

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART SEVEN -

**Tales, tea and newspapers are the subjects that Watford-based
Passed Fireman
John Crisp
recounts this month**

Days on Nights

During 1963 work had begun in connection with the WCML electrification, so any 'spare' crews were quickly rostered onto the many engineering trains that were appearing. These consisted variously of trains carrying giant auger borers, which drilled trackside holes to be filled with concrete, which was brought onto site by trains carrying large amounts of aggregate, sand and water, with a machine to mix the lot together and discharge it into the gaping holes the augers had left.

After the concrete was set, along would come a train carrying all the 'ironwork' -galvanised steel gantries, which were fixed vertically to the concrete by bolts and angle irons. Once the uprights were in place on both sides of the track, horizontal gantries were placed across the top, forming a bridge from which the 'overhead' would be suspended. Last, but not least, came the 'Wiring Train', made up of four or five old passenger coaches specially converted for their new role by having their roofs levelled, to make a continuous working platform along the length of the train and from which the gangs of men were able to string the thick copper cable, galvanised wire supports and ceramic insulators which together made up the 'catenary'.

The coach interiors were variously fitted out as equipment and component stores, workshops, offices, rest room and first aid room, with the rearmost vehicle carrying enormous drums of cable. Another of the vehicles contained a diesel generator, essential to provide electricity to all the on-board services such as lighting, heating and electric sockets for power tools. Needless to say, the train would not have been complete without some form of 'messing' facility and to this end one of the vehicles was fitted out as a fully self-contained mess-room, containing enough tables and chairs for the trains' gangs to dine in reasonable comfort, with just a little space left over to accommodate interlopers such as guards and enginemmen.

Each mess van had its own, somewhat cramped galley, with Calor Gas cooking facilities and it was my experience that train crews were always welcome to use the facilities as long as they obeyed the 'Golden Rule', which, not unreasonably, was to ensure that they left things as they found them.

This was particularly so whenever they drew off any water for tea from the electric Baby Burco boiler, replacing what they'd drawn off with the same amount of fresh, cold water. The topping-up water for this purpose was kept in large plastic cans and it required some effort to lift a fully laden one high enough to pour into the Burco - but it had to be done. Later, some of the more enterprising gangs rigged up their own self-filling systems!

Although each wiring train had a continuous line of fluorescent tubes on the roof to provide lighting when working at night or in tunnels, most of the work was done by day, and it was on such turns that I got most of my early firings turn in.

Although the afternoon shift did produce the occasional 'job', that shift, along with nights, was generally a quieter one, which meant booking-on 'spare' and sitting in the cabin playing or watching card and domino games. Officially, as I was still a cleaner (albeit, 'passed'), being spare should have meant cleaning engines, but by this time in railway history that task was, well, history!

Sitting in the cabin on nights seemed to produce a different atmosphere to that on days and I recall having many a laugh listening to the drivers' tales of yesteryear. One such tale was related by driver Ray Holmes, whose father, 'Hollie', I mentioned earlier.

Ray told a story from his firing days when, in the early hours, having just taken charge of an up freight train at Northampton, he and his driver were passing slowly through the station when an old railwayman standing at the platform edge shouted out what Ray described as 'something unintelligible' and they assumed that the man was shouting some warning about the signal at the end of the platform being 'on' (at Danger). Ray's driver shouted an acknowledgement, something in the form of 'Yeah, OK mate'.

As the engine reached the red signal at the platform-end the crew took the opportunity to fill the engine's water tanks and when that was done 'whistled up for the road'. The signal eventually cleared and the train was started. An uneventful run then followed to Tring, 30 miles further on where, as was normal in those days, the train was turned in to the loop line so that the procession of up 'residential' would not be impeded. Soon after they had stopped at the signal, the guard came up to the engine and commented on what a good run they'd had, even getting past Bletchley without being sidetracked; a rare achievement indeed! The guard then surprised the driver by commenting "What about that bloke who wanted Wolverton?"

"What bloke," replied the driver?

"Well, didn't that old boy at Northampton ask you to slow down so that he could jump off there?"

A look of horror crossed the driver's face as he confirmed that someone had shouted something, "I thought he was just telling me the peg was on," he said.

"Naaaahhhh" said the guard, "he asked if he could bring his bike on the van with him as you would be slowing down at Wolverton to let him jump off. As we approached, he switched his bike lights on, muttered something about the bloody driver not slowing down that much and jumped. The last I saw was these red and white lights somersaulting down the embankment and him letting out a bloody great 'yaaahhhh!'"

Ray finished his story in his own inimitable, dry humoured way, by commenting that, as neither he nor his driver had heard any more of the matter, they assumed the bloke must have been OK!

