

John Bernard Snell (C '51)
28th March 1932 – 29th December 2013

By David Beattie (D '51)

I first met John a few days after my arrival at Bryanston in May 1946, very appropriately in the Model Railway Club located in an attic in the Portman roof. He had come in September 1945, together with Sam Cruikshank (C '50) and Christian Strover (H '50) and together with several others over the next five years we built a very extensive O gauge layout. John designed it and laid most of the track; unusually it had an overhead system to power the locomotives, some of which he designed and built himself.

John was born in Fiji where his father was managing director of an import/export company with an interest in the narrow gauge sugar cane railway system which John soon caught up with. Prep school in New Zealand inspired an interest in the 3 foot 6 inch gauge systems there. On arrival at Bryanston he found a gauge one layout in the attic that had been built by J.I.C. (Jimmy) Boyd, a pupil in the early thirties. He, like John, later became an author and expert on the narrow gauge railways of North Wales. I remember the last vestiges of his layout being taken up in May 1946.

John and Sam Cruikshank were fortunate in having Tim Cobb as housemaster of Connaught. He was a railway enthusiast and photographer and was responsible for the Railway Club, of which John became secretary, organising a weekly programme of speakers and visits to places of railway interest. In September 1948 Peter Barlow (H 1953) came to Bryanston and also joined the club. I remember a cycling expedition to south Dorset in 1949 on a baking hot day with David Renton, by then the master responsible, to explore the Furzebrook and Goathorn narrow gauge china clay systems. Other outings included a visit to the Eastleigh locomotive works of the Southern Railway.

On leaving Bryanston in March 1951 John went up to North Wales to join a band of volunteers, headed by Tom Rolt, now regarded as the Father of Railway Preservation. They were determined to keep open the narrow gauge Tallylyn Railway at Towyn that was about to close. The inaugural train under this Preservation Society ran in May 1951 with John firing the engine. He maintained his links with the railway and in May 2011, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of this event, the Society ran a train with John cutting the tape; he was the last surviving member of the officers from 1951. I joined the Society two months later in June 1951 and we spent the next three college summer vacations helping to restore the railway, John by now driving the engines. In his book, *Railway Adventure*, on these early days Tom Rolt wrote that John was a most valuable addition to the permanent staff.

In October 1951 John and I went up to Oxford, he to Baliol College to read PPE, and we were joined two years later by Peter Barlow. Over the next few years we often congregated in North Wales to follow the progress of the restoration of the Tallylyn and other railways, such as the Festiniog.

After college and National Service, John joined London Transport, becoming manager of their Mill Hill bus depot. This involved bus driving and conducting to gain an insight into the difficulties sometimes faced by his staff. I remember Peter and I catching a bus on Bayswater Road with John as conductor!

Later in the 1960's John trained as a barrister and was just about to start practicing when, in 1972, he was offered the position of General Manager of the Romney, Hythe and

Dymchurch 15 inch gauge railway on the Kent coast. The railway had been severely mismanaged for several years following the death of its founder Captain Howey who designed and built it. John spent the rest of his life working for the RH&DR, 28 years as General Manager and then Vice Chairman and Company Secretary up to the time of his death. Among many new projects he oversaw the construction of one of the largest 00 gauge model railways in this country. His experience with the Bryanston model railway was invaluable in this project. There is no doubt that he played a key roll in restoring the fortunes of the RH&DR.

John has been the author of many books on railways, both at home and abroad. Copies of most of his books have been donated to the school library. He, Peter Barlow and I went on continental trips in the 1950s that provided some of the photographs for *Mixed Gauges*, a semi-autobiographical account of his railway experiences. Over a lifetime he built up a very large and important portfolio of railway photographs.

John's funeral was held at Hawkinge in Kent when nearly 200 colleagues and friends attended. The Chaplain took the service to the RH&DR and Sam Cruikshank also gave a short eulogy. Nick Gilbert, Head of Development and the Bryanston Society represented the School.

John has left a very generous legacy to the school and a celebration of this will be held later at Bryanston..

Sam Cruikshank, Peter Barlow and I have been firm friends of John for nearly 70 years. We, together with our wives and families, will greatly miss him.

