

# CLIMBING THE LADDER

## - PART SIX -

**‘Watford Loco’ engine cleaner**

**John Crisp**

**attempts to become passed for firing – but at first it doesn’t go well.**

**T**he name Johnson has already been applied to a couple of characters within my story and another occurrence now comes to mind. This is in the person of Joe Johnson, or ‘Holy Joe’ as he was known to one-and-all. Joe was a retired driver who, I was told, had not, in his younger years, been a particularly nice man. All this had ended long before I ever became aware of him, when he had ‘seen the light’ and become a dedicated Christian.

Every Friday when the pay office opened Joe would come to collect his meagre 10 bob pension and would always carry his own special collection box for the Railway Mission with him.

Anyone who was feeling generous, was welcome through Joe’s invitation of “Something for the poor, Brother?” to put a few coppers in the box, which was cleverly crafted into the shape of a railway signalbox, with a slot in the roof for the coins to go in. Joe, I expect, is driving engines in the sky by now.

### **DIY**

In between the odd labouring duties such as visits to The Grove, Watford No. 2 Signal Box and Willesden Loco, it was inevitable that we cleaners would be found the odd engine to clean now and then; one day for instance, we had to ensure that 46470 - taken off the IP-Way job especially for the occasion - was nice and clean ready for standby duties as a Royal Train engine, should the locomotive scheduled to haul the ‘Royal’ that day, fail.

I don’t know the occasion, but whatever it was, the train later passed majestically by, headed by a Stanier ‘Coronation’ on its way north and 46470 was duly stood down.

There was soon more to do in the way of labouring as, one day there arrived in the shed, at the bottom of No. 4 road, a wagon. Inside the wagon were a number of 8ft x 4ft sheets of hardboard, some lengths of softwood and several cans of Dockers paint. Mr Spencer, it seemed, had got some alterations in mind. The job he was about to undertake would normally have been classified as a Civil Engineers Department job, but no, he was going to tackle it himself; well, him and a few cleaners.

His plan was to rebuild the foreman’s small office, which was situated in the stores at the opposite end to the oil tanks and which consisted of a table and chair and a few cupboards, the whole lot being separated from the main room by a green wooden partition, centrally split to allow access.

Benny, err, Mr Spencer, wanted to change all this by dismantling the old four or five foot high partitions and replacing them with a full height hardboard wall, complete with a window in the centre and a door at the end. The ‘Terrible Twosome’, as Barry Clements and myself had by this time become known, gladly accepted the opportunity to help with this mammoth task; the extra labouring money was of course attractive and although I didn’t realise it then, I was to learn untold skills in the art of DIY, which would stay with me forever.

Firstly the old partitions were removed, the timber being as good then as it was when first installed, goodness knows how many years previously. Mr S then began measuring-up and deciding just how the finished project would look. It would be true to say that it was almost exclusively his own design, but credit must be given to all those others who saw it gradually developing and offered their own little hints, advice and tips on how to proceed.

Barry and I sawed and planed, nailed and screwed, lifted (and sometimes dropped) and pushed and shoved, until eventually the job was done; a double skinned partition complete with door and window; glassless, I’ll grant you, but that was all in hand. If Barry and I would care to accompany Mr Spencer

to the carriage sheds, 'oh, better bring Frank Jolley along too', we would find a sheet of glass, (which had previously been a window in an LMS express carriage), laid to one side awaiting our collection.

When we got it back to the engine shed however, we found to our dismay that it was unsuited, due to being a different size to the opening that we'd made. But all was not lost, as the sheet of glass was found to fit on the foreman's desk precisely, and made a very useful transparent top under which important notes could be placed for quick reference.

Never one to let such a small matter get in his way, the resourceful Mr Spencer eventually obtained just what he needed - a sheet of frosted, wire reinforced glass, cut exactly to size. It seems that that man could wangle anything.

With the partition in place all that remained was for it to receive a coat of paint. Of necessity, due to one or two pots disappearing when being left out in a more conspicuous position, they had now been placed in a hidey-hole at the back of the stores from where they were duly retrieved.

