

# Sir William McAlpine, Bt

## Scion of the construction industry family and steam enthusiast who saved *Flying Scotsman*

**S**IR WILLIAM McALPINE, the 6th Baronet, who has died aged 82, was a director of the family construction firm who indulged his passion for steam railways, constructing a full-scale line in the grounds of his Buckinghamshire home and, most memorably, rescuing the locomotive *Flying Scotsman* after a financially disastrous American tour.

Humorous, self-deprecating and diplomatic with a shrewd business brain, he took his job running McAlpine's Scottish and northern business from Glasgow extremely seriously. But his ability to get people round a table and sort out a problem proved invaluable in the world of heritage railways.

Bill McAlpine's passion for trains was born when, as a child in Surrey, his nanny would take him down to the lineside. Touring the country in his own personal carriage, he always made a point of waving back to toddlers by the line.

The end of steam and the Beeching cuts gave him his opportunity. He began by purchasing for £100 the last remaining steam engine from McAlpine's own depot at Hayes, Middlesex. He went on to buy a Great Eastern directors' saloon with an American-style balcony and a sleeping car from the Royal Train for his own use on the main line, and the Great Western locomotive *Pendennis Castle*.

At the request of British Rail board member Simon Jenkins, McAlpine took the chair of the Railway Heritage Trust, an independent body backed by the industry. Chairing the trust for

**McAlpine: he constructed a full-scale railway on his estate which, with a 1 in 13 gradient, is one of the steepest in Britain**



STEPHEN LOCK

three decades, he toured the country identifying items worthy of preservation and prising money from local councils towards their upkeep.

McAlpine helped to save the former LMS steam depot at Carnforth as a going concern (Steamtown), using it as a base for running steam specials. Later he teamed up with Pete Waterman to take on BR's Special Trains Unit. They divided the company into L & NWR, based in Crewe, and Rail Charter Services, retained by McAlpine.

McAlpine was also involved in rescuing the miniature Romney Hythe & Dymchurch Railway when it got into trouble, becoming its chairman, and BR's staff newspaper *Rail News* when it was faced with closure.

His crowning achievement was the rescue in 1973 of *Flying Scotsman*. The LNER Gresley Pacific, then owned by Alan Pegler, was marooned in San Francisco with creditors circling when McAlpine heard of its plight. He

bought *Flying Scotsman* for £25,000, paid off what was owed to the US and Canadian railways and had it shipped home via the Panama Canal. After restoration work, the engine returned to the main line that summer. Despite further vicissitudes, *Flying Scotsman* remains proudly in service today.

McAlpine built up his Fawley Hill Railway – with a 1 in 13 gradient, one of the steepest in Britain – to run for more than a mile. His Hudswell Clarke tank engine from Hayes was joined by a BR diesel shunter, brake vans and wagons and later his Great Eastern saloon.

The entire Great Eastern station from Somersham, Cambridgeshire, was moved to Fawley Hill; a Midland Railway signal box came from Burton-on-Trent, and a footbridge arrived from the Isle of Wight. Architectural and civil engineering gems on site include the original Wembley Stadium flagpoles and early cast-iron bridge parapets. The library at Fawley houses a large collection of railway publications.

Shortly after starting the railway at Fawley, McAlpine, with Lord Gretton, purchased *Pendennis Castle*, housing it first at Market Overton in Rutland, then at Steamtown. The engine was sold to Rio Tinto and spent 20 years in Australia, but is now undergoing restoration in Britain.

McAlpine made the 200-acre park at Fawley home to 24 species of animal, including emus, wallabies, alpacas, capybaras, meerkats, lemurs and half a dozen varieties of deer, many sent by zoos or rescue centres. On one occasion some of the lemurs staged a

breakout during a local school's open-air performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

William Hepburn McAlpine was born at the Dorchester, then owned by the family, on January 12 1936. His father was Sir Robert McAlpine, 5th Bt and later a life peer, and his mother Ella, née Garnett. His great-grandfather was "Concrete Bob" McAlpine, the first of the McAlpine baronets and the founder of the construction company. His late brother Alistair (Lord McAlpine of West Green), was treasurer of the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher.

Childhood visits to building sites with narrow-gauge steam railways fired young Bill's imagination. He left Charterhouse at 16 to join the business, starting at its 30-acre Hayes depot which housed much of the McAlpine railway operation. Save for two years' National Service with the Life Guards, he remained with McAlpine as a director until 2007.

McAlpine succeeded to the baronetcy on the death of his father in 1990 and was High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1999-2000.

Bill McAlpine married, first, Jill Benton in 1959; she died in 2003. In 2004 he married, secondly, Judy Nicholls (née Sanderson). She survives him with a son and daughter from his first marriage.

He is succeeded in the baronetcy by his son, Andrew McAlpine.

**Sir William McAlpine, Bt, born January 12 1936, died March 4 2018**