

The Railways of Stratford upon Avon in the 1950's.

John R Jennings (b 22.6.1945) although I was not from a "railway family" I developed an interest in the local transport scene from a very early age. Readers of my first family file 01.01 will obtain the necessary introduction.

Although this interest grew into that of a life time railway enthusiast I am pleased to recollect that much of what I saw in my early years was a unique snapshot of the end of the steam era before road transport developed a stranglehold. The railway was still a very important part of the life of our English market town and until the end of the decade the working methods and the men involved were more or less the same as they had been in the previous thirty years.

I am aware that it is easy to confuse the casual reader by making references to once familiar places by more than one name. This is because the evolution of the railways saw changes of location names and company names often perpetuated long after they had technically disappeared! The names used by railway employees often depended on their age and length of service. Some locations were known by a local name although that name was never officially given. I will also not dwell on railway technicalities to any great extent as they are well documented in various publications [Note 1] In my writings on the Stratford area I will attempt to use the same names wherever possible and there follows a paragraph or two that will set the scene.

Until 1952 Stratford had two passenger stations, Stratford upon Avon General was the title used by the Western Region of British Railways to identify the ex GWR station adjacent to the cattle market on Alcester Road. The title appeared in official BR WR documents in a haphazard way throughout the fifties and sixties and did appear on some ticket stock. The station signs were never changed possibly because the other station closed to passengers in April 1952. This station was the one that most Stratfordians and railwaymen always called "Old Town" although with one very late exception the title was never conferred officially. [Details in Volume 02.02]. It would also be referred to as the LMS or the SMJ. Sited at the end of College Lane this station had been owned by several different companies since 1864 but the most affectionately remembered was the Stratford upon Avon and Midland Junction Railway. Always known as the SMJ this company was the final legal amalgamation of various predecessors. The SMJ only existed from 1909 to 1922 when the "grouping" forced upon the railways by the Government took place. From 1923 until nationalisation Old Town station and the former SMJ route between Blisworth and Broom Junction became part of the LMSR and after 1947 was part of the London Midland Region of British Railways. I will normally refer to the ex GWR station simply as Stratford and to the ex SMJ station and the surrounding yards as Old Town.

Key locations that I knew well have changed in appearance over the past fifty years. Evidence of railway ownership on the SMJ route and on the GWR route south of Alcester Road Bridge are now almost eradicated except for the bridges and major earthworks. Landmarks in the text should be noted as follows.

In the north to south direction on the GW line. (In railway terms this was the "down" direction).

Bishopton Bridge. This was a hump backed brick bridge taking Bishopton Lane over the line about a mile & a half north of Stratford station. It has now been replaced with a modern structure. There

were clear views of the line over open country in both directions from the top of this bridge. The fields that once surrounded this location are now built upon or used as a Park & Ride scheme.

Stratford East Signal Box. Normally open continuously this box controlled the goods loop and junctions to the north end of Stratford station. It also controlled access to the goods yard adjacent to the gas works, the Ministry Cold Store and the locomotive shed.

Canal Bridge. There were two parallel bridges over the Stratford canal about a hundred yards past the East Box. One carried the main running lines, the other carried the goods loop and a carriage siding. In the centre waste ground on the station side of these bridges was a WW2 air raid shelter and a single story wooden mess hut used by goods guards waiting to change shift on through freight trains. The GWR had owned the Stratford Canal and the large iron pipe carried along the running line bridge was to convey water from the canal to the various locomotive watering towers.

Cold Store. Situated at the rear of platform 3 in its own compound was a Wartime Ministry Cold Store and associated buildings. This area is now a supermarket.

Loco shed. A small, two track, brick built engine shed was situated on the eastern side of the goods loop between the canal and the land at the back of Western Rd. There was a large water tower on top of the loco coaling stage on the shed site. An additional siding lay along the western side of the shed.

Stratford Station. Still in use but now (2003) a terminus. The substantial brick building and canopies erected by the GWR on the central platform has been demolished. The GWR built footbridge and buildings on platform 1 survive.

Stratford West Signal Box. Not normally open at night this box was situated on the west side of the line immediately under the Alcester Road Bridge. There was a large water tower adjacent. The box controlled access to the south end of the station and a long carriage siding that ran parallel to the up line as far as the second Shottery Fields Crossing.

Shottery Fields Crossings. Between Alcester Road Bridge and Evesham Road Crossing were two public rights of way both starting in Albany Road and leading to Shottery Fields these crossed the railway on boarded crossings protected by "kissing gates".

