

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART FIVE -

‘Watford Loco’, engine cleaner

John Crisp

helps with eyesight tests and observes the changing railway.

As I mentioned last month, the winter snows of 1963 hung on until, according to the records, the night of March 5/6 became the first frost-free night in Britain since December 22 the previous year.

But, as the skies brightened that March, another cloud was beginning to form on the horizon.

Two years previously, in what seemed like a case of history repeating itself, a brilliant economist and Chairman of ICI, Dr Richard Beeching, had been put in charge of Britain's railways, commanding the then fantastic salary of £24,000 per year.

In January 1926 a member of the ICI Board of Directors, Sir Josiah Stamp, had become President of the LMS and, like Beeching, not only commanded a comparatively high salary, but was also prone to wielding the odd axe here and there. Criticism of Stamp's £15,000 salary had drawn adverse comment, which he countered by saying that it equated to the cost of just one ham sandwich per shareholder. Sir Josiah, who later received a baronetcy, becoming Lord Stamp, met an untimely end when a German bomb exploded directly on his house, in Kent, in 1941.

On March 27 Beeching's infamous 'Reshaping of Britain's Railways' report was published, a report that was to lead to the wholesale destruction and dismantling of a large part of the railway network and the irretrievable loss of much of its infrastructure.

Initially Watford, (both the town and the depot), stood to be greatly affected by the report, as it recommended the closure of the branch lines to St. Albans and Croxley Green and also between Harrow & Wealdstone and Belmont, all of which, Watford crews operated. Of these proposals the following happened.

St Albans lost its Sunday service, although this was later re-instated, at first on an afternoon-only basis but later all day. Now, the branch flourishes and since the report, two new halts have opened - Garston (in 1966) and How Wood (in 1988) between Bricket Wood and Park Street. The line is now also electrified at 25kV AC.

The passenger service over the mile-and-a-quarter long branch from Harrow & Wealdstone to Belmont ended in 1964 -although freight trains were destined to run to the original terminus of Stanmore for a year or two longer.

I imagine that some drivers weren't sorry to see the end of the Belmont branch, as one duty, on a Saturday, involved 32 round trips for a day's work, which amounted to something like 80 miles distance - equivalent almost, to a single journey between Euston and Rugby. I know of at least one driver who always took sick leave whenever it was his rostered turn of duty.

The electric train service to Croxley Green escaped relatively unscathed for a number of years, the electrics even being substituted by DMUs during the power crises of the 1970s. Eventually however, traffic dwindled leading to a cull in the 1990s which left just one train a day (which carried passengers in only one direction) and the line was later truncated to terminate at Watford West. A small halt (Watford Stadium) was opened in 1982 for the use of away fans attending matches at Watford Football Club. Trains ended in 1996 when a new road bisected the branch, although it has not officially closed.

The branch still clings on to hope of salvation, awaiting a definite decision as to whether Watford Metropolitan Line station will close and its route be diverted to Watford Junction. This would require the construction of a new bridge over the substantial section of nearby road and canal, to link the two lines together. There was also an idea afoot in recent years to make this proposed link part of a cross country route between Chesham and Amersham, going through to Watford and on to St Albans.

Another line that progressively succumbed, not only to the axe, but the general downturn in wagon-load traffic during the 'sixties was the, by then, freight only line to Rickmansworth, with sidings respectively at Brightwells

(for Watford Water Works), John Dickinson's Croxley Paper Mill, Good-Year Tyres, The Universal Asbestos Company and the coal yard at Rickmansworth itself.

Passenger traffic to the station at Rickmansworth (Church Street) had been lost in 1952, when it was decided that the electric service was no longer a viable contestant for the more direct electric service, provided by the Metropolitan, to Baker Street and the City.

Dickinson's freight traffic hung on, until even that eventually succumbed in the 'seventies.

