

A Shedmaster's Life at Stewarts Lane

On 13 September, Richard paid a return visit to the Group, to give a further talk on his reminiscences of life in the railway industry. This time it covered the period from August 1952 to January 1955, when he was in charge of this important Southern Region shed. The District Superintendent, who was also relatively young, recognised that the job was very demanding and required someone to stand up to the pressure. When Dick first walked into the yard he asked a driver for directions to the foremans office and, when he found out Dick was taking over, his comment went along the lines of "not only were they sending an Eastern man but a college kid as well!"

There were 126 engines allocated and 700 men employed with a further 130 motormen dotted about the area at various signing on points. Stewarts Lane was still very much a Chatham depot despite being in the Southern for 30 years. The turns included commuter traffic, boat trains, Kent coast traffic, heavy freight turns, empty carriage work and a lot of specials. The job involved heavy traffic on Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Easter Day and Monday, which, when worked, earned an extra weeks holiday. Planning a Summer Saturday was a real education. There were more jobs than suitable engines, so engines were escalated up to heavier loads. The engine roster for Saturday was worked up on Friday afternoon. Engines were sent off at frequent intervals and if one was out of sequence it could disrupt the entire operation. There still had to be a good deal of flexibility, especially from the drivers accepting additional duties. Even so, they would still turn up on Sunday - for the double-time working of course!

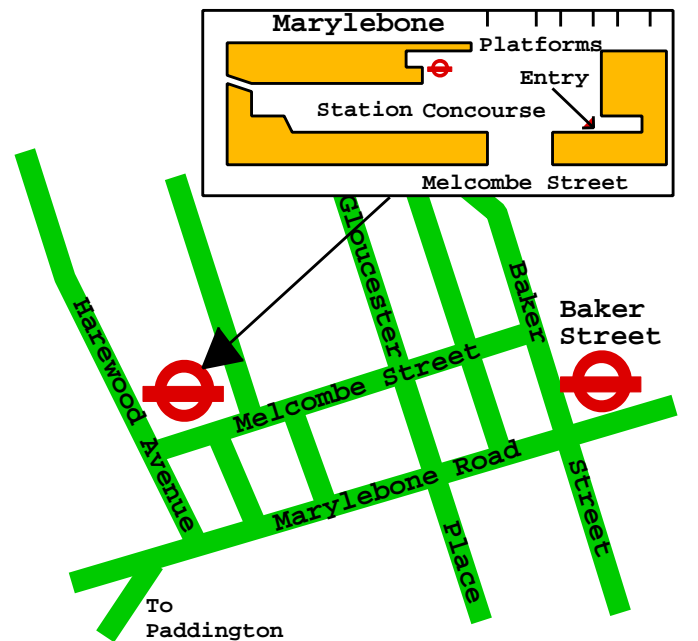
There was plenty of fiddling which Dick had to sort out. One day Dick stood in the timekeeping office at 16.20 and saw a slip come through asking for 20 people to be booked off at 20.00. Richard asked what was going on, and told the booking clerk to book them off at the 16.20. There was a real volley of complaints the following day, but the message got across.

On one occasion in 1953/4 Dick was late arriving at the shed. Britannia "William Shakespeare" was being prepared to haul the Golden Arrow. Despite the rules, the engine topped up with coal and, when Dick arrived, there was a big fire and lifting safety valves. Dick was not amused and berated the driver. Later, Dick wanted to get to Cannon Street. An engine was about to depart for the station, but as he showed the driver his footplate pass, he noted it was the same man he had argued with. The driver turned his back on Dick but, despite this, Dick took over the fireman's duties. At one point the fire was making a real roar, the driver had gone into full gear - just to get his own back!

Every 12 weeks promotion were made and one rough, uncouth man, was promoted fireman and put with a miserable driver whom no other fireman could work with. Dick thought they would be at each others throat, but they got on well - they never spoke a word to each other for two years! Dick told a story about another driver who lived on beer. He had 4 or 5 pints before he was ready to work the train. On one run, approaching Faversham where they were to stop to attach the extra portion, he sounded the whistle twice and then, as soon as they had halted, jumped off the footplate and ran to the adjoining pub, where there were two pints pulled and waiting for him. A real regular!

One man moved from being a miner in South Wales to start work on the railway at the age of 21, and only got into the top link when he was quite old. One day his fireman was taken ill and sent to hospital. The relief was only 16 and had never been out except on shunting duties. He was told to keep shovelling the coal. It went everywhere, apart from in the firebox! At Chatham, the driver, although 64 years old, took over and got the fire up before handing back to the youngster. At Faversham the fireman was wacked, so the driver again took over, right to the end. The driver normally bought his fireman a pint, but this one was too young, so he bought him an ice-cream instead!

An extended synopsis of the talk is on the web page, see below.



Forthcoming Events

15 November 1999 - Beverley Cole

The National Collection of Railway Posters

The National Railway Museum curator of the poster collection will describe the work to preserve and make available the historic advertisements of the railway companies.

10 January 2000 - AGM and Social

An opportunity to meet other members and partake of festive refreshments. Dust down those little grey cells, because there may be an opportunity to test your railway knowledge

13 March 2000 - Peter Lugg

Aspects of the Great Western

South of England Members have a chance to hear and see the superb presentation given to the York Group last year - see Newsletter No 83, page 6 for details

8 May 2000 - Martin Dawes

By Rail to Southgate Cemetary

An opportunity to hear the results of some unusual history on the GNR funeral service in the mid-Victorian period. The meeting will be held in the Meeting Room at Marylebone Station. Please enter from the door between Upper Crust and W.H. Smith's Bookstall at the East side of the station concourse. The talks will commence at 19.00. There will be a voluntary collection to help cover the cost - donation of around £1 to £2 per head. Guests are welcome.

HMRS at Bletchley Park

We have again received an invitation to attend what is becoming an Annual Lecture arranged by the Historical Model Railway Society (Bedford Area Group) in Bletchley Park Mansion at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24th November. This year the speaker will be Peter Davis and the subject - "The West Coast Main Line 100 Years Ago". There will also be a display of 7mm to 2½ inch scale models of the period on view between 6.30 to 7.30 pm and after 9pm.. Admission is free - tea, coffee and biscuits will be available at a nominal charge. Admittance to The Park, which is a secure site, is by ticket only. These are available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope, at least 6 ½" x 4½" (165mm by 115mm) to J. M. Chamney Noddern Gate, Station Road, Aldbury, TRING, Herts. HP23 5RS.

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