

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART ONE -

It was many schoolboys' dream, to become an engine driver, but for 15-year-old, John Crisp it was a genuine career choice, even if it meant starting at the bottom.

A barely-stifled titter echoed around the classroom as I, in my turn, told the other pupils what I would be doing in a few weeks time after leaving school for the very last time. Not for me any such occupation as policeman, cinema projectionist, apprentice toolmaker or colour-film processor; Oh, no, not me! I was going to be an engine cleaner.

Not that I wanted to be an engine cleaner; my visit to the locomotive sheds a few weeks previously had made me only too aware of just what a dirty, mucky job that could be. But if I was to secure my schoolboy's dream job of being an engine driver, that was where I had to start. My Youth Employment Officer had already tried his best to dissuade me and steer me instead into a job as an apprentice gas fitter. But where was the future in an industry connected with that outdated fuel? I stood my ground, and in doing so secured an interview with the Shed Master at the Watford Motive Power Depot of British Railways, London Midland Region.

On the day of the interview I travelled by bus from my home in Hemel Hempstead and alighted near the railway bridge, which carried the St Albans Road over the West Coast Main Line (WCML) as it passed through Watford. Knowing the approximate location of the shed, I walked towards the bridge and asked a railway-looking person if he knew where I could find the office of Mr Spencer, the Shed Master. "Dunno mate, I a'int Loco," was his somewhat unhelpful reply. I continued a little further, passing the offices of one of the many companies connected with what was then Watford's staple industry, 'the print' and, just on reaching a narrow opening at the end of the office block, saw two more railwaymen, to whom I asked the same question. "Yeah, Benny Spencer, down there mate," one of them said, pointing to a path where a starkly worded notice greeted me: 'BRITISH RAILWAYS, LONDON MIDLAND REGION. PRIVATE - NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT ON BUSINESS'.

Chest puffed up with pride I walked confidently down the path, knowing that I was, indeed, 'ON BUSINESS'. Halfway along the path I stood aside to allow an old man who was pushing his bicycle up the path, to pass, and as I reached the bottom I saw another notice, 'CYCLING PROHIBITED'. I turned and watched the old man. Having duly obeyed the rules and got to the far end of the path without cycling, he mounted his bike and pedalled off along the public footpath! I was now alongside a cycle shed, next to which was a flight of steps. I descended the steps and opened a door ahead of me that led into a passage, on one side of which was a window with a small wooden hatch. Gingerly, I put my head through. "Is Mr Spencer here?" I asked. "Not in here son, who wants him?" said a man. I explained why I was there and he said, "Oh, in that case, go along the passage behind you. Ben's, err, Mr Spencer's, office is at the end."

I walked along the grime encrusted, green-and-cream painted passage, and when I reached the door labelled 'SHED MASTER' I gave a gentle tap. There was no reply. I tapped again and suddenly from behind me a voice asked, "Yes, young man, what can we do for you?" "Oh, Mr Spencer's seeing me at three!" "Am I now? Ah yes, I know, John Crisp, the lad who wants to clean our engines. Come in," he said, squeezing past me to open the door to his cramped, somewhat dingy office. He flicked a light switch, under which a little sticker proclaimed 'GOING OUT? SWITCH OFF AND SAVE ELECTRICITY'!

On the wall was a large photograph depicting the scene of a station with an LMS express train rushing through and passing a signalbox. Having looked down on the station many times from the upper deck of buses passing over the bridge, I recognised immediately that the picture was of Watford Junction station. Beckoning me to take a seat, Mr Spencer sat down at his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out various documents, one of which he dropped lightly down on the desk-top. "Right, here we are, 'Conditions of Service', let's have a look," he said, going on to quote me a few passages from it. He then gave me a brief overview of an engine cleaner's job, asked me a

few questions, such as did I know how dirty the job might be and would I be prepared, at a later date, to work shifts?

I said that I had an idea the job might be dirty and realised that shift work was involved. Next, he asked me to fill in a form, and when I'd completed it, he took me on a quick tour of the shed, which was something of a change as I was usually getting booted out of such places, never mind being shown around by the shed-master! "That'll be you in a few weeks, my lad" he said pointing to a group of youths, hands and arms deep into buckets of what looked like milk, but which, I was to eventually find out, was a special cleaning substance called 'V cleaner'.

