CLIMBING THE LADDER

- PART FOUR -

‘Watford loco’ engine cleaner
John Crisp
is sent on a special assignment: he’s expecting hard work but there’s a pleasant twist.

I considered myself fortunate that, soon after I started work at the 'loco', some of the more undesirable elements among the cleaners left the service. These were three or four 'hard-nuts' who weren't really interested in the railway as a career, but were just wandering from job to job, passing time.

With their leaving, I found myself quite high in seniority among the remainder of the cleaners, and on the railways seniority counted for everything. But even seniority did not mean immunity from the odd prank by older men, such as being sent to the stores for a bucket of Blue Steam or some Pink Paraffin for the tail lamp. But you only fell for it once!

By the end of 1962 I was the third most senior cleaner, behind Chris Varty and John Clements, and this meant that I got a good share of the duties known as 'labouring'. This was where, because of a shortage of true labourers, cleaners were given alternative tasks to engine cleaning; such as clearing ash-pits; emptying the accumulated ash of several days toil from locomotive smoke-boxes; loading ash into wagons; general sweeping up; coaling engines or even just carrying messages.

These, or any of the dozen and one other things that needed doing by unskilled men were classed as labouring. And the beauty of it was that it attracted a higher rate of pay. Labouring could be, and very often was, a far dirtier job than engine cleaning, but one spell of labouring that I was given, was labouring at its absolute best!

Situated a couple of miles from Watford Junction, on the road to Hemel Hempstead, was the British Railways Management Training Centre, which was housed in a sumptuous mansion set in rolling countryside. It had been built around 1755 as the ancestral home of the Earl of Clarendon and was known as The Grove.

During the Second World War, The Grove had been used as the Control Headquarters of the London Midland & Scottish Railway, an ironic twist of fate, as it had been an Earl of Clarendon who had opposed the building of the London & Birmingham Railway across his land, thus leading to the railway's course through Watford Tunnels and then over the sweeping embankment leading to Bushey Arches.

As part of its role as a Management Training Centre, it investigated Work Study theories and practices. Apparently, The Grove was about to undergo some alteration and renovation and in order to allow this to happen, the people that ran it wanted some tidying up done - presumably on the cheap. How the Motive Power Department got involved I don't know, but can only surmise that perhaps Mr Spencer 'knew someone' on his travels to work!

However, one Friday he advised the four most senior cleaners (Chris Varty, John Clements, myself, and Barry Clements), that we would be off to The Grove the following week to lend a hand; and it would be at labouring rate. As it turned out we didn't all go together but as two separate teams over two weeks; myself and Chris going the first week, with John and Barry (who, although they shared the same surname, weren't to my knowledge related) going the second.

On our first day, although we could have caught a bus from near the station entrance, we walked the half-mile or so from the engine sheds and caught it at Watford Town Hall. On arrival at the bus stop outside the main gate of The Grove we then had to walk along the curving driveway to the main building.

Along the way, in the distance, we could see a small bridge which, we discovered, crossed the Grand Union Canal. The bridge was so narrow it was only wide enough to take single line traffic and to control this there was a set of traffic lights installed. I can clearly remember walking towards the bridge and watching the lights go through their sequence of red; red, amber; green; amber and back to red again, several times without a single vehicle passing in either direction.

Hard 'work'

Arriving at the front door we were quickly shown the way to the tradesmen's entrance at the back, where there were a number of wooden huts. A man with his jacket off and sleeves rolled up, poked his head out of a door and beckoned us over. Establishing that these two scruffy urchins in greasy overalls were who he thought we were, he took us to a hut, pointed to a pile of cardboard boxes, told us to take them all from where they were, to another hut and report back to him when we'd finished.

We never got to know this amiable person's name, but Chris and I nicknamed him 'Perfume Pete' on account of the strong smell of his after shave, which definitely wasn't the Old Spice that other men wore - if they wore any at all; sweet smelling men were a rarity in those days! In all honesty, I don't think we served any real purpose that week. Oh, yes we'd move the odd box, play train drivers with some four wheel hand carts that we found, and have wonderful fun rolling boxes along a demonstration conveyor track system, but work - oh, no; nothing like that.

And, halfway through a busy morning, wouldn't you know it, we had to stop for elevenses and, none of this make it yourself malarkey that we were used to back at the shed, oh no! Elevenses were taken in the kitchen, deep in the bowels of this palatial building; and to get there we passed along luxurious corridors.

On the first day I inadvertently opened a wrong door and came across some workmen renovating the most beautifully decorated study, complete with ornately finished ceiling, painted with cherubs and angels.

