

PRESTON SERVICES

SUPPLIERS OF STEAM ENGINES, SPARES & SERVICES

John Fowler & Co.

Special Sprung Road Locomotive No.7857

This interesting and newly discovered engine was reputedly ordered in 1896 by the showman T. Taylor of Grimsburg, Northants, as a 'special' 3 speed sprung A4 class road loco fitted with dynamo platform and dynamo, full-length canopy and right-hand mounted 'bollard crane'.

SOME HISTORY

Following a meeting in 1897 between Alfred Fowler and a Mr Hay from the Transvaal, South Africa, the engine was reassigned to Edward Chester & Co, agents for the War Department. The specification was amended to include increased winching capabilities, stronger rear axle, bearings and gears, wider rear wheels, and a headlight!

After completion, and following trials with other Fowler engines in the UK, it was shipped out to South Africa, to join the Army for the anticipated Boer War.

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Although the British Army had experimented with steam traction in various trials from around 1855, the South Africa campaign was, arguably, the first serious testing of steam in a conflict. Preparations for action in South Africa were slow to gather pace and it was not until 1898 that Fowlers received significant orders from the government, who were by then concerned about the logistics of conducting a military operation over the large area contested by the Boers, without proper roads and few railways.

There was little army experience in operating steam engines and the Royal Engineers were assigned to the task, ill equipped as they were. At this point, R.E. Crompton was 'called upon', having championed "government steam road trains" in India in the early 1870's. His experiments at that time largely fell on deaf ears and, on leaving the military, Crompton set up his own electrical engineering company in Chelmsford, which later became world famous.

Colonel Templer was eventually appointed "Director of Steam Road Transport" just before the outbreak of the Boer War, and thus later became commander of the 45th Royal Engineer Company.

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Templers' previous role has been in charge of Aldershot Balloon Factory, so this new direction was, evidently, challenging for him. Numerous difficulties arose in the early days of the war, not least caused by several engines being

lost at sea, a serious shortage of experienced drivers, and very difficult ground conditions.

Concurrent with Col. Templers initial efforts, the re-enlisted Crompton was asked to form a new detachment of "Electrical Engineers" to go to South Africa, a process which involved taking over some additional engines to join those already in service, equipped with dynamos to provide current for search lights and field telephones, etc.

It would appear that, despite efforts to adapt engines for warfare (including some armoured Fowler engines), their most productive employment was in moving large quantities of 'material' from docks to camps, a task they were reported to have undertaken very well.

By the end of the Boer War, 1st June 1902, the "Steam Road Transport" had grown to include 46 traction engines and a total of 730 men.

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The equipment was quickly sold to the Civil Administration and the 45th Company returned home. The Civil Administration then sold off the steam engines, most locally, and No.7857 was purchased by H.S. Henderson V.C., who had large land holdings in what was then Rhodesia. Henderson reportedly drove the engine to Gwelo, a journey which took many weeks on unmade roads and involved constructing river bridges along the way.

H.S. Henderson became a very successful gold miner and the engine was used to transport supplies to the agricultural enterprise in Rhodesia. No.7857 finished its working days as a stationary power plant driving gold stamps and mills.

This engine arrived back in the UK at the end of 2013, and research into its fascinating history will continue – in the hope of finding photos of the engine as ordered, being arguably the oldest Fowler showmans engine to survive, and why it was ‘mysteriously’ seconded for the anticipated military campaign.

Research information kindly supplied by the Museum of English Rural Life, The Royal Engineers Museum, and various published sources.