

The Railways of Stratford from 1959 until 1965.

This volume deals with my observations of the ex SMJ line and of the final years of steam traction on the ex GWR route. I ceased to be a full time resident of Stratford in March 1967 and by then the once familiar pattern of railway activity had gone. The ex SMJ line that had teetered on the brink of closure since 1952 enjoyed a brief Indian Summer of activity from 1960 to early 1965 when, with no prior warning, British Railways closed the section of line from Burton Dassett to Stratford Old Town completely.

I had known of the existence of the SMJ line since my earliest years living at Weston on Avon. If we went into Stratford via the A46/A34 route we would cross the line on the A34 Bridge at Clifford Sidings. I was already familiar with ex GWR equipment because of my regular journeys from Milcote to Stratford but the glimpse of the differently shaped signals and the two long sidings that rarely held more than a couple of wagons made me curious. On the more usual route to town on top of a Stratford Blue double decker bus from Welford Maypole I got several good views of the line between Luddington and the Avon Bridge at Welford. I would ask my parents why there were never any trains on the line and would be fobbed off with the sort of answer a small boy could expect until one day a passenger on the bus overheard my chattering and told me that the line was normally only used at night and that I would be very lucky to see a train in the day. I later found that this was indeed a fact but nevertheless one sunny morning as the bus stopped to pick up a passenger at the Lower Binton turning I saw steam rising over the meadows and a freight train was slowly clanking along on the low embankment that held the line above the Avon floodplain. I was probably only four years old but that image is still as clear now as it was on the day. Until I was allowed to cycle to school in 1955 I only rarely visited Old Town but once I was mobile it was possible to see what was happening there on a regular basis. Unfortunately, after school, at around 4pm in the afternoon there was never very much to see, what little activity took place in the goods yard normally went on in the morning when the Stratford GW shunting loco would arrive on the daily interchange trip from Birmingham Road Yard. Apart from the coal merchant's workers loading sacks Old Town was a very sleepy place and most of the sidings gradually became storage space for redundant wagons and little used railway maintenance equipment. In the summer months the signalman might be outside repairing or washing his old Ford Popular car. He would usually tell me if there was likely to be any traffic in the following hour or so and perhaps once a week the pick up goods train that shuffled along the line daily to service the yards at the rural stations between Blisworth and Broom Junction might be running late and would arrive to shunt the yard. Before the loco shed closed it would contain two or three locos at most but apart from the pick up goods there were no longer other regular duties for engines based at Stratford Old Town. A number of engine men and guards did remain based there and they would relieve crews from Woodford or Gloucester on the overnight freight trains. Most of the large goods engines used on the through trains were based at Woodford or one of the Sheffield loco sheds. Eventually the shed did close and the men transferred to the Western Region at Stratford GW (see Vol 02.01). Most of the more mature railway observers in the Town were saying that it would not be long before Old Town would close completely. Then during the winter of 1959 I became aware that there was a lot of activity going on there and at the rural stations between Stratford and Fenny Compton. The SMJ route was poised to become busier than at any time in its history apart from a few bursts of hectic activity in

WW2. To understand why the railway authorities embarked on this course of action it is necessary to set the scene.

