

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART EIGHT -

**An important local passenger train and the results of a violent thunderstorm are recounted by Watford-based Passed Fireman
John Crisp**

On the footplate

At its heyday Watford 'loco' had the cream of the suburban passenger work, although this had mostly all been lost by the time my career started. Of the few jobs that we did still have, the 7.31am from Tring was the most prestigious, carrying many important staff to their posts at Euston House, the London HQ of the LMR.

The complete working (or diagram) of that particular roster went like this:

The Booking-on time was at 4.40am, although in winter it was an hour earlier, to allow time to get off shed early enough to get to Tring and steam-heat the train before it went into service.

Following universal practice, drivers were allowed 10 minutes to consult both their Weekly Notice booklet and the Late Notice Cases displayed in the lobby, to ascertain whether there were any emergency speed restrictions that applied to their train, or places where the train might be diverted from its normal route or places where locomotive water was not available in the usual way.

Having made these checks, the next job was for driver and fireman to carry out their normal preparation duties. The driver would carry out the oiling of the locomotive and check that all moving parts etc., were in proper working order, while the fireman would ensure that there were sufficient quantities of coal and water on board and that the fire itself and the boiler contents were adequate. He would also ensure that the coal bunker was properly 'trimmed', with no pieces overhanging the sides and likely to fall off during the journey.

With the locomotive properly prepared, all was ready for the light engine journey to Tring, 15 miles to the north.

The coaches for the 7.31am train were stabled in one of two sidings between the down slow and up fast lines. On arrival, the driver would 'squeeze-up' the buffers of the locomotive and coaches, the fireman would duck under the buffers and remove the vacuum pipes from their dummy stops on both locomotive and carriage; this would preclude any accidental movement by allowing air at atmospheric pressure in to the vacuum system, thus rendering the brakes un-releasable. In reality the train brakes would probably have leaked off during the eight or nine hours the coaches had been standing -but they would have been held secure anyway by the guards van handbrake being previously applied.

The locomotive coupling would then be swung on to the coach hook and tightened up, following which, if it was the season, the steam heat pipes would be coupled. There was a knack to this, which involved the engaging of two lugs as the pipes were brought together and then dropping a pivoted locking bar over each lug. The steam shut-off valves would then be opened ready for when the main steam-heat valve on the engine was turned on. Finally, with a deft twist, the vacuum pipes would be brought together and locking pins inserted to prevent them coming apart.

At the appropriate time, the ground signal, known as a 'dummy', (but on other railways as a 'dolly' or 'dod') would drop into the 'off position so that the train could be pulled into the down slow platform, where all further coupling and uncoupling would be carried out by the resident shunter, either Joe Darvell or another man whose name escapes me, though his surname may have been Patmore.

Once in the platform, the locomotive was uncoupled from the north end and ran round the carriages, to be re-coupled at the London end. This done, the train was pushed northwards clear of a set of points which then allowed it to come into the up slow platform ready for the trip to Euston.

The 7.31am train called at all stations to Watford (i.e. Berkhamsted, Hemel Hempstead & Boxmoor, Apsley and Kings Langley) then Harrow & Wealdstone before running fast to Euston. It had been this train that was involved in the horrendous 1952 double collision at Harrow.

On the way to London, at the 'country' end of South Hampstead up slow tunnel, was a most unusual colour light signal, which displayed such an array of lights, that it was known colloquially as the 'Christmas Tree'! As well as protecting any train already in the (usually smoke-filled), tunnel, the signal also acted as a distant for the next signal at the far end of the tunnel and, from which, a train could take any one of four routes. Thus, the 'Christmas tree', as well as being able to show a red aspect, could show a proceed aspect, being either a single yellow, or green, plus yellow aspects appropriate to the routes that were not being taken.

The routes that could be taken from the south end of the tunnel were, Up Slow (to Euston), Up North London (Broad Street/Stratford/East London Docks), and Up Carriage Line, (always referred to as 'the rat hole', and which dropped sharply whilst crossing from up-side to down-side, passing under not only all of the running lines and Camden loco-shed, but also under the Regents Canal, before making a steep ascent to reach the surface near Park Street tunnel).