Evesham Road Crossing. A fully gated level crossing controlled by an adjacent signal box on the town side known as Evesham Road Crossing. The box was replaced with a large modern structure alongside the original as a result of modernisation works in 1959/60. It was open continuously.

Sanctus Road Bridge. This was a humped brick bridge taking the road over the line. It has been replaced with a modern structure that now carries Sanctus Road over the road that has been built on the track bed.

S M Junction Signal Box. About 100 yards south of Sanctus Rd was the junction that allowed traffic to interchange between the Old Town station yard and the GW line. It was more often referred to as "Sanctus Road Box" although the title was unofficial. It was only manned for a few hours a day

and closed completely in June 1960. Although it was demolished within weeks of closure it appeared in official working timetables for at least two years longer!

SMJ Bridge. About a quarter mile from S M Junction the Old Town – Broom Junction line crossed the GW on a single span steel bridge.

Racecourse Platform. Immediately after the SMJ Bridge the GW line was provided with rudimentary cinder and wood platforms to allow trains to stop whenever there was a meeting at the adjoining racecourse. The southern junction of the 1960 chord line making a through route from Old Town Station to the south was situated just past the end of the Racecourse Platform.

The Stannells. The final landmark within Stratford as the line went south was the substantial iron bridge over the river Avon.

Now for a similar trip along the SMJ line.

Clifford Sidings. Running from East to West the SMJ single track became double line just before the town boundary at Clifford Sidings Signal Box. This was about a quarter mile east of where the line passed under the Stratford - Oxford trunk road and the footpath that was once the route of the Stratford and Moreton Tramway.

Avon Bridge. The substantial brick bridge adjacent to Lucy's Mill carried the SMJ over the Avon and into Old Town Station. Strengthened during the works associated with the 1960 chord line this bridge now carries a road.

Old Town Station. Looking west the main buildings were on the northern side and the locomotive shed and water tower behind platform 2 on the southern side. The present road passes more or less between the platforms. These were further apart than was normal. Traces of platform 1 were extant in 2001.

Grain Silo. There had been a long siding into Lucy's Mill since early times but during WW2 a large grain silo was provided by the Ministry on land between Old Town station and the Mill.

Old Town Signal Box. An older box survived on platform 1 as a store but the box that was in use in the fifties up to June 1960 was off the end of that platform. It controlled all movements associated with Old Town station and yard. Looking west the SMJ line to Broom reduced to single track and carried straight on up the grade over SMJ Bridge. The through connection to the GW line at S M Junction swung to the right (north) through the goods yard. In 1959/60 a direct chord line was built diverging left (south) just past the signal box to connect with the GW line just past the Racecourse Platform. Opened in June 1960 this chord provided through running from the SMJ line to Cheltenham and South Wales. The line to Broom closed when this chord was opened.

SMJ Bridge. Already identified on the trip along the GW line this was a stiff climb for Broom bound trains as they climbed up over the GW only to run downhill again towards Luddington with Stratford Cemetery on the right.