Where all that paint had come from, or at least how Mr S had managed to requisition so much, was a mystery and although there was, well.... pots of it, we weren't exactly spoilt for choice when it came to colour, the options being between cream, blue and signal red. Eventually, blue was chosen as the predominant colour, after which the office was always referred to as The Blue Room.

Painting continued apace. It was spring, the mornings could be a bit nippy but, as long as the old stove was kept alight the stores were quite snug. If the flames were allowed to burn down too low however the old fire could take a bit of coaxing back into life.

The regular day shift foreman at the time was Mr Heath, and he liked nothing better, once he had been briefed about overnight events by the night-shift man whom he relieved, than to get down to frying his breakfast sausage. I say sausage whereas of course I should say sausages. I honestly can't remember how many he used to have, but he certainly crowded them into his frying pan and, although there was a gas cooker in the stores, he always preferred to do his cooking on the coal stove whenever it was alight, which this morning it was - just.

From our vantage point at the top of the ladders, wielding our paint brushes, Barry and I listened to Mr Heath's grumbles about the low state of the coal stove. Robin Clark, the washroom attendant, whose duties also included tidying up the clerks' office and the stores, was busily trying to liven up the fire, adding bits of coal, poking and prodding and puffing and blowing into the door at the bottom of the pot-bellied stove. Close by stood a bucket of paraffin, which was used to store our brushes overnight; needless to say whenever the brushes were removed traces of paint were left in the bucket, creating a somewhat volatile mixture.

Mr Heath's eyes fell upon the bucket. He beckoned to Robin, 'Put a drop of paraffin on it, laddy' and Robin obediently picked up an old jam jar, that was used as a brush cleaning receptacle and scooped a jar-full out of the bucket. The lid was carefully removed from the top of the fire and the fluid poured on to the glowing embers.

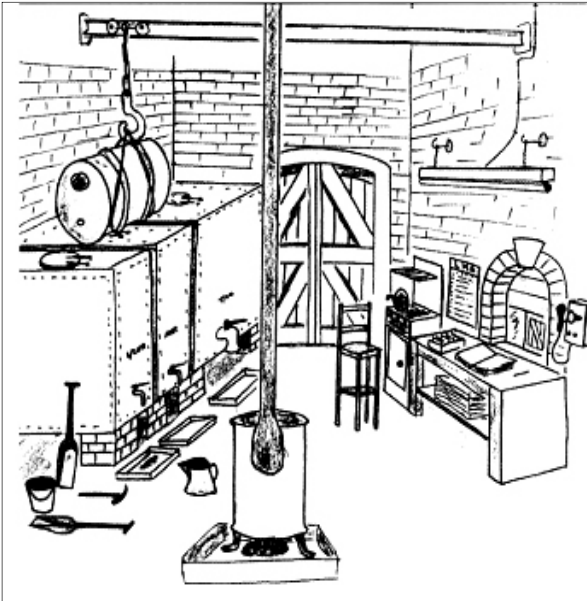
W-H-O-O-S-H, with a roar like thunder and a flash as bright as lightning, the room lit up, the two men jumping back as fast as their ageing legs could take them, their hats flying off in unison, revealing, in Robins case, a head that shone like a bright new sixpence. Mr Heath vigorously brushed his singed jacket while Robin retrieved his cap, plonking it firmly on his shiny, bald head.

Fortunately, no harm was done but if Bill Heath had seen Barry and I, woefully trying to stifle our laughter as he hopped about muttering his favourite phrase of 'Little B\*\*\*\*\*s, Little b\*\*\*\*\*s', I'm sure he would have pulled the ladders from under our legs and harmed us.

The Blue Room was eventually finished, but there remained a not-insignificant amount of paint still to use up, so Mr Spencer decided that the washroom would benefit from a nice new lick and, although Robin Clark did keep the place spotlessly clean, the colour scheme was very depressing in its dark green and, what shall we say, smoked cream. Barry and I soon had it looking a lot brighter in there, with a cheerful blue and light cream spruce-up.