The other route that could be taken at the tunnel exit was into Camden Goods yard.

As described previously, after arriving at Euston with the 7.31am, an empty stock duty was then undertaken, following which, the engine was taken light to Willesden MPD where the shed staff serviced it ready for its next duty. The enginemakers made their way from the engine shed to Willesden Junction 'New Line' station and rode home as passengers, to Watford.

(The task of oiling, mentioned earlier, would occasionally be done by the fireman, particularly if, as in the case of the 'Dobbins' - LMS 0-6-OT - the locomotive had inside motion, which was difficult to get to. Charlie Johnson, to whom I referred earlier, often used to get a cleaner-boy to oil the inside motion when he had one of these locos on the afternoon New Yard shunt job, because, apart from saving him the need, he always insisted it was good training for them. He also had an occasional arrangement with Frank Jolley, who could earn himself a packet of fags if he oiled up for Charlie for a whole week!)

The Broad Street trains also, were considered important, taking as they did, bowler-hatted gents to their jobs right in the City of London. There were two up morning and two down evening trains. Watford crews had the 7.48am up and the 5.22pm down and Willesden men worked the 8.48am up and 6.22pm down.

I'd been told that at one time there'd also been a Saturday morning train from Tring, which arrived at Broad Street at about nine and departed back some time after midday, thus allowing the city gents half a day in the office to finish their week's work. The locomotive crews on these trains spent a leisurely couple of hours wandering the streets and shops in the vicinity, though many, I believe were closed, in deference to the fact that the businesses were largely Jewish.

As was the case at Euston, there was also at Broad Street, the ritual of collecting the discarded newspapers, followed by a walk across the tracks to the guards mess-room to make a fresh can of tea.

Once the rolling-stock had been removed from the engine by the yard shunt engine (usually a Stanier class 5MT or 8F manned by Willesden men) our next duty was to drop into the yard and collect a few wagons and a van of 'stores' for Camden Loco shed. The yard at Broad Street was deceptively extensive, being on two levels, with most of the tracks on the upper level being joined by wagon turntables. Much of the traffic dealt with here was meat for the nearby Smithfield Market and fish for Billingsgate and, as the yard was some distance above street level, the wagons were lowered and raised by special hydraulic lifts.

With the stores van hooked on we were now 'right away' to Camden yard; but there was an important duty to perform on the way.

It had apparently long been tradition for a handful of newspapers to be passed to the signalman at Dunloe Street 'box', which was in between the terminus and Dalston Junction, so it was always necessary to slow down approaching the 'box' for the exchange to take place. The signalmen always seemed grateful for this gesture and must have rued the day when the main-liners stopped running.

The journey to Camden yard continued at a nice steady 25-30mph. On arrival any freight wagons were detached, the engine and stores van then making a trip across all four running lines, via a shunting spur, to the Loco yard, where the eagerly-awaited stores van was detached. There then ensued a three mile journey, light engine to Willesden, to hand the engine over to the disposal gangs

on the arrival roads, with the crew travelling back, 'on the cushions' to Watford. Occasionally the crews from the 7.31am and the 7.48am would just happen to catch the same train from Willesden and a conversation would develop about the morning's happenings, or items of interest in the papers.

One such happening that I remember discussing was how the driver working the Broad Street train that day, had forgotten to stop at Harrow. By chance, I was with him the following day to witness several city gents standing on the platform waving us down with their newspapers; although on this occasion the driver was well and truly in control!

Towards the end

Shortly before Watford depot lost its work on the main line, the drivers were trained on the English Electric Type 4 (Class 40) diesels, some of which were fitted with the Clayton train heating boiler. My diary reveals that I had one or two secondman turns on a locomotive fitted with this type of boiler (or steam generator) before I officially learnt to operate them, getting my knowledge on these occasions from drivers who had already been through the training school.

Eventually though, in April 1965, I had one final trip to the Willesden classroom for training on the Clayton's. They were simpler to operate than the Stones, and all that I can remember about them now, is that they had something called a Zwicky filter, which had to be turned every so often to clear the system of scum and lime-scale. There was also a Honeywell Stack Switch, which operated if the exhaust flue became overheated, plus a thick black rubber hose, (which here I shall call a donkeys 'thing', though it was normally described in much more down-to-earth terms) which, if throbbing when one grasped it, confirmed that water was being fed into the boiler heating tubes. If it wasn't throbbing, boy was there a problem!