Everyone was now eager for more; or just as eager to tell their story and soon another storyteller had us all in stitches.

Sulphur and a guard

This tale related to a long-standing feud between a driver and a guard, who on this occasion had been shunting in Berkhamsted goods yard. During a break in shunting the driver mysteriously left the footplate, taking with him the metal bucket that formed part of the locomotive equipment, returning soon after with it filled with powder of sulphur, a commodity apparently dealt with at Berkhamsted in those days.

The driver wouldn't reveal to his mate why he'd obtained the sulphur, but promised him he would soon find out.

When the shunting was finished the train returned to the down slow line and was coupled up to the other wagons, which had been left standing there during shunting operations. The guard gave the driver the 'right away' for the train's next port of call, Tring.

Normally the driver would begin to build up speed gradually, allowing the slack couplings to tighten and the guard to walk back to his brake-van, which he would jump smartly on to as it came alongside him. Not this time! The driver got the train on the move so quickly that by the time the van came alongside the guard, it was going so fast that he couldn't jump aboard and so began chasing after it, waving his arms, according to the story-teller, like a demented windmill.

This was what the driver wanted and he now slowed his train just enough for the guard to be within arms reach for a few more yards before finally slowing enough for him to jump aboard, knowing full well that the guard would by now be gasping for breath. As the engine entered the single-bore Northchurch Tunnel, three-quarters-of-a-mile or so from Berkhamsted, the contents of the bucket were thrown into the fire, causing the immediate appearance of a thick yellow smog at the chimney. The train was allowed to get slower and slower as it progressed through the tunnel, so that by the time the guard's van arrived there, it was hardly moving.

Northchurch Tunnel is only a short one and the locomotive was soon back out into daylight and fresh air. Glancing back at the tunnel mouth, driver and fireman could see only the filthy yellow fog pouring out of the portal. Eventually the brake-van emerged, after which normal progress was made to Tring, where the guard was found leaning over the veranda of his brake-van positively gasping for the

very breath that kept him alive. I imagine the driver came as close that day as ever he would, to being charged with manslaughter. But, what could the guard prove, when there was nothing to suggest that the smoke had been anything other than the normal product of coal combustion?

Railwaymen, as in other walks of life, certainly enjoyed their bits of fun. Another of the stories I was told, concerned the antics of one driver who very rarely made a pot of tea, but was quick to dive in when somebody else made theirs. One evening when he left the messroom briefly to move an engine, a plan was hatched: A pot of tea was hastily made, but all were warned not to touch it as a special ingredient had been added. Our friend soon re-appeared and, bold as ever, helped himself to a cup of the brew. Within a short time he made a sudden exit. The addition of a generous helping of Epsom salts had made him suddenly have a need to visit the toilet!

Railway fog signals, or 'detonators' have been the subject of some amusing tales that I have heard. A popular pastime at many a location was for someone to shin up onto the roof of a messroom, bothy, or shunter's cabin and drop a 'shot' or two down the chimney. The resulting explosion was enough to send the occupants scurrying for cover and, when the scare was over, searching for the silly devil who had done it!

The prank could of course be dangerous, especially if someone happened to be stoking the fire at that precise moment.

With detonators in mind, I wonder if anyone reading these words was among a group of lads who, one day in 1963, threw a barrage of bricks at the engine of the Rickmansworth branch freight train and later thought they were being shot at by the crew of the engine? If you were one of them, I have a message for you. 'You were had!'

After the train had been bombarded, it carried on to execute its shunting duties at the various sidings and then returned to where you were - almost. But before getting too close the driver stopped the train and sent his fireman forward to lay half a dozen fog signals on the line, the fireman then returning to his engine. The train was started, quite noisily so that you knew it was there, the whistle was sounded just to make sure, and the fireman picked up his rifle, which, unknown to you was a stout piece of wood known as a brake stick, normally used to pin down wagon brake-levers.

With the fireman pointing his 'gun' at you, the locomotive ran over the 'shots', Bang-Bang-Bang-Bang-Bang-Bang! I doubt that you heard all six, as you apparently ran so far and fast that you were probably out of earshot by the time that even the third exploded! I must confess that I wasn't on the locomotive, but what a laugh the crew gave us that day as they came on shed and told us the story.

A knowledgeable SM

One prank I did experience first-hand concerned an old feller who had once been a driver, but due to ill health had been taken off of footplate duties and given a job as timekeeper on the opposite shift to Eric Bartlett. One quiet Saturday night this particular man, George Bridge, was on duty with deputy foreman Bill Key (a deputy being a driver who had also passed the supervisor's exam, enabling him to cover for sickness, holidays etc). I, along with two or three others were also in the stores enjoying a cup of Bill's tea, although being there without proper reason was highly irregular -but who was to know?

