



## A Steam Roller IS for Life

Written by Derek Rayner

Much has been written on the subject of Conversions in the past and it is, to some, a very emotive subject. Some conversions in the traction engine world are acceptable, specifically those which were carried out in the working days of the use of steam on the road - because such an act was a necessity for commercial purposes - and such conversions are a part of the historic record of the vehicle concerned.

However, conversions unfortunately continue today. There is now no commercial reason for conversions in connection with engines requiring to work for a living as there was in the past - so why does it continue to happen?

People who are involved in today's traction engine rally scene are, in the main, preservationists. They are interested in the restoration of the object of their affection and all its history and more often than not in the authentic re-creation of something which is an historical object to its original working condition.

This certainly is not the case with those who convert steam rollers or even perhaps those who own converted steam rollers. They can only be described as desecrationalists on the one hand and perpetrators of someone else's misdoings on the other.

In railway preservation circles, there are some recent conversions of saddle tank locos to side tanks for commercial reasons (to make them look like *Thomas*) but if someone was to take an 0-6-0 'Austerity' saddle tank locomotive, stick some more wheels underneath it, put a stream lined casing on it and then, by adding a tender, say they have converted it to an A4 Pacific like *Mallard*, they would be laughed at and be vilified by all railway enthusiasts.

In the vintage and classic car scene, those who create something that never was and try and pass it off as if it had always been like that are certainly looked down on. But this sort of thing seemingly has become an accepted way of life in the traction engine world and unfortunately some people in other branches of the preservation scene look sideways at us and snigger at us behind our backs. And why have we become the laughing stock of the preservation movement and despised by some - its all because of conversions. The people who laugh at us are those who tend to be very much more purist in their views. They cannot comprehend the peculiar and very strange standards which we have very regrettably come to accept in road steam preservation circles.

This is because of the continued activities of those dedicated conversionists who seemingly cannot be swayed from their crimes against excellence in the field of authentic preservation and restoration. These people continue to convert machines and destroy our heritage. Others condone these activities in the voice of civil liberties or whatever - since they apparently say that people can do what they like with their own property. In many respects this is the all embracing problem of the malaise which has beset Great Britain today. Liberalism has taken over and there are few, if any, deterrents - people do what they like when they like, lawlessness prevails and there is little or no comeback when people destroy or steal someone else's property, personal possessions or even take people's lives. They might get a slap on the wrist but, in general, it is all just accepted as the way things are. Our once high British moral and other standards have gone - forever.

As far as traction engines and similar vehicles are concerned, they are not people's property as such. We are only the present day custodians of the historic engines of yesterday which have been passed down to us and we have a duty to all those who come after us - to protect, conserve and present our charges in an historically correct manner - and this does not mean destroying, or chopping, steam rollers in the way that has happened in the past and is continuing to do so.

One reason for this, I think, is through the ignorance of many of the parties concerned. This undoubtedly has had a major part to play in the past and I also believe that it is mainly because of the false hierarchy which seemingly exists on rally fields. For some reason, some people believe that there is more status and kudos attached to owning a traction engine or a steam tractor than there is in owning an honest steam roller. Certainly, in some people's eyes, to own a showman's engine seems to place the owner in a category close to GOD. And this is an engine with all that extra brasswork to clean, its dynamo to look after and lamps to sort out and in some instances, the owners have to work twice as hard with it - and longer - than most other engines on the rally field. Some people must surely have some strange sense of values!!

Unfortunately, because they lasted longer in commercial use, in general, than other sorts of road steam engine, there are more steam rollers around today than there are of other types. It is thus very easy to buy such a machine, in good working order, for today's going rate and then to spend another few thousand pounds on it in order to convert it into something historically worthless - something it never was - and then sell it on for a handsome profit.

Easy money for some - and it is happening still in the United Kingdom. It is decidedly unfair for some of those who buy one of these conversions. For, not having done their homework first, only later do they then find out that it was not what they thought it was. I wonder whether the conversionists of today will be thanked by those future generations for bastardising all those steam rollers - over a hundred of them at the last count - or will their present selfish attitude of destroying these machines earn them a much more appropriate accolade in years to come?

Why should people want to convert engines - and why steam rollers in particular? Firstly it is almost certainly to make a quick buck - more often than not out of some unsuspecting would-be enthusiast who knows no better. Deception, ignorance or being somewhat 'economical with the truth' has been known to play its part here in the onward sales of such machines. In some instances, the buyers are gullible non-enthusiasts who merely want a fancy toy with bright lights to play with because it looks nice and pretty and when they have bought it, they find they are then shunned by some on the rally fields. By that time, unfortunately, it is invariably too late and they find they have been conned into the ownership of a non-too-perfect engine. Secondly, some have said it is to satisfy a demand. This latter has only been created by those who want to satisfy their own vanity by climbing what they believe to be the social scale of the ladder of engine owning. But in truth, there is no such thing!

