Feature

The Future of Heritage Railways and Rail Conservation in Germany

Rolf Höhmann

About 100 German heritage and tourist railways are now organized under their own umbrella association, the Verband Deutscher Museums-und Touristikbahnen (VDMT). They meet twice a year, visit member railways, discuss specific themes and run five working groups on rolling-stock technology, railway traffic, marketing, and museum concepts/ conservation. As an industrial archeologist, my main interest for the last 5 years has been the museum concepts/ conservation working group.

Following the examples set by the Talyllyn Railway and the Ffestiniog Railway in Great Britain, the first German preservation societies were formed in the mid-1960s and the subsequent development could be described as a success story. Most of the older associations are financially sound and well organized; they possess a great deal of experience in 'keeping a railway running' even to the point of functioning as private railways that compete with other operators on Germany's free-access network. The oldest association, the meter-gauge line in Bruchhausen-Vilsen has had a chairwoman since May 2001, another sign of progress.

If we define the first 40 years of heritage railways in Germany as the first development phase, we should now look to the second phase, which I like to describe as consolidation. Consolidation embodies more professionalism, more quality and a more theoretical and scientific approach to all questions, especially the collections and their conservation. Many enthusiasts lack self confidence in what they are doing—some fear being accused of 'playing trains.' On the other hand, they have saved and collected a tremendous industrial heritage of great value that no public body could afford to collect in the same time and to the same extent. But do they realize this and how can they gain more acceptance? The acceptance of conservation and presentation professionals can be gained by developing the objectives mentioned above.

Therefore, the aim of our working group is to discuss how to achieve better quality, more professionalism and a more scientific approach in four fields:

- Collections
- Conservation
- Presentation
- Interpretation

The branch-line railway atmosphere of the 1950s is preserved at this station on Germany´s oldest museum line between Bruchhausen-Vilsen and Asendorf with an authentic railcar and restored sheds. (Author)

Collections

When we look at our collections, we realize there is now a 'closed market' for the more historical items, especially steam locomotives. There are no more scrapyards, East European reserves and plinthed locos to be saved. As a professional conservator, I miss having a complete inventory of railway heritage artefacts—only this could give a professional base for evaluation and further work on these objects. A first survey of most, but perhaps not all, locomotives and carriages preserved in Germany was presented in the somewhat misleadingly titled book *Rail Nostalgia in Germany 2000*[1]. The author listed 440 museums, organizations and collections with exactly 4000 self-propelled railway vehicles. At the time of the survey, there were 827 steam locos of which 246 were in working order. Many conservation professionals feared that the ubiquitous class 50/52 would outnumber all others, but there were 'only' 178—quite reasonable in view of the numbers produced and the long production run. There were also 751 diesel railway locos and 492 electric tramcars, but the huge majority of locomotives (1215) are small Feldbahn diesel locos with gauge of 2' and less!

The dark spot is the inventory of carriages and wagons, which are not listed in the above book. If we realistically estimate that there are 5 to 10 carriages for each engine, there are at least 20,000 pieces of rolling stock. The VDMT plans to start its own inventory survey, following the lead set by the British Vintage Carriage Trusts. Many heritage associations own or rent historic buildings and

The incredible majority of preserved locos in Germany is represented by this example of a Feldbahn diesel loco running on a peat railway in northwest Germany. (Author)

There are more than 178 *Kriegsloks* preserved in Germany and some are in other European countries, like this one in Wolsztyn, Poland. (Author)

infrastructure, which should also be included in inventories.

The last few years have seen a consolidation of collections with exchanges of locos and rolling stock, often with the positive result that most objects are now where they originally belong.

Conservation

Conservation must be the next step after collecting. Many associations have their valuable collections standing outside for a long time in the yards of their never-large-enough sheds and workshops. They have learned the hard way that unrenovated and renovated rolling stock needs constant care and should not be exposed to the elements. Therefore, consolidation also means erecting protective roofs and large sheds at worst, and dual-purpose museums and exhibition halls at best. More of our members are now building such facilities. Much early restoration and conservation work was undertaken without proper documentation of the unconserved state, so much historical evidence was lost. We should not expect the quality of a survey like *The Engineering and History of The Rocket*[2], but most German conservation associations now understand that a thorough investigation and documentation of their collected objects is well worth the extra hard work. Documentation also applies to other subjects, like archives related to their specific railway line and its buildings and infrastructure, or to their own history, especially the first years of preservation. Few societies will be lucky enough to have a John Bate whose *Chronicles of Pendre Siding*[3] give a full account of the first 50 years of the engineering work preserving the Talyllyn Railway.