My observations at Stratford station had started in the late 1940's when my Grandmother took me on outings there to observe the activities. By 1953 I was visiting the station regularly on my own and without the need to always buy a platform ticket there were a number of vantage points. One was looking through the fence at the end of platform 1 immediately adjacent to Alcester Road Bridge. There was an engine water crane on the platform end and several times an hour a locomotive would be taking water here. The fireman would often lean against the fence whilst waiting for the tank to fill and pass the time of day with any train enthusiasts present. The railways were still legally a "common carrier" and this meant that they had to accept all traffic offered to them. Stratford station handled passengers and parcels but heavy goods traffic was dealt with at the goods depot in Birmingham Road and at Old Town. There was a steady stream of railway goods delivery lorries in and out of the parcels office loading area that was situated in the centre of the buildings on platform 1. Some larger parcel traffic was brought up from Birmingham Road depot as there was little time to unload it from railway vehicles on the busy through route of platform 1. At the far northern end of the buildings on that platform were two iron gates that were constantly in use by Royal Mail vans. My Uncle Bill was a postman and he would often reverse his red Morris van up to these gates to exchange mail traffic that the porters had piled onto the sturdy four-wheel platform trolleys. Mail was carried in the guards' compartment of passenger trains and bags for nearby towns such as Birmingham or Leamington could be loaded at relative leisure because those services would sit in the back platforms for a while once the loco had run around and cleared platform 1. It was a different matter with the through services calling at Stratford on their way to the West Country or South Wales. They were only booked to stop for a couple of minutes but if there were a lot of mailbags this could hold them for longer. There was one Birmingham – Cardiff express that called at around 4.20pm that was regularly held up with the locomotive blowing off steam under the Alcester Road Bridge while mail traffic was dealt with. If I was at the vantage point mentioned above I would often hear the driver call to his mate that there was no need to hurry up with the locomotive watering because those "bloody postmen" have got barrow loads again! This was the first time I could recall hearing a broad Welsh accent as on alternate weeks this train had a Cardiff crew. The common carrier requirement occasionally produced some interesting traffic. There was a loading dock siding next to platform 1 that terminated just before the post office gates. Road access was by driving straight ahead past the booking office into the paved yard that was next to the cattle market boundary. The porters would often tip me off that something special was coming to this siding and on more than one occasion I witnessed the unloading of circus animals that were visiting the town. There would be regular horsebox traffic particularly on race or hunt meeting days. Scenery vans for touring theatrical companies and British Railway's own publicity cinema carriage also used this busy siding. At certain times of the year the guards' compartments of local trains arriving from the Birmingham area carried seemingly enormous quantities of pigeon baskets. It was a traditional and lucrative trade for the railway because all they had to do was unload the baskets onto the station trolleys, wheel them to the platform end where they were clear of the canopies and then open the baskets to allow the pigeons to fly home. Each basket had its owner's name on it and detail of the return station to send back the empties. Part of the service was that the porter had to fill in the release time on the card label. The porters were often glad of the willing help offered by someone like myself particularly when there were dozens of these baskets to attend to.

Passenger traffic was heavy with regular local trains to Evesham, Worcester, Leamington Spa and Birmingham. In order to appreciate the way of working I will describe the typical traffic of the station. Local passenger trains normally consisted of two or three non-corridor coaches hauled by

an ex GW tank engine. All trains from the north had to arrive at platform 1 regardless of whether they were terminating or running through. On the terminating trains the locomotive would have to "run round" its train and be shunted over into the Back Platform ready to form a return service to where it had come from. The Back Platform was split numerically into platforms 3 & 4 although it was all one long platform. Two local trains could be easily held in its length often with one heading south to Worcester and another waiting to go north to Birmingham or Leamington. Running a loco round its train involved co-operative work and slick operation by the signalmen in both East and West boxes. If the main up platform (2) was clear the loco would uncouple, run forward under Alcester Rd to a point just before the first Shotton Fields crossing. The West Box crossover would be set to cross the loco to the up line and it would run the length of the station to a point near the canal bridge. The East Box crossover would then be set to pass the loco back to the down line and to run into platform 1 to couple up to its train. It was now sat pointing the "wrong" way in platform 1, which, as the only available down arrival line was always busy. To clear this train into one of the back platforms the signalmen would either let it propel back under Alcester Rd again and repeat the crossing procedure to the up side but this time with the West Box setting the route into the back line, or, if there was no arriving train held waiting to access platform 1, it was more convenient to pull forward through the East Box crossover and then reverse into the back platform line. The advantage of the latter was that only the East Box was involved in the proceedings and there was less work on the instruments and booking register entries in the two boxes! A local arriving from the south and terminating would usually be directed into the back platform. There was a special type of signal mounted on the gantry just outside the West Box that indicated to the driver that he could proceed with caution into the back platform but that it was not clear as another train was occupying the northern half of it. The procedure was known as "calling on". There was a separate loop line around the rear of the back platform so as long as platform 3 was clear the loco from a Worcester arrival could draw forward and then run round this rear loop. This avoided using the down main line through platform 1. All of this activity was discharged at a very quick pace with the loco buffering up to its train whilst the fireman was stood in the track waiting to couple up, it looked very scary to those unfamiliar with the procedure but I never saw or heard of an injury. Until about 1957 all local trains were steam hauled except for the occasional visit of one of the ex GWR AEC diesel railcars that sometimes turned up on the Worcester services. They were regarded as a novelty by railway watchers who then had no idea of the changes that were imminent.

Although most local services terminated a few ran from Worcester to Leamington via Stratford as through trains although they did not call at all of the smaller Halts en route especially between Stratford and Worcester.

Apart from the express services a most important train was the daily Worcester Shrub Hill – Birmingham Snow Hill semi fast via Stratford. It was used by professional commuters to the Birmingham area and left Stratford for many years at 8.32am. It ran via Solihull rather than taking the more usual route via Henley in Arden in order to take advantage of the quicker running on the four track main line north of Lapworth. The station staff would always be anxious to get this train away on time and it was the one non-express working of the day that regularly got the Stratford stationmaster out on the platform. The corresponding return working was booked away to Worcester at just after 6.30pm in the evening. Many of the regular passengers on this train were high ranking regional British Railways staff who worked in the offices at Snow Hill or New Street and the station staff were well aware of the consequences of causing them inconvenience!

