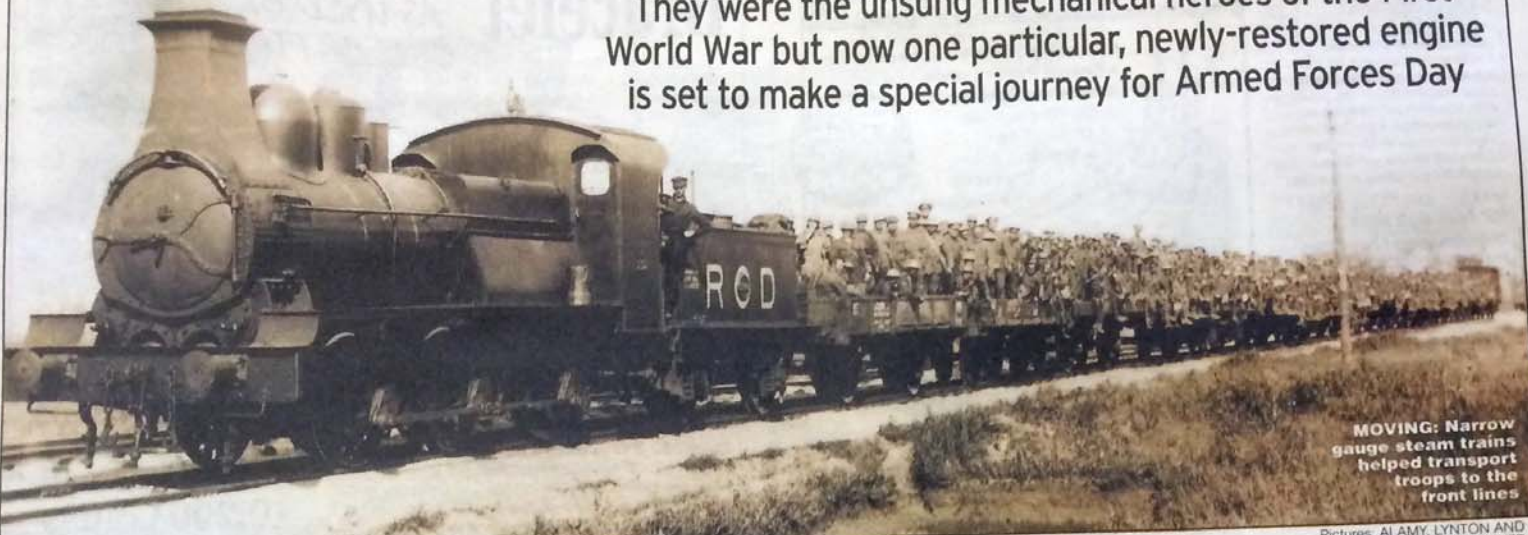


FULL STEAM AHEAD!

They were the unsung mechanical heroes of the First World War but now one particular, newly-restored engine is set to make a special journey for Armed Forces Day



MOVING: Narrow gauge steam trains helped transport troops to the front lines

Pictures: ALAMY, LYNTON AND BARNSTAPLE RAILWAY, PAUL GOWER

By Adrian Lee

THE old steam engine was in a sorry state when it was discovered rusting away in a quarry in northern France. Had an enthusiast not intervened, it was destined for the scrap heap. For one of the unsung mechanical heroes of the First World War that would have been a most unfitting end.

From June 1915 the engine was among hundreds that carried troops, munitions and supplies to the front lines. They all ran on narrow gauge lines, known as the trench railways, and without them the war could not have been won.

Later this month, on the centenary of its delivery, the steam engine, which is now called Axe, will make a special journey to celebrate Armed Forces Day on Saturday, June 27.

Axe has been painstakingly restored to its former glory in a project lasting 20 years, and now runs proudly again on the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway, in North Devon. The engine was one of 70 Joffre Class engines, built by the Kerr Stuart works in Stoke-on-Trent for the French army and named in honour of a general.

"The First World War was the first mechanised conflict," says Peter Miles, chairman of the trust that runs the Devon line. "It was fought on a vast scale that was only possible because of the railways. The steam engines were the workhorses and both sides relied heavily on them."

By 1915, northern France, where many of the key battles were fought, already had an extensive rail network. But linking existing stations with strategic areas that had no track proved a headache.

So throughout the war hundreds of miles of narrow gauge line, measuring 60cm (just under 2ft), was built. It had the advantage that it could be quickly laid by soldiers and could handle steep curves.

It was on these tracks that Axe, painted in drab grey, chugged slowly but reliably day after day. A year after delivery to the French, the little engine was handed over to British forces and remained in military service until 1919.