An Appreciation of John Snell's (C '51) Life and Work

28 Mar 1932 - 27 Dec 2013

By Sam Cruickshank (C '50)

John was born in Fiji on 28 March 1932 of an Australian mother and an English father H.E. Snell, who originally went to Fiji as Colonial Office Cadet in 1911 after studying at Balliol College Oxford. His father later joined Morris Hedstrom as their Fijian agent. His mother took him on a visit in 1938 to the UK by the trans-Pacific, trans-US and trans-Atlantic route, during which he was able to visit Grand Union Station in Chicago, his introduction to the US rail scene.

John was in New Zealand for most of the war attending St Peter's School in Cambridge and spending most of his holidays in Auckland enjoying its tram system and ferries. He also managed to visit other parts of North Island including Wellington and, on his way to England by sea, Christchurch and Lyttleton in South Island.

John arrived at Bryanston in September 1945, already an ardent railway enthusiast and artistic photographer inspired by the Colonial Sugar Corporation's narrow gauge system in Fiji and the New Zealand 3ft6in systems. He had also found out that 2ft narrow gauge railways, such as the Festiniog, existed in the UK.

John's housemaster in Connaught was Tim Cobb, a railway enthusiast and artistic photographer and in charge of The Railway Club, of which John became Secretary organizing the weekly programme of speakers and expeditions to Dorset Narrow gauge china clay lines at Goathorn and Furzebrook, Engine Sheds and Railway Works. Tim Cobb was one of John's lifelong friends, as was Ron Carrington, a later master in charge of the Railway Club and junior housemaster of Connaught. His tutor was Joyce Wilson who guided him in his choice of academic and non-academic subjects.

John made many friends at Bryanston including Sam Cruickshank (C '50) and Malcolm Trevor (Sh '51) with whom he shared a study together with Peter Barlow (H '52), David Beattie (D '52), John Blanchard (H '48), Gareth Glendenning (Sh '50), Tony Hamilton-Baker (Sh '49), Robin Lees (Sh '51) J.P. Montagu John (P '48), Christian Stover (H '51) and Rupert Studd (D '50).

The Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway on its way north from Blandford could be seen and heard from Bryanston and John, together with Gareth, Malcolm Rupert and Sam with others, spent summer Saturday afternoons watching the succession of the Saturday only expresses from the north to Bournemouth, including the Pines Express from Manchester. Equally at about 10.00pm you could hear the northbound goods climbing out of Blandford up the 1 in 80 gradient and rushing down the 1 in 80 gradients towards Stourpaine. John was a key member of the Model Railway Club, originally developed by J.I.C. Boyd (the author of many books on the Welsh narrow gauge railways) as a gauge 1 layout. John regauged the railway to 0 gauge, designing and constructing the layout, developing a fully interlocked electrical signalling system and the power control, for which he designed and built many of the electric locomotives. This helped him at the RH&DR. Many of the younger generation at Bryanston enjoyed being a member of the MRC. He was a member of many other societies including bookbinding, of which he was secretary, gramophone, photographic and music. He preferred to listen to music in the Centre Room rather than going to his dormitory to read in the rest period after lunch.

During school holidays John and Sam made John's first trip to the RH&DR, when it was only open between Hythe and New Romney in 1946, and we were joined on other trips to Kelvedon and Tollesbury Light Railway and the Elsenham and Thaxted Light Railway by Malcolm and Robin.

As well as his interest in railways, John was also interested in the urban transport scene including trams buses and trolley buses in the UK, Australia and New Zealand and enjoyed the discussions he had with Tony, John Montagu and Sam.

He was not a sportsman but he put much effort into Pioneering, being the leader of the bookbinders and the Blandford Path maintenance group, maintaining the shortest route by bicycle to Blandford: many later Bryanstonians will have been grateful. John was also the school postman, whose duties included taking the SCR mail and sorting it into the members' pigeonholes and looking after the house postmen who sorted the mail during the early morning run.

John just after leaving Bryanston and before going up to Oxford was one of the first volunteers on the Talylyn in April 1951, the first preserved railway. He fired and drove their locos, being the fireman on Dolgoch on the first public train 14 May 1951. He also had hands-on workshop experience in maintaining them in running order with Tom Rolt and David Curwen who had his own locomotive engineering company. This was critical point in John's life helping him on the RH&DR introducing him to many of his railway preservation contacts. It also provided the background for his novel Jennie (1958), now in reprint.