The goods traffic that traditionally used the route in the fifties was almost exclusively concerned with connecting the steelworks of the Sheffield area with the furnaces of South Wales. Trains would be comprised of the slowest moving vehicles then in use, this was due to braking considerations and great skill was needed by the crews particularly over an undulating route such as the SMJ. They would come down from the north along the Great Central main line and turn onto the SMJ at Woodford West Junc. The Sheffield men and sometimes the engine would change at Woodford before the run through to Stratford. The trains ran through to Broom Junction where by virtue of a chord line put in during WW2 they were directed onto the former Midland Railway route through Evesham, Ashchurch, and Gloucester and on to South Wales. About halfway between Woodford and Stratford the SMJ line crossed the ex GWR Paddington – Birmingham main line on an over bridge at Fenny Compton. Due to the complex railway politics of earlier years there was no practical connection between the two routes although they ran parallel for around a mile through the station. Each line had its own signal box and staff belonging to two different regions of BR! Just to the south of Fenny Compton on the GW line were extensive interchange sidings to tranship iron ore from the quarries of the Oxfordshire Ironstone Co into trains to take them to South Wales. The traditional route for this traffic was to head north through Fenny Compton and Leamington Spa and diverge west at Hatton station to run down through Stratford GW and on to Cheltenham and South Wales. These were also slow moving trains and even though the GW route was provided with regular loops to ease traffic problems these iron ore trains often slowed the progress of important express trains. The climb out of Warwick towards Hatton was on a stiff gradient and a banking engine was provided at Warwick to assist freight trains as far as Hatton. In the late fifties British Railways had embarked on implementing their 1955 Modernisation Plan. One of the flagship schemes of this was to electrify the West Coast Mainline between Euston and Scotland. In order to enable this to take place as quickly as possible it was decided that for the duration of the work between Euston and Birmingham New Street most of the London – Birmingham traffic would be transferred to the former GW route between Paddington and Snow Hill. For a few years the GW route would be carrying even more express passenger trains than ever before and the problems of fitting in the iron ore movements from Fenny Compton to Hatton graduated from a problem to a nightmare. Co-incidentally the steel billet traffic between Sheffield and South Wales was going through a period of growth.

In order to resolve the forgoing operating difficulties it was decided to spend a considerable sum on upgrading the line between Fenny Compton and Stratford so that the iron ore traffic could use that route together with the increased number of steel billet trains coming in from Woodford. During 1959 the layout at Fenny Compton was completely restyled into a modern interconnecting junction between the two routes, a new signal box replaced the two older ones. The former station locations at Burton Dassett, Kineton and Ettington had their passing loops extended and signal instruments with greater operating flexibility were installed. The track was re-laid with new heavy quality material for much of the route and the former platforms at the wayside stations were dug out and angled back in order to provide clearance for outside cylindered ex GWR locos. The route forward from Stratford via Broom and Ashchurch was not judged suitable for upgrading with the potential expense of renewing two bridges, across the river Arrow at Broom and the Avon near Evesham. The condition of the whole infrastructure of the Broom – Evesham section was very poor. So it was at Old Town that the biggest upheaval of all took place. The bridge over the Avon was

strengthened and at a point just past the signal box where the Broom line started to climb towards SMJ Bridge a brand new double track chord was constructed turning left across the meadow and joining the GW line at a new junction just south of the Racecourse Platforms.

The Old Town yard was reduced in capacity with many sidings removed or just disconnected awaiting the scrap men. The original connecting line to the GW turning north from Old Town and joining up at S M Junction was reduced to single track. In order to control this new layout a brand new signal box was built alongside the existing small box at Evesham Road. This location was dictated by the need for the signalman to observe the actual level crossing. When all the works were commissioned the old Evesham Road Box, S M Junction Signal Box and Stratford on Avon (Old Town Station) Box were taken out of use. By virtue of a modern installation Evesham Road now controlled all movements over the former GW line between Milcote and Stratford West Box and from Clifford Sidings to the new junction on the SMJ route. The line between Old Town and Broom closed completely at the same time. In the hurry to get all these works operational a number of things occurred that made little economic sense. When the engine shed had closed the turntable was retained because the ex LMS locos that historically used the line were of the tender rather than tank engine type. The loco working the pick up goods normally turned on it once a day and because of this when the new track was put in a fresh connection was made to the old turntable from the new down running line on the chord. Access to it was by a lever frame released from the new box. In reality of course the new layout formed a triangle of lines all controlled by one signal man and from the day the new box opened every time it was necessary to turn an engine rather than go through the procedure involved to access the turntable, including the manual pushing around of the locomotive, they would simply be run round each face of the triangle and sent back the way they had come but facing the opposite direction. I never saw or heard of the turntable being used after the new works opened so that installation was a waste of money. There had never been a turntable at the GW shed as most of the local trains used tank engines but once the facility to turn was available at Old Town any tender engines needing to turn at Stratford were sent down there rather than go north to turn on the nearest available GW triangle of lines at Hatton. Apart from these engine movements it was not anticipated that there would ever be much traffic using the "old route" from Old Town through to the GW at the now former site of S M Junc. In order to save on equipment space in the new Evesham Road box the junction in Old Town yard to access the "old route" was also controlled by a small lever frame released from Evesham Road once the loco crew had phoned the signalman to ask him to unlock the levers (electrically). It was this lever frame that had the honour of being the only installation ever to officially bear the Old Town name. It had an impressive pressed alloy nameplate that read "Stratford upon Avon Old Town Exchange G F" (*G F was an abbreviation for Ground Frame*).

