
LNER station at Wotton (part 2)

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

From the milk dock position we did manage to drop a barrel of beer between the lorry and the "dock" on at least one occasion, when the said lorry was at a particularly bad angle. Some of the young drivers had great difficulty in getting their vehicles to the "dock", particularly the Bedford "artic". An eighteen-gallon (kilderkin) is definitely not easy to pick up from the ground and raised to lorry height. The recognised technique for picking up beer barrels was to put your heads together and push hard while, at the same time, lifting with only your fingertips gripping the edge at the end of the barrel; not the most elegant or comfortable operation as I recall. We probably cheated on these bad days and first lifted it back to platform level before transferring it to the lorry. I seem to recall that an eighteen gallon barrel weighed something over two and a half hundredweight, (2cwt, 2qtrs, and 8lbs) not too heavy when set against some of the items we dragged, rolled, or somehow persuaded to board these lorries.

On one very snowy day a convoy of Americans turned up (I think from Chalgrove) to collect coke that had previously been consigned to Westcott and now transferred to them. They, as you might expect, did things in the grand manner. First I had difficulty in understanding their word "cars" instead of trucks, the description we were used to, but having got their "trucks" alongside our "cars" the fun started.

They completely loaded their canvas covered Studebaker 6 x 6s right up to the canvas covers, regardless of weight, and then disappeared at high speed in the direction of Ashendon with the loading crew riding on the canvas tops. However, some while later, they returned having failed to negotiate the steep hill to Ashendon because of overloading and the bad road conditions, salt not being used in those days, of course.

We last saw them hurtling off towards Dorton never to be seen again or heard of again so, presumably, the hills in that direction were passable.

There would be a "hotbox" dropped off most weeks, and then a large screw-jack would appear, either on the "pickup", or dropped off by the guard of a passing goods train. A few hours or days later the man responsible for repairs would arrive from Woodford, usually jumping, complete with toolkit, from the guardsvan of a later train.

After a cup of tea in the signalbox, and passing on, and gleaning the latest news or rumours he would jack up the truck, remove the cover, and proceed to grease the offending bearing. When ready for the off the truck would be taken away by the next "pickup", and the jack would also be sent on to the latest "hotbox". On occasions these trucks were important enough for a passing goods train to be stopped to collect them.

Boxvans, and indeed many other trucks, had also to be swept out, depending, to some extent, on what was to be loaded into them. You would have to transfer

goods to the other platform ready for the train going in that direction, and sometimes we would recruit the platelayers to assist, the ramps being rather steep and the loads heavy.

This could sometimes be "bit of a nonsense" if they wanted to play you up, as could well be the case when "Porter Joe" was missing. On one occasion I clearly remember the four wheeled luggage truck, which was probably drastically overloaded, and which had a rather poor braking system, running away from us, down one of those steep ramps, only stopping after passing through a wooden fence, and burying the wheels up to the axles in the cinders.

The gang stood by, just watching, and there was much panic to put everything back as was, including repairing the fence, before the appearance of the stationmaster. The fence looked the same and survived my remaining time at Wotton, a tribute to the platelayers who actually did the repair work. We might also attempt to take this truck over the somewhat uneven level crossing only to find that we had come to a complete standstill in the middle of the tracks. This usually brought words of encouragement from the signalman in the form of "I hope you realise it, but there's a train just come through Akerman Street" or "Ashendon Junction", this depending on which line we were actually blocking. We didn't ever get completely caught out as I remember.

During the winter the platforms, the pathways and the ramps would be liberally covered with ashes from the fires to prevent people slipping under the trains. These would tread everywhere, and a thaw did little to ease the situation as, no sooner had we got that lot clear and the buildings scrubbed out, then it would freeze again, and it all started once more.

The routine for shunting was roughly as follows:

In those days, just like the farms, there were few concessions made to you regarding age or physical stature; if you were there you were considered to be man enough.

I was, at that time, about the same size and weight as a shunting pole, which I soon learned to use both for coupling and uncoupling loose shunted trucks.

The guard, who may have a (friendly) grudge against lad porters, and the driver who most certainly would want to know how fast you could run, would release as many trucks as was called for at the top end of the goods yard. Your job was to stop them before the end stop and the first truck made violent contact. You soon learned to look for a Great Western vehicle, which would most likely have a ratchet brake. Applying this would take the urgency out of the situation. Once having got that sorted, you had time to get on to the more usual type of brake which, of course, needs a pin to be inserted into a pair of holes. This could sometimes be made more difficult if the brake shoe grabbed, thereby throwing the lever violently up and down.

