

## **Recollections of Wheatley GWR by Avery**

*The following is a transcription of an original typed manuscript dated 19/8/74 by Robert Avery, a former schoolmaster at Magdalen College School and resident of Wheatley. It is a set of recollections of the village railway, and includes mention of some of the station personnel and war time workings. Robert was born in 1934 and died on 16 April 2012.*

It is ten years since the trains ran to Wheatley. To be exact the passenger service disappeared in 1963 and the goods traffic two years later. Unwanted, the station was knocked to the ground two years after that. Finally, another two years elapsed before contractors came, lifted, and carried away the track.

We locals could hardly complain. We hardly used the railway, though it had its uses. It was better to take a dog on a train than a bus. But in 1960 we were far too busy with the family car. Now that's changed and we are busy with two.

The site of the station can still be seen. The road bridge at the North end has been blown up and the journey down the hill from Cuddesdon made faster but, if you stand where the bridge once was, you still get a commanding view of the line disappearing South to the River Thames and beyond. Beyond were the Chiltern Hills at Princess Risborough and the main line to London. London was a magic word in railway days. We talked of the London train, and before rationalisation which followed nationalisation we could go all the way to Paddington without a change. A monthly return cost 9/11 third class.

Looking South the eye traces the platforms and the width of the yard. The destruction is just as the contractor left it save the weeds are more abundant and the track bed wetter. The contractor got what he paid for and now there is nothing left for anyone else. Where the station stood and the railway ran is a little bit of history and an eyesore in the middle of the village. To my mind it is something so typical of Wheatley – Oxfordshire's most unlovely village. Perhaps it is a good thing to be reminded that not all places belong to the world of picture postcards and illustrated guide books. Life isn't like that.

It was the ugliness of behaviour in Wheatley that occupied the mind of endeavours of the parish priest of a hundred years ago, the Reverend. E. Elton. In his diary he writes of drunkenness, rioting, and badger baiting. Certainly Oxford undergraduates came to Wheatley for the dissolute life. When the railway was mooted Elton went to Thame in support of it on moral grounds and when it came it provided the inhabitants of Wheatley a safe means of travel to Oxford – safe that is from the vagrants and drunkards of the old coach road over Shotover. Not that Wheatley people did go to Oxford a hundred years ago. The village had its own employment and its own market.

The line through Wheatley was opened on the 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1863. It was an extension to Kennington of the Wycombe Railway Company. Not the Great Western yet. That came in 1867 – an early and successful take-over bid.

My grandfather brought his business to Wheatley *because* of the railway. His trade was timber. A Buckinghamshire man he was in competition with the mills at High Wycombe. My aunt tells me that travelling down to Oxford one day on the train he saw from the carriage window the ideal site for a new works so got out and bought the land. He and his sons owed a

lot to the railway which transported their goods to London, the Midlands, Bristol, and Wales. The firm's notepaper bore the cachet "Adjoining G.W.R. station".

I got to know the railway from our own back garden which overlooked the line and from my father's office which was as good as built actually on the down platform. But any sustained observation of railway practice was made from the signalbox. I remember when I had learned to read what an impact the notice on the signal box door made. "Great Western Railway. No unauthorised person allowed in this box By Order". My father was always scrupulous, however, in asking permission either of the Station Master or the Signaller on duty: men whom he knew very well. Closely knit though the village community then was – I am speaking of the days during and immediately after the last war – people did not take one another for granted. No-one presumed.

During and after the war when I lived in the signalbox there were two Signallers and a Porter-Signaller. The shifts were 6-00 a.m. to 2-00 p.m., 2-00 p.m. to 6-00 p.m., and 6-00 p.m. until 6-00 a.m. The afternoon shift was the regular time for me. I used to have the box to myself then. The morning was busy because the local coal merchants would walk across the running lines from the sidings opposite and have their morning break with the Signaller: the gangers likewise if they were working in the station. Gangers were the men who looked after the track and ran about the line on a petrol driven trolley. There were three coal merchants and they were busy unloading trucks six days a week. One such firm was owned by the village's only Alderman, a distinguished and assertive man of authoritative opinion who told me whenever he came into the box I was destined for the Church but so far, it seems, in this he did not speak with his customary authority.

In the war one of the two Signallers who was, I think, an army Captain was in charge of the local Home Guard. He fitted gas-masks in the box in 1939/40. He was very quietly spoken. The other had a strong round voice and presented a rather fiercer aspect to the very young. His two sons went on the railway and then fought in the war. One suffered in prison at the hands of the Japanese. Both were fine cricketers. After the war the younger used to work in the G.W.R. office on Carfax, Oxford, which I always thought a pity because he was so far from the trains. How I would hate modern signalboxes, if that's what they are called, where you don't see the trains at all.

