
LNER station at Wotton (part 1)

The hazy memories of a Temporary Lad Porter, 1943 to 1945.

I joined The London and North Eastern Railway Company Ltd at Wotton Station, Bucks in September 1943, at the tender age of fourteen years.

To be employed in such an exalted post you had to attend a Medical Board in London; Hamilton House, I seem to remember, although where it was actually I can't. However, I do remember queuing for a long time to get into the Gold and Silversmiths' Hall to see the sword that was eventually presented to King George the Sixth by the people of Stalingrad.

The staff consisted of:

Station Master - James Rice

Signalman - Gilbert Adams

Porter - Joe Wilkins

Porter Signalman - Don Ayres

Porter Signalman - Johnny Knibbs

Lad Porter - Bob Cherry

Platelayers:

Ganger - Fred Dormer

Deputy - Spen Kirby

- Ron Tipping

- Graham Russell

- Fred King

Wotton station was situated between Ashendon Junction and Akeman Street station on the Neasdon to Woodford section of the L.N.E/R/ Great central Railway. It was built on a steep bank, the platform being some fifteen feet above the office block and entrance. There was a steep gravel path which turned to sleepers some twenty feet or so from the top.

The rail gradient was also quite steep although I don't remember the actual figure involved.

The office block, a single storey building, consisted of a booking office, two waiting rooms – one general and a separate one for ladies – toilets and a porters' room. At the end of the block was a suitable sized coal bunker (it must have held two tons at least). Coal was never in short supply. At the end was a small, windowless archive room.

There were two platforms constructed of sleepers, each with a wooden waiting room, the one on the downside then being used as a „lockup“ for the more valuable items that passed through. As there was a large overhanging canopy over each this didn't cause any problems plus, of course, the fact that we would leave any passengers safely ensconced in the lower waiting rooms until the last minute. These platforms were joined by a level crossing also made of sleepers. This meant quite a long walk to get up to the platform.

To complete the picture there was a goods yard with a cattle dock, a loading gauge, a weigh bridge and stationery, hand-operated crane.

The office

This was not too different to offices anywhere, and contained a steel safe, a ticket machine, fitted desks or benches with drawers round two sides, and a letter press.

A quite large fireplace, with a fire to match on cold days, a few chairs and stools completed the furnishings.

There was an internal telephone in the office also being operated from the signal box as a bell; three rings to call the porters up to the platform, for instance, when the "pickup" was imminent, or some other train was due. One ring would call the signalman, with two for the office. I dreaded these, and the reason for this will become clear later on.

In the general waiting room there was a G.P.O. phone which was of the coin in the slot variety; this was used mostly by members of the public or for incoming calls as there was not really much outside contact necessary apart from the box of fish mentioned later. This room had a series of hard wooden benches round the walls and, fortunately for me, no fireplace to keep stoked up or clean. There was a chocolate machine in the middle of the floor. Unfortunately, it was always empty and later removed. The office and this room were, of course, connected by a ticket window. The ladies' waiting room did have a fireplace but for economy reasons it was never lit in my time; this room also had those same seats.

The porters' room had a table with chairs, a bench with a storage compartment underneath, and a kind of kitchen range with an oven. This, by a strange coincidence, was mostly kept well stoked up. This room was probably large enough to have accommodated most of the station staff on the complete section of the line between Woodford and Neasden. These rooms all had parquet floors and so had to be scrubbed regularly. Windows also didn't have to be missed otherwise there were sudden repercussions.

The up waiting room also had wooden floors but mostly only required sweeping out and the windows cleaned as it was very little used, the only stopping trains on that side being the evening ones from Brackley, one each day only. The down one was nearly always too full of goods to be cleaned. At least, that was my excuse.

Now to the Administration

I seem to remember this aspect of the railwayman's life as being simple though, whether I believed that to be the case at the time, is open to question. Certainly, compared to modern ideas, it was. It also appeared to be quite efficient, the files being stuck on "spikes" and retained in the office until the end of the year when they were relegated to that archive room at the end of the office block. Probably all the paperwork ever generated at Wotton since the station opened in 1912 ? was housed in that one small room.

One thing that used to fascinate me was that the daily cash bag containing the "float" could be, and was, hidden in the ticket stamping machine which was fastened to the desk in front of the ticket window, a most unlikely place to look; not that it would have contained much cash, should someone have been so bold as to have looked.

The stationmaster took control of the money, and I have never seen his equal at counting and sorting cash. There were more coins in use, and more denominations, in those days but his speed for that action was only equalled by his speed with the pen; very precise and organised.