There was always the little matter of points. It wasn't unknown for the "comedians" to want to send down the trucks in quick succession and, so, the points had to be

set correctly or changed during the run. One very important point that had always to be kept in mind was the position of the points operating lever.

This was too close to the track to allow the shunting pole to pass while actually holding the brake lever down so you had to suspend the operation by lifting the pole over the lever at the right time. There was always the short brakestick which, of course, couldn't be used to couple or uncouple trucks, so mostly the choice of what to use was made for you. A short time before I joined Wotton Joe had moved the rail end stops with several trucks of bombs. Presumably ratchet brakes were not in evidence at the time.

A third type of brake was the wheel operated one, which required many turns of a wheel on the side of the truck; a very effective device, provided you could spin the wheel quick enough; usually placed in position by the engine rather than loose shunted. This type of brake would normally be fitted to large trucks such as "Warwells", a vehicle for transporting tanks or other large and high loads.

One other problem with this truck was that it had to be loaded over the end because the "well" in the centre did not correspond with any of the dock heights and so the "cattle dock" gained a new lease of life.

One real problem for the driver was the great variety of engines that were used on the "pickups". A "pickup" was the general goods train that stopped at all of the small stations, and the types of engines used had to be seen to be believed.

By using them for this purpose it saved running them "light" back to Neasden or Woodford, this being the section covered by the Wotton "pickup"; good for economy but not popular with all drivers. Some of these engines must have been very difficult to shunt with, as it was quite possible to have a Mogul, an American utility, or even a W.D. utility in front. The most popular, and at the same time the most useful was the J11, "Pom-Pom", an 0-6-0 tender - very powerful but compact. One other problem the big engines caused was that the drivers didn't like going too far into the goodyard with the engine because of the weight and the radius of the curves. This did make it increasingly difficult for the driver to see during loose shunting.

The way to get the trucks out of the yard was to put the train of trucks in - not very popular with me as it meant coupling up when the buffers met with a very loud bang.

Almost certainly the only way to get the three links over the other hook was by compressing the buffers. This was the part of the process that I was not too keen on, as I did not relish the idea of my poor little arm being crushed between two large railway trucks.

I have listed my pet hates but, despite them, it was this, together with the lamps, the part that I liked best. Administration was a bit boring, to say the least.

At the bottom of the yard was a hand operated crane (5 tons capacity) mounted on a railtruck fixed to a section of rails which were not connected to the system but set

close enough for the jib to reach over a truck. I think it was more as a "showpiece" than as a tool as I only remember it being used once (I do not remember what for though). That the platelayers were rounded up to do the hard part I do remember. That this machine did not find favour in that department I also remember.

It was fortunate for us all, and more so for the platelayers, that the R.A.F. at Westcott had their own crane which, incidentally, because of its height, normally had to travel over the hills through Ashendon because of the low bridge (thirteen feet, I seem to remember) at Wotton.

As a result of this, one of the Westcott cranes had some of its ballast removed which had the effect of lowering its capacity from five to three tons capacity but made it easier for it to make the somewhat difficult journey. This didn't have any adverse effect on us, as it was seldom that anything heavier than this arrived and, in the event, they retained a five tons capacity one anyway. One R.A.F. driver by the name of Bert Wainwright could not only get the cranes under the bridge but could also, with "gay abandon", put the three ton "artic" and the forty-five-foot "Queen Mary" into the goods yard, the long one having to be reversed in from the direction of Ashendon, the position of the weighbridge not helping the operation very much. Bert's method for getting the crane under the bridge was quite interesting. He would move the jib until parallel with the ground and then run in the depression on the wrong side of the road. With the occasional "clang" as the jib touched lightly on the underside of the bridge he would slowly go through, lock up the jib, and go back along the old Brill Tramway.

I must say we always heaved a sigh of relief when Bert was in charge. He would also give us a pull with the crane when trucks required moving up the yard, as often was the case with the loaded coal truck for Sid and Mr. Bates I will explain later.