At Balliol College, Oxford, John read PPE and was friendly with Christian, David, Malcom and Peter. Whilst at Oxford he was secretary of the O.U Railway Club, treasurer of the O.U. Camera Club, sorting out its accounts and college representative on the O.U. Music Club. David and Peter joined John on his early UK and continental railway trips, which provided photos for Britain's Railways Under Steam (1965), for which John drew the maps aided by John Blanchard, whilst Peter Parker (who later became Peter Barlow's brother-in-law) researched the railway companies' dividend records. Photos for Mixed Gauges (2007), an autobiographical work that John stated was "an adventure which I shall never forget", came from these and later trips. As well as the UK, the book also covers East and West Europe, Scandinavia, Iberia, Australia, NZ, North and South America, India and Indonesia.

After Oxford John did his National Service in the Royal Engineers, being posted as sergeant to the Pioneer Corps Depot at Wrexham, which enabled him to continue to visit many of the Welsh narrow gauge railways and keep in touch with Festiniog developments.

Following his National Service, John made a trip back to New Zealand in 1956 by signing on as the eighth supernumerary engineer (out of seven!) on the Australian merchant ship MV Aualind. This meant that he had further experience of steam driven equipment such as generators and winches. The latter had similar Stephenson valve gear to the Talylyn Locos and for which he machined new parts: once again valuable to him on the RH&DR.

He returned to the UK late in 1957 and, in 1958, joined London Transport as a management trainee. During training he met David and Peter as a conductor and Sam when he was a depot inspector. Later John became Chief Depot Inspector of the Muswell Hill Garage and learnt about the intricacies of scheduling buses and their crews, as well as work place negotiations. In 1963 he was a co-author with P.B Whitehouse of Festiniog Revival.

In 1966 he joined the Eastern Region HQ at Liverpool Street where he worked on railway operating costs, which gave him a ringside seat on what was happening to BR and he decided to leave in 1968 following the death of his father. It enabled to have his first large car a Ford Zephyr, which was followed by a series of Saabs with their superior engineering based on the experience of making Saab Fighters.

He was invited to arbitrate and mediate in an internal dispute on the North Norfolk Railway with Alan Bowman and Capt. Peter Manisty, becoming its first chairman. It was very much a hands-on role, from writing up the accounts to cutting up bullhead rails with a mechanical saw on Weybourne Station in mid-winter. During this time he edited *Trains* 1969 and wrote *France* in the Ian Allan Continental Handbook series (1971) *Early Railways* (1972) and *Early Railways-Mechanical Engineering* (1974) and qualified as a barrister, though he never practiced.

In February 1972 he became the General Manager of the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway, now in the care of Lord Garnock as Chairman and his Vice Chairman Bill McAlpine, now RH&DR Chairman, with the charge of rescuing the RH&DR. It was a tough job which called on all his previous experience and education from MRC days at Bryanston, locomotive driving from his Tallylyn days, workshop experience on the Tallylyn and MV Australind, his London Transport management and man management experience and his time as chairman of the North Norfolk Railway, as well as his legal training.

John's book *One Man's Railway* (1983) chronicled how J.P. Howey had built and developed RH&DR and the problems which beset it after Howey's death in 1963. The RH&DR had little capital and its coaches, track, bridges, buildings and model railway needed restoration but the locomotives were in fair condition. It required inspired management to lead the full time staff, mainly skilled workers who drove the engines in the operating season and acted as platelayers in winter, but also the skilled engineers in the machine and erecting shop and coach builders supplemented by additional part time staff in the shops and cafes and volunteers, including skilled tradesmen and engine drivers. Many of the volunteer drivers had progressed from driver experience days. During his time as General Manager and Managing Director, he had the support of George Barlow in his early days and later John Roberts to assist him in the control of the day-to-day operation of the railway.

During John's time he introduced a wireless control system to assist in the operation of the railway and colour light signals to control the trains and road traffic, designing much of the interlocking circuitry himself to standards required by the Railway Inspectorate. At the same time he started the planned replacement of the track with heavier rail and hardwood sleepers and introduced the Maddiesons Camp loop to cut the New Romney-Dungeness section into two halves, so as to improve the RH&DR's operating capacity and secure the valuable passenger traffic from the camp. This also allowed regular interval train timetables and, with use of the Dungeness loop, to run on some Saturdays the Hythe to Hythe non-stop train. He did not neglect the accounting and administrative side, introducing IT systems for both and, because of his legal training, he took on the duties of Company Secretary, a post which he held till his death. John used to query how business rates were set and achieved reductions for the RH&DR.