But even after this, there was still paint left over, so Chief Clerk Mr Gill, perhaps a little envious of the bright new colours elsewhere, decided that he and his clerks should have their office decorated. There was no stopping us now and Barry and I took great joy in scrambling about on ladders and over desks while the clerks tried to carry on as normal with their paperwork, wiping the odd splash of blue from their ledgers.

It seemed like the more paint we used, the more we were left with; so in order to use it up, Mr S decided that he would have his office painted too, and eventually we got our stock of blue and cream



**Above: The time-clerk's office at Watford MPD with oil storage tanks.**



**Above: The foreman's office at Watford MPD, before the alterations described in the text.**

down to a fairly low level. The only red we had used though, was on the Late Notice case in the drivers signing-on lobby. Fortunately, we hadn't had anywhere near so much red to start with. But, with everywhere inside the shed looking so fresh and clean, why not brighten up the outside with some nice red office window frames?

With hindsight that was a wrong decision, because a rumour began to circulate that the drivers of several down trains had come to a screeching halt when seeing this bright red vision in the distance only to find it was the external window frames of the Watford Loco Shed Master's office, rather than some sort of emergency warning signal.



**Above: After some DIY by the cleaners (on labourer's rates) using materials that mysteriously arrived at the shed, this was the re-vamped foreman's office.**

**ILLUSTRATIONS by JOHN CRISP**

True rumour or not, orders quickly came from Euston that the offending colour was to be removed and this was achieved by mixing the dregs of the cream with a touch of red to produce a more acceptable, though ghastly, pink, which was liberally splashed over the offending red. This lasted until the shed was eventually pulled down in 1968.

Recalling my adventures with pal Barry Clements, it brings to mind an amusing incident that occurred between him and Bill Heath. Bill had once been a driver and because of a propensity to make as much overtime as possible when out on the road, and thus 'stinging' the Company, had earned himself the nickname 'Stingem'.

By the time Barry and I started, Bill had long since been day-shift foreman and, on paper at least, commanded the respectful title of 'Mr Heath, Sir'. To his face it was generally Bill and behind his back it was usually 'Stingem', something along the lines of 'Don't let ol' Stingem know' or 'Better ask ol' Stingem first'; that kind of thing.

One day Barry had to make a written application asking Bill for a spot of leave.

I think it's possible that by this time Benny Spencer would have moved back to Woodford Halse from where he had originated, or Barry would have made his request to him.

Fully aware of Bill's proper surname, Barry for some reason, began his request 'Dear Mr Stingem...' Mr Heath, as can be imagined, was furious and demanded a written apology. Barry of course obliged and duly submitted his letter. 'Dear Mr Stingem,' it began. Needless to say his request for leave was refused.

## **Back to school**

The afternoons were beginning to draw nicely out, indeed, in a couple of months the longest day would be upon us. There was something pleasant about standing on the sunlit platform 8 of Watford Junction waiting for the 4.52pm home and watching the activities of the afternoon shed-turners busily arranging the freshly coaled and watered engines into the correct places for their next duty.

It was pleasant, sure, but how I longed to be able to take an active part in the goings-on; but until I reached my 16th birthday near the end of July, that wouldn't be possible, not officially. But when the time did come I would be able to enter into the grade of passed cleaner, although that would mean an end to regular dayshifts.

June 1963 came, and in preparation for my 16th birthday I, along with Barry who was just a couple of weeks younger than me, was sent to firing school at Willesden Loco for classroom tuition, from footplate Inspectors Tulley and Roger.

The school was set up in an old concrete hut, situated on the edge of Willesden loco shed and contained various aids to learn about firing locomotives and the safe running of railways.

Pride of place, went to a magnificent model railway, owned by the members of Willesden Mutual Improvement Class, or MIC. The MIC was run by volunteers, who were eager to pass on their knowledge of locomotives and operating practices, to others. Management recognised the value of such classes and did a great deal to encourage them.