You had to be very careful in the signalbox which was kept impressively clean. You could see your face in the steel tops of the levers and in the brass work. You were forbidden to touch the levers and whenever the Signaller had to shift one he always held it with a duster. *Zebo* was used on all the black iron work so that shone too. There was polished brown lino on the floor and invariably a fire in the grate. The box was swept unceasingly or so it seemed to me and especially by the Porter-Signaller who may have been conscious of his secondary role and wished to give no cause for complaint. I think there was strong sense of hierarchy. There was no doubt that Stationmaster Clark was an impressive figure. He always donned his pillbox hat and met all the trains. He built his house on the slopes of Ladder Hill facing the station. He could almost look into his office from his drawing-room window. His immediate successor never, to my eye, wore his hat which was a sign of the times because that was just after nationalisation. He in turn was succeeded by Wheatley's last Stationmaster and he was moved by British Rail before the line closed so in the end the station had no staff at all.

I don't know which of the stationmasters was responsible for a joke played on a young lad who was office boy. The station was low in paraffin for the signal lamps and the boy was sent

on the 10-20 down to Oxford, told to get off at Littlemore, and walk the line to Kennington Junction where there were supplies. Now it happened the Signaller at Kennington that morning was a Wheatley man so when the boy was in the train the Stationmaster was on the telephone to tell the Signaller that the boy had been told to ask for a gallon of red and a gallon of green. The boy duly arrived and delivered his message. The Signaller poured out a gallon of pink paraffin into one empty can. "There's yer red", he said and then, pouring another of pink into a second can he said, "But you can tell them at Wheatley they'll have to mix their green for themselves." And with that he produced a bottle of green ink from which he had removed the label. The boy got the train back to Wheatley and solemnly reported the facts to the amusement of all who heard him.

There was a brick kiln and works North of the station on the climb to the tunnel under Shotover. Access to it was across an open level crossing and trains were restricted to ten miles an hour. This was hardly a hindrance because trains from Oxford were slowing down to stop at the station or at least to exchange the single line token and trains in the other direction were climbing out of the station on a gradient of 1 in 84. Goods trains at night on wet rails would make a horrible hash of this and wake the village at 1-00 a.m. When trains were due a warning bell rang continuously at the crossing. With up trains in section from Morris Cowley the bell rang for a considerable time before the train appeared which prompted carts and lorries to take risks so that there were some accidents and many narrow escapes.

I probably travelled by train long before I spent days in the signalbox. There were two morning trains to Oxford for shoppers. The "five-to-nine" as it was known locally which crossed the up London and the 10-20. The latter was a big engine turn from Paddington having travelled via Maidenhead and High Wycombe. Going to Oxford always meant a long wait at Morris Cowley where tickets were sold to passengers who had joined at Horspath Halt. We always came home on the 4-50 diesel rail car. Once during a bus strike I was allowed to travel with the driver in the cab which meant I had a wonderful view of that pin prick of approaching light as we came through the tunnel. A railway line with a tunnel is a very superior affair and it became a sine qua non of a really good model railway.

One regular passenger on the homeward bound rail car was a woman who worked in Oxford and lived in Farm Close, Wheatley, now a housing estate but then a picturesque and narrow lane of slate tiles and old thatch. The step into the carriage was very steep and she, as was right on behalf of a season ticket holder, was invariably assisted most gallantly by the platform inspector sporting a carnation in his button hole in the traditional Great Western manner.

The war brought special excitements. When the Reading line was bombed expresses for Worcester were rerouted to what was announced on the loudspeakers at Oxford as the Thame Line. And this also happened in 1964 when a petrol train overturned at Didcot and brought down a footbridge over the line. In 1943 U.S.A. freight locomotives worked heavy goods trains through the station prior to going abroad after "D" day. And when in 1944 the Americans opened a military hospital at Holton Park a mile to the East of the village, ambulance trains came to Wheatley from East coast ports worked by London and North Eastern engines of Great Eastern vintage. The trains were too long for the platforms and with most of the passengers stretcher cases had to draw up several times. They spent so long at the station that they conflicted with trains in the time-table and caused problems if the pick-up goods happened to be in the yard. It was a case of too many wagons and coaches for too little

track. And somehow fate decreed that the Signaller at Thame or Morris Cowley always had something to offer just when Wheatley didn't want it.

In the end Wheatley didn't want it and didn't get it. A bus from Aylesbury every forty minutes, supplemented by those from High Wycombe and Little Milton put us all down at Cattle Street or Gloucester Green and picked us up again whilst the train steamed up the hill to Shotover, past William Morris's motor works, and across the Thame at Kennington to the Oxford gas works and that inevitable wait at the cemetery outside Oxford station – empty. So, Although the last train of all – to Princes Risborough and back – was full, its passengers in carnival costume and accompanied by patriotic tunes treated it in as cavalier a fashion as all those who never went by train had done. Well, it's all done away with now. Only the scars are left. But if you come to Wheatley, especially on a Sunday, you'll find us busy with our cars.

Robert Avery – 19.8.74

*This article was commented on by Chris Heaven, 2014, from his personal hobby site*

*<http://www.railwaymapsanddocuments.com/page-51.htm>*

*It is followed by an account, by the same author, of a car journey tracking the Stephenson Locomotive Society Railtour "Farewell to Kings".*

*This was the last train hauled by a [King Class locomotive](#) before the end of the steam era on British Railways.*