One aid for moving trucks, though not much used, was a long wooden pole that had a metal end, not unlike a "Dutch hoe" in appearance. This device could be placed on the rail and, by using a levering action, propel the truck, or even trucks, slowly forward; useful to join up a series of trucks ready for the "pickup" to collect or to move them away from the "vee" end of the goods yard.

The previously mentioned "cattle dock" provided a level "roll on, roll off" surface for "flatbed" trucks and was used mostly for loading and unloading vehicles. On wheeled loads much roping would take place. This would be reinforced by nailing wooden battens and chocks to the floor of the truck. I am certain that nothing ever broke loose that was despatched from Wotton.

Animals (mostly sheep) were very occasionally received, though almost always at night, and by passenger train, of course. These would be collected by their new owner very quickly.

For Westcott the goods were many and varied, beer, spirits and cigarettes being a regular delivery.

One item I remember in particular was beef dripping packed in cardboard boxes, which would have to be moved into the shade, as did beer on hot days, of course. A

quick call to Bicester 241 usually, like for the fish, got a quick response – at least to collect the drink.

One very regular delivery was coke for the boiler house and this was moved by a man called Sid (Corbett, I think). Sid worked on piecework for a man named Levy and the firm then, as now, was called Aston Clinton Haulage, a very well known local transport firm, now much larger and under different management. However, Sid could move coke like no one would believe, but his technique was really very simple. He would first take the top of the load off the hard way, by digging into the coke and throwing it into the lorry over the top of the truck. He would drop his tailboard. and reverse tightly to the truck door then, usually with some help if it were available, drop the door onto the lorry which had the effect of releasing some of the coke into the lorry making the clearing up from the ground as little as possible. Even so, there was always plenty left on the ground. Sid used a short wheelbase Bedford tipper which enabled him to get it close to the trucks in that rather unfriendly yard.

Surely coaltrucks could never have been designed for unloading as there really was no way of lowering the door without losing a large quantity of the load onto the ground and the temporary repairs to the floors made it almost impossible to run a shovel along the floor to pick up that part of the load remaining in the truck.

A few trucks of coal arrived for Westcott. These were moved by Mr Bates from Grendon Underwood. I sometimes see their vehicles around, so they are still in business in the area. He would also take goods for the villages in his capacity as a general carrier.

One other aspect that made life harder than necessary was that the doors had to be closed again. They were quite heavy and much higher than you might expect and you had to get two wedges into slots to hold the door closed. It was certainly of benefit to be tall and strong - a one man. and his boy job for certain.

Another regular delivery was engines and bombs. All kinds of bombs were stored at airfields like Westcott, although not for their use. We would have several trucks at a time of 500 and 1000 pounders which would have to be unloaded by hand.

The usual method was by rolling the bomb off the railway truck, and hoping the lorry was close enough to catch it. Bombs were often carried in coaltrucks provided they had oilbox axles. The small doors sometimes made them very difficult to unload but the drop down doors had the advantage of forming a kind of ramp, useful because the heights of the two vehicles were quite different, and the layout of the yard not very helpful. We did manage to drop a two hundred and fifty pound incendiary. When this happened it was "all hands to the pump" to get it back to the right level, bombs being completely smooth and not having handles. As you might expect someone produced a tool and unscrewed the end, just to see what it was like.

One day we received a four thousand-pound inert bomb which did cause some concern as to how it could be offloaded. In the event we just rolled it off, in the normal manner, onto the back of the lorry, and instead of it going through the bed as expected, it merely lifted the front wheels some two foot or so off the

ground. This one was filled with silver sand. Again, someone unscrewed the end to have a look and, for sometime to come, there was a small heap of this sand in the yard to remind us.

The engines were quite acceptable to us as they were lifted by the crane and only had to be roped and sheeted - though not quite so favourite on a wet day as it was all "scramble", ladders not being much in evidence at Wotton. The unloading could sometimes get you a very "wet shirt" if you carelessly tugged the sheet off before emptying the inevitable puddle that had formed on top of the case.

I have referred to the difficulty drivers had in that yard. The reason is really simple. The two sidings were shaped in the form of a bowlegged vee (not unlike a wishbone) with the sleepers and rails standing proud of the surface, this latter aspect preventing any vehicle running close alongside because their wheels would jam in between the sleepers, but forcing them to approach in reverse.

The lorry used by the armoury for bombs was an Austin six-by-four flatbed, which was probably one of the most unmanouverable vehicles for the purpose. Add to that the fact that some of the younger drivers obviously had little experience, it made for some very interesting days.

