

BROTHERS IN STEAM

Whilst on holiday recently in the Yorkshire Dales we travelled along the B6255 Hawes to Ingleton road, and passed by the Ribbleshead viaduct. This brought back fond memories from more than fifty years ago when my brother and I were firemen on the Midland section of the L M S. railway company. During that time we were in the top links at Saltley locomotive depot in Birmingham and worked on the Carlisle link. We worked the freight engines from Water Orton sidings to Carlisle Durrant Hill. This was a 225 mile run that the Black Fives were more than capable of.

As I recall, two jobs departed from Water Orton, one at One Thirty in the morning and the other at Four Fifty in the afternoon. I would book on a bit early and stack the coal forward as much as possible, then try to get under the coal hopper to top the rear up. This was a big help when you got to the long drag and the coal was further and further back. The early morning job on Monday was the worst for me as I was the handy man at home (I still am), so I would be working at home then in the evening would go to our club with the lads (fellow firemen) and arrive home at about eleven to get changed for work. It was very hard to do this instead of jumping into bed, but it would have been a waste of time to go to bed for an hour or two as I had a problem sleeping during the day. This was one of the reasons I left the job even though I was near to becoming a driver. Once at work I felt refreshed and ready to go.

The run to Carlisle took Seven hours and Forty minutes and was called non stop, but in fact we stopped twice for ten minutes at Rotherham and Skipton. There the Tender was replenished with water and the wagon inspectors (Wheel tappers) would check the train. These stops were no picnic for the fireman, the tank was filled and it was the only chance to lift any clinkers from the fire bars with fire irons, or more specifically a Dart , (spear like tool) and a Paddle (long metal shovel). If there was any time left we would drag coal forward with a pick. Then we were off again. On arrival at Durrant Hill depot we left the engine and it was taken to Upperby depot to clean the firebox, smoke box, ash pan and fill the tender with good Yorkshire hard coal (they didn't have any at Durrant Hill). The driver examined the engine and we would then walk up to the barracks on Gibbet Hill to take a bath and have breakfast in the canteen. It would be about mid-day before we got to bed and I had been up about twenty eight hours. We were called to book on for our return journey at about Nine o'clock in the evening. This was tough because, as I said before, I don't sleep well during the day. We got back at about Eight o'clock on Wednesday morning. We were paid based on mileage not hours. The Carlisle link was the longest non stop freight job worked by one set of men, so we were booked off for one day between trips. This meant that I had the same problem all over again on Thursday. With the afternoon job we arrived at Carlisle about Twelve-Thirty and got back home (if I remember correctly) in the early evening, so I had no sleeping problems with this trip. My older brother Harry was also a Fireman at the same time but didn't have trouble sleeping during the day. He worked on the job until he reached retirement as a driver. Now at the age of Eighty Six I am like my brother (who is Ninety) I can nod off anytime!

I divided the Birmingham to Carlisle trip into three sections that matched the three sections of the job. Birmingham to Rotherham, Rotherham to Skipton and lastly Skipton to Carlisle.

The first section was fairly easy going with no really heavy gradients, but did include the heady aroma of the breweries of Burton on Trent. After passing through Derby there was a steady incline to Clay Cross tunnel and then fairly easy going to Rotherham.

The second section entered the heavy steel and ancillary industries area. In the dark it was quite a sight to see them lighting up the sky. If I was lucky, I would see the coke ovens right alongside the track discharging into the hopper wagons below. The ovens were about two foot six wide by thirty foot high, in groups of twenty or so. It was like a waterfall of fire when a door was opened.