The model railway layout at Willesden, (I wonder what happened to it in later years?) contained nearly everything needed for both tuition and pleasure - trains of course, plus stations, sidings, tunnels, signalboxes, semaphore and colour light signals most of which along with their points, were remotely controlled from a large bank of switches. To add the final touch, there was a device made by Tri-ang that produced the sound of a locomotive whistle; ghastly!

At firing school we were taught many of the things that a fireman needed to know, although a lot of this knowledge had already been gleaned from unofficial footplate trips, or from reading the Rule Book and picking the brains of our more senior colleagues.

At the end of the week, having been shown things like, how to hold and use the shovel; the composition of coal and how to get the best from it (learning a useful mnemonic into the bargain); how not to waste fuel; how to fill the water tanks; the correct way of coupling and uncoupling locomotive and train; how the communication cord works and how to re-set it if pulled, we were tested on our knowledge.

The approximate composition of British Railways steam coal was Nitrogen 1.5%, Oxygen 8%, Carbon 75%, Ash 10%, Sulphur 0.5% and Hydrogen 5%. As an Aide Memoir, the mnemonic NO CASH was learned by taking the first letter of each constituent part.

The inspectors' favourite questions were, inevitably, about Rule 55, which referred to the actions to be taken in instances of 'Detention of Trains on Running Lines'. There were also questions on what action to take where trains were '...stopped by Accident, Failure, Obstruction or other Exceptional Cause'.

Having satisfactorily answered the Inspectors' questions and, subject to the provision that their decision didn't take effect until we reached our respective 16th birthdays we were both declared 'Cleaners, passed to act in the capacity of fireman', or to put it another way Passed Cleaners.

Before being sent away, a stern reminder was given about Rule 12, which included the statement - 'Employees must exercise proper care in getting between vehicles for the purpose of coupling and uncoupling'. This particular rule was divided into no fewer than 10 sub-clauses, Rule 12(a) through to 12(j) and was an important one to us, as on the LMR, it was the fireman's duty to couple and uncouple their own trains at terminal stations and yards (except where shunters were specifically employed for the purpose).

The old 1950 Rule Book was a cumbersome manual - not so much in size, as it was designed to fit conveniently into the pockets of any item of uniform clothing, but in content, couched in phrases designed to cover every aspect of railway operation, all, of course, in the management's favour.

Random selection of almost any page shows that practically every rule could be cancelled out, or modified, by another.

For instance Rule 68 contains the passage, '...except as provided for in Rules 70 and 215'. Rule 105 has the rider '...or except as provided for in Rule 104' and in Rule 133 '...the Driver must see that Rule 55 is observed'.

It is notable that the old Rule Book spoke often of 'men' carrying out such and such a task and in some cases it referred to Employees or Persons but, just to cover everyone, Rule 16 stated (among other things) that 'Where women or juniors are employed, the Rules and Regulations apply to them as to men'.

One's Rule Book soon became cluttered with amendments, which were issued every so often as sheets of sticky paper, and which had to be appropriately cut, then licked and glued to the appropriate page. Around 1972 however, the Rule Book was considerably updated, with provision being made to easily remove whole pages of obsolete rules and insert any amendments.

Not many weeks after attending firing school, I found myself back in the same building to attend Boiler Training School. This was to learn the correct operating method of the Stones Steam Heating Generator, which was one of three different makes of 'boiler' used for heating diesel-hauled trains. The Stones were fitted to the Sulzer Type 2 diesels which Watford crews were now increasingly allocated on their local passenger trains, although the diesels themselves were not actually based at Watford.

A bigger version of the Stones boiler was also fitted to the English Electric Type 4s, which Watford drivers were yet to be trained on. There were a number of youths from different depots attending the school, one, surprisingly, from Devon's Road, Bow, whose allocation consisted entirely of English Electric Type 1 diesels, which weren't fitted with boilers. We were soon being introduced to Air Atomising Valves, Blowdown Valves, Butterflies and Bow-Ties (neither of which flew nor were worn).

In the classroom was a mock-up boiler, used as an aid to tuition and also to demonstrate, when being examined by the Inspector, the correct operating procedure.