The weighbridge was very little used in my time but was a nuisance in so far as it had to be kept clean. The weighing arm, in particular, had to be rubbed over with emery cloth regularly and kept well oiled. One good point was that, along with all the other buildings, it had a fireplace but it was never lit in my time.

At about ten each day "Wagons" (Wagon Control), based at Marylebone, would call up by phone to find out how many trucks we had that were ready, or would soon be ready, for moving out. This meant someone had to be in the office at that time, having sorted out the details the night before.

They would want to know the type of trucks available and, sometimes, "special" ones had to be labelled for specified destinations, those with oilbox axles being particularly sought after.

It was sometimes "politic" to forget to report the whereabouts of some if a need was soon to arise. They would also arrange for that "ex" hotbox to be picked up if urgent.

Sheets were also of great interest and value, being carefully dried and folded to a set pattern ready for reuse by us or sent on the "pickup" going in the right direction. Other depots would call for sheets, and they really were worth their weight in gold. Ropes also merited the star treatment, and were handled in the same way. We would also order and dispose of these items as required officially or there was a working "bush telegraph" system between Princes Risborough, Akeman Street and Haddenham to provide a quicker service. In most cases the R.A.F. would give us plenty of notice if anything out of the ordinary was on the move; for instance aero engines required two sheets to cover the wooden case. This type of valuable load would be loaded into a "wagon" with an oilbox axle. I tend to call trucks "trucks" but mostly they were known as "wagons".

The "pickup" would take away any empty trucks or would bring any special type of truck ordered by us, "flatbeds" being the most common, usually for vehicles.

There were some twelve signals, eight or so points "dollies" and about two dozen or so platform pathway and office lamps, with that all important porters' room light, to maintain.

These lamps all burned paraffin which meant that they all required more than a little looking after - particularly the signal lamps which had a tendency to go out on very windy days - or sometimes the indicators in the signal box, which were used for those lamps out of the signalman's sight, would falsely record that they had done so. These indicators were operated by an element inside the lamp chamber on the signal and heated by the lamp which, in turn, gave an indication to the signalman as to the state of any given lamp. On very cold, windy days the wind would cool the element and so the long trek to the distant signal would have to be undertaken just to make sure that the lamp was still burning brightly. Because there was no lamp to carry this might bring the bike into play. Any use of this meant that you had to carry it some distance from the station to get clear of the signal and points actuating rods and wires.

Mostly it was O.K. but, if it had gone out, then the "fun" began. Would it be best to try and light it up on the signal ladder or bring it down, light it, and then try to get it back up without it blowing out again? I can only say that my decision was mostly the wrong one and there would be several trips up and down the ladder before success was attained.

Often, on my return to the station, I would be informed that the "so and so" had gone out again - but only on the odd occasion did I have to go back for a second try. Often, over a period of time, the indicator in the box would flicker just enough to save a second trip. One other way the signalman could get a false reading was when the glass got smoked up either by the wind blowing the flame about or bad trimming of the wick by yours truly. On these occasions the crew of a passing train would slow down and call out to the signalman that a lamp was out or not showing up. Naturally it was always blamed on the first set of circumstances by me and on the latter by other interested parties. Whatever the reason, I still had to make that journey to clean the glasses, wiping with cotton waste wetted with paraffin being the remedy. On the days that we were short of staff, or we were busy in the yard, it might just be permitted to take a can of paraffin and fill those lamps close to the station on site plus just cleaning the glass.

The signal lamps themselves were simple devices made of brass and square with a window glass on each side which was very loose fitting, this being a prime factor in their penchant for going out in high winds and making life difficult for the "lamp boy", whoever he may be.

A hinged cover joined by a short chain attached to the carrying handle prevented your hands from being burned while carrying them, and this device also caused the cover to open when the handle was released, thereby exposing the heating element in the lid of the lamp chamber of the signal to the heat of the flame.

The "points dolly" lamps were round, but basically the problems, and the cures, were the same. They were very inclined to go out but did have two advantages as there was no great distance and there were no ladders involved.

Some signals had a platform, and then a second short ladder to the actual signal, and these could be very dangerous on cold, and frosty mornings. All the ladders were metal and very cold to the touch on cold days - but I only remember falling once, and then by some good luck I just managed to hold on. I didn't drop the lamp.

