

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART THREE -

New engine cleaner at 'Watford Loco',

John Crisp

gets his first taste of engine driving, and 'meet' insurance salesmen.

T hose were the days on nights. When we rode our lamps without our bikes.'

So went a little ditty that I often heard quoted by driver Charlie Johnson (whom we shall meet later). The lamps he referred to were acetylene lamps, which were not much larger than a standard size bike lamp, though powered not by batteries, but by acetylene gas. This gas was produced by mixing a substance, known as Carbide of Calcium, with water. As well as providing the energy for Charlie's cycle lamp, it was also used in fitter's inspection lamps.

When men were working on locomotives, they sometimes used a paraffin flare lamp to light their work; these however produced a lot of smoke and a not particularly efficient light. The acetylene lamps though were cleaner, and gave off a more focussed, brighter light, than a flare. There were strict instructions relating to the storage of Carbide of Calcium; only small quantities could be kept in any one place at a time as it only needed to get slightly damp before it started giving off poisonous and explosive fumes.

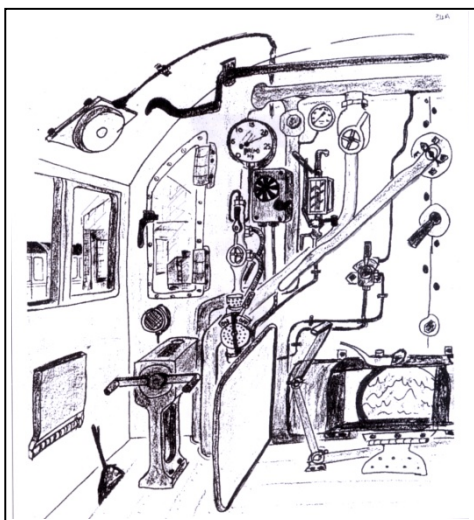
One of the shed labourers was Frank Jolley, whose mischievous, ferret faced smile endeared him to everyone. Frank could tackle just about any job in the shed, and always seemed happiest when he was dragging around big hoses, or scurrying in and out of fireboxes, with an acetylene lamp, when locomotives were on shed for boiler washout.

He would climb into the (usually still warm) firebox with a wire brush and get to work removing the carbonised deposits, which built up on the tube-plates. It was a filthy, thankless task that required him to wear goggles and a face-mask to prevent his being blinded and choked by the thick reddish black dust. Frank was also a very keen wearer of the clogs, which had so mystified me on my first day.

Another unpleasant, if not filthy, task was that which required a fitter to enter the steam locomotive's tender water tank, to search for leaks or carry out other maintenance. At Watford this job was usually assigned to a dinky little man, always cheerful and smiling, Billy Boulwood, or Bolt'ole

as he was often called. To see him squeezing his tiny frame into the water filler hole of the tender, was an experience not to be missed.

The work of an engine cleaner could be very dirty, but with the excellent washroom facilities at Watford Loco one could easily get cleaned up. Before tea or lunch breaks a quick splash with some water and a bar of Lifebuoy soap would be sufficient, but there was one old fella who thought it a waste of money to buy a bar of the real Lifebuoy product. This old boy was Jack 'Banger' Attwood, another of the four drivers, who had been kept on after retirement to clean the ash-pits or offices. The others were Robin Clarke, Chris White and Arthur 'Dubby' Deacon - I never did find out the reason for Arthur's nick-name of 'Dubby', nor indeed Jacks, of 'Banger'.



Above: A sketch by the author of the cab of 2MT No. 46431, the first steam locomotive that he drove, at Watford.

Of the four, I'd say 'Banger' was the jolliest, prone to breaking into song with the old tune 'The Music Goes Round and Round'; I learnt the complete song just by listening to him sing the odd snippet now and then (but don't ask me to sing it now, thank you)! One day, when he saw me washing with my bar of Lifebuoy soap, he said "You don't want to pay good money for that." (I recall it was 9d or 1/- a bar). "I can get you three bars at Woolworth's for ninepence." "Can you, Jack?" "Yes, I'll get you some on my way home this afternoon and bring it in tomorrow," and true to his word he did. Of course, it wasn't real Lifebuoy with its subtle carbolic smell. No, this was real unadulterated Carbolic, which you could smell a mile off; but still, it did the job and old Banger meant well! It probably made me realise why he had this strange habit, not only of singing his favourite songs out loud, but of walking round the shed and suddenly letting out the phrase "Carboleec!"

Another way of getting cleaned up, especially at the end of the day was to rub a mixture of T-oil and sand into hands and arms. My great pal at the time, Barry Clements and myself kept a secret stash of it on out-of-steam engine No. 40657 at the end of No. 5 road. Goodness knows what effect it must have had on our young skin, but it used to bring it up lovely and white after a days toil!