Learning the Clayton boiler also put me in good stead when I became a secondman at King's Cross a few years later, as the EE Type 4s were still very much in evidence there during the early 'seventies.

One particular turn that I recall at the 'Cross' was as blatant a contravention of the Trade Descriptions Act as ever there was. In 1970 a new train began to run; it was called 'The Highwayman' and started, unusually, from Finsbury Park rather than King's Cross, from where it ran to Newcastle calling at Potters Bar, Stevenage and other places, at a reduced fare to compete with the National Express coach service.

While it provided a welcome service, the publicity for it was a bit near the mark, describing the train as having beautiful blue, white and gold carriages, when they were in fact bog-standard Mk1s with a sticky label in the window! Nor did the train take the most direct route to Newcastle, meandering instead around the coastal route via Eaglescliffe, Stockton and Sunderland. The train was always diagrammed for a 'Whistler' (EE Type 4), a class whose diesel engine sound, I once heard someone refer to as '...like someone chucking a load of beer bottles up in the air'!

Back now to 1965, by which time steam traction was fast disappearing from southern England. Reference to my diaries appears to show that the last LM steam locomotives in the London area, ran around 20/21 November, although my memory, for some reason, disputes this. What appears to have been my own last steam firing turn, was on Saturday 4 September with driver George Felton on a pick up goods to Willesden with Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 4 Mogul No. 43018.

This particular class of locomotive was another that appeared to have a different name according to where you were. We called them 'Chinese Fours' but I have never seen them referred to as anything other than 'Flying Pigs' anywhere else, and it cannot be denied that they did have a certain ugliness.

With steam gone, Watford shed became purely a booking-on point, the few diesel locomotives needed to cover our remaining turns of duty being stabled at the nearby carriage shed. This had once been a hive of activity, with coaches being shunted about all day long, by characters such as Ernie Darvell, Len Bateman and another man, Bill somebody, but who's full name escapes me, although I recall, he had the nickname of 'Banjo'. The pride and joy of the carriage shed had once been the Directors saloon, which was always kept not just clean, but spotlessly so and highly polished. This, along with all the other carriages, was now gone. Only the DMUs for the St Albans branch service were stabled here now, along with the diesel locos, thanks to the presence of a fuelling point.

The year also saw the first LM London area AC Electric Multiple Units being phased into service and the few diesel hauled locals still about, were now in the hands of Stonebridge Park, Euston, Bletchley, Northampton and Rugby men, leaving just a few local freight turns covered by Watford.

Of these, there was one inter-regional freight, to Acton GW and another to St Pancras Churchyard on the LM Midland Division. It made a nice change on the 'Actons' to see something a bit different, although I had only ever seen one steam locomotive, rushing light engine towards Paddington or Old Oak Common.

The 'something different' now came in the form of Warship' and Western' class diesels.

As I recall, the crew for the Acton freight booked on at about 6pm and worked firstly to Acton, generally with a 'Chinese Four', then to Camden, returning via Willesden Brent, before heading back to Watford.

The St Pancras job was split into two, with one crew booking on in the afternoon, working to St Pancras Churchyard sidings, near Somers Town yard, then back up to the North London yard to be relieved. The relieving crew, who had travelled as passengers from Watford via Willesden Junction High Level, would generally be able to persuade the driver of the Broad Street bound electric train that they were on, to drop them off level with the yard (rather than the nearby Camden Road station). The crew that were relieved could either walk to Camden Road, or wait hopefully at the signal near the yard for a kindly driver to stop and pick them up on a Richmond bound train, from where they would travel back, again via Willesden, 'as pass' to Watford.

The fresh crew worked back to Watford, via the Hampstead Junction line, through Hampstead Heath tunnel and then by way of the yards at Willesden to Watford.