The permanent records were kept in large ledgers which required the use of the letterpress, a device with which I had little experience. All I had to do was keep it clean by rubbing the platens vigorously with emery cloth, greasing the screwthread; and dusting it off daily.

I understand that the operation of it went roughly as follows. First the information was handwritten onto paper with ink in the normal way. This was then damped with water. The empty page of the ledger, and this sheet, were then mounted into the press between the platens. The quite large screw was now tightened down and left. After the required time it would be loosened, the pages dried, and normally a fair image (true copy) would have been transferred to the ledger.

My main part in all of this was to ensure that the outgoing trucks had cards made out and attached. by a metal spring clip on the chassis, showing the destination and main marshalling points; something like – R. A. F. Chilmark via Neasden - would be typical. The bare basics only would be shown "No doubt to confuse the enemy", but such was the system in those days that anything sent was almost sure to arrive. I would have to collect and file the incoming cards, those "spikes" coming into use, and inform the customers of the arrival of their trucks. Here the bicycle might also come into play; any use of the outside phone for such purposes being reserved for the Stationmaster. The customer or consignee would have been previously warned of the imminent arrival, as would we, by post, our notification coming through the very efficient internal mail system. For outgoing I would normally dispatch paperwork to the consignor in the same way. The only one I remember in detail was for the army, and it was form G980, which was made up of several sheets of differing colours, each one going to a different person.

I remember that on pay-days - it couldn't have been a very great sum to collect - but someone always had to accompany the stationmaster in his car to Aylesbury to the bank. Normally his wife would go, but at other times one of us would be delegated to be escort. This would also entail a stop off at Akeman Street, and so a large part of the day would be used up in a non-productive fashion.

Each week the ganger from Akeman Street (Jim Figg from Westcott) would walk along to pick up the wages for his gang and any mail or other item for Mr Gassor who lived in the Station House there and, to all intents and purposes, ran the station. I am not quite sure what rank Mr Gassor held, but I believe it to have been station foreman. The actual stationmaster's post was held by Mr Rice. On other days I might just get sent on the bicycle if there was important mail or messages. This was a trip I always looked forward to as the railway ran very close to the airfield. I did, of course, come "under fire" from the Akeman Street gang if they were working on that section of the line which could well mean I had to "run the gauntlet" of both gangs in one day.

On one day a week I would have to go to the local Post Office to fetch the employment stamps and, on my return, make sure that all cards were brought up to date.

On the very odd occasion when I was alone in the mornings, I would have to call at the station house to collect the keys, listen to a lecture before unlocking the station. The theme of this lecture by Mr Rice was usually about how people were unable to get up at the same time each morning, completely ignoring the fact that he was still in his dressing gown, and that I almost certainly had woken him up by repeatedly ringing the doorbell.

On these rare occasions I was allowed to issue tickets, although there was usually a certain amount of foreknowledge as to who would be travelling that morning, and as to their intended destination. This meant that I could be given precise instructions before the event, which had the affect of making me appear very efficient and, what was more important, it preserved the reputation of the station in the eyes of the travelling public.

We got caught out one day, though, when one of those previously mentioned American servicemen came, and asked for a "Roundtrip" to wherever, and I didn't even understand roundtrip (return) in those days, so no chance; but it all came right in the end.

We eventually got used to Americans as they became more frequent travellers, and more of them arrived at the camp.

I would also, under the same kind of conditions, collect the tickets of those passengers coming off the train as well as any fares from those that had boarded without tickets; again these were regulars, mostly servicemen travelling from home to Westcott, who had left their departure from home to the last minute.

Mr Rice was always in charge of tickets and all administration while he was on duty; and it was quite difficult to learn from him because everything was done so quickly. Whether it was a deliberate action to keep others in the dark or whether it was his natural way I was never quite sure.

To be fair, I must say, when he did decide to teach you something he certainly knew his subject, having travelled extensively through the railway system. His day off was Thursday, and I have to admit that sometimes we made the most of it. A trip to the platelayers cabin or a few minutes early away at night could well be the outcome, although both could meet with problems as, in the former, we were out of touch with anyone calling into the office, and in the latter basically the same was the case. It was a problem to find a suitable excuse when the reckoning was called for on the following day.

Of course, what made things much easier in all aspects of life in those days, was that prices just did not fluctuate in the same way that they do today. I would think the price of tickets had remained the same for some considerable time before I joined, and would remain so for some time after I left.

In general the passenger traffic was very light indeed on weekdays in particular. There was an early passenger train which came down from Marylebone Monday to Friday, arriving at 0805 which departed at 0825, arriving back at Marylebone at 1010.