The through express trains consisted of services to the west of England and South Wales. In winter months there was one "Cornishman" train a day that commenced at Wolverhampton and called at major stations all the way to Penzance. It conveyed a restaurant car and often loaded to over ten coaches. In the summer months weekday traffic was heavier and a second train followed the main service at about a twenty minutes interval. The destination for this service was Torquay and Kingswear and it relieved space on the main train. The down "Cornishman" left Stratford at around 10.15am and the up working at around 6.25pm. The South Wales trains started at Birmingham and called at the main stations to Cardiff via Stratford and Gloucester. Depending on the time of year there were two or three in each direction daily and they had a buffet car rather than a full restaurant car. Before describing the scene on a busy summer Saturday I will now put the freight traffic into the picture as Stratford was a very busy through route for several traffic flows. To understand the operational problems faced by the local railwaymen the physical nature of the GW route needs further description. The approach to Stratford from the south was on a fairly easy gradient as the line crossed the Avon at the Stannells and swept over the flood plain, past the racecourse and on into Stratford. At the end of platform 2 the grade changed and as the line swung round and over the canal it was on a stiff climb all the way to Wilmcote and continued to climb at a lesser rate almost to Danzey on the North Warwickshire route. The line to Leamington diverted at Bearley West Junction and was not so severe. All trains going north that were in excess of a certain load were entitled to be assisted by a "banking" locomotive pushing them at the rear end. In the case of passenger trains unless there was some malfunction with the main train loco the banker would buffer up at the rear of the train whilst it was stopped in platform 2 and when the lead loco was ready to set off he would sound a series of "cock crows" on his whistle, the banker would then literally push as hard as possible for about the first mile or so to give the train a good start off. The banker was never coupled up to the train he was pushing so he dropped off before leaving the area under the control of Stratford East Box and then drifted backwards usually stopping opposite the box so that the signalman could shout across instructions for the next job. If there was a "sick" locomotive on the front of a passenger train the banker would stay with him all the way to Wilmcote and in the case of freight trains it was normal for them to be banked to Wilmcote or even Bearley West Junc. Until the late 1950's there was one locomotive allocated solely for banker duties whilst another was provided for shunting the goods yard at Birmingham Road and running interchange trips to and from Old Town Yard. In order to be ready for its next duty the bank loco would normally wait in the short overrun to the carriage siding outside the West Box. As soon as a train requiring assistance had cleared Alcester Road Bridge the bank loco could be released to move into position at the rear of the train. There was often no great hurry as the train loco nearly always needed to take water from the water crane situated at the northern end of platform 2. It was this constant blocking of the up platform that also caused variations in the way local trains were run round. At night if the West Box was not in use (switched out was the official term) the bank loco could not access the rear of the train requiring assistance in the way previously described. If a heavy freight were to stop for water at platform 2 it would be difficult if not impossible for it to restart on the curving gradient without the banker so they ran through and came to a stop for water at a water crane that was situated at the side of the up line to the north of the East Box, this crane was fed from the tank at the entrance to the goods loop. This meant that the rear of the train would be clear of the crossover just north of the platforms and the banker could run across from the down line at that location all under the control of Stratford East. After about 11.30pm there were no passenger trains to hinder freight operations and I can recall many still nights lying in my bed at Eastfield Close and listening to the whistle crowing and exhaust beats of both locos as they

set off towards Wilmcote. I could hear the change in the sharp exhaust notes as they briefly muffled under Bishopton Bridge by which time they were well in their stride up the bank.