The 'Ricky' branch

The 'Ricky' branch ('Ricky' being the universally accepted abbreviation for Rickmansworth) was the source of one of the messiest and most unpleasant jobs that I had to perform as an engine cleaner. Sitting in the cabin one day enjoying a nice quiet cup of tea with the other lads, an irate Wally Kemp came dashing in. "Quick you boys, Charlie Johnson's just run over some cows on the Ricky. He's coming on shed and I want you to hose his engine down." We dashed out of the cabin; well, sort of dashed, because you never knew whether or not to believe Wally, and got hosepipes at the ready just in case; very soon the wayward locomotive came on shed and was turned into No. 1 road, with a beaming Charlie Johnson at the controls. Charlie was a jolly, red-faced man, who always had a grin from ear-to-ear, though he could be a very formidable opponent if crossed!

Bits of dead animal hung everywhere; and the stink put me right off the steak and kidney pie my mum had packed for my lunch that day!

The engine was duly hosed down and despatched, leaving us cleaner boys' to shovel the mess from the pits and into the ash wagon. Not a pleasant task.

As I mentioned, you could never quite believe Wally Kemp, as he could sometimes distort the facts a little, especially if he wanted something doing. Take the day he warned us that 'Mister, Doctor Beeching' would be arriving on the 3.25pm semi-fast Euston-Northampton train, to inspect the station and then the loco sheds.

'I want this place sparkling like a new pin' Wally ordered. 'Whitewash the gas-lampposts, point-handles and water-hydrant covers. Clear the pits and... well, whatever else needs doing'. We all sprang into life and had everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion in good time for the great master's arrival.

The 3.25pm duly pulled in to platform 6, with us cleaners looking expectantly toward the station, eagerly wishing the train to depart so that we could get a glimpse of his entourage. Eventually the little Sulzer type 2 diesel gave its two-tone hoot and pulled away. All that could be seen was a deserted platform 6, with just the usual scurry of passengers off the 3.25pm, dashing up the stairs to await the arrival on platform 8 of the 3.33pm all-stations to Bletchley service.

All too soon we began to feel that we had been duped, our suspicions being quickly confirmed by a smiling Wally, walking through the shed towards us, breaking off from his cheery whistling only long enough to mutter, with just a hint of a smile, something about Dr Beeching's plans being changed at the last minute! He resumed his whistling and turned to make his way back to the office.

I think probably my first experience of dear old Wally's half truths, concerned a pop record of September 1962, 'The Locomotion', a version of which, by American girl act Little Eva had reached No. 2 in the charts.

Wally asked the cleaners to put an extra sparkle into engine No. 42097, as some girl models were coming down from London to do some publicity shots for a new product being launched - Locomotion Cocoa.

The 'models' turned out to be the British girl group, The Vernon's, whose own version of The Locomotion managed just one week in the charts at No. 47.

Anyway, the girls had some shots taken in the cab and on the foot-framing of the engine then, the shed staff watching were invited to join them for a couple of shots. Because I had on a rather dirty pair of overalls I decided not to take part. One of the photos was later featured in the London Evening Standard and I always felt a little disappointed that I hadn't worn a cleaner pair of overalls and got in on the act.

But, as for Locomotion Cocoa - well, have you ever heard of it?

Apart from the time that Wally had given me a rollicking for, as he thought, trying to fiddle my booking-on time there was another occasion that caused Wally and myself to clash, a couple of years later, when I had become a fireman. There was a turn of duty that started at 4.40am and, by good fortune there was a train that arrived at Watford at 4.43am, which was three minutes later than ideal

but, not too much to worry about at that time of the morning! Not so with Wally. He threatened to send me back home straightaway, losing a days pay, but, having let him have his say and promising not to let it happen again (until the next time, I thought) he relented and let me book on. Fortunately I had a different start time for the rest of that week, so the problem didn't arise. In fact, it never arose again with Wally for, sadly, that very same week he collapsed and died whilst getting ready to come to work. That news had been brought to me by a road-learning driver who had recently transferred to the depot and who, on boarding diesel No. D5007 at Watford, that driver Bill 'Dick' Whittington and I were working the 7.48am to Broad Street with, asked if we knew about the day-shift foreman who had just died. We hadn't heard anything, but put two-and-two together and realised it could only be Wally.

All out...