Having opened such and such a valve, closed this switch, opened that valve, done something else and something else, we would then be taken into the roundhouse shed at Willesden and let loose on the real thing.

The week passed quickly and at the end of it I had gained knowledge of yet another aspect of railway operation which was virtually useless anywhere else!

On one of my earliest turns involving the operation of a Stones steam generator, I came across the following poem on the boiler compartment wall of a Sulzer Type 2.

*Here I sit broken hearted,  
Cannot get this boiler started.  
I just can't make the damn thing go,  
I cannot make the water flow.*

*The air won't blow,  
The oil won't run,  
The spark won't come.  
In short, I think its days are done.*

On July 26 1963 I became 16 and a 'Passed Cleaner', so eagerly awaited my first firing turn. These were important as they attracted a higher rate of pay than for cleaning and each one counted towards the achievement of 'First Year Firemans' rate of pay, which became effective after 365 turns.

In my new role as passed cleaner the biggest immediate change was in going from regular day-work onto shifts, which varied over an eight week period with the starting times being 8am, 2pm, 4am, 4pm, 6am, 6pm, 4am (again) and the eighth week beginning with a day in which one booked-on twice, this being 12.1am on Monday for eight hours duty, book off and then back again at 10pm and the rest of the week.

Although diesels were fast taking over, steam was by no means finished in the London Midland Region's London area and before a young man could fire a passenger train locomotive, he had to satisfy the footplate Inspector that he was capable. Therefore, I was duly rostered to take my main line firing test on the 7.48am Tring to Broad Street service, on Thursday August 8 1963, a date which was to become significant in railway history - and it had nothing to do with my firing exam.

I was due to book on at 5.15am and had ridden my bike to Hemel Hempstead station, parked it in the old stable, which now served as a staff bike shed and walked towards the platform ready to catch the 4.30am staff train, immediately sensing however that something was wrong. What compelled me to do it I don't know, but I made my way up to the signalbox to enquire about my train.

The 'bobby' told me that all 'uphill' trains were stopped north of Cheddington. Word was, and he was sure that someone had got hold of the wrong end of the stick, that an attempt had been made to rob the 'Up Postal', an 'attempt' which turned out to be the biggest crime of its kind ever known in Britain at the time, infamously becoming known as 'The Great Train Robbery'.

Soon after the signalman and I had spoken, the 'Call Attention' bell code (1 beat) followed by the 'Is Line Clear for Local Passenger Train' code, sounded. The surprised signalman 'phoned his colleague at Berkhamsted - the next 'box in rear- who told him that trains were now on the move again and the staff train would be the 'next up the slow'. So I was able to get to work ready to take my main line firing exam.

Booking on, I first had a cup of tea in the cabin, and joined in the chat and speculation about what might have happened earlier. I then went into the shed and looked at the large blackboard, which had chalked up on it details of which engines had been assigned to which jobs.

'7.48 B/St, 2096, 1', the board proclaimed, which, translated meant the departure time and destination of the train, the locomotive number and the shed road where it would be found.

I was to take my test under the watchful eye of Inspector Tulley who was also checking the board and together we made our way to No. 1 road, at the end of which engine No. 42096 simmered quietly. I climbed onto the footplate while Jack Tulley had a few words with my driver, Sid Muskett, who was busily oiling the locomotive motion.

Sid was a real character, who could answer the most normal of questions with the wittiest of responses. For instance, I remember my friend Barry Clements asking Sid if he smoked. "Only when I'm on fire" came Sid's quick riposte. Another time, Barry was admiring Sid's very smart wristwatch and, pointing to the bezel asked Sid if it turned. "Only when I do," replied Sid, executing a 360-degree turn!

Back to the shed, however. Both men climbed aboard and I felt the Inspector watching my every move as I carried out the fireman's preparation duties and, when all was ready, we set off, light engine for Tring. On the way down, we passed several 'uphill' sleeping car trains in succession, which had been delayed by the earlier dramatic events.

