

CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART NINE -

**Night coal and other duties, including the transition from steam, are recounted by
Watford-based Passed Fireman**

John Crisp

as he concludes his series.

For as long as could be remembered, the gas works at St Albans had been serviced by two daily coal trains, one in the morning, leaving Watford at about 10.30am and the other, an early afternoon trip, which additionally serviced the yards at Bricket Wood and at Park Street.

Eventually, around 1967, the yards at both Bricket Wood and Park Street were closed. By this time passenger traffic had increased to such an extent that it was deemed necessary and, with the two intermediate yards now closed, possible, to run an extra passenger trip. This extra trip was in fact an extension of a service that until then had left Watford at about 11am and terminated at Bricket Wood, as the single line one-engine-in-steam regulations precluded it from carrying on to St Albans due to the coal train being there, (albeit tucked safely away in the sidings).

From now on however, the gas works would be serviced at night, after the passenger service had finished.

During the time that the coal trains ran, during daylight shunting was carried out under the direction of a shunter, whose handsome looks and stunning likeness to a famous film star, earned him the nickname of Clark Gable.

I don't recall that Mr Gable (whose true surname I can't recall, though his first name was Frank) ever worked the night shift and in fact, I believe he retired when the change to night work took place. The duty of shunter was then undertaken by a Watford guard (Percy Smith) who lived at St Albans and who took on the duty for personal domestic reasons. Tragically Percy, a deeply religious and thoroughly likeable man, was destined to die in the 1970s on the very day that he retired from railway work.

Prior to the days of the night coal trains, I recall an occasion when I was paired with driver Ted Curtis on the afternoon run.

Leaving St Albans we were handed the single-line token by the signalman, a man known as 'the Captain'. Having then passed through, and exchanged the appropriate tokens at, Bricket Wood and Watford North, we arrived at Watford yard only to hear the news that 'the Captain' had collapsed and died in his signalbox not long after we'd left.

An event on a Sunday night/early Monday morning in November 1967, which I would firmly put into the category of 'experiences I wouldn't care to repeat' happened on this same branch line on the night coal train with driver Ernie Coles, and which could well have resulted in the death of one or both of us.

After routinely shunting at St Albans, we had mustered our return train, been despatched by Percy Smith and were now arriving back at Watford, where we gave up the single line token to the bobby at No. 3 'box.

As we ran into the reception road the wheels of our English Electric Type 1 diesel No. D8002, suddenly 'picked-up', that is to say they locked and began to skid. Ernie immediately released the locomotive air-brake (this being the only means of slowing the train, as the wagons were not vacuum fitted) and the whole lot surged forward, with Ernie skilfully re-applying and then releasing the brake, but to no avail on the slippery rails, which hadn't been used since the previous Saturday.

As my driver wrestled the brake lever with one hand and clung to the warning horn control with the other, I jumped off the locomotive and began to manually apply as many of the wagon brakes as I could - not easy with a moving train, whilst at the same time watching out for obstructions such as

point-handles, old sleepers and divergences of track. All of a sudden, the train came to a shuddering halt, the buffers of the wagons clanging loudly through the still night air. I, in my mind, congratulated Ernie on his brave and skilful work in bringing the train to such a remarkable halt but, as I arrived at the engine, a sickening sight greeted me. There was our locomotive, leaning precariously over, with the side that I had been sitting on embedded in an electric locomotive that had just arrived with a train from Willesden; and there was no sign of my mate.

As I shouted out 'Where's Ernie, has anyone seen Ernie?' to no one in particular, a figure sidled up to me; it was Ernie, who had also jumped off when he realised there was no point in trying to do any more with a collision so imminent. Our next concern was for the fate of the electric locomotive's crew. Having just arrived and stabled their engine, their priority was to go and make a fresh can of tea, an action which may well have saved their lives.

Naturally, there was an internal inquiry, with my actions of jumping off, first being considered as cowardice, until they were fully explained to the idiot inspector who made the accusation and, whilst my intentions had been entirely honourable in abandoning ship, I do think it better to be a live coward rather than a dead hero.