Many freight trains consisted of a variety of trucks, closed vans, flat wagons and tankers and carried all manner of goods. Others were dedicated to just one load and going south most days I saw several trains of steel hopper trucks filled with orange iron ore. These had originated in the quarries of Northamptonshire or Oxfordshire and were bound for South Wales. There was an equivalent number of empties going the other way of course. It took me some time to understand why coal seemed to be taken in trainloads in both directions. Apparently it was all to do with the suitability of certain grades of coal for specific jobs with Welsh coal heading north to the furnaces of the Black Country and the softer coals from the Midlands collieries heading south and west for the domestic market. Stratford was a destination for several grades of coal with the demands of the gas works, the locomotive shed and the house coal merchants. Wharburton's coal merchants unloaded their house coal from a siding at Birmingham Road Goods depot whilst Dingley's and the Co-Op handled their coal at the Old Town Yard. I never saw any sort of mechanical aid used for unloading; the coal was shovelled by hand into strong Hessian sacks that were placed on a large set of Avery scales. When full they would be lifted by hand on to a flatbed lorry for local deliveries. Some of the trucks that had brought coal into town were used to take away coke from the gas works and ash from the locomotive shed. Ash and cinders had commercial value and large quantities were sold for public works use. The last remaining commercial user of Clifford Sidings was an ash merchant who obtained his supplies from Leamington loco shed after Stratford shed closed in the early sixties. There was at least one dedicated parcels train that ran from Birmingham to Swindon and back overnight and spent some time exchanging parcels traffic stood at platform 1 while the loco took on water.

British Railways operated the classic three shift system that went back to the early days of the railways which were 6.00am – 2.00pm; 2.00pm – 10.00pm and 10.00pm – 6.00am. By allowing a little bit of welcome overtime at the beginning and end of the day the station staff only worked the two day shifts with each man working one week late and the next early. After the last passenger train at night had been dealt with the foreman would lock the booking hall and parcels gates but leave open the post office gates so that the Royal Mail could continue to operate with the overnight parcels trains. The signalmen, loco crews and goods guards all worked the three shifts system. Each man had his grade and promotion within grades was governed by seniority based on length of service as much as ability. I estimate that around four hundred men were full time railway employees based in the Stratford area in all departments. There was only one Station Master, a position held at the time by Mr Bright, who normally seemed to work daytime office hours but would pop in to the station during the course of an evening several times a week. I believe the booking office staff were salaried and came under the direct control of the Station Master as did the refreshment room ladies. The busy booking office had a head clerk who appeared to work a similar pattern to his boss plus at least two other clerks one of whom was a junior. I nearly joined British Railways in 1960 in that then vacant junior job. In addition to the issue of tickets the booking office staff made up and issued the wage packets to the non-salaried men in all grades in the area. There was a second ticket window in the small booking hall and at the end of the week there would be a steady stream of men calling there to collect their wages. The practical running of Stratford station was in the hands of the two shift foremen who supervised a team of ticket collectors, porters, parcels office staff, shunters and cleaners. Passenger guards signed on at the station but all locomotive grades reported to the loco shed. I believe that the small messing shed adjacent to the

Stratford East starting signal near the air raid shelter served as a signing on point for the Goods Guards. The road transport drivers reported to Birmingham Road Goods Depot. In the yard opposite the loading dock were several huts and timber buildings used by the platelayer gangs. Another full time job was that of Bill Poster. This man was responsible for the pasting up of the many advertising and weekly notices on hoardings throughout railway property in the town and on some of the nearby rural stations. In the summer he would have his work cut out as seaside excursions would be a weekly affair and the "bills" as they were always called had to be kept current. I remember overhearing one of the foremen ticking off the Billposter one afternoon following a complaint. I gathered that one of the Birmingham office commuters that used the 8.32am was in the Railway Commercial Dept at Snow Hill and noted any outdated or torn posters on the wayside stations during his journey. On this occasion something was not to his liking at Wilmcote and he had tipped off the foreman that morning! One thing that was evident to a regular observer was that despite such small irritations all of the railway men got on well together and seemed to like their job. It was still only ten years or so since nationalisation but on the Western Region little had changed. Stratford station was still in all but name a creature of the GWR with the old pride in the job very much in place. All of the men like their colleagues on the Royal Mail wore a full uniform and whilst the platelayers and loco men would often of necessity be dirty the grades that faced the travelling public were always immaculate with polished footwear and spotless uniforms. The ticket collectors and passenger guards often sported seasonal buttonholes taken from their own gardens. In addition to the older, ex GWR men, by the late 1950's there were several younger men in their late twenties who had become railwaymen on leaving their enforced two years period of National Service. Some had come from a railway family so had just followed tradition but many had been recruited in their pre de-mob weeks by a British Railways employment team. They found the offer of a secure, uniformed job with a pension an attraction in the late forties and early fifties but by the end of the decade things were changing. As I grew up and was able to grasp more of the contemporary scene I realised that by the late 1950's many of the familiar faces around Stratford station were disappearing, there was the odd death in service but the main reason was that the old hands were retiring and the young men were leaving the Railway service because of the attractions of higher wages and shorter hours being offered in the factories of Coventry and Birmingham. By 1959 this shortage of labour particularly in the skilled grades was having an effect on the operation of services. There was another event that also contributed to the local railway labour problems and I remember being told of the complex history behind it by one of the ex SMJ men.

