



FACILITY DRILL

Steam Fairground

PDF Date: 28 February 2020

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Steam Fairground

Last weekend we went to see Carter's Steam Fair which was set up in Bel Air Park in Dulwich, South London. As we got off the train, immediately we could hear the familiar organ music drifting over the trees at the edge of the park. We exited the station, went over the pedestrian crossing immediately outside and a short walk past the tennis courts brought us to the wondrous sight of a large collection of fairground rides from the past, all assembled on the grass in a corner of the park and in full operation. The first thing I noticed was the faint aroma of oil and smoke wafting past occasionally, which set it apart from other ordinary fairgrounds, enough to give an air of historical authenticity, but not so much as to spoil the fresh air and sunshine.

This is a traditional funfair, begun in 1976, made up of rescued and renovated steam-powered rides dating from the first part of the twentieth century. The magnificent Jubilee Steam Gallopers ride dates from 1895 with a 1900 Gavioli organ providing the music. I was delighted to see many rides that I recognised from my own past, although at that time they were generator-powered. As we arrived not long after the opening time of midday, there were no crowds, and I took the opportunity to get clear photos of all the rides and decorations without having to work around people or wait until someone moved or walked on. At every turn I found another skilfully painted item in the traditional fairground style, with 3D lettering and brilliant colours.

Steam Fairground

Having walked all round several times, we retired to another part of the park for our sandwiches, and when we returned, the crowds had grown. The sun came out and the smell of candy floss and hamburgers began to pervade the air, as the place filled up with families and children. Now my photos were much more interesting, as the rides came alive, being full of passengers instead of just one or two. As I stood by the Octopus ride, I felt as if I had stepped into a time machine and was back at Blackheath Fair in the 1970's. The biggest difference today was that everyone was taking pictures and movies with their mobile phones, which didn't exist then, and indeed some of the rides warned against mobile phones falling out of pockets whilst the rider was being flung around.

I could not help but compare this with the giant Christmas fairground that we visited last December in Hyde Park. That was very much larger and set up for an extended period over Christmas and New Year. It was full of flashing and chasing neon lights and dayglo paintwork, continuing the tradition of loud colours and even louder music, and many of the familiar rides were present in newer "plumage", brighter and faster. Both of these fairs were enjoyable but for different reasons. The Christmas one was very much better at night, when everything was brightly lit. My main interest in Carter's fair was because I had been on those types of rides in the past, so it was "Memory Lane" time, as well as enjoying the decoration and artistry.

The other fascinating feature is how you can watch the ingenious workings of many of the machines and see clearly how they operate. This to me is much more interesting than the modern ones with computer controlled and synched music, strobe lighting effects and tacky plastic figures speaking to passers-by. I am very glad that someone has rescued the old rides and renovated them as originals, without trying to update or change them. It must have been quite a challenge to do this and still conform to the present-day safety rules, which are more stringent than they ever were in the past.

It is gratifying to see these interesting and historical pieces of machinery revived and used for their original purpose, which is the best way of preserving them, as it pays for their maintenance and restoration of future ones, and also encourages others to take an interest and do the same and maybe take on similar projects. A scrap yard would be a sad place for these pieces of fun that really ought to be swirling and whizzing around on a lovely sunny day in the park or village green. (952 words)