The engines were cleaned with specially developed solvents known as 'V' Cleaner and 'X' Cleaner, which came in 40-gallon oil drums. One type (V) was used to remove grease and the other to give a final polish. If, as happened occasionally, we ran out, two or three of us cleaner-boys would be sent to the nearby diesel-fuelling-point at the carriage sheds to get a couple of buckets of fuel which, although making a satisfactory substitute, did have the drawback of leaving ones overalls stinking for ages. Not that 'V and 'X' cleaners were without their own smell, which, although it didn't cling, was none-the-less distinctive. Distinctively ammonia.

I had never previously given much thought to ammonia's origins, but there was someone amongst us who had, the man revered amongst us lads as the man who knew all about those little things in life that others paid little attention to: Frank Jolley. Wherever we gathered, Frank was never far away, although he wasn't actually one of us; not a cleaner. One day whilst a gang of us were cleaning an engine, we somehow got on to the subject of ammonia and its unique smell.

Frank heard the discussion and commented. "Well you know what it's made from, don't you?" Well, none of us did, so with that mischievous little grin, which only those who knew him can picture, he told us: "orse piss." "What?", we cried in unison, scarcely believing our ears, "orse piss," confirmed Frank, "that's what its made from." Four engine cleaners were immediately turned into gibbering idiots, as they fell about laughing, not so much at the words, but the way in which they had been delivered, with Frank, standing there with his weasly little smile stretching from ear-to-ear, wondering what we found so funny. That just made us laugh all the more.

So, ever since that day, I have always believed that ammonia was a by product of a horses drinking habits but, on checking recently with the Oxford Dictionary, I found that ammonia is, apparently, 'distilled from spirit of harts horn, a substance got from the horn of the hart; formerly the chief source of ammonia'. Ah, well. It does say 'formerly', but, 'orse pee or not, it certainly worked and it worked best on engine No. 46431. It just shone.

A 2-6-0 Ivatt Class 2 tender engine, it was regularly used on the Boxmoor-Camden freight duty, on which, after a day's shunting in the yard at Hemel Hempstead & Boxmoor, she had a run up to Camden Goods Yard, a mile or so outside Euston. I had seen this engine many times during my loco-spotting days, but with never an idea that one day it would be me who would help to keep it sparkling so immaculately and later stoke its fire. It was also on this engine, that I would have my first drive of a locomotive.

This was under the watchful eye of Johnny Hoare, who at the time was a passed fireman, that is a fireman who, having passed the drivers examination on Rules, Regulations and Enginemanship can undertake driving duties whenever the need arises. (In the same way, an engine cleaner, who had passed the fireman's examination, would become a passed cleaner - a cleaner with the ability to take on fireman's duties where required).

On this particular day, John was working as a fireman and he and his driver were busy organising the engines into the correct positions for their afternoon and evening duties, a procedure known as 'shed-turning'. Although they weren't supposed to, driver and fireman (particularly if the fireman was 'passed') often used to split up so that they could move two separate engines at once. Thus, as one was brought off the coaling point and put in the shed, another could be moved from wherever it stood, to replace the one that had just been moved.

Cleaners of course were supposed to take no part in this, but the lure of steam didn't end at just cleaning the things! So, I and Barry Clements, decided to ask John if we could ride with him on the locomotive he was just about to bring off of the coaling stage. John was nothing, if not witty, and said we couldn't ride; but we could have a drive if we liked - as long as we kept quiet about it and followed his instructions. Although this was my first drive it wasn't, as it turned out, Barry's.

As the three of us boarded the footplate, John did what every engineman does when first getting onto the footplate and quickly opened then closed the gauge glass test valve, thus ensuring that there was sufficient water in the boiler. He then glanced at the steam pressure gauge, checking that it was registering enough steam to move and, more importantly stop, the engine. John then ushered me into the drivers' corner. "Let him go first," I said, pointing to Barry "I haven't driven before." Barry and I swapped places, so that I could see how it was all done.

As the locomotive had a good pressure of steam in the boiler, we were able to get the added benefit of using vacuum to control our progress. Barry 'created the brake' by opening a valve which caused a vacuum in the smokebox to a level of 21 Hg - i.e. 21 inches of mercury, the standard way of measuring a vacuum, and until recent times the most widely used method of slowing or stopping British trains was the vacuum brake.

On LMS locomotives it also allowed the driver to have a greater control over his locomotive steam brake. It worked like this: steam locomotives were fitted with two braking controls. One, the hand brake, was to hold the locomotive still whilst parked (or 'stabled'). The other brake, power operated by steam, was controlled by a valve placed within easy reach of the driver. Before releasing the handbrake it was practice to first apply the steam brake, thus transferring the load away from the hand brake mechanism and making it easier to unwind, whilst at the same time ensuring that the locomotive wouldn't move before the driver was ready.