Not many passengers normally came; a few servicemen who lived locally and had overnight passes from Westcott. The music master from the Blind School at Dorton House was a very regular traveller, but it could hardly have been a profitable run.

However, having said that, as I have previously, there was no other way of travelling in those days to these somewhat remote parts of the county so it was of value to the local population to have this form of public transport, it being virtually the only way to get to London or anywhere else for most people. Cars not being much in evidence during those wartime days the long walk to and from the station would be taken as being part of everyday life, and the fares in those days were reasonably cheap.

The Monday morning departing train would see a few visitors from Wotton House travelling back from a weekend in the country, and a few local people perhaps going to such exotic places as Haddenham or High Wycombe for the day. They would return on the evening train. One journey I well remember making, as so many others of my age group must also have done, was to face the dreaded Service Medical Board at High Wycombe although, in my case, it was 1946, long after I had left the Railway Service. Life in the Army was, in general, much more relaxed than life on the Railway

Most days the guardsvan would contain some kind of package for us and we would have something to send away; a further good reason for the railway being there.

I have previously mentioned the box of fish that came. Another regular was a "pin" of beer from Burton on Trent; no doubt of very great importance to the officers of Westcot to whom it was consigned. This was one article that found favour with me because of the ease with which it could be handled - light in weight and just sitting on a small "sacktruck"; something that otherwise didn't happen often.

On occasions we would receive a basket of racing pigeons. These would have to be released and the actual time entered onto the label. There was only one timepiece suitable for this operation and that, surprise, surprise, was the stationmaster's gold half hunter watch which left all other devices, including the radio, absolutely stone cold.

The engine for these trains was always a 4-6-2 A 5, presumably to allow it to travel both ways without being turned - a very important aspect to be considered.

The morning passenger train came in on the down platform - engine leading, of course, and, so that it could leave in the same way, it had to be uncoupled and recoupled after running round the train. In normal weather there was no problem, except that of coupling which, incidentally, was the responsibility of the station staff.

However, on very frosty mornings I was despatched to the points at the intersection of the platform and the main line to see if, in fact, the points had completely actuated, which wasn't always the case. If there was a problem then, with plenty of arm waving, the signaller would get the message and he would try again until a successful conclusion was reached. I may or may not then be invited onto the footplate for the short journey round the train although I was not really "into" trains but always appreciated the gesture and enjoyed the short trip. The points at the

other intersection were looked after by the fireman although this set could be seen quite clearly by the signalman and did not normally give trouble. The most likely cause of this points problem, I would suspect, was their close proximity to the bridge so they were not very well insulated underneath as would be the case for the other sets. The other reason for them to be monitored was that they were masked from the signalman's sight by the standing train. Therefore, he could never be sure what was actually happening and, no doubt, the low temperatures would play their part in making the actuating rods contract.

These points would be regularly and liberally dosed with oil during the bad weather to try and improve the situation but, if it helped, it certainly didn't resolve it.

On these unsupervised mornings my next job would be to load the outgoing train before doing the necessary, but somewhat dirty and frightening job for a fourteen years old, of coupling and recoupling the engine. A railway engine, even these comparatively small A 5s, are rather intimidating when you are literally underneath them, and the crew want see how far they could go in the "tricks department"

The uncoupling was, by comparison, easy as the engine was going away and the only thing to remember was to make sure that the brake and heating pipes were correctly attached to the brakevan after releasing both them and the screw coupling from the engine. The correctness of these joints could, of course, only be tested when the engine was recoupled at the other end. Sometimes the brake pipe might need further attention after the vacuum was applied.

At this other end it was a rather different story; and this was the part I was never very keen on, partly because the driver would release large quantities of steam for my benefit.

I am sure that I was never in any danger although I was not so sure at the actual time he would then have to push the engine forward to compress the coupling to permit the screw to be tightened. He would always carry out this latter operation with me standing between the buffers, and usually he would make the most of it. I can certainly recall having been in much happier places particularly on those very cold dark winter mornings, without lights, when the steam was rather slow to disperse.

He would then have to test the braking system before declaring it to be OK for use. You would carry out this operation wearing heavy gloves as the joints on the heater pipe could be very hot and the screw coupling very greasy and dirty.

On most occasions the fireman would be standing looking down from the platform or the front of the engine offering much good advice or, in other words, "stirring the pot".

I cannot remember there ever being a serious problem with any of this. I was, nevertheless, always pleased to hear that the train had arrived safely at Marylebone.

The lamps would now have to be resited. I often got the task of changing the tail lamp but the guard always took responsibility for this, and the engine crew for the front ones.