The Third section was the best for scenery even if it was the hardest. I had to lift and remove Clinkers from the Firebed with the Dart and Paddle and deposit it on the trackside. This was important as we needed plenty of steam for the long drag from Settle to Aise Gill summit. It was a case of building up a decent bed of fire to give you time between fireings to drag forward some coal. I would have liked to sit back and admire the scenery but it was not possible if you were to keep a head of steam to ascend the drag. One thing I remember was the anglers enjoying themselves in the river Ribble at Horton in Ribblesdale whilst I was slogging away. Then came the crossing of Ribblehead viaduct. On a windy day this could be quite an experience, as I found out on one trip. Between the engine cab and the tender the gap was covered by a double leaf folding door, this had a very strong spring to hold it in the closed position. The Tool bucket was usually placed to the side of this on the tender footplate. It was issued from the loco stores during the preparation of the engine for its day duties. The tool bucket contained a collection of spanners and a tube shaped tin containing emergency equipment *ie* flags and detonators to clip on the rails to warn any following traffic of danger. I usually removed this equipment and filled it with water for hand washing before having a snack on the move. On this very windy day a gust of wind caught us and overcame the door spring then blew the bucket of water across the footplate and over the door the other side. If it had been about two foot forward it would have caught my mate on the side of the head. My brother Harry had a similar experience when the door was blown open and the wind blew the coal right off his shovel. We were told that the turntable at Hawes junction (now out of service) was closed. It had a wall of sleepers set vertical in the ground around the perimeter to protect it from the wind. Apparently wind caught a banking engine and the men were unable to stop it, I can not confirm if this is true but it is feasible.

In general from Aise Gill summit the going was fairly reasonable running except for a short incline up through Low House crossing which after the light running from Aise Gill was sometimes the straw that broke the camels back. A final short run took us to Durran Hill sidings where we hooked off our train and went light engine to Durran Hill loco depot. Their men took it to Upperby loco for preparation for our return trip. We then had the walk to the barracks at Gibbet Hill for our well deserved sleep ready for our return trip.

My brother Harry and his mate had a bit of trouble on one trip when the booking-in clerk at the barracks thought they were pulling his leg when they gave their rightful names as Harry Noon and Harry Knight. All it needed was if the guards name had been Harry Morning to complete the set.

The return journey from Carlisle had its problems but not in anyway like the journey from Birmingham. Particularly for me, on the early morning trip, with my sleeping troubles. On one trip I remember being so tired that when we topped the summit and were coasting down the drag. I stood up and held on to the two injector steam valves (two brass wheels about four inches in diameter that controlled the steam inlet to the two injectors that by a series of cones overcome the boiler pressure to force replacement water into the boiler.) these were set high on the boiler back plate, and about three foot apart. With my feet set apart I soon dropped off asleep for about ten minutes (so my driver said). One other place always was difficult for me in this respect. It was when we were running through Derby station at around seven in the morning, for some reason this seems a time when my body needs to sleep. Even now if I have had a sleepless night I can usually drop off at that time.

The difference with the two trips was that at the end of the return trip, the running was easy just when you needed it to be. When the fire was well clinkered up, the coal at the back of the tender and of course you were tired. I remember one trip when our engine had obviously not been coaled up with best coal. This became apparent when the firebox built up with ash and not clinker. By the time we were nearing home I was having difficulty in getting coal into to the firebox due to the build up of ash, it was up to just over the fire hole lip plate (a semi circular casting that covering the lower half of the fire hole to prevent wear on boiler plate work. Above this was the smoke plate, witch was a semi-circular plate to deflect cold air down to the fire bed and not the tube plate) as you can imagine we virtually limped home.

There were several reasons that governed what sort of trip you had. The first of course was the engine you had, I must give credit to the shed foremen at Saltley Depot they did the best they could to find you the best engine. During the war and for many years after maintenance of motive power was at its lowest. If you were unlucky you would get one that had its big ends (the main bearing connected to the wheels) knocking. I found that when I went to bed at home or at the barracks I could still hear the banging in my head. Or you could get a bad steamer, rough rider (worn axle boxes) and poor coal. Saltley had a tall recoaling hopper (The Cathedral), coal problems would occur if briquettes or ovoids were loaded into the coal hopper. They were made of coal dust and some sort of bitumen binding agent pressed into 9x9x12 inch briquettes or large egg shaped ovoids. Due to the mix it was impossible to damp them down to lay the dust. Thus you went home as black the ace of spades. Poor coal meant you burnt more, as Harry found out when they were given a 5 XP for the return trip from Carlisle, they arrived at Birmingham with only about a barrow full of coal left.