John was able to loan the RH&DR locomotives to both the Liverpool and Gateshead Garden Festivals and to Bure Valley Railway when it did not have its own locos, so as to provide additional income which was used to continue the RH&DR's loco refurbishment programme, including the purchase of *Black Prince*, a pre-war German pacific built by Krupp

for the 15 inch gauge. This was in addition to the normal exchange of locos with the Ravensglass and Eskdale Railway. RH&DR also ran the school train for New Romney Secondary School on contract to the Kent County Council, for which two diesels locomotive were purchased from TMA Engineering based on a design used for the R&ER diesel "Lady Wakefield". He also ensured that there were sufficient coaches in the peak season so that no one was left behind to wait for the next train. He looked again at the extension to Sandling Junction BR and an additional site for a second RH&DR line with station adjacent to Chichester BR, but neither proved practical.

During the operating season he was always in his office to receive and bank the day's takings, so as to keep an eye on the day-to-day finances of the railway, especially as it was important to keep borrowing to a minimum. The capital situation was improved by selling shares in the company at a premium with little possibility that a dividend would be declared, but providing certain free travel facilities on the railway.

Building on John Holder's post-war efforts, John Snell ensured RH&DR publicity grew through his many railway connections, both in the UK and on the continent, and the many lectures he gave, and with locomotives on show at many locations, such as the National Rail Museum and the Severn Valley Railway and other preserved railways. There were also gala days with visiting locomotives from other UK and US 15in gauge railways including Mother's and Father's Days, Thomas the Tank Engine, 1940s days with the armoured trains, and bus and coach days, as well as RH&DR's AGM day.

He served as representative on the Hayward Society. The society was founded in 1976 by Lord Gretton and Robin Butterell and its aims are to further the association of those miniature railways from 7 1/2in to 2 1/4in. John also arranged volunteer experience for many of the sons, and occasionally the daughters, of his friends.

He served as a Conservative Councillor for Dymchurch (where his house was and which backed on to the railway and had fine views over the marsh) on the Shepway District Council, which covered Folkestone, Hythe and Romney Marsh. John also served as a Director of the Dart Valley Railway (1992-2000) and was an active member the Continental Railway Circle for continental enthusiasts in the UK.

After he retired from the full time post as Managing Director in 1999, he remained very busy becoming vice chairman of the Board keeping a keen interest in the day-to-day loading of trains during the running season with the drivers whistling or waving to him and the development and installation of automatic barriers, for which he sourced a cheaper version than the type used by BR. As he continued as secretary he was in New Romney two or three times a week. It was during this period that he wrote and painstakingly prepared the photographs for Mixed Gauges as well as making further trips to North and South America, South Africa, NZ especially for the 75th anniversary of St Peter's School, the Continent and Scandinavia.

John felt that he had kept the RH&DR among the top half dozen preserved railways for 27 years and many of the problems he had faced over that time were generally the same as those faced by Danny Martin his successor and his engineering director Kim Richardson, especially in maintaining the machinery which runs at speed in the open air and which is wearing out and needs constant renewal. They were made more difficult with the increased competition of Heritage sites such as Dover and Walmer Castles and Children's Activity Centres, together with tight financial situation after 2009. John did not like the word

preservation, since those who ran the preserved railways were keeping alive a way of life, a system, a network and anything living must breathe and change on the basis that if a thing is not alive it is dead and if preserved belongs in a museum.

Retirement allowed him to help other preserved lines such as the Rother Valley (the extension of the K&SER from Bodiam to its original terminus next to BR's Robertsbridge station), the Welsh Highland which now has four South African 2-6-2 +2-6-2 Garratts (illustrated in *Mixed Gauges* in use on the Alfred County Railway) to ride on the first through trains from Porthmadoc to Caernarvon and return on 14 May 2013 on the Festiniog and keep up his links with the Talylyn by taking part in 60th Anniversary of the first public train on the first preserved railway on 14 May 2011. John also kept up his links with the "Big" railway through his friendship with Robert Breakwell of First East Anglia and Peter Barlow of First Great Western. It also gave him time to maintain links with his family.