In the kitchen we were shown to the 'staff quarters' and were quickly taken under the wing of a man who told us he was a Southern Region dining car attendant on a training course, but who, even though he had his uniform to prove it, was such a character, you could only half believe if he was telling the truth or not. He told us that the head cook's name was Fanny Fanackerpan, "But don't let her hear you call her that, and if she does hear you, don't let on that I told you" he warned. I think it fair to assume that that was not her name and although she was a bit of an ogress, she looked after us marvellously, with coffee and biscuits at eleven, lunch at one, then more coffee around three.

After this there was just time to do a little 'work' before making our way back to the shed in the staff van, which also became our mode of transport to the place for the rest of the week. Arriving back at the shed each evening after this heavy toil, there was just time for a nice warm in front of the cabin fire, before wearily making my way to platform eight for the 4.52pm train home!

Having that 'nice warm' was needed; there was by now a distinctive nip in the air and as the days got shorter and the evenings got colder, the winter that was about to break was to be one of the most severest ever recorded. It would throw the country into chaos, disrupting all walks of life and all forms of transport, including the railways.

Inclement Weather

'During fog and falling snow, off to the signalman you must go,
When you get there you must sign, his register: remind him that you're on his line.
Witness that he does his bit, a collar on the lever, see him fit.
Satisfied his task is done, walk back to the engine, best not run.
The bobby must not clear the arm, 'til he's sure you're safe back in the warm!'

With a little poetic licence, this is based on a rhyme I once heard, (but cannot fully remember), during the first snowfall that I experienced in my railway career.

It refers to the rule book requirement stating that the fireman of a detained train or locomotive must go to the signalbox and remind the signalman of the train's presence, especially where there are no other arrangements, such as track circuiting or a signal-post telephone, in force.

In clear weather, one was able to wait two minutes before carrying out this duty, but in conditions of bad visibility, the requirement was immediate.

On arrival at the 'box the fireman had to make an entry in the Train Register to the effect of 'Rule 55, Up Slow, Signed, Time' and ask the 'bobby' to countersign. If the train was to be detained for any amount of time, the fireman had to ensure that the signalman made the operation of any signal that would allow another train to enter the same section of line on which his own train was standing, impossible.

This was usually achieved by the signalman placing a wooden or metal 'collar' over the lever concerned, thus rendering it unmoveable by obstructing the release handle. The fireman was then allowed to return to his engine, the signalman allowing him sufficient time to do so before lowering any signal which subsequently became free. (The term 'lowered' was used regardless of whether the signal went up or down to show clear).

Although the diesel age was very much a reality by now, there were a large number of steam locomotives still active, reliant on, among other things, water. Part of the preparation duties that a driver carried out before taking the locomotive off shed was to ensure that the water tanks were full. Once out on the road the tanks could be replenished, either from troughs placed between the tracks at certain locations,

or from the (once familiar) cast iron water columns with leather 'bags', seen in locomotive yards or the platform-ends of important stations.

Of course, in freezing conditions some means had to be used to limit the occurrence of the water in the columns turning to ice and this was done by the provision of strategically-placed braziers, usually referred to as 'frost-fires' or 'frost-devils' which, even if they were placed on station platforms were the responsibility of the Motive Power Department.

The job of maintaining these generally fell to the cleaners - certainly this was the case at Watford. Frost fires were also lit inside the shed, although these were generally looked after by the fitters. Watford Junction had 12 platforms in the early sixties, seven of which had water columns, with frost fires all under the jurisdiction of the Locomotive Department.

In order to maintain a supply of coal at the fires, three or four cleaners would be instructed to obtain a four-wheeled parcels barrow and take it to platform 12 and load on as much coal as they could, from a wagon which was specially provided for the purpose.

This done, distribution began, starting with the column on platform 12, following which (in ideal conditions), it was a simple matter of taking the barrow over the barrow crossing to the column at the south end of platform eleven and replenishing the coal heap there. These conditions, though, were far from ideal, which meant that the barrow could not, without impossibly mammoth effort, be pulled up the platform ramp, so it had to be lugged along the platform and put into the lift and taken down, then along the subway and back up in the lift serving platforms 9, 10 and 11.

The lifts at Watford Junction were from another age entirely, and driven not electrically, but hydraulically, with water supplied under pressure from the Loco Shed pumping house. The Health & Safety people today would have an apoplectic fit if they were to come across them. Looking back I suppose they were dangerous, but as was so often the case in those more innocent days the danger wasn't so apparent.

What danger there was, lay in their construction and mode of operation. For a start, the riding platform was just that, an open platform with nothing between the rider and the brick and concrete walls of the lift shaft. In order to bring the lift to the required level (if it wasn't already there) the operator had to reach into the shaft and grab a handle and give it yank, then, with a strange slow 'who-o-o-o-o-o-shing' sound the lift would move up or down, as the case may be.