They pulled dripping cloths from their buckets then slobbered them over greasy wheels and boilers. Across the way, an old man wielding a broom, swept up in the pits between each set of rails, while at the open end of the shed a red flag, its stick pushed into a bucket of sand, fluttered to warn drivers of approaching engines, that somebody was working there. In an adjacent pit, another elderly man, helped by two strapping youths, ladled great scoopsfuls of soaking wet, black ashes into a wheelbarrow, filthy dark coloured water seeping from its drainage holes.

Mr Spencer then led me back to the office and asked how I felt about getting involved in all that mess and muck; I can't remember my reply, but it must have been satisfactory as he told me that he'd now make an appointment for me to see the Company doctor at Euston. Even though the railways had been nationalised for 14 years by then, old hands still referred to the railway as 'The Company'. Indeed, 10 years later when boarding an early morning staff train, I was asked by an officious guard if I was a 'Company Servant'.

Glancing at a reference book in his drawer, Mr Spencer informed me that if I passed my medical and took up work, my wages would be 97 shillings a week, my hours would be 8 'til 5, Monday to Friday, with an hour for lunch, plus 8 'til 12 every other Saturday which, over a month equated to the then working week of 42 hours. He made a brief telephone call to arrange an appointment for a medical and made out a free pass that would take me from Hemel Hempstead & Boxmoor station to London Euston and back.

Thus, a few days later I presented myself at 10am to the BR doctor at 66 Drummond Street, Euston, an address indelibly etched into many a London Midland employee's mind. Now, the street barely exists, most of it having been swallowed up during the station rebuilding programme, begun more or less around the same time as I started my career. The medical consisted of me giving a sample of 'water', a check of my lungs with a stethoscope and the hold-and-cough examination involving a uniquely male part of the human body. By far the most important part of the medical was that for eyesight, which consisted of two main parts, one being the familiar optician's vertical sheet of letters which gradually diminish in size, and another for colour recognition.

At that time, no one could enter the footplate line of promotion without perfect eyesight, glasses were certainly not tolerated and anyone needing to wear them in later life for distance vision, became confined to shed duties, which may or may not include driving, depending on the severity of the defect. The test for colour recognition was divided into two parts; firstly the Edridge Green Lantern Test, consisting of lights of three colours (red, green and yellow) plus white, which were randomly transmitted onto a screen in a darkened room, the candidate having to call out each colour as it appeared.

I was a little concerned by the time I'd reached the end of this test, as I sometimes referred to yellow as yellow and other times as amber. The other test, the Ishihara test - named after its Japanese inventor - consisted of a book on each page of which a circle of coloured dots contained a letter, number or picture, made up of dots of other colours, which would be easily identified by someone with normal colour vision, but not by somebody without. My worries over yellow and amber were apparently unfounded as, a few days later, precisely on my 15th birthday, bearing a threp'ny stamp and the previous day's postmark of 'WATFORD, HERTS. 7.15 P.M. 25 JULY 1962' a small brown envelope arrived on my doormat.

Trembling slightly, for I knew what it must be, I cautiously opened it. The letter inside it, on British Transport Commission, British Railways, London Midland Region notepaper read: "Dear Sir, Application for Employment. I am pleased to inform you that you satisfactorily passed your medical Examination at Euston Station and you can commence work at this depot on Tuesday 7th August 1962. When reporting for duty at 8.0a.m. you should bring with you your National Health Insurance Card and your Birth Certificate. Yours faithfully (B. Spencer)
Locomotive Shed Master.

Tuesday 7th August 1962 was the day after August Bank Holiday Monday, which in those days fell on the first Monday, rather than the last Monday, of the month. For the first few days, until my free pass between Hemel Hempstead and Watford was arranged, I travelled by bus, which was in fact more convenient, but more expensive. I alighted from the bus at the same point as I had that few weeks previously, but now felt no need to ask anyone the way.