John was a regular attendee at the Connaught Lunches started by Sir John Hall (C '49) and Sir Terrence Conran (C '50) in 2009, with an attendance of 14 or 15 members but reducing to five (Terrence Conran, Sam Cruickshank, Brian Falk, George Marwick (C '50) and David Wynne Morgan (C '48) at the latest lunch in 2013 through death and incapacity.

Like many of his closest friends we supported him through our love for him, making available our business experiences and by phone calls, looking after his house whilst he was away, visiting him or staying with him in Dymchurch and entertaining him in our family homes, often by way of weekly coffee mornings or at Christmas. John was a loveable but intelligent lone bachelor, who needed support in later years when his health deteriorated and mobility was a problem, but he was able to drive until his death through natural causes.

Staying with John was a privilege as one had access to his vast library which in addition to his valuable collection of historical railway books, timetables, magazines, photographs, films tapes and DVDs, contained a large collection of musical records, tapes and DVDs, as well as a huge number of detective, science fiction and modern novels. John was also up to date on the cinema. So John was a walking encyclopaedia on these subjects as well as railways. Music was important to him and he usually took his breakfast listening to Radio 3.

Conversation, especially over the evening meal, was important and this was followed by being entertained by items from John's railway photos, films and tapes, music and miscellaneous DVDs, such as *Dad's Army* with its North Norfolk scenes, *Allo Allo* and *Yes Prime Minister*. He was eco-minded believing in nuclear energy and solar panels to heat his hot water.

John had already invited Revd. Robert Featherstone a musicologist, organist and volunteer driver on the RH&DR to take his funeral service. This was attended by at least 120 of his friends, including David, Peter and Sam from Bryanston, as well as Nick Gilbert Head of Development, his work colleagues, representatives from the organisations with which he was associated. The guests left to the strains of part of the first movement of Bruckner's 8th Symphony. Bruckner said that a cathedral organ had much in common with a steam locomotive. In his eulogy Robert referred to Bruckner's comment quoted in *One Man's Railway* that "driving a sizeable locomotive for the first time, once man has opened the regulator and felt the iron horse stir into life he is a changed man". Sam had the privilege of taking a part in the eulogy by covering his younger life and education, as did Peter Rothschild who was Assistant Divisional Superintendent of LTs Central Road Services when John was at

Muswell Hill Garage, who covered his LT and RH&DR life and went with John on some of his railway trips in retirement.

It was great for us to have been John's firm family friends, Sam for 68 years, Pamela for 52 and our daughters, Celia for 44 and Ruth for 42. Importantly he treated all children as adults and expected them to have their own point of view. We much appreciated his Christmas cards of railway scenes, some of which were based on photos in Mixed Gauges, whilst others were on show in Tudor Drive. His last one came in 2012 with the greeting "With best wishes for this and every future Christmas and New Year" with a photo of the summit terminus of the Pikes Peak Railway at 14,000ft looking over the Great Plains 10,000ft below.

John's life has shown that the choice of Bryanston as a school for him allowed him, with his incisive mind and determination, to develop to the full in the near egalitarian Bryanston School society of his era. His career proved that time spent on reconnaissance and hands on experience is seldom wasted. Indeed many people thought that John was an engineer by training not by experience. His life showed how valuable his friendship was and how it gave him access to many opportunities, both for himself and for his friends.

As a conclusion it is fitting to quote John's Envoi to Mixed Gauges first written and published anonymously about 45 years ago:

Asthmatic but brute-forceful too
Neglected yet obedient
With rusty sides and clanking rods
But still alive and servient

She is doomed now; men condemn her
Say she's dirty and old fashioned
Far too costly, and her service
Is labour without a profit

So go she must, and now instead
We'll have machines of greater power
The figures show their better worth
In ton-miles per train-engine- hour

To those who believe that all figures are truthful
Her death will be welcome: but some will remember
Her power and her struggle, her grime and her glory;
Though gone like the sunset, she'll not be forgotten.

To younger readers I would say only that the last verse has three
Cylinders with valves set accurately; and the first three only two
Cylinders, but with the valves slightly off-beat in different ways—
In second and third verses

JBS