Watford's most prestigious freight turn was the 'night-goods', which used an engine that had returned light from Tring, having previously worked the early evening down Broad Street service. The night-goods left Watford at about 8pm or 9pm and worked as far as Willesden Brent south-end sidings, firstly passing all the yards alongside the up slow, then running onto the start of the old Hampstead Junction Railway before stopping and then backing into the 'High Level' sidings.

If the crew were so disposed, and I certainly was, it was the fireman's duty here to jump off the engine and pop round to the fish and chip shop near the back of Harlesden DC lines station and get supper. By the time the fireman arrived back at the engine, the re-marshalling of wagons for the next stage of the journey had usually been completed and supper could be taken. If shunting was not finished, the bag of food would be placed on the main steam manifold pipe near the top of the cab to be kept warm until the work was finished. Those fish and chips were always delicious and the shop where they came from provided me with the first instance of seeing a notice that I have seen many times since, namely 'If our products please you - tell others. If they don't - tell us'. I certainly never had cause to tell them.

Having had an excellent supper, it was then time to work the train through to Camden yard, often seeing our colleagues there who had worked up from Acton. More marshalling took place, with usually time for a brew of tea before heading back to Watford via Willesden Brent sidings to dispatch and pick up some more wagons.

Apart from the few freight turns, the only other work that Watford by now had, were the DC lines duties, which had once been shared between Watford, Willesden, Stonebridge Park and Broad Street depots, but which by now were allocated to just Watford and Broad Street. But the glory wasn't quite all gone.

An intriguing entry in my diary for Wednesday 12 January 1966, shows that driver G.N. Smith and myself 'Assisted Royal Scot to Euston'. I recall George and I, having already been alerted by the shed foreman, watching this prestigious train limping into Watford with an ailing English Electric Type 4 diesel at its head and us hooking on with our English Electric Type 1 No. D8008 and setting off somewhat sluggishly, with only 1,000hp available, to Euston. George though, whipped the train up to such a speed that we were doing an amazing 75mph plus, through Wembley. Amazing because 75mph was not only the top permitted speed for that type of locomotive, but to achieve it with a trailing weight of some 500-600 tons, plus a dead locomotive, with a diesel of such a lowly power rating was indeed, quite a feat.

With so many men now booking on 'spare' with nothing to do, card schools, darts and dominoes became the order of the day, the only other way of passing the time being to wander round the shed and recall better times.

One day, while doing just that, I noticed a contractor with his gang of labourers getting some gear into place, ready to lift the track in the locomotive shed yard. By the time they'd got everything set up the motley crew decided that they'd done enough and would resume their task the following day.

That day never came. Well, the day did, but the labourers didn't. As a small group of us went out intending to watch progress, the hapless contractor told us that he'd got his men from the labour **Table**

Table One: Locomotive-hauled trains worked by Watford Motive Power Depot crews between 1962 and the advent of full electric passenger services from 1967.

UP: MONDAY-FRIDAY

Time	Type	From	Destination	Notes
1.30am	Pass	Watford Jcn	Euston	Staff train
6.51am	Pass	Tring	Euston	
7.30am	Pass	Tring	Euston	Strengthened to nine coaches. Suburban trains were normally seven coaches, but such was the popularity and importance of this one that it had two extra coaches added. It was this train that was involved in the 1952 Harrow disaster.
7.48am	Pass	Tring	Broad Street	
4.50pm	Pass	Tring	Watford Jcn	
5.22pm	Pass	Bletchley	Euston	