After the cessation of passenger services into Old Town the loco shed there had been retained for freight duties and a team of goods guards plus the signalmen and goods yard staff all "signed on" for duty as before. The loco shed at Old Town was finally closed in 1958 when the few remaining loco responsibilities were transferred to the GW shed. The men based at Old Town were told that they would be transferring to similar duties on the Western Region at Stratford GW. Now with the labour situation as it was this would seem to be a good move by the railway management but it caused a lot of ill feeling and problems. I have already mentioned that railway jobs were heavily dependent on "seniority" or less politely "dead man's shoes" whereby promotion was slow and regulated by complex agreements between employer and unions going back many years. Some of the younger men at Stratford GW had just started to see some promotion when suddenly a group of men with much greater service were transferred into their ranks. The cosy atmosphere that had existed at Old Town meant that the ex LMS and few remaining SMJ men were long serving and immediately filled the more senior grades. Some of the GW men were demoted back to jobs (and

pay) that they thought they had left behind whilst others could see a longer wait for promotion. It would have been bad enough if the newcomers had been from another part of the ex GW system but these were LMS men and that really poured salt on the wound! This event accelerated the departure of several of the younger fit and capable men out of railway service for good.

I have included the previous two paragraphs to set the scene before describing the events that took place on a typical Saturday in summertime at Stratford station. There were a number of enthusiastic observers of the railway scene at that time. I was one of about six local schoolboys all in our early teens plus several adults including railway photographer Tom Williams. [Note 2]. We would all eagerly await the publication of the summer time table that came into force for the period between Mid June and early September each year. In addition to the "Cornishman" service being split daily with separate trains for Penzance and the Torbay line there would be additional services on Saturdays between the Midlands and the West Country going directly to destinations such as Newquay, Ilfracombe, Weston Super Mare, Pembroke and Minehead. In the busiest four or five weeks over July and August most of these trains would be duplicated with an unadvertised relief train following the advertised one as soon as the railway operating authorities could find a path for it. The outbound trains would originate at either Wolverhampton or Birmingham and the first departure from Stratford was at around 7.30am with a steady stream of southbound trains following all morning. By 2.00pm the first northbound train would be due through, usually a morning departure from Weston Super Mare quickly followed by a procession of trains many often running late and with more carriages than the allocated locomotive was supposed to haul over the Cheltenham - Birmingham route via Stratford. The southbound traffic was handled very efficiently by the platform staff who had to get large numbers of Stratfordians with their heavy luggage onto the trains as quickly as possible. Most of the passengers were families taking their annual holiday and many of them were working class people well known socially to the railway men. The atmosphere on platform 1 was very light hearted as each express train was cheered in by the children and luggage loading and locomotive watering completed in record time. On a sunny morning the engine men faced a pleasant outbound job as the run from the Black Country down through Warwickshire and Gloucestershire was a fairly easy one with favourable grades as far as Bristol where most of the crews handed over to West of England men and after a break would crew a north bound train back to the Midlands in the afternoon. The routine local trains still had to be dealt with as normal and by 2.00pm when the shift changed the morning men had certainly earned their wages but under pleasant circumstances. By contrast the 2.00pm – 10.00pm shift was definitely a poisoned chalice.

The incoming foreman nearly always found that he was short of staff. This was because there were now vacancies that remained unfilled and the "relief" men that had been scheduled for work did not always turn in for this unpopular shift. In the days when the pubs closed at 2.00pm for the afternoon and 10.30pm in the evening there was little incentive for men to work on a Saturday late shift. In earlier days draconian discipline would have been applied to malingerers but those times had gone, the foreman had to make the best of it. If he were lucky one or two of the early shift men would agree to stay on and finish at 6.00pm which would give them the maximum continuous time allowed on a shift and still get them into the pub for the evening. There were several reasons for the unpopularity of the shift. The main one was the fact that they would be dealing with passengers returning from their holidays on overcrowded, late running trains that often lacked a buffet car. Arrivals from the south were discharged onto platform 2 and the porters would be expected to be ready to assist passengers with their heavy luggage. The favoured method of handling it was not to