George Bridge was a keen motorcyclist, who used his machine to carry him all of the half mile or so to work each day. He had left his bike in the proper place at the top of the steps leading down to the locomotive sheds, which was situated next to the house of the Station Master, at that time a Mr Shorrocks.

George's bike needed an oil change and he thought that this nice quiet Saturday night would be the ideal time to do it but, as the bike sheds were not a particularly convenient place to undertake such a task, he thought that he might ride his bike round to the station front, take it up in the lift, along the platform, into the engine shed and do the oil change in the bright, warm environment of the stores.

Another motorcyclist, fireman David Hughes, volunteered to ride to a local garage to get some oil while George brought his bike around. Meantime, another of our number, Bernard Holliman, decided to take a walk around the station for some fresh air. By the time David returned with the oil, the 'patient' was waiting in the stores for attention. Drip trays were positioned and the job begun. Everything was well under way, with George only too happy to leave the work to David and Bill; and then the 'phone rang.

George answered. "Hello, Loco". There was a pause, then, "Yes, that's me." "Oh, hello Sir, err, not actually riding it, Sir". Another pause. "No, I'm sorry, Sir. It won't happen again." "Yes, thank you, Sir." George looked ashen and was shaking as he replaced the receiver and sat down.

He looked at Bill. "That was Shorrocks," he said, "Knows me flipping name as well." Bill asked him to explain. "On the 'phone, that was Shorrocks, reckons he saw me riding me flipping bike along the platform. Well, I said I wasn't, but....," he trailed off. "And were you?" asked Bill, "Course I blooming was," retorted George. "Knows me blooming name as well, that's what I can't understand."

Bill asked him where Shorrocks was to have been able to see him. "Up in No. 3 Box! He'd have seen everything from there." A heated discussion ensued about why Shorrocks needed to be out and about at that time on a Saturday night, but all was quickly forgotten when David announced that the oil change was nearly complete, and, in order to settle George's nerves, I volunteered to make a nice fresh pot of tea. Bernard, as usual, must have smelt the teapot for, just as the tea was being poured, in he walked from his stroll and we had a good laugh telling him about the excitement he had missed.

A while later when George went out to answer a call of nature, Bernard said he hadn't missed all of the fun; far from it in fact. His had been the voice on the other end of the telephone!

Poor George never did find out.

Too much tea

The staple drink of all railwaymen throughout the ages has been, as might be expected, tea. No fireman would dream of leaving the shed without a can of tea to quench the thirst of himself and his driver whilst out on the road. Generally, both men would bring a brew that could be made up at an appropriate time during the shift and, I have to say that there were some weird and wonderful concoctions brought in by some.

For instance, some men, generally the more senior drivers, brought their brew in a jar, and it consisted of a syrupy mixture of tea, sugar and condensed milk to be scooped out and into the can of boiling water when required. Some didn't even bother with a jar; a screwed up ball of greaseproof paper held the whole gooey-mess, which at the appropriate time was scraped straight off the paper into the can!

One old boy didn't drink tea as such, but kept a bottle inside his jacket filled with, well, I don't know really. He always said it was Ova'tine (sic) though people who had known him a long time, said it was nothing more than cold tea.

The most popular way of bringing a brew to work was in a small metal or plastic, double-ended ovular tube, with a lid at each end and a divider in the middle, making two closed compartments. In one little compartment would be an amount of leaf tea and in the other a quantity of sugar. Milk was brought in a separate bottle.

My tea canister was a plastic one, purchased at Woolworth's for about 9d and into one end of which would go just enough Brooke Bond Dividend Tea for one brew (about a quarter to half full) whilst the other end would be crammed with as much sugar as I could get in.

I was to find out that Johnny Hoare, who I mentioned earlier, put enough tea in his little container for several brews.

We were at Tring on the last part of a night duty that saw us working the 6.51am local up to Euston and, with everything ready, nice fire, coaches coupled and being heated, John gave me his little tin and sent me to make a brew. Without noticing, I did as I would have done with my own brew and chucked the whole lot into the can, thinking, as I poured the water on, that it did look rather strong. I walked back along the platform, swinging the can in time-honoured fashion as I went, to stir the leaves.

I boarded the engine, placing the can on the warming tray above the fire-hole door and John poured out a lidful to make room to pour in the milk. "What the Dickens is this? Tar? Don't tell me that you put it all in?" he said, to which I could only and innocently, reply that I had. "There's enough tea in my little pot for three or four brews," he exclaimed. "I can't drink that," said he, and if the truth be known, neither could I and I at once offered to run back to the porters room and water it down, but it was too late; the guard's green flag was waving and his whistle blowing. It was time to go.