The Beeching Report also gave me my first experience of a railway strike. The NUR, rightly so, had taken great exception to the Report and in October of 1963 called a one-day strike. However ASLEF, the footplate-men's union, which I had joined some months before, did not support the strike and their members were told to report for duty as normal.

I can't remember how I got to work that day, but I managed somehow by bike or bus, only to spend it wandering round the Loco yard with a couple of Willesden firemen, who had been told to report to the depot nearest their home. We climbed up in to cabs to check boiler water levels and the condition of fires, but there was no real excitement.

Not so elsewhere, however. We got news during the day of a bizarre incident in which a bored railway worker had taken a shine to an idle diesel loco, had rung himself off of the shed and later, by going too fast through a junction, succeeded in turning the locomotive over. I can't remember the details of the perpetrator or where it happened, but my memory seems to say that it was a trainee fitter, at Crewe, on a Western Region 'Western' class diesel, all of which seems a highly unlikely combination. However, the incident did, in some way, shape or form, happen. Perhaps a reader knows some more details?

Watford

Watford is unusual in that it has five stations containing the name of the town. The biggest and most important is Watford Junction, which has always been a stopping point for many express trains.

Branching off from the Junction in a north-easterly direction is the single line to St Albans Abbey, the first station on which is Watford North Halt. There used to be several sidings here, variously serving a biscuit company - from where cheap tins of biscuits could be purchased, and a hosepipe-making factory - which once suffered a catastrophic fire, the smoke from which I saw from my school playing field, some nine miles away in Hemel Hempstead.

There was also another siding serving various coal merchants and which, during the 'sixties, was completely re-built to become Watford North Coal Concentration Depot, where merchants from a very wide area came to collect their supplies instead of having the fuel delivered to their own local siding. A large supermarket now covers the site.

Heading south-westerly from Watford Junction, on the DC electrified 'New Lines' there is Watford High Street station, now with the busy Harlequin Shopping Centre just a short walk away. On the same line, in the direction of Croxley Green and now disused, is Watford West station.

Interestingly there are three Watford 'junctions'; the station previously referred to and two others on the LUL Metropolitan Line, although these are no more than actual physical junctions rather than stations, being referred to as Watford South Junction and Watford North Junction and which form a triangle of lines between London Baker Street, Rickmansworth and the fifth of the towns stations', known simply as Watford.

The track layout at Watford Loco shed comprised six shed roads, three of which were in the original building and three in an extension of a later date. The roads were numbered 1-6, with number 1 road being furthest from the main line, which suggests, as I was once told, that the main line originally ran slightly to the east of its present route, although I never was able to establish whether this was so.

It did, or it didn't, depending on who you were speaking to at the time.

In addition to the shed roads there was a short head shunt leading directly out on to the up slow and which was generally used for engines going to or from the permanent way shops or those having

come from north of Watford. Next to No. 1 shed road was the 'back road', which for a couple of years after I started, held an out-of-steam Midland 0-4-0 Class 2P loco No. 40672 which, along with a sister engine, No. 40657 standing 'dead' at the end of No. 5 shed road, had a sack tied over its chimney. Once again, depending on whom you were speaking to, the sack was said to render the engine exempt from some form of tax or insurance or, just to show shed staff that the fire was not to be lit! You paid your money...

By some adroit clambering over the tender of No. 40672, one could gain illicit access to the roof of the fitters mess-room which, being flat, made a nice place to hide away from the foreman. But, when some of the card games (oops!) got a bit heated, the prowling man knew exactly where to look and his cry of 'Come down and clean this engine, you little b*****s' left us in no doubt that we'd been rumbled!

Next to the back road stood the coaling stage, with two tracks leading into it, one on a fairly steep incline and the other on a slight down gradient. The raised track was for the coal wagons to stand on and the other was where the engines came alongside for coal to be manually thrown into tenders or bunkers, the difference in track levels alleviating the need for too much upward throwing and shovelling of coal.

Alongside the wagon road was a platform from where the coalmen were able to climb into the wagons. There was a staircase leading up to the platform, underneath which was a dingy room which had once been the coalmen's mess room but, now abandoned, was said to house several large rats. The whole of this was surmounted by a large water tank, in which some of the more adventurous had been known to take a cooling summer-time swim!