The only way, of course, to reach these outlying signals was to walk the sleepers - except when it was "icy", or very thick fog, and then you walked on the ash path alongside the track on which, of course, you had to be careful not to trip over the cables that operated the signals and which, periodically, crossed this path.

Although you would always walk against (towards) the oncoming trains it was, nevertheless, surprising to find how close they could get to you, particularly in fog, before you became aware of their presence.

One thing I would say about walking the sleepers and "doing", the lamps is that there can be few places more exposed to the elements than a railway track or the signals alongside them; only the occasional bridge or an upturned "fogging box", to shelter from the, all too frequent, showers of rain. Why did it always seem to rain on the days scheduled for "doing" the distant signals or, indeed, any other lamps?

The distances involved were approximately three-quarters of a mile each way to the distant signals with just one bridge each way, so it was possible to soak up a fair quantity of water on those days.

You could nearly always be sure that the "lamp boy" would get a heavy blast of steam from any slow train he had the misfortune to meet - all in good fun though - and mostly you were expecting it. It was not the "done thing" to cycle with the lamps but it was permissible to travel to Akeman Street in that way.

I once travelled to Akeman Street in the leading goods brakevan of two being pushed by an engine - not the usual way to do things - and I think it is one of the worst rides I can ever remember taking as these vans appeared to sway and yaw in a totally uncontrolled manner, but the guard didn't seem concerned as no doubt he had done it all before.

One of my favourite days was to do the "up" distant, which was very close to the western end of the Westcott runway, a first class vantage point to watch the aircraft takeoff - in good weather only, of course. From here you could see the entire takeoff run. On one very bad foggy day I was "doing" this lamp when the gamekeeper? (or was it a good day for poachers?) on the Wotton estate fired his shotgun, presumably at my sound. It was much too thick to see any distance, and the shot hit the metal signal arm while I was actually putting the lamp in the chamber. No harm was done but both Spen Kirby, who was "fogging" at the time, and myself, clearly heard it - obviously, not the best place to be on foggy days. I always considered the "fogging box" to be a glamorous place; making toast on a blazing brazier while sitting in a cosy wooden hut. But now, having had time to

consider all the facts, I can't really think of a worse place to be on a cold, wet and foggy night, totally isolated from all other human beings apart from the call to return to base, which was a repeated pulling of the distant by the signalman.

One day some oxygen and acetylene bottles arrived and, a few days later, a man with welding gear followed. He proceeded to build up the worn part of the rail intersections and, after smoothing his handiwork down, would move on to the next joint. It was some weeks before he had finished, but it must have been a far easier and cheaper method than total replacement and, no doubt, would have been as a direct result of the war.

Carpenters also paid us a visit, travelling each day on the first available goods train; so sometimes it was rather a short working day. They did all the necessary repair work before moving on to pastures new. The standard of the workmanship, in those days, was always first class, typical of all things to do with the railways. Everything was made to last.

I remember that the regular carpenter wanted to share my apple on one occasion but his interest somewhat diminished after tasting, as it was a Bramleys Seedling, something that I took most days in the spring. I must say that the look attractive.

The days of make do and mend were just beginning - no more or less on the railways than anywhere else - but it must have seemed strange to those brought up in the ways of the system to have to repair rather than replace.

A system of high-speed goods trains started to come through. I seem to remember the aim was to sustain a speed of some sixty M.P.H. between their point of departure and their destination. All trucks had to have oilbox axles and the first six had to have vacuum brakes attached to the engine. The engines were mostly Moguls - incidentally my favourite.

What other happenings might be interesting?

The gradient leading up to the starter signal on the down side was quite steep and this caused many trains to have problems in starting off from rest.

The usual way for coal trains, or those with loose couplings, was for the guard to apply his brakes. The engine would then "set back" against the guardsvan thereby allowing him to start off each truck individually. This normally worked quite well except when the guard failed to release his brakes quick enough, and a coupling would snap - a quick shunt back, recouple, and away. The last trucks on a long train, as you can imagine, would be moving quite fast by the time the couplings tightened, hence the occasional broken one, particularly if the guard had released his brake too early and the last trucks were moving backwards. This was a battle that was hard for the guards to win.

