Withdrawn in 1906, it was sold for £9 and, removed from its underframe, was used for several purposes, including as a clubhouse for a model railway club. Once based at the private South Cambridgeshire Railway near Royston, it eventually moved to Rocks by Rail for restoration, before moving to the LWR. Now also at the trust’s workshop, the underframe and running gear from an appropriate ex-LNER brake van have also been acquired to enable the carriage to run again. The group has decided to name the carriage ‘Elizabeth Garrett’ after one of Richard Garrett III’s nieces. Elizabeth was a remarkable person, becoming the first woman qualified to practice medicine in Britain, and the first to qualify as a doctor of medicine in France. She was also the Mayor of Aldeburgh – Britain’s first female mayor. The group plans to name each of No. 514’s compartments after other famous Suffolk women. The carriage will also incorporate parts salvaged from a GER four-compartment First class grounded coach body from nearby Knodishall.

In May 2020, the trust acquired a second



ABOVE The present end of the line, at the junction of Buller Road and Station Road. Leiston station is just behind the trees in the background. LWR

grounded GER coach body from Framlingham, which was donated free of charge. The plan is to use the body, which has been described as being in “amazing condition”, as a station building like the ones used at Thorpeness, thus resurrecting another piece of the Aldeburgh branch’s history.

On the locomotive front, the LWR has recently acquired Andrew Barclay 0-4-0DM Works No. 349 from the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust. Built in 1941, the diesel shunter was used at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Puriton near Bridgewater before being sold into industrial use. The railway says the new locomotive “will enable us to make full use of the works line that we have recently finished re-laying. The locomotive will also play an important part in assisting with the unloading and loading of visiting steam locomotives to our line in the future.”

Although the trust one day hopes to run *Sirapite* on its resurrected railway, the locomotive “will pose a problem in operating passenger trains owing to the lack of sufficient braking capabilities,” says Julian.

From small acorns...

The Leiston Works Railway has come quite a way in a very short space of time. Yes, 660 feet of track isn’t much to shout about, but the trust has revived a unique and often-overlooked industrial line that served its community for over a century. Whatever else one can say about the LWR, it is totally unlike any other heritage railway in the country, bar maybe the Leighton Buzzard Railway, and it is wonderful that the enterprising spirit that gave birth to the preservation movement still survives over 70 years on. The LWR might still have a long way to go before it becomes a fully fledged heritage railway, and it might never be a ‘premier league’ player, but it is keeping a vital part of East Anglia’s industrial history alive, and that’s something we can all get behind. ■

