

# Hood heads home!

November 1 saw the return of a main line Class 50

PIP DUNN

enjoyed 50031's trip to its former Plymouth home.

**B**irmingham International at 0800 on a crisp autumn morning seems an unlikely place to relaunch a Class 50 on the Railtrack system. However, on November 1, I am standing watching 50031 *Hood* coupling to Past Time's 'Pilgrim Hoover' charter to take it to Plymouth. Relieving 87101 *Stephenson*, the large-logo Class 50 sets the ball rolling for the new dawn on Class 50 operation at 0812, pulling away with the 12-coach load.

A familiar sight on the Birmingham route since their arrival on the Western Region in the mid 1970s, the Class 50s last worked to Birmingham in 1990. The cross-country route to Plymouth saw the last regular Class 50 workings in 1989.

Soon the train emerges from the station at New Street, and *Hood* hammers towards the famous 1-in-37 incline at Lickey. Faces I haven't seen for years are saying 'hello' and stopping for a chat - it's reunion time!

Arrival is 20 minutes early at Bristol and after a brief pause for photographs, the train is back on its way to join the Berks and Hants route at Cogload Junction, north-east of Taunton. Whiteball summit, at 1-in-86, is the first test for *Hood*, but it's hardly noticed as it romps up and blasts out of the tunnel!

After the Exeter photo-stop, the train is ready for the finest part of the trip - past the sea wall at Dawlish and then Dainton and Rattery banks. It seems hard to believe that the last time I travelled behind a Class 50 from Exeter was March 1991, with 50036 *Victorious* on the 2210 local to Newton Abbot. A rough sea pounding the wall at Dawlish added to the atmosphere that cold winter night. Today, however, is sunny and the sea is relatively calm. The sight of a '50' rounding the curve at Langstone with a long train makes me feel ten years younger!

After passing Aller Junction, just past Newton Abbot, there's a big test for '031 - the three mile climb to Dainton Summit, a stiff 1-in-36 at some points. Although the speed drops, *Hood* successfully hauls its 12-coach train in fine style. Rattery bank starts straight after Totnes, which means *Hood* has a ten-mile incline, half of which is 1-in-90 or steeper. This gives a chance to hear the 16CSVT engine hard at work, and 50031 copes admirably.

Soon we're at the summit at Wrangaton and now it's more or less downhill all the way into Plymouth North Road. Passing Laira depot reveals just one or two power cars stabled outside. It's hard to imagine that this was the home of the Class 50s, and although to me *Hood* will always be an Old Oak locomotive, it was allocated to Laira on two occasions.

The Class 50s had their infant years at Crewe, but it was Laira where they really matured and will be best remembered. Alas *Implacable*, *Agincourt*, or *Dreadnought* are not sitting on shed awaiting for their next turns. Instead, it's all quiet.

Arrival at Plymouth is on time at 1351, and *Hood* is the centre of attention as the sun allows good pictures. The run round is prompt, ready for the return at 1447.

With the 330 passengers back on board there's an immediate test for *Hood* - Hemerdon bank, two miles of hard slog, most of it at 1-in-42. With its immaculate paintwork glistening in the winter sun, the locomotive must be a fine sight, powering up the bank. Another sprint along the Dawlish sea wall is just as enjoyable before running into Exeter, possibly the busiest Class 50 location on the Western Region in days gone by, where trains from Waterloo would meet those from Paddington and the West Country.

After Exeter, I meet Jon Dunster of the Fifty Fund, *Hood's* owners, who tells me how and why *Hood* became the first Class 50 to haul a train on the national network for over three and a half years. The Fifty Fund owns three locomotives; 50035 *Ark Royal* was its first purchase in August 1991, followed by 50044 *Exeter* in November and then 50031 shortly afterwards. All are kept at the Severn Valley Railway at Bridgenorth, and while *Ark Royal* is undergoing repairs, 50044 has been restored to original condition as D444 and lost its *Exeter* name. The SVR's experience looking after mainline steam locomotives, combined with good records kept by the Fifty Fund, made certification of *Hood* fairly painless and cost effective.

For the last leg of the tour from Bristol to Birmingham, I catch up with old friends in the front coach and enjoy the sound of *Hood*. After an unscheduled stop at Cheltenham, there's a chance to savour the experience that shows why we need main line preserved diesels. The driver applies full power, and the sound of the locomotive echoes around the frosty night and it just keeps on going right up to the bottom of the Lickey. The attack on the bank is phenomenal.

The first Class 50 I travelled behind up the Lickey was 50014 *Warspite*, back in 1981, and 16 years on the impression of power a Class 50 gives as it hammers up the 1-in-37 is still awesome. A green signal shines along the bodyside, picking out the detail of the radiator grilles, the exhaust hangs in the cold air and sparks fly out of all four exhaust ports, providing an early fireworks display!

The top of the bank is reached at little more than 20mph, and the power is kept on to get the train rolling faster on the descent into Birmingham New Street.

Talking to organiser Andy Staite, despite there being only 330 passengers, he's more than happy with the day, and the locomotive has performed impeccably and the event has been a success. It's been a great day for all. *Hood* has done itself proud. As I board my train home, 50031 is waiting to go back to the SVR, but I know it won't be long before I'm at Paddington waiting to go to Penzance on a Class 50 again. The happy days are here again!

**Main pic:** Just like the old days! 50031 *Hood* passes Teignmouth on November 1 with the first mainline Class 50 working since withdrawal by British Rail in March 1994. *Hood* worked Past Time Rail's 'Pilgrim Hoover' charter from Birmingham International to Plymouth and return without any problems. PHIL CHILTON.

**Insets:** Exeter on the outward trip, 50031 looks immaculate (left) and back where a Class 50 belongs - at Plymouth North Road station (above left). BOTH PIP DUNN.

