The Race To Watford Junction

David Lloyd

recalls the satisfaction of
taking on a crack express with
a semi-fast commuter train – and
occasionally winning.

After completing 12 months as a cleaner at Watford Junction I was interviewed to go forward to the firing school located at Willesden. It had been an interesting but often dirty time cleaning engines although to be fair the Watford engines were kept in good condition.

The allocation of engines at the time were mainly made up of BR Standard 4T numbering 10. 80034-38 80064-8. The only one reputed to be a bad one was 80064 now preserved at the Bluebell Railway. Other engines at the time were 40672 a 4-4-0 midland 2P, 44443, 44440, 44442, 44348 & 44363 all Midland 4F known locally as "plus fours."

42464, 42317, 42301,41220,41223, 41224, 40010 & 40020 came and went during this time the smaller engines being used on the push and pull services on the Watford Junction-St Albans and Harrow and Wealdstone-Stanmore branches. Various other larger engines could be anything from a Super "D" Black Five, 8f, 9f or Austerity were on shed overnight having either worked freight to the goods yard or were used for empty coal wagons back north. One always made its way to Willesden in the day time shunting at Bushey and Oxhey and Harrow and Wealdstone en route.

40672 was permanently allocated to the Permanent Way shops which were located beside the up slow between Watford Junction and the Watford tunnel. The most senior driver was allocated to this days only position his name at that time was Charlie Herring and heaven help anyone who tried to be funny about his name with fish jokes.

Life could be quite hard as a cleaner especially if you upset Bill "Stingem" Heath the shed foreman. His nickname strictly used outside of his hearing was due to his ability to slap one of your ears if you were cheeky or gave him backchat. He also had a mellow side and rewarded you if you did well. He would often ask us to coal an engine in the mornings. This was achieved all by hand with the coal wagons raised above the level of the bunker or tender. The work was hard especially when starting a new wagon. The soft welsh coal was mostly large lumps and took the skin off your hands if you did not pay attention.

The worst job was clearing the ash from the ash pit. It was all done by hand. The ashes were sometimes over 2 feet deep and had to be cooled with a hose pipe. You then shovelled them onto the side of the track and after a few shovels hit hot ash again and watered down again and continually repeated the process over and over again until the ash pit was clean. The shed turners would then shunt some empty wagons alongside the ash and you would begin shovelling the ash into the wagons. This was not too bad with the wagon door open but when you reached the stage where the ash began falling back out you closed the door and had to shovel up over the side to fill the wagon. This meant you had to throw the shovel of ash some 8 feet in the air into the wagon. The dust was choking and even the slightest breeze covered you in dust. However, when "Stingem" asked you to do it you complied as this meant you were sent home at lunch time with a full day's pay.

Some real characters at Watford were Bill Sales and his assistant Frank Jolley. They were responsible for washing out and building new brick arches. If you showed an interest Bill would take you under his wing and teach you washing out and sit in the firebox for long periods of time watching you build a brick arch. He never used your name to him everyone was just "matey." George Beadle

the workshop foreman was rather a grumpy man but again he would go to great lengths to explain minor repairs and how various parts of an engine worked.

Finally I mention Fred Quick. He was the storekeeper/booking on clerk. Fred had a bad stutter and would often take considerable time telling you something but, he had a bad temper at times but could also be the nicest most helpful person. When you booked out tools or clothes you would think they were his personal items but they were always complete and the detonators always in date.

Most of the work was either on local passenger trains between Euston and Tring or freight trips to Hemel Hempstead, the Tring duty shunting Kings Langley and Berkhampsted en route, and the Rickmansworth and Croxley branches. Quite a few P/W jobs came our way either on the main line on Sundays or the electric lines to Euston at night. We also had the goods yard shunted by "Jinties" the numbers I do not recall.

Having attended the firing school at Willesden under the supervision of firing Inspector Jack Smith and it being April when the annual leave was just starting I found myself allocated to many freight duties and enjoyed learning from drivers in the Rugby link such as Nib Daniels, Bob Jackson, Dobbie Loveday, Ollie Holmes and many others.