The works were more or less complete by the spring of 1960 and the opening was scheduled for the start of the summer timetable. A number of special trips were laid on for enginemen based at Woodford and Gloucester to come and inspect the new route so that they would be familiar with the revised layout, in particular the location of the line side telephones that allowed them to communicate with Evesham Road Box. It was then very unusual for the signalman to be so remote from the junction that his box controlled. In earlier times this work would have warranted a box at the Junction itself near the end of the Racecourse Platform as well as having to retain the existing Evesham Road box but instead economics dictated that the lone signalman could only observe the progress of trains from Clifford Sidings over the new chord on the illuminated track diagram above his levers. It was also unique at the time in being the only mechanical signal installation in the UK

where the signalman was not able to observe whether or not the rear vehicle of each train (on the SMJ) was carrying a tail lamp and therefore complete. It was not unknown for certain types of freight train to suffer a break away caused by failed couplings. The illuminated diagram and the provision of run away trap points at the Racecourse Junction were considered sufficient protection as the SMJ route was freight only.

Not long after the new facilities were opened there was a graphic illustration of what could happen if the signalman did not observe that the tail lamp was in place especially on freight trains. It actually occurred on the GW part of the route controlled by Evesham Road and involved a freight train proceeding south. When Stratford West Box closed down at 10pm the retiring signalman would set his points for the through route via platforms 1 & 2 and clear the main line signals in each direction. He would operate a special switch that allowed Stratford East to communicate directly with Evesham Road as though Stratford West did not exist. This was a normal arrangement common throughout mechanically signalled railways. Late one summer evening Stratford East went through the procedure to pass a down freight train onwards to Evesham Road. The normal time between hearing that the train had entered the section of track between Stratford Station and Evesham Road and it approaching the crossing gates was about four minutes for a slow moving freight. On this occasion it did not appear and so the signalman knew that it had probably stopped at the end of platform 1 for water. This was not uncommon but in order not to inconvenience road users the signalman would restore the signals to danger and open the gates back up to clear the road traffic. For operational reasons he would probably tell Stratford East and Milcote by phone what he had done thus explaining time delays in the normal routine on the instruments. When the train moved off the driver would whistle so that Evesham Road would have time to shut the road gates and clear his signals, in the summer with the box windows open the whistle was easily heard. On this evening when the train did get away from platform 1 he jerked the couplings badly and one of them towards the rear of the train broke. The signalman had cleared the route and as the engine approached the crossing gathering speed into the dusk the signalman was distracted by one of the other instruments requiring attention and he forgot to wait to observe the tail lamp. The freight was well on its way past Sanctus Road when the signalman did return his attention to it and he assumed that it had passed him intact so he opened the gates back to the road. In the meantime the rear few wagons and guards van slowly gathered momentum on the falling gradient and after a couple of minutes they smashed through the closed crossing gates. Fortunately because of the quiet time of night no road vehicle was struck and once alerted by the impact the guard applied his handbrake. If the signalman had seen that there was no tail lamp he would have known that something was wrong and left the gates open until he knew what had happened. I believe that the signalman did not get dismissed as he might have been in the past but he was downgraded, this was almost certainly due to the labour situation.

The traffic over the "renewed" SMJ was very healthy and for a couple of years the facilities performed the job that they had been designed for until the summer of 1963 when the labour shortage that had blighted the railways for years suddenly became a crisis. A combination of leavers, retirements, lack of recruits and summer holidays for those that were left meant that there were simply not enough signalmen available to man the boxes between Fenny Compton and Clifford Sidings and because of shortages at more important locations particularly on the Banbury - Leamington main line the few men that were available for the SMJ line were transferred elsewhere. The line was not open for traffic at critical periods but because of contractual obligations to keep the furnaces of South Wales supplied the iron ore traffic was still sent out. On the busiest summer

Saturdays during 1963 the slow moving ore trains had no choice but to take their old path via Hatton and cause operating problems to the busy main line through Leamington Spa. The investment in upgrading the SMJ had been defeated by a lack of manpower! The empty iron ore trains coming north but now proceeding straight through the Racecourse Platforms at Stratford and on up the bank to take the Leamington route at Bearley West added to the summer operating problems already described in Vol 02.01. It was an almost masochistic act for an empty class H goods train to appear amongst the returning holiday trains on a summer Saturday afternoon but appear they did causing great distress to an already overloaded system!