It was quite fun to watch a Jinty 0-6-0 trying to push seven or eight loaded coal wagons up the slope of the coaling stage, and with sheer determination on the part of the driver it was generally accomplished after a lot of slipping and sliding!

Air raids and pimps

To the east of the coaling stage was an embankment, into which an air raid shelter had been dug during the war years. Not now needed for this purpose, it housed instead, the special firelighters used for igniting the fresh coal placed in a locomotive's firebox after a spell out of steam. These lighters consisted of several thinly chopped 6 or 7-inch sticks of wood coated in a kind of candle wax and with wood-shavings crammed between the sticks, the whole bundle being held together with thin wire. They also were known by the curious name of 'pimps'.

I recall one occasion, after I had started shift work, arriving at the shed at around midnight and finding not a soul in the stores or the cabin, but faintly aware of a commotion in the Loco yard. Going to investigate, I found a group of men forming a chain gang and passing buckets of water up to the fiercely blazing 'pimp house', the entrance of which was disgorging flames, several feet high, into the dark night sky.

The cause of the fire was never established, but within a few days a wagon of fresh firelighters arrived and all available men were seconded to replenish the stock; it was the first, and only, time that I had ever seen this replenishment take place and with steam nowhere near as prominent as it had been, I wonder now if all those 'pimps' ever all got used?

Also on the embankment was the 'pump-house', which provided hydraulic pressure, not only to the water columns in the loco yard and the station, but also to the anachronistic station lifts.

The loco yard reached right into the environs of the station with one road from the shed coming right alongside No. 9 up slow platform and another coming right alongside the St Albans Abbey branch bay platform, No 10. This section of track led to another entry/exit road and it was this one that was used the most, giving access to the St Albans branch, plus the carriage sidings and freight yards, as well as the main line, via platforms 11 or 12.

It also led to a turntable, which I had never seen moved, although it was used occasionally to stable engines on. There was a cast iron notice, warning drivers that they must obtain a release from the signalman at No. 3 'box before moving the 'table as, in being turned, it would foul the track leading into No 10 platform.

Stabled in No 6 shed road was the breakdown van, an old black painted carriage, split internally into two sections, one half being open, and where various tools for re-railing errant rolling stock were kept, the other half being the riding accommodation. This consisted of a compartment with seats, plus,

if memory serves me correctly, a sleeping compartment cum leading-fitters office and, for brewing-up, a galley, the most inviting feature of which were tins of corned beef and Huntley & Palmers biscuits, though these were strictly for use when the crew was out on emergency!

On one occasion the van was sent away for refurbishment and was temporarily replaced by a maroon painted, standard LM brake composite coach, which was not allowed to occupy the hallowed space on No 6 road, but was banished to the turntable road instead. Eventually our own van came back, brightly painted in signal-red and took up occupancy in its sacred spot.

Plum jobs

Spring of '63 saw me as the most senior cleaner at Watford depot and as such I got the cream of the labouring jobs. One duty was to accompany the eyesight inspector on his occasional visits. The eyesight test to gain entry into the footplate line of promotion has already been described, but another examination was for men who had experienced deterioration in the original high standard of their vision. The test required the examinee, accompanied by the Inspector, to view from 1,000 yards, a stop signal arm being raised and lowered, and for him to satisfactorily tell the Inspector which position the arm was in at any given moment. Such an exercise required of course, a perfectly straight piece of road, and the section of up fast line between Watford Tunnel and Watford No 2 signal-box fitted the bill perfectly.