The question raised recently in the magazine by Peter Jordan and commented on by Anthony Coulls in the last issue about converting steam rollers to avoid paying for a Category G test is largely an irrelevance - for surely no one in their right minds would contemplate spending lots of time, effort and money in order to convert a steam roller into a four-wheeled thing, merely to avoid paying around £50 to take a driving test. This is totally illogical.

Many people - owners or vendors of conversions - create, or attempt to create, fanciful bogus histories of their machines in order to justify the circumstances. In preservation circles, it does not pay to lie or be 'economical with the truth', especially in the traction engine world. There are always those just around the corner who know the true facts!

Steam rollers which were built as such and used as such should remain so. They are a very important link with our historical past and we do not have the right today to destroy them in the way that some are choosing to do. Without them, our present roads would not exist in their current form and those horrible looking 'pseudo-tractors' or 'showlers' would have nowhere to go.

Conversions do not come into the category of anything to do with the term 'authentic' or 'historic' and in most instances are not worthy to grace the same rally field as correct and authentically restored and preserved road steam vehicles. They are non-entities and can best be described as expensive toys owned by some who are vain enough to think themselves a cut above the rest because they have got one. However hard they work, however well they are looked after, however prettily they are painted up - they are not truly an authentic engine.

Notwithstanding Peter Kelly's Editorial in the April issue specifically relating to the conversion of a Marshall steam roller which was apparently done just for the owner's benefit, so that he could have a four-wheeled toy to play with, it is encouraging to note that the relevant items which were removed during the conversion process were carefully stored so that the engine can be put back into its correct and original form at some stage in the future.

It will be interesting to see, in the fullness of time, whether this does actually happen. A parallel might be drawn here with a steam roller owner in the north who had similar good intentions but storage problems associated with his reusable components - and the fact he left them unattended in the corner of someone's yard for a long time - meant that his prized items were sent away for scrap by the owner of the property, without reference to the owner of what had become a steam tractor. In this instance, despite the original good intentions, the re-conversion became an impossibility and the eventual sale of the 'toy tractor' realised much more than the machine would have done, had it remained in its correct steam roller form. The owner therefore profited considerably from his conversion - by default. I would ask the question in this instance, whether this is morally right.

We justifiably took our hats off a year or two ago to a true enthusiast who bought a steam tractor, which was a converted steam roller - and then decided to return it to its original condition. There may, of course, have been some pressure to do this from enthusiasts and owners of other engines he met at the various events to which he took his poorly converted machine. But he certainly gained their respect - and a major award from the Road Roller Association, which was reported on in this magazine at the time - by returning the distressed engine to its correct roller form and he has now got a much better and authentic machine as a result of it. Oh that more could be persuaded to do the same!

The loss of status in the mythical and hierarchical ranks of the engine owning fraternity is obviously seen as a potential problem by many current owners of conversions in this respect - but I guess that most people who own such toys would be thought considerably more highly of if they were to authentically rebuild their charges - for the sake of historical accuracy.

I believe people in the UK are becoming more aware of the stigma attached to the ownership of a conversion. It's just like having a 'Q' registration plate on your engine - nobody wants one. There are also signs that we are at a turning point in this respect from a financial point of view. It has become very noticeable in recent times that a lot of conversions have been sold outside the United Kingdom. Some may decry the loss of engines to the Continent, in particular, but one wonders whether many of these non-historically correct machines have had to go in that direction because UK enthusiasts are becoming more aware of the situation - and also of the anti-conversion feeling which exists amongst enthusiasts and others. Hence, the only way in which the owners of many of these unwarranted conversions of good English steam rollers are able to rid themselves of their extremely non-authentic toys is to sell them to European enthusiasts - who may not, in all instances, know what they are buying.

Those who have created the many bastardised vehicles which we see around today and those who assist in providing the means of making such non-reversible conversions as do exist, should be ashamed of themselves. They truly cannot be called 'Members of the Preservation Movement' and it is up to all of those who are such true people to cast out those 'non-believers' from the rally scene.

Steam rollers are for life - as the well known RSPCA advert about dogs says - and I will continue to fight for the rights of these honest machines to be like that - for ever.