This train would, of course, depart in the "up", direction while starting from the down platform and, it would be true to say that it was travelling very slowly having just started but I was always led to believe that it contravened the rules for a loaded passenger train to travel over a crossover. Presumably, like all other rules, those of the railway system were meant to be severely bent if not actually broken.

One item that came on the morning train - papers for a local newsagent, Cook's of Brill. We would normally get the papers down to the porters' room, if there was time, and cut the wrappers off the packages ready for the people to sort them and take them off to Bicester Camp and the surrounding villages. On some days the wrappers would include the American Forces paper "Stars, and Stripes", which made for good reading at lunchtimes and, as was so often the case, the paper was torn or incomplete which made it far more "interesting", as you can imagine.

To digress, Ashendon was served by a different newsagent and he would only supply those papers he deemed suitable for those residents. I seem to recall that you could have either "The Daily Herald" or the "News Chronicle" during the week and "Reynolds News", or one other that I fail to remember, on Sundays. It could be thought that he might have been somehow politically biased. I wonder!

Back to the story -

A box of fish came every week on the early passenger train; this having to be got rid of quickly as, in those days, it was only packed in ice and soon started to remind you of its whereabouts if forgotten. That previously mentioned phone came in handy, and a call to Bicester 241 fortunately usually got a quick response.

My hours were from seven thirty a.m. to four thirty weekdays and seven thirty to twelve on Saturdays for, if I remember correctly, the princely sum of fourteen shillings and seven pence. Would it sound better converted to decimal coinage - seventy-three pence? Saturday finish usually depended on the arrival of one of the porter signalmen, who may have been at Akeman Street or just starting a new day; mostly they would start the day so were usually on time. His starting time was the difference between going to the cinema or not.

At the weekends and evenings the signalman would, on completion of his shift, set the signals and points to run on the platform line as all weekend and evening passenger trains went through to Brackley, stopping at Wotton in both directions, with just a porter on duty to cover the arrivals and departures. None of these trains would bring many people, often local servicemen and women coming home for, and travelling back to, camp after that, all too short, 48hrs.

If you had to travel through London to this area the best thing to do was to get your warrant made out to Brackley. This would allow you to travel on either the Aylesbury or the Wotton line and, what was more important, there were often more convenient trains back from Aylesbury which would give you that all too valuable extra few minutes at home.

The penalty for sending all trains platform line was that of speed restriction, probably not too much of a problem for those wartime trains, mostly goods. The signalbox could, of course, always be opened at reasonably short notice should the need arise.

The Ashendon Junction to Grendon section of the line was not restricted in the same way (apart from wartime regulations), that Aylesbury was - 60 M.P.H. on that line I seem to remember.

It was said that a Special Train was timed at approximately 90 m.p.h. before the war between those two junctions and one other train, also in a big hurry, chopped a fair size fallen tree in half, without slackening pace, at Akeman Street. Those must have been the good old days of the railways although the pace of some trains did increase after the war particularly the Saturday "Football Specials" and that part of the "Master Cutler" that used that line.

The goods handled by Wotton were, mostly, either for R.A.F Westcott or for the army at Wotton Camp; from Wotton mostly outgoing soldiers after training, some almost certainly direct to the Continent to war.

Both the R.A.F. and the army did occasionally use a special train when large numbers of men finished courses at the same time but mostly they used the normal scheduled service with, possibly, an extra carriage.

On one very cold morning I remember the incoming train having a burst heater pipe in one of the carriages which had, without doubt, done an enormous amount of damage, including breaking the glass in the picture frames. Yes! There were actually pictures in carriages in those far off days; but luckily there were no passengers in that compartment at the time.

On another day a rail on the G.W.R./G.C joint section broke due to the cold weather, at a point some eighteen inches from the fishplate. This, of course, required the whole rail to be hurriedly replaced and, surprisingly, little disruption to traffic occurred, a tribute to the platelayers of the Ashendon Junction gang. This rail would have had to be transported on their bogie to the site and be replaced by hand.

There didn't appear to be any rivalry between the G.W.R. and the L.N.E.R at working level; in fact, I recall the opposite to be the case. On one occasion I remember the "lamp man" from the joint section coming to my rescue on a particularly windy day, when I was suffering from "lamp lighting problems". I seem to recall that "Lampy", as he seemed to be known by all, but most probably "Mr Lampy" by me, was employed full time on lamp maintenance duties. At the Ashendon end of the Wotton section we shared a common signal post, but the only time we were likely to meet was on these bad weatherwise days.