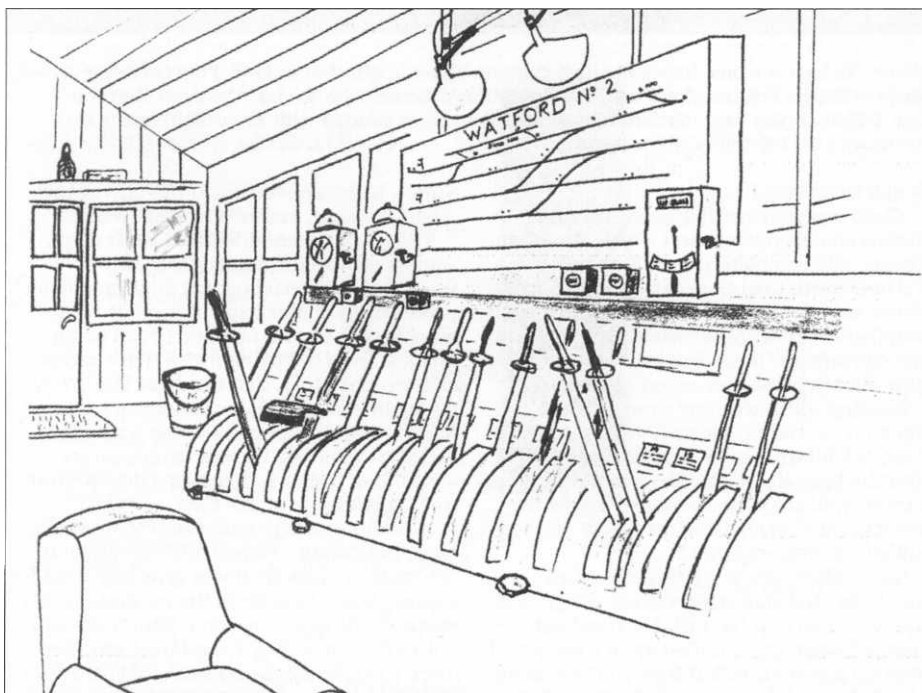
The eyesight inspector was Mr Johnson, based on the Midland Lines at St Pancras. The established procedure was that he would 'phone the Watford shed foreman to advise that he would be arriving on such and such a train and would require a cleaner to be available to accompany him to the signalbox. When the Inspector arrived at the shed, he would first go into the stores and obtain a bundle of cloths - the type which were normally used by enginemen to protect their hands from scalding hot pipes and controls on the footplate. In this instance though, they were currency, to be given to the signalman to acknowledge his co-operation.

"Off you go with the Inspector, then lad" the foreman would order. "He'll tell you what to do." The Inspector commented that he didn't recall my helping him before, which I affirmed, and so, as our small group (myself, the Inspector and, on this occasion, two examinees) made our way alongside the shed towards the signalbox, he explained my part in the proceedings.

"I'll be taking these men down to the tunnel," he said, pointing to where we could see first the divergence of the fast and slow lines, then, at a good mile or so, the mouth of the fast line tunnels. "Watch carefully and when you see me wave this newspaper," (which, by way of demonstration, he took from under his arm and waved with a flourish), "pull the lever so that the signal goes gently up, leave it there for a few seconds then gently let it fall again. Keep doing that until I wave again. That's when I'll have finished."

As we arrived at the 'box, which stood opposite the Permanent Way Engineers workshops, the Inspector called out "Eyesight Test, please signalman," to which the signalman gave a cheery wave acknowledging that all would be OK. "Up you go then boy," said the Inspector, handing me the bundle of cloths. "Give these to the bobby and watch out for my signal." The term bobby, dated from to the earliest days of railways, when trains were signalled through each section by flag-waving policemen.

It was my first visit to a signalbox and I was immediately struck by the cleanliness of the place. Brass bells and instruments shone like gold and the floor was so highly polished that one could happily have eaten a meal from it -



Above: This drawing by the author, shows the inside of Watford No. 2

not, I think, that the signalman would have allowed it! I handed the cloths to the signalman, a man who, I imagine, was of Dutch, or possibly South African origin, if the amusing way in which he spoke was any guide.

"Dem poor bastinks has got a long walk," he said, as we watched the men getting further into the distance. I began to wonder if even I would be able to see the Inspector waving, and of course, there were no high visibility jackets then, these being a year or two into the future.

Whilst waiting for them to reach the required distance the bobby got a 'release' for his signal from Watford No. 1, the next 'box along the line, and then showed me what I would need to do. Following his example, I gave a mighty pull on the lever, which came back with such unexpected ease that I nearly propelled myself through the wall behind. "Steady, dat bastinks only just outside d'box," laughed the signalman, "You don't haff to pull hard when dey are dat near."