Reporting to the timekeeper on my first day I was asked to wait in the driver's signing on lobby until Mr Spencer was free to see me. In the lobby, three of the four walls carried glass fronted notice boards all, except one, with

black painted frames: the exception had red frames. Painted across the top of this one, in white lettering, was the legend 'LATE NOTICES' and displayed in this case were notices relating to the up-to-date situation regarding the safe and efficient running of trains. It gave such information as to where emergency speed restrictions had been necessarily imposed, or where water for locomotives was temporarily unavailable.



Above: A sketch by the author of the signing-on lobby at 'Watford loco'.

The black-framed cases contained various instructions and orders, such as 'LONDON MIDLAND & SCOTTISH RAILWAY. Employees Must Not Expose Themselves To Unnecessary Danger By Going Between Wagons Which Are Being Shunted...' or 'Enginemmen Must Not Allow Their Locomotives To Emit Excessive Black Smoke In The Vicinity of Residential Areas...' Another, issued by 'THE RAILWAY EXECUTIVE' stated 'Following A Recent Fatal Accident, not in this Division, it has been found necessary...' etc, etc, etc. An obviously new warning was headed 'BRITISH RAILWAYS, LONDON MIDLAND REGION' and pointed out the dangers of coming into close proximity of the 25kV overhead wires that were being erected in connection with the forthcoming WCML electrification. There were dozens of them, alongside which were various notices relating to Trades Union meetings, Staff Association Sports and Social Club meetings and details of

footplate vacancies at other depots.

A fire grate, long since disused, occupied one small corner of the room and even here its chimney breast was hung with a notice which had a chalked section in the form of a graph and referred to the amount of coal that had been consumed in a previous month; it also showed the target-saving for the following month. I suspected, though, that as it was giving details for 'October' it was some while since it had last been updated.

Every so often somebody would pop in and peruse a particular set of notices, which consisted of a column of names with rows of times and days of the week printed alongside. These, I found out, were the enginemmen's rosters of their starting times and 'turn' numbers. A quick glance at my watch showed the time to be just after a quarter-past-eight, or to put it in the terms to which I would gradually become accustomed 8.16.

I began to wonder if I'd been forgotten and whether I should give a reminder to someone that I was there but, just at that moment the smiling face of Mr Spencer appeared round the door. "Ah, good, you're here. Right, we need to get you some overalls. Ah, yes and a Rule Book. Most important. Come on then, follow me," and we turned to leave the lobby; but as we did a voice called out, "Have you got a minute Guv'nor?" "What is it Dave?" "I need a quick word." Getting my overalls was, for the time being, forgotten.

Mr Spencer opened a drawer in a desk under one of the notice cases and pulled out a hefty black book. "Here, read this until I come back," he said. The book was full of even more notices, which had, I assumed at some time or other been pinned up, then later taken down and stored, as new or revised notices superseded them. They covered similar subjects as before, like ordering enginemmen not to allow their locomotives to blow off steam in places where the public may be distressed or annoyed by such happenings. There was a strict instruction not to waste coal and a warning of how a driver had been dismissed from the service for irregularly supplying some locomotive coal to a signalbox. Various other warnings were given about bad time-keeping and about how men should be economical with lubricating oil.

Eventually the shed master returned. The person who had called him away was David Stirling, a pleasant, well-built chap, of either Scottish or Northumbrian descent and one of three clerks who worked in the administration office under the watchful eye of Chief Clerk, Mr N Gill. David was unfortunately destined to die at a relatively young age, following, I believe, a brain haemorrhage. As well as being Chief Clerk, Mr Gill was also the local agent for a benevolent fund called the Running Department Insurance, and almost every time that we met, Mr G would try and enrol me in to the fund for the weekly sum of sixpence (a proper sixpence that, mind!). Very worthy as the fund no doubt was, at the tender age of 15 I had better things to do with my meagre earnings than worry about insurance, although Mr Gill eventually got his way and negotiated my entrance into the Fund.

The other two clerks were a young lad called Keith, who jumped up excitedly from his seat every time a train or locomotive passed by the office window, and a young man from the West Indies whom, a few days after I started, somebody kidded me was called Sam. Much to my embarrassment, and after I'd used the expression a couple of times, I then discovered this not so.