In those days there was little time for sentiment and Axe was

known simply as engine number 2451. It's thought to have operated mainly in the Somme region, which saw some of the bloodiest fighting, also carrying wounded soldiers back from the battlefields.

Later Axe helped in the clean-up operation after the ceasefire when tons of equipment and debris had to be shifted.

Axe then switched to industry and remained in service until the mid-1960s, finally toiling away in a quarry near Boulogne with four other identical engines.

It was here that they were found abandoned a decade later and bought for a few francs.

"The engines were all derelict and in a shocking state," says Peter. "They'd been worked to death."

Axe and three others ended up at a museum in North Wales, where they became static exhibits. It seemed impossible then that the ageing engine would ever again travel under its own steam.

However the fortunes of Axe revived along with those of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway.

The 19-mile line linking the two resorts opened in 1898 and had eight stations but never really thrived.

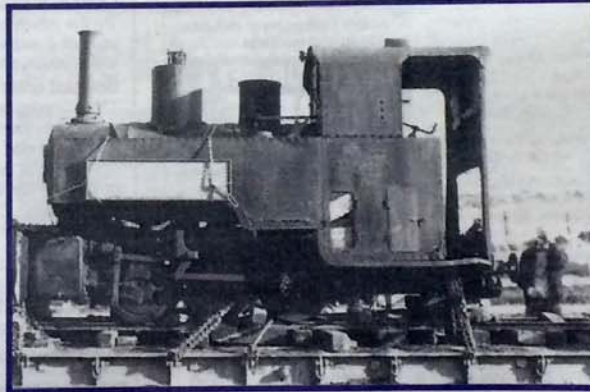
It was closed in 1935 as passenger numbers dwindled.

DESPITE this there was local opposition to the line's demise and one resident laid a wreath on a buffer at Barnstaple station. It bore the words: "With regret and sorrow from a constant user and admirer - perchance it is not dead but sleepeth".

The narrow gauge track was ripped up, the stations sold and signals pulled down. The route became overgrown and all but forgotten until the late 1970s when a campaign began to run trains for tourists along the route again.

"It's a beautiful, scenic stretch with breath-taking views over the Bristol Channel," says Peter. "There was a vision to re-open the line but it took time and we had to acquire land and rolling stock."

The First World War engine was



CLASSIC: Axe has been restored to its former glory and painted green in the colours of the Devon railway, top, after the First World War the work-horse was found rusting in France

bought from the museum in North Wales for £2,750 in 1983 and named Axe after a river in the area. The plan was to get Axe steaming again in two years but that proved wildly optimistic. The old engine needed a new boiler, replacement cab and moving parts, which had to be made from scratch.

The £140,000 restoration eventually took 10 times longer than first expected. It ran in parallel with the purchase of land and the former station buildings which would eventually allow the first section of line to re-open. They included

Woody Bay, on Exmoor, southern England's highest railway station.

In 2004, a mile of the line carried its first passengers for almost 70 years but it was to be another four years before Axe was ready. In 2008 the first puffs of steam billowed from the locomotive's chimney, salvaged from another of the Joffre class engines, and it finally rolled again.

"There was a great sense of pride because it's been a real achievement to get Axe back in service," says Peter. "It was built quickly to serve a purpose but the quality of

work in those war years was probably better than it needed to be. It's sturdy and is now helping bring our railway back to life."

Axe wasn't built for speed and travels at up to 15 miles per hour, pulling three carriages. Now it's one of three steam engines on the line. The plan is to re-open the next stretch of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway, covering more than four miles, in the next five years. It's hoped the entire line will be carrying passengers by 2030 at a total estimated cost of £50 million. But it's already a success story.

LAST year 46,000 people took the two-mile round trip that's currently possible. About 150 dedicated volunteers help the railway line prosper.

"This is a unique railway," adds Peter. "Some of our visitors remember the line from the days when it was originally open. There's something magical about steam engines - the smells and the noises. It's almost as if they are alive."

On Armed Forces Day, Axe will celebrate its centenary by making a special fundraising journey for Coming Home which is part of the Haig Housing Trust charity.

The restored engine, now more splendid than ever in the green colours of the Devon railway, will pull carriages of visitors with all receipts donated to the appeal. Coming Home raises funds to buy and adapt houses for wounded servicemen and women returning from war, in particular Afghanistan.

The charity made news around the world last year after it was part of the team that organised the Poppies in The Moat appeal at the Tower of London.

The exhibition of 888,246 ceramic poppies raised millions of pounds for Armed Forces charities and was visited by people from around the world including the Queen, Prince Philip and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

For Axe life has gone full circle. In its infancy the engine transported the soldiers of the First World War and in old age it's helping their modern counterparts.