GWR Class 6803 'Bucklebury Grange' – our very own steam engine

The Great Western Railway (GWR) designed and built steam locomotives that were both elegant and superbly constructed. The main production works were in Swindon where it made some of the most powerful locomotives over a period spanning over 100 years, commencing from the middle of the 19th century. In many respects the GWR had been the pioneer of the then modern railway with such great engineering names as Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Daniel Gooch, Major William Dean, G.J. Churchward, C.B. Collet and F.S. Hawksworth.

In the very early days of the railways, locomotives were known by their name alone. As the numbers of locomotives increased, it became necessary to refer to them by number (although many were named as well). The GWR used fine cast brass number plates carried on the cab side to identify its locomotives and its number series never exceeded 4 digits throughout the entirety of its existence. The GWR was generally very organised and consistent when naming locomotives with whole classes of locomotives being named according to a theme. Thus the most powerful King class express locomotives were all named after British kings, next down in prowess were the Castle class named after Castles. After the Castles, in order of precedence came the Hall class named after Halls and then the Granges which were numbered in the 6800 series and named after Granges in the area served by the GWR. Locomotive 6803 was named 'Bucklebury Grange'.

Driving wheel diameter had a big impact on the haulage characteristics of a steam locomotive. Express locomotives had large diameter wheels (typically 6' to around 6'8") which were suitable for high speed running but the large diameter wheels reduced the hauling capacity. Freight locomotives had much smaller diameter wheels (typically around 4' diameter) to maximise haulage capacity but these were only capable of low speed running. The majority of freight trains had either no or only a very limited number of wagons with brakes that were controllable by the driver and so could only run at 15 to 20 mph to ensure that they could stop when required. Mixed traffic locomotives had a driving wheel diameter typically between about 5' and 6' and, as the name suggested, meant that they could handle freight (apart from the heaviest mineral workings), parcels and cross-country / stopping / excursion passenger trains and in reality this type of locomotive was the backbone of the steam railway. The Great Western had a large mixed traffic 4-6-0 the Hall Class with 6' diameter driving wheels which gave them a greater turn of speed but impacted their haulage capacity.

Locomotives are usually classified by their wheel arrangement. A 4-6-0 has a four wheel bogie in front of the 6 driving wheels. Back in the early years of the 20th century, rather than a 4-6-0 design, Churchward opted for a slightly smaller 2-6-0 design with 5'8" diameter wheels. 342 locomotives of what became known as the 4300 Class were built between 1911 and 1932 with the design being so successful that many were used by the military in Europe during the First World War. The last two batches were built by Churchward's successor Charles Collet. The design was based on proven standard components, the cylinders from the Saint Class of 4-6-0s, the wheels of a class of suburban tank engines and the standard No. 4 boiler.

By the mid-30s, the earliest of the 4300 2-6-0s were showing their age and with train loads and speeds increasing, a more powerful locomotive was required. Churchward's successor Charles Collet planned to rebuild the 4300 class of 2-6-0s to fulfil Churchward's original 1901 plan for a mixed traffic 4-6-0 with 5'8" diameter driving wheel by re-using the wheels, valve motion and tenders for the new locomotives. When considering the rebuilding of the 4300 2-6-0s into 4-6-0s the extra pair of carrying wheels at the front increased the overall length of the locomotive allowing a bigger boiler rated at 225 psi to be fitted and also allowed the fitting of a larger and more comfortable cab. The 4300 cabs were pretty spartan affairs whereas the Granges were fitted with much more commodious side window cabs reflecting the slowly increasing demands for improved working conditions.

100 of the 43xx 2-6-0s were withdrawn and rebuilt, 80 as Granges and 20 as the smaller, lighter Manor or Class 7800. It had been intended to rebuild all of the Class 4300 locomotives in this way but the start of WW2 saw the programme suspended and it was never continued after the end of hostilities.

The Grange Class were built in 2 batches, the first (including 'Bucklebury Grange') between August 1936 and December 1937 with the remainder of the class built between February and May 1939.

'Bucklebury Grange' was completed and operational on 5th September 1936 and was allocated initially to the shed at Wolverhampton (Oxley). When based at Wolverhampton, it would have typically worked west and north of Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury, Chester and up to Birkenhead or south towards Banbury as well as around the West Midlands, mainly on 'fast' freights from Birkenhead docks as well as secondary passenger trains. These fast freight trains would typically run at speeds of 40 to 60 mph and with either all or a significant proportion of the wagons fitted with automatic brakes under the control of the driver conveying perishable goods such as fruit and broccoli. The Granges were also popular for powering excursion trains. In August 1950 'Bucklebury Grange' was allocated to Banbury but had migrated back to the West Midlands and Stourbridge Junction shed by March 1959. At Banbury, 'Bucklebury Grange' would typically have worked fast freights and inter-regional passenger trains towards London via the Chiltern route, down through Oxford towards Reading and north to Wolverhampton. Steam locomotives never generally tended to work much more than 50 to 100 or so miles from their home depot before being swapped for another locomotive. Of course there were exceptions such as the locomotives which hauled the non-stop Anglo Scottish services but they were just that – exceptions. This was why there was always great excitement amongst spotters when a 'foreign' locomotive from a far-away shed appeared, perhaps on an excursion or as a result of being 'borrowed' by a depot that was short of an engine to work a service. It is thus unlikely that 'Bucklebury Grange' was a regular performer anywhere near her namesake.

Bucklebury Grange 30/10/1961 (© D Southgate)

May 1965 saw Bucklebury Grange move to her final shed allocation which took her back to Wolverhampton Oxley from where she was withdrawn on 28th September 1965 having served for 29 years and travelled some 843,825 miles. After withdrawal in the early autumn of 1965, "Bucklebury Grange" was sadly broken up and disposed of at Birds of Long Marston.

In 2011 one of the two Bucklebury Grange brass name plates sold at Auction for £15,100 and in 2016 one of the two engine numbers sold for £1800 at Auction to private collectors. Fortunately an example of each has been retained on display at the Kidderminster Railway Museum.

Bucklebury Grange name plate and number on display at Kidderminster Railway Museum 2020.

To commemorate the first birthday of His Royal Highness Prince George on 22nd July 2014, Hornby created a detailed model named "Bucklebury Grange" after the West Berkshire village's family home of his mother Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge. 500 of the models were produced of which the first 200 were sold in a special numbered limited edition sleeve for Harrods.

Although all of the Granges were scrapped at the end of steam good progress is being made with the construction of a replica, number 6880, 'Betton Grange' (http://www.6880.co.uk/) at the Llangollen Railway. The project started back in 1998 and the boiler was first steamed just before Christmas 2019 having undergone very extensive refurbishment at Tysely locomotive works just outside Birmingham. The construction of the new Grange has been made much easier by the Great Western's policy of standardisation as the project has been able to make use of various components from other GWR locomotives including the boiler which came from a Hall class locomotive, the wheels are a spare set from a preserved 4300 2-6-0 on long term loan from the Severn Valley Railway, the leading bogie and tender have been borrowed from another Hall class locomotive belonging to the 'Betton Grange' project group. Although there is still much to do to complete the locomotive, the prospect of being able to ride behind a Grange class locomotive once again is now within sight.

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