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Alan Pegler



Railway enthusiast and entrepreneur who used all his wealth to rescue the Flying Scotsman and the Ffestiniog Railway from oblivion

In 1952 Alan Pegler rescued a moribund slate quarry railway in North Wales and began the restoration project that was to turn it into Britain's leading narrow-gauge line, the Ffestiniog. Eleven years later he captured the hearts of railway enthusiasts when he bought Britain's first 100mph locomotive, *Flying Scotsman*, and transformed it into the world's most famous loco, surpassing even the *Rocket* and *Mallard* in terms of stardom.

Pegler then secured a deal enabling him to run his beloved "Scotsman" on the British Rail network after every other steam locomotive had been retired. Today's mainline charter-train operations — a valuable part of Britain's tourist industry — owe much to that agreement.

Pegler, with his trademark mutton-chop whiskers and well-spoken manner, was a man of many talents. His curriculum vitae included a colourful variety of roles: signalling assistant, dive-bomber pilot, company director, Lloyd's underwriter, railtour operator, busker, cruise ship lecturer, actor, commentator, courier, salesman and professional Henry VIII impersonator.

He was president of the Ffestiniog Railway, a position he held until his death, and had been president of the Gainsborough Model Railway Society and vice-president of the Gresley Society dedicated to preserving old rolling stock. His appointment to OBE in the 2006 New Year Honours was a richly deserved recognition of the enormous contribution he had made in his many walks of life.

A wealthy industrialist with a slight touch of eccentricity, Pegler blew his fortune in pursuit of his steam dream and throughout the 1960s and early 1970s the "millionaire steam buff", as Fleet Street's reporters called him, was often in the news.

Alan Francis Pegler was born in London in 1920. He was brought up in the Nottinghamshire village of Sutton-cum-Lound. His father, Francis, ran the Northern Rubber Company in nearby Retford. A childhood interest in trains was encouraged when Pegler's parents took him to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. It was there that he first set eyes on the magnificent machine that was to change his life — LNER Pacific No 4472 *Flying Scotsman*.

"I gazed up at this huge gleaming monster and was lifted up into its cab. I was spellbound and couldn't stop thinking about it all the way home," he recalled.

That early acquaintance with the pride of the LNER was to be renewed on May 1, 1928, when as a schoolboy he stood in awe as *Flying Scotsman* flashed through Barnby Moor station with the first non-stop run of the *Flying Scotsman* express. "I think the special relationship I was to have with her really began that day," he said.

After Hydneys House School, Sussex, and Radley College, Oxfordshire (where he gained a pilot's licence at the age of 17), Pegler went up to Jesus College, Cambridge, to read law. Before he could graduate, the war intervened and he joined the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm, flying Blackburn Skua dive-bombers — and once surviving a crash-landing in one. He later moved to the Royal Observer Corps and then the RAF Photographic Recognition Department.

Pegler in the cab of Flying Scotsman in 1987. He said that the celebrated locomotive, which had beguiled him since boyhood, had ruined him, "but I still love her"
Pete Lomas / Associated
Newspape

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Pegler had been made a director of Northern Rubber on his 21st birthday and, after the war, took up his duties at the family firm, becoming a Lloyd's underwriter in the 1950s. These roles brought him a handsome fortune and he began to organise excursion trains, including the *Northern Rubber Special*, for his workforce.

In 1952 he and a friend travelled to Wales to take a look at the "decrepit, decaying, derelict shambles" that was the Festiniog Railway (FR) and, "with the blind optimism only young men possess", decided to buy it and reopen it.

Pegler agreed to put up the money, and the Ffestiniog was duly saved. In a hugely generous move he transferred his majority shareholding to the trust which runs the line to this day. The FR itself acknowledges that one of Britain's leading tourist attractions owes its very survival to him.

Meanwhile, the Pegler mainline excursions had become so popular with railway staff that his name became known to the British Transport Commission chairman Sir Brian Robertson, who decided to reward his enterprise by appointing him to the BTC's Eastern Area Board. That led to one of his greatest thrills — being on the footplate of the streamliner *Sir Nigel Gresley* as it broke the postwar steam speed record by hitting 112mph south of Grantham in 1959.

Between 1940 and 1960 Pegler had married four times and it was joked that his fifth wife was the *Flying Scotsman*. He decided to buy the A3-class locomotive in 1963 after learning that none was to be saved by the nation. "I was horrified at the prospect of seeing this marvellous class wiped out and resolved that if the state wouldn't correct the injustice, then I jolly well would," he said.

With funds resulting from his "retirement" from Northern Rubber two years earlier, he bought the locomotive, restored it to LNER apple-green livery and spent the next six years using it to haul hundreds of special trains all over the country.

In 1969 Pegler took another huge gamble. Faced with growing hostility from the British Rail hierarchy, despite his contract to run in Britain until 1971, he decided to ship the by then unique engine across the Atlantic for a promotional tour of the United States and Canada, backed by the Trade Department. Starting in Boston, his "Buy British" exhibition train ran to New York, Washington and Dallas in the first year; from Texas to Wisconsin and Montreal in 1970; and from Toronto to San Francisco in 1971 — a total of 15,400 miles, many of which Pegler drove himself.

Huge crowds turned out everywhere the train went, but the railroads were charging heavily for the privilege and it was all coming out of Pegler's pocket. By 1972 the £1 million he had started with was gone and he was £132,000 in debt. He declared himself bankrupt, arranged for the locomotive to be placed in the Sharpe army base in California "to keep it out of the clutches of creditors", and worked his passage home by lecturing to cruise ship passengers.

Amid a welter of Fleet Street "riches to rags" publicity, he arrived in Britain, undone but unrepentant, and told the Official Receiver: "*Flying Scotsman* has ruined me, but I still love her."

There was one last throw of the dice. Amid rumours that the "A3" was about to be seized by creditors, Pegler persuaded another wealthy steam enthusiast, William McAlpine, to buy the engine and ship it back to Britain, which he duly did in early 1973.

Pegler went to sea as a cruise ship lecturer to pay off his debts and was discharged from bankruptcy in December 1974. After that he worked variously acting the role of Henry VIII at Tower Hill medieval banquets, as an Orient Express train manager and as an InterCity land cruise commentator before retiring to sheltered accommodation near London Docklands.

"When the good Lord calls me to the happy shunting yard in the sky, I shall have no regrets," he told *The Railway Magazine*. "I've had a great innings."

To the vast majority of railway enthusiasts, especially those who grew up after the war, Pegler was a folk hero, revered wherever he went. Yet he remained to the end modest, friendly and almost self-deprecating in respect of the achievements that have brought pleasure to millions of people.

Pegler is survived by a son and a daughter.

Alan Pegler, OBE, railway enthusiast and entrepreneur, was born on April 16, 1920. He died on March 18, 2012, aged 91

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