Then there was the Driver you were booked with (this worked both ways of course). If I remember correctly, the links were composed twelve sets of men, and each year you moved to the driver below on the list. This way you knew if you were going to have a good or bad year in front of you. One Driver who will be nameless was particularly bad. I was told a story about him by his fireman. They made the stop at Skipton and the fireman was rushing to get some clinker out of the fire. The Driver climbed back up on the footplate and said "one of the headlights is out". It was the fireman's responsibility to light the oil lamps, but it would have been just as easy for him to do it while the fireman was trying to keep a good head of steam for him to finish the trip. I was lucky during my tenure, because I moved up to the top passenger link before I took my year with him. Most of the drivers I had would do what they could to help you out, depending on their physical state. Most were getting older by the time they had reached these links. In fact most of them in the lower links (being younger) would work "day about" *ie* do the firing alternate days. I had one driver that did all the firing when I was booked with him.

I was booked with this Driver on an evening class A London goods train. Just as we were about to pull out of Lawley street sidings our loco Inspector Tommy Wood climbed on. My mate just nodded to me to say stop where you are. As soon as we got the OK, I proceeded with Tom standing behind me. We were going via Wigston Glen Pava Liecestershire. There we where to be relieved by Liecester men and return to Birmingham on a return goods. On the route from Whitacre junction there was quite a heavy gradient up to Arley tunnel followed by a down grade to Nuneaton. The Engine was a 2,6,0 crab in a very poor condition and we seemed to be using quite a lot of water. As we climbed up towards the summit at Arley tunnel Tom stepped forward and said to me "do you think we will be OK for water, or should we stop at Nuneaton to top up?" I looked at the guage and said "I'm sure we will, we have not used half a tank yet and all the hard works done." "Ok" he said. I thought, how strange! I was a fireman with a driver and a loco inspector and I am the one who is being asked to make the decision. Perhaps he was testing me for the time when I would be tested to become a passed fireman the first stage of becoming a fully fledged driver.

I had another experience with Tom in Durran Hill, Carlisle. He joined us as we were about to leave. Fortunately, I had not started to put a good bed of fire on ready for the climb out of there (the correct way is to keep a low bed of fire). He turned to me and said "Albert I want to see you keep a low bed of fire by the book". This meant no more than six shovels round the box at a time. I thought this was going to be a bit of a job because of the climb and no decent bed of fire to start with. I did manage to keep a good head of steam all the way to Aise Gill summit, and when my mate shut off for the descent, I opened the fire doors to find that the fire was so low I had a job to build it up for when we had to open up again. The fire must have been "dancing on the bars". I had to break up the coal into very small pieces and spread it over the box and put the blower on full to get it going again. Fortunately it picked up sufficiently for us to reach the bottom of the gradient I said "that was a close call Tom", "yes" he said, "perhaps the fire was too low when we started off, remember that in future" I thought to myself "it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't got on". Fortunately for me, he got off at Skipton.

My brother and I started on the railway as young men, him at Eighteen and me at sixteen at the Aston depot on the London North Western section of the old L,M,S Railway. Harry started as cleaner and I was bar boy because I was only sixteen. Harry's job of course was supposed to be cleaning loco's, but he was put on "calling up". The task was to "knock up" drivers and firemen booking on overnight. They were to be called one hour before booking on time. The "caller up" rode out on a railway bike fitted with oil lamps and knocked on the door till they got an answer. In those days it was said "the only people about after midnight were "railway men, midwives and policemen" and on the whole it was true.