DOWN: MONDAY-FRIDAY

Time	Passgr/freight	From	Destination	Notes
0.57am	Pass	Watford Yard	Amington Sdgs (Staffs)	Empty coal wagons. Train worked as far as Bletchley by Watford crews. Return working usually a mixed freight from Coventry.
2.30am	Pass	Euston	Watford Jcn	Staff train
5am	Goods	Watford Yard	Tring	(Time is approximate). Colloquially known as the Langley-Berko's. Shunting at Kings Langley (Fyffes Bananas for W Pratt & Co), Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted and Tring, returning mid-afternoon, picking up at Berkhamsted and then to Watford.
8.15am	Goods	Watford Yard	Hemel Hempstead & Boxmoor	(Time approximate). Train generally referred to as 'the Boxmoors' and involved shunting at Kings Langley and Hemel Hempstead, returning mid-afternoon with a freight trip to Camden, then return light engine to Watford.
3.33pm	Pass	Watford Jcn	Bletchley	Detach two empty coaches at Tring. These would later be attached to a terminating train to form the strengthened 7.30am up 'residential' the next day.
5.22pm	Pass	Broad Street	Tring	
6.38pm	Pass	Euston	Bletchley	Return with empty stock to Watford
9.1pm	Pass	Euston	Bletchley	Return with a freight train to Watford

Notes: Additionally there was an up freight that left Watford Yard at around 9.30am and known variously as Trip 39 or Trip 52. The relevant reporting numbers for these trains were usually carried on a small 'target' board on one of the front lamp irons and the word 'Target', rather than 'Trip' was often the way of referring to the trains. Target 39 (or 52) ran from Watford to Willesden South West sidings, calling to shunt at Headstone Lane, Harrow & Wealdstone (including a trip to Stanmore and back to Harrow), shunt at Kenton, North Wembley and then to Willesden. Freight trips were also worked to Croxley Green (coal), Rickmansworth and intermediate sidings (general goods traffic), Bricket Wood (builders materials), Park Street (coal) and St Albans (gasworks coal). A trip to Watford North, served a couple of private sidings and the coal yard, which later became the NCB Concentration Depot.

exchange and it was now obvious that the work was going to be too much for them; he wondered if we knew where there were any men willing to carry out the arduous task of lifting the track.

Well, of course there was a bunch of men sitting spare right here, at the shed and before you could say Richard Beeching, or some such thing, a gang of passed cleaners, firemen and the odd driver were rounded up and pressed into service, lifting the very rails and sleepers that they and their forebears had driven and fired their locomotives over for more than a hundred years. I don't remember what rate the guy paid, but it was quite attractive, especially in view of the fact that we were already being paid by British Railways!

Mind you, at the end of a day lifting thick wooden sleepers and heavy steel rails, my arms felt as if they'd been stretched to twice their length and White Horse Oils were, surely, never more gratifyingly applied? At the end of the week, when the contractor paid us, he said he would need to have signatures from us, so that he could claim the wages against his tax, but to avoid us having to pay extra, he would be happy with our signing any name. As a consequence he went away with some very notable names on his list, M. Rooney, F. Sinatra, R. Hood and C. Kent among them and I do recall someone suggesting M. Mouse, though he thought that might be a bit suspect!

The time eventually came for the old shed to be abandoned altogether and one Sunday in November 1967 I was in a group of three or four men booked on specially to remove all furniture, stores and paperwork to the new Central Signing-On Point for guards and locomen on platform 9 of Watford Junction Station. Among the dust covered artefacts was an old ledger, recording details of men who had worked in the shed in bygone years. It contained such entries as '(Persons Name), Lost In The Service of his Country, 1917' and '(Persons Name), Dismissed from the Company's Employ, Due to

Table Two: Locomotives allocated at various times to Watford MPD between August 1962 and summer 1964

No.	Type	Notes
40657	4-4-0 Class 2MT	Stored out of use
40672	4-4-0 Class 2MT	Stored out of use
41223	Ivatt 2-6-2T Class 2P	
41289	Ivatt 2-6-2T Class 2P	Push & pull fitted
42096	Fairburn 2-6-4T 4MT	In the late '50s early '60s Watford had an allocation of BR Standard Class 4 2-6-4Ts, later exchanged for some LMR 2-6-4Ts operating on the Southern.
42097	Fairburn 2-6-4T 4MT	
42099	Fairburn 2-6-4T 4MT	
42100	Fairburn 2-6-4T 4MT	
42101	Fairburn 2-6-4T 4MT	
42616	Stanier 2-6-4T 4MT	
43007	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 4MT	
43018	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 4MT	
43021	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 4MT	
46423	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 2MT	
46431	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 2MT	
46470	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 2MT	
46526	Ivatt 2-6-0 Class 2MT	Painted green. GW lamp irons.
47307	0-6-0T Class 3F	No AWS
47355	0-6-0T Class 3F	No AWS
47606	0-6-0T Class 3F	Non-vacuum, No AWS. Although the term 'Jinty' appears to have been used by some, the class were almost always referred to as 'Dobbins' in the London area. No. 47606 was once reproduced as a Tri-ang model.
78029	BT Standard 2-6-0 Class 2MT	
78034	BT Standard 2-6-0 Class 2MT	
78035	BT Standard 2-6-0 Class 2MT	