Frank Jolley, would often accompany us on our coaling sorties and he always gave the call "beeeelow" before summoning the lift. This was a warning to anybody about to operate the lift from the other end, and the call was always "beeeelow'" regardless of whether the lift would be going up or down' Eventually time caught up with these dinosaurs and they were replaced by electric lifts in about 1965.

The weather went from bad to worse during that infamous 1962/63 winter, so much so that an army unit was drafted in to assist with such things as unblocking points fouled by snow, unloading parcels trains and even taking on responsibility for the frost fires. Cleaning engines was not pleasant in cold weather and there was nothing better than to be able to put frozen hands into a bucket of V or X cleaner that had been gently warmed on a nicely glowing frost fire. But, one had to be careful not to leave the bucket on for too long or the whole lot would go up in flames!

To assist with clearing points a steam engine would occasionally be drafted in, with a steam lance attached to a special connection near its smokebox and the snow would be blasted away, only for the water produced by the steam to promptly freeze up again! There were even cases of locomotives themselves freezing up. One morning during the 'big freeze', as the period became known, I was travelling to work with a colleague, fireman Ray Taylor, and the train that we were on made its usual stop at Kings Langley.

With station duties completed, the guard, in whose van we were riding, waved his flag for the driver to re-start the train - but nothing happened. The guard reluctantly began trudging along the platform to investigate the hold-up and from our relatively cosy vantage point we could see arms waving and pointing in anguished gestures, following which the guard returned to his van.

"Bloody injectors frozen up," he said, "they're going to have to chuck the fire out." This was a serious matter, as, with the injectors frozen, there was no means of transferring water from the locomotive's tender to its boiler. In extreme cases this could lead to the boiler exploding, but steam locomotive boilers' incorporate a safety feature to prevent such catastrophe. Threaded into the top of

the firebox were two metal fusible plugs, looking rather like large bolts, the cores of which were drilled out and filled with lead.

As long as there was enough water in the boiler to cover the top of the firebox (and therefore the plugs), all would be well. If, however the water dropped to such a level that the plugs were uncovered, the lead would melt (or 'fuse') and release a torrent of steam and water onto the fire and dampen it down. This in itself could present a considerable hazard to the footplate crew, as the sudden cooling of the fire was a potential for the flames to seek air from another source, the most obvious being the cab, leading to the phenomenon known as 'blow-back' in which the footplate effectively becomes the firebox and combustion then ensues.

Although this hadn't happened on this occasion, once the plugs had gone, or were likely to, there was no further action to take but to physically remove the fire from the box by the use of a fire-iron, in the shape of a long-handled shovel, some 12 or more feet long and which was part of every locomotives' equipment.

There were four such fire irons carried as standard equipment; the long handled 'clinker shovel' just mentioned, plus a 'pricker' and a 'dart', both of which were used for breaking up a firebed which had become fused with clinker and thus restricted the flow of air. There was also a 'rake', which had no 'teeth' but was more like the type of thing a croupier might use to pull in the chips at a roulette table; much bigger, of course.

'Dropping a plug' was normally associated with poor enginemanship, though there were occasions, as was the case here, when it just could not be avoided. An anxious passenger, no doubt frustrated by the delay, had overheard the guard's remarks and suggested that the crew might try thawing the injector out by putting a lighted match under it, which would have about the same effect as trying to melt an iceberg with a blowtorch!

As the station staff instructed all passengers to detrain and make their way to another platform and await the next arrival, Ray and I saw the hapless crew shovelling out the fire. Later during the day the unfortunate locomotive arrived on Watford shed, having been towed in 'dead' from Kings Langley by another engine.

Coppenhall Junction

The foul weather had also been a contributory factor in an horrific collision in falling snow, at Coppenhall Junction, near Crewe, on Boxing Day. Because of the effects of iced-up points, trains were backing up until, late in the afternoon and compounded by a signal-post telephone failure, the 1.30pm 'Mid-Day Scot' from Glasgow ran into the back of the 4.45pm Liverpool-Birmingham train which was just about to move away from a signal stop.

The impact of the collision caused the rearmost coach of the Liverpool train to ride up over the next vehicle, taking the lives of 18 people. Regrettably the cause was attributed to the driver of the 'Mid-Day Scot' not proceeding at a low enough speed, after having first stopped at and then passing, the previous signal at danger, albeit partly, but not fully, in accordance with the rules prevailing at the time.

The winter snows of 1963 hung on until, according to the records, the night of March 5/6 became the first frost-free night in Britain since December 22 the previous year.
But, as the skies brightened that March, another cloud was beginning to form on the horizon

……Continued in **Part Five**

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