One incident that he had proved this, he was stopped by a man who asked him the way to somewhere. Harry thought this man was a bit strange, more so when he said "give me your bike". Harry held on to his bike and kept it between them and said "I will walk with you to the end of the road" He knew that he always met a policeman there. When he got there he met the policeman and gave him a sign to let him know the man was a bit funny. To his surprise he just got on his bike and rode off. Harry thought thanks! And continued walking, at the next corner the policeman and his sergeant jumped out and grabbed the man. The policeman said he had escaped from a mental home and they were instructed not to tackle him alone. "So it's OK for me to stay with him alone then?" Harry said.

My job as a bar boy was to renew burnt firebars on engines that were in for a washout. This was done to remove limescale from the boiler and was supposed to be done every three weeks. I also had to climb into the firebox and scrape down the tube plate, brushing down the walls with a wire brush and worse of all clean off the accumulated ash from the brick arch. This was a curved shelf made of fire bricks built below the tube plate to about half way towards the fire door. The job determines whether you are keen enough to stay on the railway, as I don't think there could be a dirtier and unhealthy job than this. We were not issued with masks, until I said I would not do another one unless I had a mask. They mysteriously found some in the stores.

From there I moved up to a cleaner, but like Harry I was put on calling up. By then the war was on and the cleaning of engines was not a priority. Like Harry, I had a few incidents while I was a "caller up". The night shift started at Ten o'clock and we would wait for our list of men on the "control link". These men did not have a scheduled job, but were on call as required. Due to the amount of traffic at that time, ordinary freight trains were never on time. In fact, they could be late by as much as Ten or Twelve hours. The crew was often on overtime and needed to be relieved. This is when the control link was used. We used to go out and tell them what time to book on. One night the air raid sirens went off at about eleven o'clock and the shed forman came in to give us our lists. We all refused to go out as we said we could have done them before the raid had started. He said "I will report you all to the boss in the morning". We said "so will we"! We waited there for him to come in the next morning and he told us "it was not right not to go out in a raid". One of the "caller ups" from Walsall (near Birmingham) was, to say the least, a bit dim. He would catch the last train and one night he fell asleep in the waiting room. The porter didn't spot him, locked the door and he spent the night in there. Another night he was going out on calls and said "what shall I do about my oil lamps if the sirens go off"? We said naughtily, "wrap them up in these cleaning rags" (they were oily). Sure enough just after he left the sirens went off and he did wrap them up. As he rode down hill the lamps burst into flames! The same man was fond of falling asleep on a bench if he finished his "call ups" after Five o'clock. Usually the local policeman would wake him up as he passed by on his way to book off. One morning it was a new officer on the beat and he didn't wake him. He didn't wake up until eight o'clock and was soon dismissed as not suitable. Another lad had an experience like Harry he knocked on a drivers door and stood back to look for the drivers response. This was usually a tap on the window, instead he felt something brush against his leg and then say "meow". It was the driver on all fours. He turned tail and said he didn't remember a thing till he got back to the depot and reported it to the shed Forman. After about a year I joined Harry as a passed cleaner and was eligible to work as a fireman when the occasion arose. When it did I couldn't have had a worse driver. He was well known for expecting his fireman to do all the work. This included oiling the back end *ie* the big ends and eccentrics of an engine with inside motion. I assume this was because he was too fat to climb and and because he didn't want to dirty his spotless overall jacket (he didn't wear the trouser half). Unlike Tommy Wood, he insisted on two shovels full at a time not six and this was on an eighteen inch loco. I felt more discouraged about the job after that trip than when I was a bar boy. Promotion at the Aston depot was very slow, so I applied and got a transfer to the Midland division at Saltley Birmingham as a fireman. A short while afterwards I was joined by Harry. From then we both progressed through the links, for me to the top links from where I left the railway in 1954. Harry stayed until he retired



ALBERT KNIGHT AGED 20 AT WATER ORTON IN 1943
BY MIDLAND REGION DERBY BUILT CLASS 2P.