Bad Timekeeping'. Another entry stated '(Persons Name), One days Leave of Absence Requested; Wife in labour. Leave Granted, upon Forfeiture of One Days Wages.'

All of the entries, throughout the book, were in the most ornate handwriting, not exactly copperplate, but very laboriously executed nonetheless. The ledger contained over 100 years of the history of Watford Loco, but, amazingly the next I knew, it had been consigned to the fiercely burning bonfire that had been lit in one of the ash-pits. Utter sacrilege.

For my own part I did manage to acquire an excellent Tilley Lamp, which Bill Heath was just about to throw into the scrap wagon. "I'll have that, Bill" I cried, as he drew his arm back ready to throw. "Go on then laddy, take it away and put it in the boot of your car," which I did, pronto. During the enforced power cuts that the country endured in the early 'seventies, that lamp came in very handy!

Having settled in our new base, which had been the Ladies Waiting Room on platform 9, I witnessed the demolition of the old shed, brutally executed by a crane swinging a giant ball. An undignified end thus befell the place where I began my working career. By 1970 the site had become the new Watford Junction car park, reached by a tunnel which had been dug under the entire width of the station and main running lines.

No. 3 signalbox had been demolished and the St Albans branch line platform moved and re-sited further to the east.

1969 was the year that the depot finally lost its remaining freight work and while the drivers were absorbed into the DC lines duties, there was nothing for the firemen. Some left the service whilst others, like myself, transferred away to other depots.

I first went to Stewarts Lane on the Central division of the Southern. All of my railway life I'd had a hankering to get on to the Southern. Now I was there, I couldn't stand it. I don't think it was the Southern's fault. There were several factors lined up against me. It was a long way to travel from Hemel Hempstead to the other side of London, just to sit in the mess-room spare (or 'As Ordered' to use SR parlance), or maybe to go as secondman on a 350hp shunter from Stewarts Lane to Victoria.

Occasionally I had a trip down to Brighton as secondman on a Class 73 hauled goods train, then back up to Redhill with a parcel van train, but mainly it was mess-room duties. So, having used my redundancy move to get to the 'Lane', I then decided to use my 'move within the same grade' option to transfer to King's Cross.

This was a different story all together. I loved the work there, starting as a secondman in the Cambridge Link, progressing rapidly to No 3 link, with a regular driver called 'Tex' Edwards. This link had jobs to Peterborough and Doncaster, as well as the more mundane shunting and empty stock duties, which were shared with all links. From No 3, I progressed into No 2, the Leeds link, and had the finest two and a half years of my whole railway career with a superb driver, Freddy Orr. Fred was a stickler for a clean footplate and throughout our time together we amassed a small horde of cleaning materials, such as washing-up liquid, paraffin and rags, kept in a small canvas bag, and which we both took turns to use when on a long run. Even on a shunt, or empty coach job we made sure that the footplate was immaculate.

On the long distance jobs, Fred always allowed me to drive 'down', while he began the journey by getting the footplate looking neat and trim; and then, coming 'up' we reversed the roles.

When I was paired with any other driver, I did have a bit of a sweep-up, but I never cleaned the cab anywhere near as thoroughly. I finished my time at Kings Cross as a secondman in No 1 link, where the long distance work consisted of trips to Doncaster, York and Newcastle, the latter of which involved lodging at a private hotel, before working back to London 12 hours later. In years gone by the lodges consisted of hostels or barrack-rooms and could be found all over the system, but as the practice diminished the old lodges closed down and private hotels were used instead; indeed, I believe that King's Cross and Newcastle footplate crews were among the last to have lodging turns.