The Steam and Electric link covered mainly local passenger work with some drivers qualified for the electric service to Euston and Broad Street. Passed Fireman would then be allocated to cover the position of the driver and often a passed cleaner would find himself working with a passed fireman. This leads me to the race to Watford.

Probably the most prestigious of the local services was the 16.56 from Euston to Tring. It was a semi fast local stopping at Watford Junction, Hemel Hempstead, Berkhampsted and Tring. It was a very popular train with the commuters and was always heavily loaded.

By coincidence the "Red Rose" express to Liverpool left Euston at 16.55 and this is where the race came in.

The duty for the 16.56 booked on at 11.01 and we travelled passenger to Euston. My driver was passed fireman Peter Willis who was a gently spoken man with a good sense of humour. En route to Euston Peter asked me what experience I had on passenger services. I told him I had worked the 20.00 Euston-Tring the 17.22 Broad Street- Tring and the 07.31 and 09.50 from Tring to Euston and the 07.51 Tring to Broad Street.

He explained that many senior managers went home on the 16.56 and it was not only necessary to run on time but also not allow the tanks to overflow at Bushey troughs. As we approached Euston Peter told me to look out on the right side for 80068 he would check the left side. I asked him why 80068 and he explained he had checked the engine board and had seen this engine had been allocated to the 09.50 from Tring and it would be there engine for later.

Peter saw 80068 in the up siding shunting neck and when we left the electric on platform 7 we walked across to platform 1 then made our way to the up shunting neck on the rather difficult to traverse foot path.

We relieved the early crew and I checked the fire, boiler and water tank levels whilst Peter looked round the engine. As with most Watford engines it was clean, the footplate had been washed down and we were in good shape. The engine for this duty was usually the most recent that had been for a heavy overhaul and this was the case with 80068. I knew that we may be called upon at any time to perform a shunt but usually if you were in the up siding shunting neck you were not much use as to take empty stock to the down carriage shed meant traversing across all the line into the station which could only be done by going into and out of the station. During the shunt Euston came to a standstill.

A can of tea and our sandwiches were taken at 15.00 and the engine just simmered in the sunshine. At the side of the shunt neck was a high wall and the whole area was a sun trap. Water was available to enable us to fill the tanks before we were due to drop onto our train in Euston.

At 16.00 Peter suggested we made the fire up. After opening the bunker doors and allowing a large quantity of coal to spill onto the footplate, Peter got to work breaking the large lumps with the coal pick into pieces the size of your fist. He gave me instructions how to build the fire up starting with the front corners, then across the front and finally down the sides. He said to leave the middle and back corners for another 20 minutes to enable the front to begin burning through.

It was necessary to allow sufficient time for soft coal to burn through and this could take 30 to 40 minutes depending on the use of the blower and dampers. Peter asked me if I had watched the empty carriages before run down from the up siding shed into the platform. I was amazed to see two shunters pulling the brake release valves to enable the brakes to release. One then when to the front guards compartment the other to the rear compartment. They then slowly released the handbrakes until the carriages began to move. Bearing in mind the 1/75 gradient they soon moved and gathered speed.

They would then use the handbrakes to control the speed and bring the carriages to a stop on the buffers. Apparently the shunters had never allowed the carriages to hit the buffers they were so experienced and confident in their work.

At 16.30 Peter watched me make up the back end and middle of the fire and told me to fully open the rear damper and open the front damper just a little. Peter then set the blower enough to draw the fire and almost closed the firebox doors.

The shunt signal cleared and we moved forward beyond the points that protected the shunt neck after filling the tanks. The outlet shunt signal cleared and we were signalled onto platform 8 in the station where a shunter coupled us to 9 non corridor carriages weighing some 290tons. The guard asked Peter for his name then went to the rear of the train to carry out a brake test.

It was now 16.45 and the fire was beginning to burn through and Peter wanted the boiler filled to 1 inch from the top of the glass, any higher and 80068 could prime on the Camden bank and cause a loss of power and speed.