Needless to say we had a dry run to Euston that morning, but John, good-humoured as ever, took it all in his stride and tried to let me feel not too bad about it, although he couldn't resist telling the Watford driver, in who's electric train cab we travelled back from Euston, not to let me loose with his

tea if ever I was paired with him! John, for his part, always reminded me from then on "not to put it all in" whenever I was his fireman and about to make his tea.

Newspapers and tea

At the other end of the scale was an incident involving driver George Rawles, known to all as 'Chocolate' due to his surname being pronounced Rolls, as in chocolate rolls! I was at first a little in awe of George, but as I got to know him better I found him a really nice bloke, indeed, he became another of my 'favourite' drivers.

One day George and I had worked the 7.31am local up from Tring. On arrival it was the fireman's job to uncouple the coaches, which, with experience could be accomplished quite quickly, particularly if the driver had stopped with the buffers squeezed up and the couplings slack. Having unhooked, the fireman would then nip smartly up on to the platform, by now empty of passengers, and quickly search the train for the morning papers left behind by thoughtful commuters. No matter what one's taste or political persuasion a good selection could always be guaranteed.

The next job was to go and make the tea whilst waiting for the carriages to be removed by the station shunt engine.

In the shadow of the now demolished bridge taking Ampthill Square over the railway, and standing between the arrival and departure tracks, was a building which, because of its brick and glass construction was colloquially known as 'the greenhouse'. It was from here that the day-to-day running of the 'yard' (the immediate environs of the platform ends) was conducted by the various inspectors and shunters.

There was always a kettle on the boil, so it was here that I went to brew up, knowing that I could pick up my mate at the platform end if the carriages were released early. As I washed my tea can of the dregs from our previous brew, I noticed to my horror, that there was no lid on the jar that George had given me, and indeed, very few leaves in the jar! I wondered whether the lid had come off as I walked along the platform; if it had, why had I not heard it drop? More to the point, how was I going to brew up with the few measly grains of tea that were left in the jar?

They would have made a very different brew to the one I'd made at Tring a few weeks previously. Desperately I searched round the room, hoping that nobody would come in and suspect me of rifling the lockers that lined the walls. Suddenly, tucked away in a cupboard beside the sink, I found it; a bag of Hornimans Yellow Label tea. My life was saved; surely the owner wouldn't mind me taking just enough for one brew? I grabbed the bag; it felt light, but tea packets do. Eagerly I pulled back the flaps. Nothing, save for a few leaves; just about the same amount as I already had.

Maybe by combining the two lots I'd have just enough for half a can of weak, but better than nothing, tea; So, shaking the packet vigorously into the can, even swilling Georges jar out with a few drops of hot water, I opened the tap on the urn, allowing its boiling liquid to pour on to the leaves. The result looked like gnats pee but, having done all I could, I returned to the engine, scouring the platform with my eyes as I went, but seeing nothing of the errant lid.

I climbed onto the footplate, and sheepishly explained to my mate what had happened. "Oh, that blooming things always doing that", he responded, rifling through his case and triumphantly retrieving a lid, imprinted with the slogan 'Frank Coopers Oxford Mint Sauce'. George, not for the first time it would appear, then set about the task of extricating the tea leaves from his rule books, time-tables and sandwich tin.

As the carriages that we had brought in from Tring were now being removed we shunted our way across the tracks, ready to back down onto an earlier main line arrival and take the coaches to Port Arthur sidings, the 'downside' carriage servicing sheds at Euston. Why they were called Port Arthur I didn't know, but that was the name many generations of railwaymen had given them.

The method of operation on these workings was quite unusual, in as much as a carriage shunter, qualified to act as a guard, accompanied the train for the short journey between the platforms and the sheds.

Once the enginemen got the 'tip' to start the train (signified at Euston by a proceed aspect and an illuminated 'R' on the signal post) the train was hauled out of the station onto the down carriage line which, paradoxically, began on the up side before running under the main lines to the down side, through the short Park Street tunnel and as far up Camden Bank as was required for the rear of the train to clear the points leading back into the carriage shed roads.

Once at this point, the guard/shunter would apply the vacuum brake from the valve in the rearmost brakevan and keep it applied, (I believe in some cases, by the use of a judiciously placed, squashed matchbox) until the shed staff were ready to receive the train of empty stock. The brake would be released and the train begin moving under its own momentum, the engine crew not usually needing to apply either power or braking until the last few hundred yards into the shed.

In time honoured fashion the practice appeared safe enough although, regrettably, one fatality did occur around 1964/65 when a train was turned into the wrong road and collided with a Sulzer Type 2 diesel, killing the driver, who was unaware of the wayward train heading towards him.

.....Continued in **Part Eight**
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