The screw coupled trains were merely pushed back with the brakes applied. This would have the effect of compressing some of the sprung buffers thereby giving him a push, and hopefully he would also be on his way. I do remember that some trains

pushed back a considerable distance, even past the home signal, before having any success though.

Odd things come back as I go along - only the points guarding the entrance to the goods yard were operated by the signalman. They also had a very short signal. Those inside the yard were operated by the shunter, and didn't have a lighted "dolly". These were replaced during my time there, when certain other alterations to the yard were made, mostly in trying to provide more room between the sidings.

One place always worth a visit was the platelayers' cabin, when the platelayers were in residence. This had to be seen to be believed. There were sleeping bodies all over the place; and a fire worthy of a power station. The overall impression was of an Aladdin's cave. There would be all the tools needed to carry out their many tasks, and all forms of "bedding" material you can imagine. No shortage of advice for a fourteen years old lad porter; though whether it was always good advice is another matter. It was very seldom acted upon if I remember correctly.

Late in the day they were usually so fast asleep that it was no problem to sneak up and snatch the door open, which would cause smoke to fill the cabin. This action never failed to raise a flow of threats and bad language totally unfit for young ears. I was never guilty of this but mostly got the blame. Playing cards was totally out of order except on days when Fred Dormer was away, so it was mostly a cross between "discussion" - more commonly known as arguing - or sleeping.

On the odd day when they wanted entertainment, Ron might demonstrate his skill at dropping a hammer onto a detonator which was hidden round the corner, and might take several attempts, but when successful would bring the sleeping residents to a state of wakefulness without doubt.

These detonators, though quite powerful, were never kept in boxes or under cover, but could be found virtually anywhere in the cabin. The tale was told of one falling off the shelf above the fireplace - I understand that all had left before it ignited in the fire.

The method of supplementing their meagre coal ration was quite interesting. It literally fell off the back of a train, with a little help from a friendly fireman, who had piled it up ready to give it a push at the right spot. Of course, this would have to happen on a day when the stationmaster was away, and it would be "spirited", away in minutes. These cabins were remarkably weather proof, virtually air tight, with just a small window, although only made of sleepers, with a brick or stone chimney, and caulked with tar, with newspapers or anything to hand, to keep the odd draught out. They had a felt roof.

When they were working on the length on lamp days I might get entertained by demonstrations of hammering in spikes with multiple hammers or some other party piece.

It was certain that I could not get by them without some abusive remarks, as there was always an invisible division between platelayers and station staff. Nevertheless,

I always look back on the "gang" with some affection. Life was never boring when they were around, and we certainly couldn't have functioned without their help.

Overall the system was very reliable even under wartime conditions; trains ran very close to scheduled times. There was the odd breakdown, of course, and the latest story/rumour regarding the American utilities blowing themselves to pieces was always in circulation.

During the summer, the spring situated in the wood on the hill (Brickwell) to Ashendon, that normally supplied the station with water, would dry up and a tender filled with water would then be stationed in the goods yard. The water was drawn from a large brass tap and had to be carried to wherever it was needed. It was like life in the village; it is very surprising how little water you actually need when it has to be carried any great distance, and if there was any in the pipes at all then that was what was used. Thinking back, the water in the tender couldn't have been very tasty after some weeks in the yard. Not that the spring version, when carried through the rusty pipes, could have been all that much better.

A firm from Princes Risborough (David Way and Sons - gone now, I fear) started to resurface the road from Ashendon blacksmith shop to the station. Each night they would finish off with a well-constructed ramp where their new Tarmac met the old. I would take note of this so that my speed could build up, only applying the brakes at the last second. In those days the surface was rolled many times, and this improvement must have given me several extra minutes in bed when, after some six weeks or so, this was finished.

What of the people?

Not many left, I am afraid, which makes it all the more difficult to check any facts, but of course it started out as my memories so I had better leave it that way. In the main not bad memories at that. If they had been I feel that there might have been less.

Joe came to the railway rather late in life, having worked in the building trade for many years, mainly for Fleet and Roberts, an Aylesbury firm, and only starting at Wotton at about the start of the war.

He had previously cycled from Pollicot to Oxford (some twenty plus miles) to carry "hods" on the various sites there.

I always considered Joe to be "Mr Wotton" - he was a man of great energy and had learned the ways of the railway in a comparatively short time.

He transferred to Aylesbury as a shunter when Wotton closed and used to cycle the twenty plus miles round trip daily.