Mr Spencer took me into the office where the time-keeper sat. He was on one of the tallest seats I had ever seen and I found myself wondering how he ever managed to get up on to it. The room was collectively known as 'the stores', although in truth the stores proper were in a small room behind the one in which I now stood. Three large, green painted tanks lined one of the walls and each had a legend painted on it. The largest one carried the inscription 'T -Oil', this being an essential lubricant for the smooth and cool running of steam locomotives' moving parts. There was an arrangement of pulleys on a steel T-shaped bar above the tanks, on which 40-gallon oil drums could be hoisted and their contents dispensed into the tanks. The other two tanks, smaller than the one containing T-Oil, were of equal size to each other.

There was one for paraffin for locomotive headlamps and the other for a mixture of paraffin and oil called 'longlight' which was used in the lamp's which enginemen used in their cabs at night to illuminate the boiler water-gauge glasses. Paraffin alone was not suited to this purpose, as the close proximity of the lamps to the very-hot boiler back-plate meant that the paraffin soon reached its flash point and the lamp would go up in flames. The addition of oil lowered the flashpoint and thus the risk of self-combustion. I had first hand experience of this phenomenon some years later when, as a young fireman I was sent to cover work at Willesden.

I relieved a fireman who was on overtime, working one of the local inter-yard freight trips. It was still daylight, so no lamps were needed, but as dusk descended and the shunters went for a tea break and my driver went for a chat with a colleague on a nearby shunting engine, I took the opportunity to light the headlamps. I left the footplate to light up, then returned to the cab and lit the gauge glass lamp. When the shunters returned to resume work, I went to get my mate, firstly reassuring myself that the locomotive was safe to be left unattended (hand brake on, sufficient water in the boiler, cylinder drain cocks open, reverser in mid-gear) and made my way across to where he was. I was only gone for a few minutes, but when I returned, the gauge glass lamp was a mass of flames, which soon died away leaving just a burned out, blackened shell of a lamp.

As my driver climbed back on to the footplate, I explained what had happened. He shrugged his shoulders saying "Some silly b****r must have filled it with ordinary paraffin. Never mind, we'll manage. Got a torch?" Luckily I had, and every so often I shone it on to the glass to check the water level!

Back now though to the stores. The man sitting on the tall seat was time-keeper Eric Bartlett, a man whom I came to have a great deal of respect for. "We want some overalls for this new lad, Eric" said Mr Spencer. "Well, see ol' Quickie. He's out the back," replied Eric. I was led into the stores, where racks of overalls, over-coats, hats, lamps, shovels and wooden clogs met my gaze. Wooden clogs, I thought. Whatever can they be used for? I then met 'ol Quickie', or more correctly Fred Quick, a man with a strangely deformed hand and who stuttered and 'effed and blinded' with every sentence he spoke. Mr Spencer asked him to sort out some overalls for me.

"Looks like a f-f-f-four to me," spluttered Mr Quick and he pulled a pair of size fours from the rack. "Here, try these f-f-f-flipping things," he said throwing me a neatly folded, clean blue bundle. I put them to one side and began to undo the laces on my brand new 'Tuf boots, bought especially for my new career. "You don't need to undo them f-f-flipping things," he stammered. And he was right, I didn't. The wide bottoms just sailed over my boots, no problem! Remember, this was the 'sixties, when fashion conscious young men such as myself were wearing very tight denim jeans, with the excess length turned over on the outside, and they would never have gone on over footwear, not even the fashionably slim and pointed winkle-pickers of the time. So, kitted out in my nice new overalls I was sent to find the other cleaners and help them. "They'll tell you what to do," said Mr Spencer helpfully. All I had to do now was find them.