An important part of the working-group discussions covers conservation policies. Some examples, like the model-railway-style conversion of a tank engine into a tender engine or the exhibition of unrestored locomotives in the Deutsches Technikmuseum in Berlin give the chance to reflect on the techniques and results of conservation projects. The conflict between returning an object to working condition and the historic value of specific techniques that should be preserved is well illustrated by the dubious value of overhauls at the Meiningen Steam Locomoting Works where welded steam boilers have been substituted for the original riveted boilers. The German state conservators are organized by their federal government and federal legislation protecting monuments usually does not include 'movable' objects. Consequently, very little railway rolling stock is protected and nor does it benefit from public money or tax reductions. In comparison to other European countries like France and Spain, there are no national 'rolling railway monuments,' and neither is there a national collection like in Britain. Perhaps this policy will change with the inclusion of the Semmering Railway and Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in the World Heritage list and the pending application for the French Villefranche-La Tour de Carol meter-gauge line.

Presentation

Presentation of railway history is a field that requires further development. Most heritage railways are actually linear open-air museums. In comparison (and competition) to many classical museums, they have the advantage of being 'living museums' that show related objects in their natural setting.

Such a setting can be described as a 'railway landscape,' but these landscapes are now very changed by modern signals,

True Prussian railway landscape: A former P 8 loco, telegraph wires, and small stations are today preserved only in Poland. (Author)

The French National Railway Museum in Mulhouse presents all the elements of a railway line, including signal box, signals, water tower, water crane, weighbridge, buffer stops, turnouts, guards hut, bridge, etc., in a small open-air space. (Author)

telephone lines, buildings and surrounding new urban developments. For example, presentation of the typical Prussian State Railways environment is no longer possible in Germany and can now only be found around Wolsztyn in west Poland where there is even some rolling stock of German origin. But the future of the Wolsztyn experience is far from secure. The Saxon narrow-gauge lines in eastern Germany remain more or less unchanged since before WWII. However, most are still carriers, so we must expect great changes like new carriages, modern facilities or, even worse, complete abandonment.

Interpretation

Some heritage railways face the task of saving 'historic islands' in otherwise completely changed surroundings. The oldest preserved narrow-gauge line in western Germany, the Bruchhausen-Vilsen metre-gauge railway, could still save the original atmosphere of one of its three stations in Heiligenberg, including the renovation of some private sheds for agricultural use. Once each year, staff at this station demonstrate the life and working circumstances of bygone times by wearing period costumes.

Another approach presents railways as systems—Musée français du chemin de fer (the National Railway Museum of France) in Mulhouse compresses all the elements of a railway line into a dense open-air exhibition, including a signal box, signals, water tower, small bridge, tracks, etc. At first glance, it seems like a caricature, but on deeper inspection this installation offers a great opportunity to interpret the linear railway system as a whole.

This kind of interpretation is normally found only in professional museums but it could be a natural possibility for heritage railways.

The development of volunteer efforts to preserve the railway heritage with all its problems, and the history of the volunteer movement in general and specifically are great stories in themselves. The work needed to keep things running and organized is of interest to many visitors and shows that there is more to a heritage railway than just 'playing trains.' Many items tell their own stories, but must be interpretated by guided tours or through well-written explanations. The quality of guide books is increasing and there are many good-to-excellent examples. But there is still plenty to do and much to learn from professionally run museums of history, art, etc. ■

This article was first presented at the international conference 'Slow Train Coming: Heritage Railways in the 21st Century,' held in York in September 2001.

Notes

1. L. Kenning, *Bahn-Nostalgie Deutschland 2000* (Rail Nostalgia in Germany 2000), Verlag Kenning, 2000.
2. M. R. Bailey, J. P. Glithero, *The Engineering and History of The Rocket*, National Railway Museum at York, 2000.
3. J. L. H. Bate, Chronicles of Pendre Sidings, Rail Romances, 2001.

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