Joe finally ended up as a shunter at Westcott, by then a Ministry Research Establishment which had a private siding with their own shunting engine, the system being joined to the British Rail system by a single line from Akeman Street.

Joe was a bit of a dancer and also, at sometime during the evening, would give a rendition of "The Volunteer Organist" or some other "oldie". Those that had close contact with Joe would normally be called "Me Old Mate". This indicated that you had finally "made it" in his eyes. On Wednesday or Thursday someone would have to keep watch for the Hopcraft and Morris beer lorry on its way to Dorton Club from Brackley. A sighting of the lorry meant that it was well worth Joe taking a cycle ride to Dorton, beer being in rather short supply in those days.

Graham Russell would most probably be playing in the band that supplied the music for the dances in that previously mentioned Ashendon hut. He would almost certainly give a solo performance on that also previously mentioned saw.

As a direct result of writing this I have made contact with Don Ayres. He tells me that he moved to Brackley, both to work and live, and left the Railways in 1965 when the line closed. He then joined the Post Office and has since retired. He was able to remind me that at Wotton, on the up side, there was a further starter signal called the advance starter. I had included it in my list of lamps but had totally forgotten what it was called. It stood about a quarter of a mile on the "up" side of the station. It was very short in height.

This must have allowed trains to pull farther forward than normal thereby permitting entry to the goods yard but still be under control of the signalman. I think Don and I are the only survivors from those long gone days.

John Knibbs left Wotton to join his sister in California and to grow oranges. I have not heard of him for years. On a Saturday, late in the summer (I would guess at September because I remember going harvesting afterwards, and clearly remember seeing the R.A.F. ambulance reversing up to the camp mortuary from there) of 1944 a Wellington aircraft taking off from Wescott ploughed into the Akeman Street signal box where John was on duty. He was very lucky not to have been injured. The plane took away a large chunk of the western end of the box before crashing in the field at rear - most if not all of the crew were killed. I, too, was lucky as I had been asked to collect John's lunch from his home at Lower Pollicott. and take it to him as he was planning to stay late to clear a petrol train for the army petrol depot at Waddesdon. However, just before I left, he rang to say not to bother, as he would be finished earlier than expected. My most likely time of arrival at Akeman Street would certainly have been before the crash and the part of the box that was removed was where visitors normally sat and I, almost certainly, would have waited to cycle home with John when he finished.

Ron Tipping was killed in an accident at Wotton in December 1946.

Some of the platelayers would have followed their fathers or other relative - this being a common way of joining the railways - and would probably hope to end up as ganger or deputy before retiring. They would learn the business the hard way. By this I mean they would have to get involved, there not being many training courses in those days. These jobs were considered to be better than the average, which would otherwise normally be on farms or the local brickworks.

The distance to and from work always had to be taken into account as cycling or walking was about the only method of travel. Ashendon Junction, like many others,

could only be reached by walking or cycling along the track. Fred King always walked from Brill.

Only some of those listed on page one were, to my mind, "real railwaymen" - Mr Rice, Gilbert Adams, with, possibly, Don Ayres and Johnny Knibbs; and not forgetting the platelayers.

I think of a "railwayman" as one who started his working life on the railway and intended to stay there until retirement, and who had a kind of dedication to the Company. The Company was, without doubt, always right in whatever action it took; or that was what some people firmly believed.

Looking back, the stationmaster was what would now be called a "big fish in a small pond". He could have his garden dug by the platelayers, his windows cleaned by the station staff, and really anything else he required within reason. He was, of course, a "company man" and, in his eyes, the L.N.E.R. could do no wrong. His gold half Hunter watch was always correct regardless of B.B.C. time signals or any other time indicator.

Some of the R.A.F. personnel that we regularly dealt with were transferred to the army on or about the time of D. Day (6th June 1944). Little did they think, when they used to "rib" me about being "called up" into the army, not the "cushy number that they enjoyed in the R.A.F.". that they, themselves, would beat me there by some three years.

It was difficult to join the railways and, although I was only temporary, I found it equally difficult to leave as, when I came to give in my notice, I was informed that this was a job of "national importance". This then meant that I had to convince the Ministry of Labour that I wasn't totally indispensable. After cycling to their office in Thame they agreed, and I left in July 1945.

BOB CHERRY. September 1992.