After the summer of 1963 and throughout 1964 the SMJ route was open for traffic whenever there were enough signalmen available. At times the line returned to its nocturnal role of earlier years with the traffic being passed during one twelve hour period between 10pm and 10am. In the true tradition of railway service the remaining men that worked these extended shifts were mainly older employees whose loyalty to the job was part of a tradition that stretched back to Victorian times. The final demise of the route came with no warning at all when early in 1965 senior BR regional management announced that the line had closed. The reason given was that the steel industry had withdrawn their custom from the Oxfordshire Ironstone Co because it was now cheaper to import Spanish ore of better quality via the South Wales docks. The decision came as such a surprise to local railway managers that they had no plan in place to supervise an orderly shut down of the line's infrastructure. At first it appeared that the "closure" might be temporary. With experienced men in short supply it was ironic that management decided to instruct the signalmen to attend their boxes to test the instruments regularly in order to prevent deterioration and vandalism although they had no trains to handle. This arrangement lasted a few weeks and during that time the final official train movement over the line was a trip by the Stratford banking engine as far as Clifford Sidings Box to convey a churn of fresh water to the signalsman there. A hastily arranged "farewell" enthusiast passenger train was the last train to use the section of line between Old Town and Burton Dassett on April 24th 1965 by which time the rails were red with rust and the railway that had survived against many odds since 1864 really was finally gone for good.

The scene at Stratford GW went through a lot of change around the same time with the loss of the gas works traffic and much of the wagon load freight dwindling away at Birmingham Road depot. By 1963 all of the local trains that terminated at Stratford were worked by diesel railcars, the pick up goods service over the SMJ had finished and so the only remaining task for the loco shed was to provide a base for coaling and light servicing of the banking engine. Not surprisingly the shed was closed and the trio of available engines that worked the banking turn were transferred from the responsibility of Tyseley shed to Leamington Spa. With no coaling facilities now at Stratford it was necessary to swap over the banking engine on a daily basis so in order to eliminate unnecessary engine mileage one of the first local trains of the day from Leamington to Stratford reverted back to steam haulage so that the fresh engine could be delivered and the old one sent back on the return working. This was the 8.43am ex Stratford train that features in so many photographs of mine with the changing background of the line between Stratford station and Bishopton as the new developments took place on the land in the Timothy's Bridge area. In Sept 1962 the daily Cornishman train was rerouted via the Bromsgrove line and there were no longer any through railcars to South Wales. The local trains from the Worcester direction declined in number and the only way to get south of Stratford to Cheltenham and beyond was on a couple of through Leamington – Cheltenham railcars daily. The summer Saturday holiday trains survived until 1966 but there were fewer of them and road traffic was seriously eroding passenger numbers by then.

The freight trains continued to go through but by 1965 they were nearly all diesel hauled with the consequence that the banking engine was no longer considered necessary so that too was withdrawn. During the final summer of the West of England holiday trains a fleet of poorly maintained steam engines had no choice but to struggle out of platform 2 without the reassuring shove of the banker at the rear.

On the human front the station staff had been reduced considerably. There was no longer a Station Master; I think the Leamington man inherited that responsibility. The parcel office staff had gone and the porters dealt with the remaining parcel traffic. The road parcels vehicles were by now based at Leamington but one lorry did park overnight at Stratford probably because the driver lived there. The Post Office vans called a lot less often as I believe most of the mailbags were taken by road to Leamington or Birmingham to be transferred to rail there. The baskets of pigeons too were no more as their owners turned to road transport. I ceased to be a resident of Stratford in 1967 and by then, apart from a few freight trains running straight through, the station was reduced to handling local passenger traffic. Once the local trains from the south ceased the West Box was no longer needed as railcars could just pull back and drop into platform 2 or 3 from the East Box end. In the ten years from 1955 to 1965 I witnessed a change in transport and social history that was both remarkable and sad.

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