I wandered around looking for the other urchins that I was about to join, but could only see older men working on engines or sweeping the pits. Other men, wearing those clogs that had so puzzled me earlier, were dragging heavy lengths of wire-covered rubber hosepipe around and then inserting the end nozzles into receptacles at the side of an engine. The clogs, I discovered, were considered to be the best footwear when working in the wet, dirty conditions of a locomotive shed. A lad of about 20

passed by. "You look lost," he said. I told him that I had just started and was looking for the other cleaners. He glanced at his watch and said brightly, "Oh, tea-time, they'll be in the cabin by now." "Thanks," I called, as he went on his way. The Cabin? I thought; where the heck's the cabin? I wandered around trying to find this cabin, afraid to ask the workmen, (or fitters as I later learned they were called) for fear of showing my ignorance.

One thing that I did notice while wandering, was that these fitters were using enormous great spanners, about 18 inches to two feet long, as they worked on the various parts of locomotives that had been dismantled. Any of the spanners that were not in use were hung on large wall-mounted racks, which also had painted on them the shape of the appropriate spanner that belonged in a particular place. Nearby stood a large hand-operated sharpening stone.

I came to an open door, which was unmistakably the washroom and toilet and I thought I might as well use the facilities. As I walked in, an old man was busily to-ing and fro-ing his mop, keeping the floor spotlessly clean. The brass and chrome work positively shone. He saw me and stopped his mopping, "Hullo" he said in a gruff, well-weathered voice, "Haven't seen you before." I explained how I'd started that morning and was now trying to find the other lads who were in the cabin. "I'm not sure where it is though." "Well, you must have passed it when you came in this morning, it's at the bottom of the stairs." I immediately realised where he meant, but before leaving I stood and mused over the wide range of washing facilities available. There were two long sinks, each with a capacity for three people to stand and wash their hands, plus three individual washbasins and two enormous sinks which were provided for men to wash their dirty overalls in. There were also two shower cubicles, one or other of which, I was to find out later, was used by a driver who, even when he was off duty made a special journey to use!

The man who had told me where to find the cabin was called Robin Clark, an old retired driver, kept on specially for the purpose of cleaning the washroom and also for helping to clear ashes from the pits, and carry out general cleaning duties, along with two other retired drivers. I collected my bag of sandwiches from a drawer in the lobby, where I had left them earlier and went to the 'cabin', the place where all the men took their meal break - all, that is except the fitters. They had their own room but often made their pots of tea here, as it was quicker to use 'our' hot water urn rather than waiting for their own, slow, electric kettle to boil.

The green painted door of the cabin had a little enamel sign, which someone had affixed to it 'Fog Cottage'. As I walked through, I saw a group of five or six youths, some of whom I recognised from my interview visit. I introduced myself as the new cleaner, the response to which was that 'there was a new victim in the camp'. "Have they dun yer yet" a voice called out. "Done me?" I questioned. "Yeah, dun yer balls." Alarm bells rang inside my head and, hoping that my face did not belie my horror; I tried to reassure myself that they couldn't mean them balls. "Nah, course 'e ain't bin dun, 'e's only just started," called someone else. "I should watch out mate," one of them said, "they'll get you when you least expect it." "Get me? Who will? What'll they do?" I asked apprehensively. "Ah, don't worry; Here, sit down, have a cup of tea and I'll tell you," he said.

He poured some tea into the upturned lid of his tea-can and pushed it across the table towards me. Then, slowly and menacingly, began to explain the ritual. "We-1-1-1-1, they'll pounce on you one day when you're just minding your own business." There was a long pause before he continued. "They'll take you round to the coaling stage, get your overalls and your trousers off and grease you!" "Grease me? What with?" "Grease of course. What d'you think. Oh, and sand. We've all had it done, it's part of the job," he said. "Your mum'll go mad when she comes to wash your pants." And with that they all fell about, laughing. I wondered whatever I'd let myself in for? Why hadn't I listened to the Youth Employment Officer and gone to work for the Gas Board? But, no; probably just the same thing would happen, except they'd use Boss White or Flux or some such thing.

The days that followed were fraught with tension, as I half willed them to get on with it if they were going to. The days turned to weeks, the weeks turned to months, and the months turned to years and strange to say, I never did 'get dun' even though, I must confess, I was part of a group of lads who later carried out the same deed on a couple of 'victims' who started after me!

.....Continued in **Part Two**

Copyright John Crisp

[Originally published in Steam World Magazine in January 2010]