In the yard at Tring, Inspector Tulley scrutinised my every move as I coupled the engine to the train, ready for Sid to move it out and into the platform for the trip to London. The majority of the train's passengers were bowler-hatted businessmen and once they and their women colleagues were on board, whistles shrilled and we were off. On the way to Broad Street I sensed that I wasn't doing too well, I just didn't seem to be able to work with the Inspector watching over me and although we made it to our destination, I failed my exam.

I was given another chance a few weeks later, with driver Don Wheeler at the controls, but still under the watchful eye of Inspector Tulley. For some reason I felt more comfortable, I even found time to watch how Don handled the locomotive.

I had a keen fire ready when the station foreman's whistle blew and the guard waved his green flag; the boiler was full and as Don opened the regulator I closed the fire-hole doors. Don soon had the regulator wide open and the cut-off up to about 35% (this was the same as having a motor car in second or third gear).

The first station stop was at Berkhamsted about five miles on from Tring. Before the regulator was closed, the blower was turned on full and the ash-pan dampers were tightly closed so as to limit the possibility of the fire blowing back into the cab as we entered the narrow, single-bore Northchurch tunnel that intervened before the station stop.

Once out of the tunnel the exhaust steam injector was turned on to maintain a good level of water in the boiler and the fire was topped up, with one shovelful of coal being placed at each of the four corners of the firebox, two each side at the middle and two more trickled under the door. Having now arrived in the station it was time to watch for the guard's signal to start and when it came, Don blew a short toot on the whistle and we were off to Hemel Hempstead & Boxmoor, the next stop.

Once again the fire-hole doors were closed, injector turned off and all available steam directed to the serious business of getting a train on the move. Thus the pattern was set for the rest of the journey, with station stops at Apsley, Kings Langley, Watford Junction and Harrow & Wealdstone.

After Harrow the next stop was Primrose Hill. After we left there and progressed nearer to our destination, I was able to note that the stations and signalboxes along the North London Line between Camden Road and Dalston looked as though they'd all been freshly painted. There was Canonbury with its model canons and well kept flowerbeds, Highbury & Islington with its signalbox proudly displaying hanging baskets, full of summer flowers, blooming in full colour; then there was one more stop - at Dalston Junction - before the steep climb up towards the terminus.

I knew this time that I had performed much better, and indeed, on arrival at Broad Street Inspector Tulley confirmed that I had passed with flying colours. I subsequently enjoyed many a trip to and from this once fine, but modest, city terminus.

As well as LM trains, those from Eastern Region GN suburban lines also used Broad Street. Services from Hertford North or Welwyn Garden City joined the North London line at Canonbury Junction, and what fun it was to race a 'quad-art' suburban train up the bank from Dalston, with the GN men on their Brush Type 2 or 'Baby Deltic', and us with either a LMS Class 4 tank or Sulzer Type 2.

It was usually neck and neck, with a bit of gain here and counter-gain there, until the serious business of bringing the trains safely round the curves at Haggerston and Shoreditch and into Broad Street took priority.

In later years Broad Street lost its locomotive-hauled services, the GN trains becoming exclusively DMUs and the LM ones from Tring disappearing altogether, with just the DC electrics, to either Richmond or Watford remaining.

Nowadays, there is nothing left at all of Broad Street which was swallowed up in the massive Broadgate development of the 1990s, although there has been talk of making the section of route between Shoreditch and Dalston, part of an extension of London Underground's East London Line.

Having learnt to fire the 'proper way', that is with a fairly thin fire and placing a half-dozen shovels full round the firebox at regular intervals ('little and often'), I was then taught to fire the 'Watford way'.

This was the - officially frowned upon - method of filling the firebox with coal until you couldn't get another spoonful in there, then putting the shovel away in a corner and sitting back to enjoy the ride.

Very often, on leaving Tring, I'd think that I'd got it wrong and the fire wouldn't burn through in time but, once under way and with a good draught now drawing the flames and hot gases through the tubes, the steam gauge soon crept up to working pressure, and when the driver shut off steam for each station, that was the time to put on the injector, allowing cool water into the boiler and preventing the safety valves from blowing.

.....Continued in **Part Seven**

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[Originally published in Steam World Magazine in June 2010]