At 16.50 Peter said to close the firebox doors and he put the blower on to full to draw the fire. The boiler was filled 1 inch from the top of the glass and steam pressure rose to 210psi and 21inches showed on the vacuum gauge. Peter said the steam pressure was sufficient as the draw of the fire on the bank would raise the pressure as the fire burnt through.

Commuters were running up the platform to find compartments with seats as the whistles on the platform began to sound. The coloured light starting signal was green with the letter “S” illuminated in the box. The guards waved his green flag Peter gave a short whistle in acknowledgement released the steam brake and opened the regulator.

80068 with the cylinder cocks open began to move forward towards Watford Junction 17 miles away with a running time of 26 minutes. Peter closed the cylinder cocks and opened the regulator further and the engine began to move forward gradually picking up speed. As we cleared the platform the engine on the “Red Rose” was just going under the road bridge ahead. As we cleared the road bridge 80068 was really digging her heels in and Peter set the cut off to 50% and opened the regulator to second valve.

Within a hundred yards we were level with 46208 “Princess Helena Victoria” a maroon Princess Class. As we passed the fireman gave us a wave and the race to Watford Junction was on. Despite 46208 being a class 8 engine she had 550tons behind her and would take time to build up speed. As we topped the Camden back the “Red Rose” was well behind us the noise from the exhaust echoing off the tall buildings at the trackside.

We went round the left hand bend with the injector on passed Camden MPD and then plunged down and under the up fast line. The DC electric track went off to the left and we climbed up and into the Primrose Hill tunnel. Speed quickly rose to 60mph as we passed Kensal Green and as we approached Willesden Junction Peter shut the regulator I put both injectors on. Peter checked the

speed down to 50mph for the bend through Willesden Junction platforms. Looking back there was no sign of the “Red Rose.”

The engine was steaming well and the fire was white hot. I checked with Peter as to when to start firing but he said the fire would last until we approached Watford Junction. As we cleared Willesden I closed both injectors and Peter set the cut off at 30% with the regulator fully open. 80068 accelerated to 62mph and Peter adjusted the cut off to 20%.

After we had cleared Wembley Central I put the injector on and left it on with steam pressure hovering on the red mark. It was a case of keeping the steam pressure below the red mark and by opening the firebox doors to create more draft it prevented the safety valves from lifting. Harrow and Wealdstone was passed and looking back the “Red Rose” could be seen coming up fast.

Peter had said put both injectors on approaching Bushey troughs and leave them on until we stopped at Watford Junction. As we passed Carpenders Park the “Red Rose” was slowly passing us. At the troughs we were level and the fireman and I appeared to lower the scoop together. As soon as water began to cascade from the tank cover I lifted the scoop and checked the water level which was showing half a glass, steam pressure was down to 200psi and the fire was so white it was painful to look into the firebox.

Passing Bushey Peter shut the regulator and set the cut off to fully forward and our train began to slow. The “Red Rose” now began to pull ahead and we were soon looking at the passengers seated in the train many of whom just stared. Others smiled some even waved. As Peter began to brake for our first stop the “Red Rose” was past and all we could see was the red hand lamp on the rear of the train. Our race to Watford was lost today as to win you needed to be stationary in platform 8 before being passed.

Checking the fire I was surprised to see what good shape it was in. A few shovels of coal placed around the fire box and the back corners once again filled was sufficient and I left the injectors on until we received the right away from the guard. Injectors off, steam pressure 220psi, boiler full we were ready for the fast run to Hemel Hempstead.

As we came out of the Watford tunnel before I could get the injector on the safety valves lifted which to me was a demerit mark as it was such a waste of water, coal and effort. But we were back to 55mph and still accelerating ahead the Kings Langley distant signal was clear. The next station to pass through was Apsley which did not have a signal box or signals. At Hemel Hempstead the train seemed to almost empty out and the rest of the journey to Tring stopping at Berkhampsted soon passed.