try and carry it over the footbridge with the individual passengers but to load it all onto the four wheeled post office barrows and wheel it the full length of platform 2 onto the boarded crossing and back down platform 1 to the booking hall exit. Very often a delay to this would occur because the locomotive would have drawn forward to take water and was fouling the crossing. The crew, now nearing the end of a long shift, would be busy preparing the locomotive for the heavy climb out of the station and it was not unknown for these trains to spend up to 15 minutes stood at this spot while steam was raised in locomotives that were not now getting the standard of maintenance that had been the norm in past times. If a local train was due out of platform 3 the signalman would allow it away in front of the express as he knew the express crew would appreciate the break and there was no point in delaying the local. In the meantime tired families would be waiting impatiently for their suitcases with the prospects of a tip for the porters diminishing rapidly. Many of these returning holidaymaker trains were "strengthened" by the railway authorities at their departure point to try to ensure there were enough seats. Old carriages that only ever got used for excursions were added to the normal train with the result that with the loco stood at the water crane there could be up to three coaches stuck out of the end of platform 2 under the Alcester Road bridge and even past the West Signal Box. Any passengers needing to alight at Stratford from these coaches had to force their way with luggage and children up the corridor full of standing passengers until they got to the first door that was next to the platform face. At least the delays mentioned above meant they had no worry of the train leaving with them still on board! There was also the matter of the banking locomotive. Passenger trains could normally expect a quick shove for a mile or so and then they were on their own but the driver of the train loco on these occasions knew that he was up against the odds very often with the combination of a badly steaming engine and poor quality coal. Whilst the fireman attended to the water the driver would use the telephone provided in a box near the home signal to ask the signalman to let the banker push him to Wilmcote. Unfortunately there were several potential problems to make a refusal more likely than consent to this particular request. Although Wilmcote Signal Box was supposed to be open, the shortage of signalmen meant that in fact it was often closed and therefore the first place at which the bank engine could shut off and be turned back was Bearley West Junction. With the strong possibility that a down local train could be in the section to delay its return the banking engine could be lost for up to an hour and might need to take water when he did get back. Such was the procession of returning holiday trains that it was not unknown for one to be waiting in platform 2, one to be held at Milcote and another to be held at Long Marston. (For technical reasons prior to the summer of 1960 it was not permitted for a passenger train to be held at Evesham Road Crossing although in the unlikely event that S M Junction Box was manned one could be held there). With every train needing the bank engine losing it for an hour or more was a doomsday option, however with no facilities for a following train to overtake, the signalman could not risk letting a poorly performing locomotive forward if it was likely to stall on the bank and block the route for a long period. So the driver who made the most noise down the telephone sometimes got his way and the following trains were further delayed. There was also another situation that occurred more often than it should due to the extra length of the trains. If things were going to plan every time the bank engine pushed a train out he would be quickly run back to sit on the West Box carriage siding so that once the next train stopped in platform 2 with a quick change of the points he could be let out to buffer up to the rear coach and await the whistle from the lead engine to commence the push. Unfortunately these extra length trains often fouled the points and the bank engine was trapped. The West signal man had to get the station staff on the phone to go and tell the lead engine driver that he would have to try to ease his heavy train forward when ready, a task that very often was not possible as they just sat with wheels slipping on the adverse grade. The only option then was to

find another loco to couple onto the front to assist the train to come forward a short distance. In the mid fifties most of the local trains were steam hauled and it was no great problem to get the loco of a waiting local to give assistance but by 1959 many of the local trains were in the hands of diesel railcars so that option was not always available. In one extreme case the only method of resolving the situation was to allow the next waiting express to leave Milcote under a special operating rule and when it got to near the West Box the loco uncoupled from its train (the rear of which remained astride Evesham Road crossing) and went forward to push the stalled train clear of the points. It then ran back to its own train to allow the bank engine out of the siding to do its job. All of these activities provided hours of interest to the observer but a desperate amount of work for the railwaymen involved. On the very busiest summer Saturdays a locomotive would be sent from Tyesely depot to stand by at Stratford to assist any northbound train in real trouble by coupling onto the front and "double heading" the train through to Birmingham. Once it had been used it would be at least two hours before it would arrive back so in reality it only assisted a couple of the trains. There were many occasions when these overloaded trains would arrive hours after their booked time because of problems with their locomotive before they even reached Stratford.

