

In Memoriam : Some Personal Recollections of Howard Burchell

It was with some sadness that I learned just prior to Christmas of the death, in August, of Howard Burchell (66–99) at the age of 81, after 10 active years living with prostate cancer. My earliest memory of Howard is not at the RGS, but of being given very precise directions on how to reach the hallowed domain of his model railway without incurring any injuries, it being necessary to climb a loft ladder and avoid hitting one's head on the woodwork at the top in order to get there. At that time the Burchells lived only a few doors away from my parents, before the demands of an expanding family precipitated their move to a more spacious home in Benton. A definite attribute of this house was that it possessed an unusually large garage, one half of which could thus be given over to the construction of a reworked, refined, and decidedly more accessible railway layout. This was very much a work of art, assembled with an understated attention to detail that was also characteristic of Howard's approach to educational instruction. I was fortunate to benefit from his expertise in both areas, the finer points of A Level Physics being explained in the same lab which he so generously made



Howard (left) pictured in 1959 fixing a headboard to GWR 0-4-2T locomotive no. 1447, prior to a special Sunday service run for the Oxford University Railway Society on the Abingdon branch line.

(Photo Courtesy of the Oxford Mail)

available to the RGS Model Railway Society, despite the fact that when stowed away the school layout took up an ever-increasing portion of his store cupboard! In no small part, the club's popularity was testament to Howard's stewardship, whereby pupils were granted a considerable degree of autonomy in how the society was run, but he was nearly always on hand to offer advice and assistance if required.

Whether in school or at home, Howard was a self-assured yet modest man with a dry sense of humour, who chose his words carefully and used them to great effect. This was a distinct asset in the classroom, where his teaching was at once clear and concise. I recall, in particular, the occasion when he derived the equation $E=mc^2$ (more correctly, as he pointed out, $\Delta E= \Delta mc^2$). This was done with such simplicity and finesse that the precise moment whereupon the exposition on the whiteboard reached its zenith has remained fixed in my memory ever since. Although economical when speaking,

Howard was nevertheless a sociable person, being an active member of the local branch of the Stephenson Locomotive Society until not long before he passed away. For 29 years he

was also treasurer of Benton Methodist (now St. Andrews) Church, of which he and his wife Margaret were enthusiastic members. In this the couple, who shared a strong Christian faith, carried forth a practice from their days in Oxford, where Howard read Physics at Wadham College and Margaret trained to be a teacher. Fittingly, it was a conversation regarding the Ffestiniog Railway which broke the ice when they met, after which it soon became apparent that Margaret, coming from a railway family, shared some of Howard's passion for steam power. In his case, this stemmed from the close proximity of his grandparents' house to the goods depot at Shipston-on-Stour station (closed to passengers in 1929).

Being friends with Howard's two sons, David (74–84) and Andrew (76–86), I was to become, some years later, a fairly regular visitor to the home of a more recent Burchell generation. I always received a reassuringly warm welcome there, and if lucky we were let loose on Howard's model railway. In my case this showed an unusual degree of trust on his part, given my propensity to run trains round the school layout at breakneck speed - a habit which, I recall now with fond amusement, quite rightly met with Howard's disapproval! When I called in to see Howard and Margaret a few years ago, I was pleased to find him still building rolling stock painstakingly from kits to add to his OO gauge recreation of "God's Wonderful Railway", of which he had a remarkably encyclopaedic knowledge. It was touching that over the years, the importance of family to Howard was marked by the appearance of wagons owned by fictitious companies bearing the name of his 4 children (and in due course, as he was proud to show me, grandchildren).

To many former students who had little direct contact with Howard at the RGS, he will no doubt be remembered for his trademark white lab coat, without which he was rarely seen except at assemblies. Handily, this allowed him to carry out occasional cricket umpiring duties in full regalia without the need to change attire, although perhaps it would have been more apposite if the traditional colour of scientific and sporting wear were G.W.R. "Locomotive Green"! This is how, in years to come, I may catch the occasional glimpse of Howard in my mind's eye when thinking of railway matters, or even atomic physics. Now, if I could just remember how that proof went again....

Stuart Laws (74–84)