Different railways used varying types of steam brake lever; on the LNER for instance the steam brake control was ratched and the driver was able to vary the degree of braking quite easily. The LMS type of steam brake effectively had only two positions -either fully OFF or fully ON and to release the brakes the driver had to set his brake handle to OFF then force in a piston - or 'plug' against steam pressure from within. Once the spindle was pushed home, it could be locked in position by a small brass clip; but immediately the brake valve handle was moved from OFF, the clip would release and drop down, pressure of steam forced the plug out and the brakes were immediately and fully applied.

However, a simple but cleverly designed system of valves using a combination of steam pressure and vacuum suction allowed the driver to gain infinitely variable control of the brake, as the 'sucking' effect of the vacuum kept the piston in as much of a released, or applied, state as the position of the brake handle demanded.

So, back to our ride on the footplate. The engine's reversing lever was set in forward gear and, with all necessary formalities and precautions taken - including ensuring that there were no men still working underneath in the ash-pit - Barry gave the regulation toot on the whistle, released the brakes and gently eased open the regulator. No. 46431 creaked gently into life and trundled sedately up the yard. Once the locomotive was moving, the cylinder drain cocks at the front of the engine were closed by the use of a rodged lever, thus silencing the 'swoosh-swoosh-swoosh' sound that is normally heard as steam is blown direct to atmosphere from the cylinders. The idea here being, that whilst a locomotive is standing, steam will find its way into the cylinders and condense back into water. When the regulator is opened - allowing high-pressure steam into the cylinders - the lying water will have nowhere to go and, being incompressible, will try to burst its way out of the cylinder linings, causing immense damage and indeed danger. Thus, drain-cocks are fitted to allow this water to escape.

The regulator was closed and the brakes gently applied so that the engine came lightly to a stand just inches from the massive concrete buffing blocks at the south end of the yard, right alongside the bay platform of the St Albans branch line. John sent me to 'nob-up' (pull the point-lever), so that the 'road' lay set to take us into shed road number 4. (Railwaymen rarely refer to 'tracks' or 'lines' as such, but nearly always call them 'roads'). Climbing back onto the engine it was now my turn to take the controls and move this iron beast into the shed.

I unlocked the reversing lever handle and wound it into the forward position; I released the brakes by moving the brake handle to the OFF position, pulled the whistle lever to give a short 'toot' and gingerly opened the regulator. My steed began to move. "That's the idea," said John encouragingly,

"give her a bit more," and I moved the heavy metal handle up a fraction. "Good; now shut off and let her roll." I snapped the regulator shut and the engine rolled along under its own momentum.

As we approached the shed, Barry gave another short 'toot' on the whistle while John told me to start braking. Nervously, I gave it a bit too much brake and it slowed more than necessary, but still had enough latent energy to keep rolling into the murky shed. Then, at the end of the road I gave a final, gentle application of the brake and the locomotive was brought to a halt, surprising even myself that it had not kept going, straight over the wheel stops and through the wooden doors into Eric's stores. I then applied the steam brake fully, waited for Barry to finish winding the handbrake on, pinned the power-brake handle into the OFF position and shut the vacuum ejector.

John reminded me to open the cylinder drain cocks as I screwed the reversing lever into mid-gear (for much the same reason as one selects neutral on a motor-car gearbox). As I went to move away from where I was standing I noticed that my legs had turned to jelly and, commenting on this, sensed that my voice had a definite touch of the shakes. No small responsibility driving an engine!

Johnny Hoare turned away from me slightly and I suddenly heard a voice calling: "Crisp, Crisp, did I see you driving that engine?" the voice demanded. Sheepishly I looked out of the cab-window. There was no one to be seen. "Crisp, Crisp," the voice called again; this time from the other side. I crossed the footplate and looked out, but saw no-one. John looked at me and laughed, "You look as though you've seen a ghost," he said. "I certainly think I heard one," I replied, asking if anyone else had heard the voice. John shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, saying that the excitement must have got to me.

The voice didn't call again on that occasion, but, strangely, whenever I was in John's company I heard it. It was some weeks later that I eventually found out why. It had been John himself calling; he was an absolute master at the art of ventriloquism!

Unfortunately 6431, (enginemen rarely referred to the full, post-nationalisation, number of their locomotives), was to become just a shadow of its former self when it returned from Crewe or Derby works after being sent away to have the Automatic Warning System apparatus fitted. It arrived back at Watford with its paintwork somewhat duller and with poorly re-filled holes where it had been drilled for various bits to be fitted.

Cleaning it was never quite the same after that, but another loco, freshly returned from a re-paint, quickly took its place in our affections. Locomotive number (4)2096 sparkled like a new pin and, whilst I was a cleaner, I was determined to help keep it that way. But soon Watford received yet another shiny locomotive.