The Stratford locomotive shed was a sub depot of the large ex GWR shed at Tyesely in the Birmingham suburbs and was run by a charge hand and staffed by a fitter and one or two labourers although there were always vacancies. The Stratford based footplate men "signed on" at the shed including the increasing number who by the end of the decade had finished with steam engines and were driving the new railcars. The traditional role of the shed was to provide overnight servicing for the tank engines that would head the first local trains of the day to Leamington and Birmingham. It was also the base for the bank engine and the shunting engine that normally worked the Birmingham Road Goods Yard. Only light servicing was carried out so the two latter engines would return to Tyesely at intervals for attention and be replaced with freshly serviced locos. There was a pool of around six of the ex GW 2251 class locomotives based at Tyesely that rotated on these duties. After the SMJ shed at Old Town closed the locomotive that worked the daily pick up goods train over the SMJ route would turn up for coal and overnight accommodation. Occasionally an excursion train would terminate at Stratford bringing visitors for a theatre matinee. The locomotive would visit the shed to take coal and await its return duty. These excursions were often full length express trains with a large passenger locomotive, sometimes of a type not normally seen at Stratford. They were not popular with the shed staff because the small coaling stage was a totally manual operation. Trucks of loco coal were shunted up the ramped track at the rear of the stage and the labourers had to hand shovel the coal from them into "tubs" with small metal wheels that were then pushed by hand out onto a ramp that was shaped so as to cause them to tip up and discharge the coal into the waiting locomotive tender. The tubs held about 5 cwt and were supposed to be kept filled at all times. A large visiting engine could devour the contents of all of the tubs with ease. Filling the tubs on a warm day was not a pleasant task; I did it often as an unofficial duty in return for being allowed to ride on the footplate of the banking engine.

By the late 1950's the workload of the shed had declined as many of the local trains were being run by the new green diesel railcars and competition from road transport was having a big impact on the goods traffic to Birmingham Road yard. I don't remember exactly when but the provision of the shunting loco ceased at some time around 1959 due to a combination of less work and shortage of crews. Any shunting required had to be done by the bank engine in between its normal duties. The bank engine was booked as a twenty-four hour job except on a Sunday but it was often used on the Sabbath to haul track repair trains for the local gangers. Most weekends in 1959 and winter/spring

of 1960 there was a lot of additional locomotive and engineering train activity connected with the construction work going on at Old Town and along the line to Fenny Compton in connection with the upgrade of the western end of the ex SMJ route.

My recollections of that work and of the scene around Old Town are contained in volume 02.02.

J R Jennings; last revised 3.2005. Following a proof read by a friend with no railway knowledge I refer similar readers to Note 3 below.

[Note 1] I have compiled a list of publications containing references to the Stratford Transport scene. Refer to Volume 02.03

[Note 2] T E Williams. Tom Williams was an accomplished railway photographer who lived in Stratford. He started to photograph the railway scene around 1948 and continued to do so until the mid 1960's. His black and white negative collection is held in the National Railway Archive at York, unfortunately the location of his colour slide collection does not appear to be known. A small number of them are in the custody of private individuals including myself. Tom worked in the wine & spirit dept of Flower & Son in Brewery St. I believe that he was eventually the manager there. Throughout the 1950's he graduated from a bicycle to a Vespa Scooter and later to a Hillman car to transport himself to photo locations. When he married in the late 1950's his first home was a flat at the town end of Alcester Road opposite the Hospital from where he could easily keep an eye and ear on the activities going on at the station. His first wife tragically died in the early 1960's leaving him to raise his small son on his own. Although he later remarried his photographic output diminished rapidly for both this obvious personal reason and the fact that steam traction was coming to an end. I believe that he left Stratford after Whitbread took over Flowers Brewery because they relocated his job. There may be some additional personal background about him entered with his negative collection at York.

[Note 3] Glossary of Railway terms used.

Locomotive, loco, engine, banker and bank(ing) engine all refer to any type of individual steam locomotive.

Signal Box. A control centre from where track routes and their associated signals were set by means of mechanical levers grouped together. The signal men communicated with each other by various electro mechanical instruments, bells and telephone.

Water Tower or Tank. A large oblong steel tank set on a tower or suitable building approx 40 feet above ground to provide good pressure. Water would be fed into this at a constant rate until it was full.

Water crane. These were situated wherever locos needed to take water. They were connected to the water tower by large bore iron pipes. A horizontal delivery pipe was swung out over the loco filler hole and water was discharged at a very fast flow rate to minimise delays.

Ganger. A railwayman employed to maintain the track.

Shunter. This word had two meanings. 1. A shunting locomotive. 2. A man who was employed to couple and uncouple trucks in a busy yard. He might also supervise loading and recording of freight. At passenger stations where running round was a regular job one of the porters would be designated porter/shunter, a separate grade that carried slightly enhanced pay.

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