The Wotton platelayers seemed to share the "fogging" duties at the Ashendon Junction distant. I remember being allowed to place a detonator on the rail at this point under the close scrutiny of Ron Tipping.

This "fogging box" had a kind of remote system for placing the detonators on the rail, apparently without the operator leaving the shelter of his "box", apart from replacing the "fired" ones with new ones at intervals as required. This device appeared to hold six or so detonators attached to arms arranged in the form of a "star", and at each pull of a lever the "star" turned one position thereby placing the next one on the rail.

The detonators for this device were different from the normal ones and had a kind of spring clip which fastened tightly to the arms of the aforementioned "star", unlike the others which had two lead clips, these clips just being pressed (moulded by hand), to fit the rail section. I never actually saw this device in action, so it could have been for experimental use only. However, this was on the G.W.R section of the line so could well have been in regular use elsewhere.

It didn't half clear the mind if you were daydreaming, and failed to notice a nearby detonator before it exploded, as the noise is considerable.

Normally, of course, you would see the man in the fogging box but when they, or any lookout, finished it was the practise to leave the last detonator on the line. This was when you could get badly caught out as they could have been working anywhere along their length.

Another area of this "good relations", was that of receiving coded telegrams, particularly on Saturday mornings when I would often be alone on the station. The internal phone would ring (two rings) for the office, and a voice would announce that "This is Telegrams. I have a message for you", or words to that effect. This was the sign for me to go into a "blind panic" as the actual wording of the message made little if any sense to anyone. These telephone calls were normally relayed through Ashendon Junction signal box and then through Wotton box but, on Saturday mornings, Wotton would often be closed so we would have direct contact with Ashendon and this is where Mr Ayris, the signaller at Ashendon, would often come to my rescue. Mr Ayris, who came from Pollicott, would intercept the message and then relay it to me afterwards, it being much easier to take these somewhat incomprehensible messages from someone you already know, who had considerable experience of these things, and probably even more experience of working the local boxes. Mr Ayris often worked Grendon and Ashendon junctions as well as Wotton and later did many years at Aylesbury. The next action was to try and find "His Nibs" to come and decipher the all-important message with the aid of a codebook, but I fear that they sometimes had to await his return from wherever.

What of these signal boxes? They were places where you really had to be on your best behaviour. The signaller was "king" of his "domain" and one would almost stand in "awe" of him. They all seemed to set a very high standard of discipline and cleanliness. I, certainly, would never have been allowed to clean the signalbox windows (that was no particular hardship I may say) and a visit to the box was only by "kind permission". However, I do remember that the signallers I worked with would always go to some trouble to show you round their particular box and might even allow you to pull a signal, not forgetting to use the cloth which they always used to prevent hands touching the bare metal levers, thereby preventing rusting of the steel parts, or tarnishing of the brass. The "bell" system I never quite came to terms with, no doubt because I was not exposed to it for sufficient time or, perhaps, I just never ever thought of becoming a signaller. The life of a signaller must

have been very lonely at times as the boxes, such as Ashendon, were very isolated; several fields had to be crossed to reach it, although there was always the phone for company.

A somewhat pointless and wasteful exercise, in my then very humble opinion, the kind of thing more suited to the Armed Forces, and something I was to learn more of some three years or so later. I also thought it to be something of waste to retain a special train for such purposes during a war. I do remember that this train was very well turned out, however, very "awe" inspiring indeed.

I will try to describe the goods side:

First the "milkdock"; literally just a gate in the up platform fence at farm cart height originally for loading and unloading milk churns - a thing of the past - and so now it was used to provide a nearly level base for heavy goods taken from the "transit van"; incidentally a very important part of the "pickup".

All stores that could be manhandled were less than a full load or were "attractive" - cigarettes and spirits being a case in point, - would be carried in the "transit van". Sometimes this would be an open sheeted truck, and there would sometimes be more than one, depending on the volume of goods on any given day.

Cigarettes would come in large wooden cases with cardboard linings direct from W.D. and H.O. Wills or John Player. These cases were made up of loose sides and ends; only being held together by twisted wires. The consignee, on receipt, would cut the wires, empty them, and re-assemble the parts which were already labelled for their return. On one occasion we received them in the return state but addressed as usual to the N.A.A.F.I. at Westcott. This brought forth the Railway Police but I don't think any conclusion was reached other than the fact that someone, somewhere must have been a heavy smoker. It was very unusual to encounter "pilfering" even in those wartime days.

One item that did cause a "load of bother" was a service revolver left in a kitbag by an aircrew officer that didn't arrive with the bag, I think I heard the name "Smith and Wesson" more times than in any cowboy film of the time.