One morning, after booking on and having the obligatory cup of tea in the cabin, I wandered round the shed and found the fitters fixing a '1C' shed plate to the smokebox door of a locomotive that was not the usual black, but green. The only LMR locomotives that were painted that colour were the Stanier 'Coronation' class 'Pacifies', 'Royal Scot' or 'Jubilee' 4-6-0s. This, however, was none of those. It wasn't even a Stanier loco, just an everyday Ivatt 2-6-0 'Mogul', just like 6431, but green and not only green; Great Western green.

No. 46526 had freshly arrived from Stourbridge where it was said that heavier trains and increasing dieselisation meant that there was no longer a need for this type of locomotive; so they were sent away to other depots to work out their few remaining years; Watford received this one and Willesden got six examples as well. There was however an operating snag with these locos.

Having operated on the Western Region, their headlamp irons followed the GWR fashion of being placed 'sideways' to match the position of the bracket on the lamps. No. 46526 did come with a set of WR lamps but as they were, er, different and considered to be something of a collector's item, they soon mysteriously disappeared. The locomotive was to all intents and purposes useless and spent more time out of traffic than in, simply because it could not display head or tail lamps. By the first week of December 1963 No. 6526 along with its cousins Nos. 6431 and 6470 had been despatched, and were replaced in May and June 1963 by the BR Standard version of the loco; Watford's examples being Nos. 78029, 78034 and 78035.

Although a worthy enough locomotive I never had quite the same affection for them as I'd had for the LM versions. But, steam was in rapid decline and within a year or so even these were gone forever!

Getting the Strength of Insurance

There was a man I had often seen walking through the shed, wearing a fawn overcoat and brown trilby hat, whose *raison d'etre* I could not fathom. One day I came face to face with him.

"Ah" he said "you're the new cleaner, how are things?" I replied that so far things were okay, but naturally wondered who he was and why he should refer to me as the new cleaner when in fact there were several of us. Things soon became clear. "I'm Mr Looker"; "Fred," he added. "I thought you might like to look at these insurance policies, specially for locomen."

He was a true insurance salesman and had no doubt picked out each engine cleaner individually to make them feel like someone special when hawking his policies; and although I say he was a 'true insurance salesman', Fred had in fact once been a driver. He was now assigned the position of AWS Inspector, training and examining drivers on the Automatic Warning System. Although the Harrow disaster, and five years after that, the Southern Region's Lewisham tragedy, had shown once again the need for a signalling aid to assist drivers in poor visibility, it had still taken several years further testing, for the system to be accepted as safe and reliable.

Now, it was, at last, being installed on the former LMS and LNER main lines and also part of the Southern's south-western division. Of course, the GWR had had a very reliable system for many years, although its major failing was the fact that it used a physical contact between the locomotive equipment and the signal-activated apparatus placed in-between the tracks, which could lead to damage to the equipment. The BR version used magnetic induction to pass the signal from track to cab and was less susceptible to damage.

Anyway, apart from his position as AWS Inspector, Fred was also the area representative of the London Midland and Scottish Railway Enginemens's Assurance Fund and within a few minutes of our first meeting, he'd made me the proud owner of two Life Insurance policies, one of which cost me 1d and the other 4/3d, a total of 5/2d, payable out of my wages weekly.

Another insurance salesman was Mr Gill, to whom I referred earlier. He was the area agent for the Running Department Insurance and had, on several occasions, tried to talk me into taking out one of his policies. He eventually succeeded one day by driving a very hard bargain. It happened on a day that Mr Gill wanted something bringing down from Willesden Motive Power Depot. The normally-appointed person for such errands was Frank Jolley and when asked, Frank felt that he wouldn't be able to manage on his own and asked if he might take a cleaner with him to assist. Mr Gill agreed and sent Frank into the shed to search for someone. I was the handiest and Frank beckoned me to come back to the office with him.

Mr Gill's eyes lit up immediately. He explained what it was we were to collect (though I can't now even begin to remember what it was), but then, to my disappointment, announced that I couldn't go. Well, I could... as long as I agreed to join the RDI! He'd finally got me; but sixpence a week seemed such a small sum to pay for the privilege of looking around Willesden loco shed without having to dodge out of the foreman's way - and besides I could always drop out of the RDI later on, (which indeed I did).

So the forms were duly signed, Gill snatched my first tanner subscription and I went to Willesden with Frank. What a joy it was to be able to walk about without being questioned or warned that the Loco Foreman was prowling around. I recalled that in my loco spotting days an unauthorised Sunday visit there with a pal, was ended prematurely when, what I now believe to have been a prankster, ran towards us shouting that we'd better scarper as the foreman was on the warpath and chasing him. We made a hasty retreat, but lost all sight of the person who'd 'warned' us. Undeterred, we made our way to Old Oak Common just a few hundred yards down the road and saw a wealth of GWR locomotives instead.

.....Continued in **Part Four**

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