I remember an occasion on one of these turns, where due to some out-of-course working and, having got back to Watford too late to catch my last train home, I decided to walk the eight or so miles to Hemel Hempstead, rather than wait for the next (staff) train at 0300hrs the 24-hour clock system, had been introduced progressively since 1964, the LM adopting it in June '65).

My walk took far longer than I had anticipated, with me getting probably four-fifths of the way there before finally bunking over the chain-link fence and on to the platform at Apsley, to catch that same train anyway. I could never understand why that train was scheduled to stop at Apsley, as the station doors were firmly locked overnight and anyone joining or alighting there would have to do exactly as I had done and hop over the fence!

That walk was something I vowed never to do again, although in fact I did, a few weeks later. The part that I didn't repeat, was the foolishly risky chance that I had taken by walking the mile-plus distance through Watford tunnel, which was fine - I never saw any rats or other beasties in my torchlight - until a fast freight entered from the north end, the noise from the clanking, rattling wagons echoing horrendously off the roof and walls of the enclosed space! I can't ever remember being so scared in my life, before or since, wondering what would become of me if one of those wagons derailed and scraped along on the ballast where I was walking.

Luckily I found a platelayers refuge, one of a number of special recesses in the wall, designed to allow track workers to take shelter from passing trains. The noisy wagons rushed by, mercifully behaving themselves and staying on the track, and I was never more grateful to see the tail light of a guards brake van, indicating that the threat had passed. But, no sooner had the din died away than I heard another train entering from the south end. This was nowhere near so much of a threat, as I was walking on the 'up' side and this train was on the down; nevertheless, I stayed in my relatively safe bolthole until that train too had passed completely by.

I continued apace, until eventually I could see the orange glow cast by the street lamps on the nearby trunk road getting gradually brighter as I reached the tunnel mouth. Once outside, I continued walking the next 600-700 yards as far as the road bridge at Hunton Bridge Hill and scrambled down the embankment to the relative safety of the public highway. Definitely an experience not to be repeated.

Nor indeed, was going to work in a thunderstorm. Ever since childhood I have never liked them, remembering to this day seeing my first flash of lightning, when aged about four.

But, having now grown into a man of 16 or 17, I had become braver and couldn't allow such matters to bring the transport system of Great Britain to a halt. So, sometime during 1964 when I was scheduled to book on just after midnight for an empty wagon train duty, I decided to catch the last bus to Watford from my local stop at 11.16pm - (catching the bus gave me a little longer at home, as the last train in those steam days left Hemel Hempstead at 9.50pm). When it came time to leave home there was the most terrific storm raging and it took every ounce of my courage to attempt the eight-minute walk to the bus stop.

Having got to the stop, I waited, and waited and waited. The bus never came. There was nothing to do but trudge all the way back home, with flashes of lightning and enormous claps of thunder raging all around me; I went past my house to the nearest public telephone kiosk around the corner, to advise work that I couldn't get there.

The problem now was that I had no pennies, I had sixpences and shillings, but no pennies, without which you could not get a line to the operator.

Unable to make a call to work, I was, to all intents and purposes Absent Without Leave (which in railway terms was shortened to AWL rather than the army version -AWOL).

I got a right roasting when I went in the next night. The annoying thing was that I found out the bus had run, but because the crew were concerned about going along country lanes in the storm, had taken the more direct route to Watford via the M1 motorway!

Another strange aside to this incident was that the fireman on the New Yard shunt engine was asked to decide if he wanted to stay on the shunt, (where he could get a couple of hours kip when the bulk of the work was done), or work the empty coal-wagon train to Bletchley, (the train itself went on to Amington in Staffordshire, crewed, probably, by Bletchley men). Settling for the shunt job, he next day got an official warning (referred to as a No. 1 Form) for refusing to cover my turn!

Several things spring to mind recalling this incident, which show how our lives have progressed.

- 1) I was reliant on the bus, so had not yet learnt to drive.
- 2) Telephone calls had to be made via the operator, so STD had not yet come to Hemel Hempstead.
- 3) I was trying to use a public call box, so we were not yet on the 'phone at home.
and of course...
- 4) Why hadn't somebody yet invented the mobile 'phone?

.....Concluded in **Part Nine**

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[Originally published in Steam World Magazine in August 2010]