

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART TWO -

John Crisp

soon adapts to life as an engine cleaner and learns about the nuance of details of time, money and local trains.

I soon adapted to life as an engine cleaner and although the work was very, very dirty, it was never monotonous and there was always the added bonus of getting paid every week.

Wages in those days were paid in cash rather than by the cheque or bank transfer that most people are used to now. I must admit I was rather envious at the end of my first week when at 11.45am on the Friday all the other cleaners said they were off to the station to collect their money, I of course having to wait 'til the following week, as the railway, following universal practice, kept a week's money in hand.

When I booked on at the end of the second week, I was presented with a small brass disc stamped with my pay number (194) and the legend 'MOTIVE POWER DEPT. WATFORD' stamped around its perimeter.

Thus at 11.45am I was able to join my colleagues in the queue just off of the main passenger subway at Watford Junction station and present my little disc at the pay office window in exchange for a small cylindrical tin, with 194 painted on the lid, and which contained my first wage. The contents of the tin were emptied, checked against the pay slip, stuffed into my jeans pocket and the tin returned through the window ready for next week's ceremony.

In later years, when I was earning somewhat more than 97/- I was the victim of a dud five pound note which found its way into my tin. I later, and in all innocence, paid part of my gas bill with it and had no sooner arrived home from the gas showroom, when I was visited by the local constabulary demanding to know if I realised that I had passed a dud note to Eastern Gas. I, of course, was not aware and wondered how they could say that I had passed it.

I had no way of being certain whether it really was mine but had to take the showroom ladies' word when the police took me back there. It would have been foolish in the extreme to knowingly pay in a dud note at somewhere where it could be traced back to the presenter and, despite making this point, I had one hell of a job convincing them that I had not got a stash of them, bought from 'some bloke in the pub'.

And it was not only the police that I had to convince; the railway cashier too, was reluctant to believe that I had drawn it in my wages as the money had been collected direct from the bank on the day it was paid. Eventually I won my case and was given a genuine note, but I still wonder to this day whether that dud 'fiver' really was mine.

In my first year's service I enjoyed a luxury that would eventually have to end; every night in bed! Engine cleaner's hours were from 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, with an hour for lunch, and from 8am until 12 noon every alternate Saturday. Over a two-week period this averaged out to what was then the standard working week of 42 hours.

But even though I should have finished at 5pm I soon learned that I could catch the 4.52pm train, which took me to the station I used at the time - Apsley (although my pass was valid as far as the next station -Hemel Hempstead). If I happened to miss the 4.52pm there was another train about 34 minutes later and indeed during the 'rush hour' a fairly frequent service followed.

The same could not be said for the rest of the daytime service, which frankly was appalling and was destined to improve only with the coming of electric trains, some four years later. The first public train of the day in the 'down' direction (that is away from London) was at 6.5am and was formed of a DMU heading back home to Bletchley after working an early staff train up to Watford.

This train was, I suppose, what might have been classed as a 'workmans', carrying as it did, many people setting off for jobs down the line, both railway and private industry and, being only a two-car unit it got very crowded.

After this train there followed the 7.28am, 8.28am and 9.30am trains, variously to Tring and Bletchley, after which there were no more local trains until almost three hours later at 12.25pm. There was then a further gap of over 1.5 hours until the next train at 2.8pm, after which came the 3.33pm, which started from Watford and was a convenient connection for passengers from Euston out of a Northampton bound semi-fast, which was due in to Watford at 3.25pm.

Following this the next train was the aforementioned 4.52pm. The 4.52pm was the first of the evening residential trains (what now of course would be termed commuter trains) and it was also the one that Mr Spencer used to take him to his home station of Bletchley.

Although I knew that he was aware of me catching this train a few minutes before I officially finished, it was best to keep out of his way, so that he could plead ignorance if any big-wigs were around to question why one of his staff was going home early. Thinking back, I'm not sure that Mr S should have been catching the 4.52pm either!

Although Steam World uses 'am' and 'pm' as its house style, I learned to quote some times with the hours and minutes separated by dots and others separated by strokes. This was the method used internally by the railways to readily show morning and afternoon times, without the 'am' or 'pm' suffix, with 'am' being represented by a dot (e.g. 8.28) and 'pm' by a stroke (e.g. 4/52)

The system became obsolete when the 24-hour clock system was gradually phased in during 1963/64. I had the dots and strokes method pointed out to me very early in my career when one of the shift foremen, Wally Kemp, accused me of trying to diddle the 'company' by booking on, on my time card, at 8.00 and off at 5.00 instead of 5/00. He accepted my plea of ignorance with a stern warning to make sure that I got it right in future.

The 24-hour system was not entirely foolproof, though. I recall hearing of an instance where someone had phoned a railway booking office asking the time of the last train and on being told 22.11, turned up at twenty minutes to eleven, only then realising that the train had left half an hour previously!

.....Continued in **Part Three**

Copyright John Crisp

[Originally published in Steam World Magazine in February 2010]