"Now, let it drop back again" he said. I released the locking device on the lever as he'd shown me, and gave it a gentle push, but even that was more than was needed and the lever went crashing back into the frame, dragging me with it!

"Dat's done it, now I'll haff to get d'release again," complained the signalman, going across to one of the several telephones placed along the wall at the back of the box. He pressed the button on the 'phone in a series of long and short pushes, then, when his colleague at the next signalbox responded, asked him for further use of the signal, afterward warning me not to let the lever go completely back next time. As an added precaution he placed a floor brush against the levers on either side of the one I was pulling, so as to prevent it slamming all the way home and getting 'locked' again.

Eventually our men reached their destination and Inspector Johnson, holding the newspaper above his head, began waving it slowly from side-to-side as my cue to begin pulling back and forth on the lever. It gave me a strange feeling to see this massive black and white arm (viewed from behind as it was from here) going up and down in time with ones movements.

After several minutes the paper was again waved, indicating that the tests were over and the men began their long trek back. The bobby had brewed a pot of tea and kindly offered me a cup while I awaited their return. Sitting there supping my tea it seemed as though life could sometimes be lonely in a signalbox with nothing for company but the jangling, tinkling bells of the telegraph circuits, the occasional telephone conversation with colleagues along the line and the thunderous roar of the trains flashing by on their journeys north and south, shaking the 'box literally to its very foundations as they went.

When they reached the box, Inspector Johnson called out his thanks. Finishing my tea, I thanked the signalman and bade farewell as I descended the stairs to re-join the others.

"Don't forget that down fast I just pulled off for," reminded the signalman, his words immediately drowned out by the thunderous roar of what must have been one of the last instances of a 'Coronation'-hailed express heading north. The train fast disappeared into the distance and I waited for the swirling smoke to recede before checking that it was safe to cross over all four running lines to the up slow side, from where I returned to the shed, my part in the proceedings done until the next time; a time I looked forward to with great anticipation. I did indeed get the opportunity to carry out this task several times after that, but unfortunately I never came across that particular signalman again.

Nowadays of course, such an exercise would be impossible for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that Watford No. 2 signalbox and its semaphore signals, were swept away, along with dozens of others, when the whole area became signalled by colour-lights in 1964, during the modernisation of the WCML. Also, the greatly increased frequency of service since electrification would preclude such use because of the disruption it would cause.

Ghosts of the 'box?

A year or two after the 'box had been demolished I had, on one occasion, the firm conviction that it was in fact still there. This happened around 1965/66 when I was secondman on the engine that served the sidings of the Permanent Way workshops, which stood on the site of the original Watford Station, about 150 yards north of the present Watford Junction.

When I started my railway career there was a regular driver allocated to this turn, at this time, driver H (Hollie) Holmes, and his engine - except when it was in the shed for boiler washout or other servicing - was always Ivatt 2-6-0 No. 46470. The 'P-Way shops' job could be an interesting turn as it called for the taking and fetching of P-Way wagons to various parts of the London area system. Later,

when Hollie was transferred to shunting duties in Watford yard, the turn was put into the links, so that different drivers worked it on their rota.

One of these drivers was Bill Andrews, a former London Tilbury and Southend man, who was so proud of his descendance that he had a notice on his locker proclaiming such. I also considered Bill to be one of my 'favourite' drivers. On this particular day, during a break in shunting at the P-Way yard, we were sitting on some sleepers enjoying a cup of tea, when, from across the way, where the old No. 2 box had stood, I heard the 'ting-ting-ting' of the signalling bells along with the crashing of the levers being put back into their frames. I wondered whether Bill had heard them, but he seemed not to have done; so, should I say anything or just keep schtum? I decided that silence was the better option, in case Bill thought I'd gone completely off my rocker - but, from then on, whenever I was on a locomotive in Watford P-Way shops, I always heard - I swear I did -the sound of No. 2 signalbox in full swing!

Of course, since that time the WCML has undergone another major infrastructure change, with the once state-of-the-art signalling system of 1964 itself being replaced by an ultra modern electronic system.

.....Continued in **Part Six**

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