After three years at 'the Cross' I was now old enough to become a driver and applied for a position at my old depot of Watford, but before I could go I had to pass my drivers exam, which I took in February '73, in front of Inspector Allen from, I believe, the Leeds or Doncaster division. He had a reputation for asking some strange, albeit legitimate, questions and I regret that I got caught on quite a few and, along with two others who took their exam that day, failed. A fourth candidate passed.

I got my second chance a month later with Inspector Allan Richardson, a real gent who asked intelligent, clear cut questions and who, at the end of a day where my brain had never worked so hard, pronounced me fit to hold the title of driver.

So eventually I found myself back at Watford.

Before I could actually do any driving, I had to be trained on the Class 501 DC EMUs and then the diesel railcars. The EMUs were used on the Watford/Euston/Broad St/Richmond services, Watford men sharing the work with Broad Street crews. I also had to learn the DMUs for the St Albans branch, which Watford men worked exclusively. In 1976 Watford crews were let loose on the main-line AC electric units, and along with other drivers from the depot I then trained on them.

Following my involvement in a fatal accident, my interest in working on the railways waned and eventually I decided to leave railway employment.

Some 20 years later, I almost made a return to railway work.

Following the accident at Hatfield in 2000, Railtrack decided to take on vast amounts of track-workers and also, to tie in with the new European legislation on working hours, more signalmen - or signallers as they are now called.

Being a customer of my local jobcentre at the time I decided to try my hand at signalling. I applied for a position and was sent a fact-pack with a self-assessment test attached. If, having completed this, one felt competent enough, one was invited to make formal application, which I did. I did have one reservation though. One of the self-tests comprised various scenarios involving trains at signals, occasionally with a level crossing intervening. The idea was to test the applicant's logic in deciding whether a second train, waiting at the signal behind the first, should be allowed forward or have to wait, due regard being paid to: the position of the crossing barriers; the signal aspect displayed to the first train and; the length of one or other, or both of the trains.

The correct answers were then given on the next page and I found that I had answered all questions correctly, except two. But, the astonishing thing was, that Railtrack's interpretation of these two situations allowed the second train to be

shown a proceed indication, thus entering the section in which the first train was standing.

Their logic was that because (in this example) the first train had a green light it would be moving off! Oh, yeah! Says who? Could that first train not have failed at the green light? Could not the driver have collapsed at the controls? Could not the communication cord have been pulled? There are a dozen reasons why the leading train would not necessarily respond to a green light.

I felt pretty certain that the block regulations hadn't changed that dramatically since I left BR so that trains could now enter occupied sections because the first train will be moving off? I think not. To make matters worse, the expensively produced booklet also showed a picture of a semaphore signal, which had been printed the wrong way round!

However, my formal application was accepted and I was offered an assessment interview with the personnel officer at London's Liverpool Street. I caught an early train from my home station of Lowestoft and on arrival in London found my way to the assessment centre.

Having registered and been told where to attend I awaited the opportunity to point out this fundamental error in established railway practice.

Part of the assessment test included a variation on the very same exercise and I deliberately answered the question 'wrongly', although in effect correctly, by saying that the second train should be kept at its signal until the line ahead was clear. The assessor checked the answers of the dozen or so of us that were there, and explained where I had gone wrong, to which I replied that I couldn't agree and needed to speak to someone about it. He patiently explained the workings of the railway, at which point I gave up; after all, if I got the job, I could voice my concerns to an experienced signalling manager (if such a person still existed).

As things turned out, although I passed the assessment, I later received a letter from Railtrack saying that all current vacancies had been filled, but they would hold my details on file. Thus, I never got to find out whether I really was right, or whether 150 years of Block Regulations had been thrown out of the (signalbox) window!

I did notice a year or so after, that Railtrack were bemoaning the fact that they were unable to fill all the signallers vacancies in the area. I couldn't imagine what they had done with that file with my application in it.

• *The author is donating his fee for this article to the Royal British Legion, Lowestoft & District Branch www.rbllowestoft.com*

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