After de-training the remaining passengers we propelled the carriages back into the middle sidings uncoupled and waited for the outlet shunt back into the platform. When it cleared we moved into the down platform and then light engine back to Watford MPD.

The following day the race was a non-event against 46207 “Princess Arthur of Connaught” as we were checked by signals approaching Willesden Junction and the “Red Rose” passed us at Brent Junction and then showed a tail light gradually disappearing in the distance.

Wednesday saw us fair better against 46208 “Princess Helena Victoria” as leaving Euston I looked across towards platform 15 and the train was still in the platform. We arrived at Watford Junction first and the “Red Rose” passed us at Kings Langley with the fireman shaking his fist at us. I had been told that Camden and Liverpool crews loved the race and enjoyed it as much as we did.

On Thursday the “Red Rose” was hauled by 46240 “City of Coventry” which was unusual as the engine allocation was normally a Princess class.

We were well ahead at the top of Camden bank and won the race easily to Watford with the “Red Rose” passing us as we left the platform.

Friday the “Red Rose” was once again hauled by 46208 with the same fireman watching us as we passed them half way up Camden bank. The Liverpool crew had obviously got fed up with us and

soon caught up at Wembley. Peter called out and asked if we were in good shape and when I gave him the thumbs up let the cut off out and 80068 surged forward and began to overtake the 46208.

We held our own until Bushey when Peter shut off and the "Red Rose" went past quite easily. I was surprised at Tring when Peter invited me to drive the engine back to Watford. I guess I did reasonably well as a few weeks later we worked the 20.00 Euston-Tring where we ran round the train and worked the 21.40 Tring-Watford Junction. Peter went off to see his mother who lived in a cottage on the down fast side. I made up the fire and when Peter returned he told me to take the train to Watford.

When the signal cleared for the up fast I was a little worried and in good cause as I overrun Berkhampsted by one carriage and stopped adjacent to the signal box which was situated between the up fast and down slow. The signalman came out onto the top of the stairs and said "I see you have a boy driver Peter." As we left Berkhampsted Peter gave a pull on the whistle and came over to the driver's side to wave to a lady standing in the doorway of a row of cottages. Peter explained it was his wife and that was where he lived.

I worked the 16.56 several times and the race was always the highlight of the duty. I was then promoted to Willesden as a fireman and thought my 16.56 days were gone forever, but I was wrong. In the summer of 1959 the diagrams were changed and the 16.56 was allocated to Willesden for the Euston-Watford journey with relief at Watford by a Watford crew.

This then was very different as the Watford engine came on shed at Willesden in the late morning was coaled and had the fire cleaned and prepared later by a Willesden crew and ran light engine to Euston for the 16.56. It came on shed with an almost empty bunker as it had worked the overnight staff train and the 08.12 Watford-Euston before taking empty stock to Stonebridge carriage sidings.

For some reason Willesden men did not like the Standard 4MT and on the first week of the diagram change a fireman asked me to change duties with him. I agreed as it was a late duty with extra pay after 18.00. What a difference Willesden coal was. Sometimes it was very good other time indifferent and often quite poor. To ensure a good fire for leaving Euston I used to fill up the back of the firebox and about 10 minutes before departure push the fire over with a fire iron fill up the back corners and inside the door. The best Watford engine was still allocated to this duty and on this occasion was 80066 fresh from overhaul.

The race to Watford was now not so enjoyable as by the time we passed Willesden I had to fire to maintain water and steam. Oh for some soft Watford coal again. Later that year the Standards were all transferred to the SR and an allocation of Fairburn tanks numbers 42077 to 42082 replaced them. Willesden firemen were happy firing these engines and the 16.56 was lost to me forever.

I cannot complain as over a period on 15 weeks I worked the 16.56 for 12 weeks being invited to change over every week. The three weeks I missed was because of two as annual leave and one due to the fireman working his own duty. But financially it was amazing as with a Saturday rest day and a 15.00 book on I worked many Sundays on one occasion 7 in a row.

I must say that the BR Standards were very capable and free steaming engines with comfortable cabs being built with the engineman in mind.

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