

Robert Avery and the Wheatley Railway

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During the Second World War, Robert Avery, grandson of William, spent a lot of his spare time in the signal box at Wheatley, observing railway activity, and his recollections provide an insight into the ways of the railway and the people who ran it. The signalmen at the time were Messrs. Jackson and Cox, with Bill Ladbroke who acted as porter/signalman. The shifts were 6 am to 2 pm, 2 pm -6 pm, and 6 pm - 6 am. The morning shift was always busy in the signal box, because the coal merchants would walk across the running lines from the sidings opposite the box, and have their morning break with the signalmen, and the gangers likewise if they were working in the station. The coal merchants were Tombs and Son, and Reids of Cuddesdon. Another merchant, Mobbs, still has his yard by the site of the old station.

During the war, signalman Jackson was in charge of the local Home Guard, and he fitted gas masks in the signal box during 1939/40. Both Jackson and Cox were real gentlemen, and kept the box spotlessly clean. No-one was allowed to touch the levers except with a duster. The lever tops were so clean that it was literally possible to see one's face in them. The black ironwork was also cleaned thoroughly, using 'Zebo'. There was brown lino on the floor, and invariably a fire in the grate. The box was swept regularly and thoroughly by Bill Ladbroke.

There was a strong sense of hierarchy throughout the station staff. Stationmaster Clark was an impressive figure, who always donned his pillbox hat to meet every train. He built his house on the slopes of Ladder Hill, in a position which commanded a fine view of the station. In fact, Wheatley's last Stationmaster, Mr Kimber, also lived on Ladder Hill. He was assured that the prospects at Wheatley were good, but unfortunately, these assurances proved to be empty, and in its latter days Wheatley had no station staff at all; the guard of the daily goods train opened up the office and worked the ground frame which replaced the signal box, which was demolished in July 1964.

Just outside Wheatley was Cooper's crossing where a warning bell rang continuously at the approach of a train. With an up train from Morris Cowley, the bell would be ringing for many minutes before the train actually reached the crossing, and this prompted several people to take risks. There were several instances of collisions between train and lorry on the

crossing, but few of a serious nature, partly because the trains were restricted to 10 mph over the crossing. Such restriction was helped by the climb out of the station up to the tunnel at a gradient of 1 in 84. when hauling long goods trains on wet rails, drivers would invariably encounter a great deal of difficulty at this point, and on more than one occasion woke up the entire village at about 1 am.

The morning trains to Oxford, including the 'five to nine' were always very popular during the late thirties, as was the 10.20 am. The 8.55 was a local train, usually with a Prairie tank in charge, but the 10.20 was an Old Oak common turn, travelling via High Wycombe and Maidenhead, and whilst usually a 'Hall', sometimes turned up hauled by a 'Castle'. Going to Oxford usually meant a longish wait at Morris Cowley, where tickets were sold to those who had joined the train at Horspath Halt. Sometimes the train would be held at Kennington Junction for another train to get ahead on the main line, but this brought no joy to the railway enthusiast because the carriages were often hidden in the cutting before the Thames Bridge.

A typical shopping trip to oxford would mean returning on the 4.50 pm (later 4.40 pm) railcar. Numbers 9,11, and 20 were regulars on this run. At Morris Cowley, the railcar passed the workers' train to Banbury which was held at the box. The engine on the workers' train was nearly always No. 2921, *Saint bunstan*, beautifully turned out.

London trips were usually made on the 8.40 am up, an Oxford turn, usually in the charge of 'Halls.' The regular engines on this turn were Nos. 4928 *Gatacre Hall*, 4973 *Sweeney Hall*, and 5960 *Saint Edmond Hall*.

The doyen of the line was the 11.25 m off Oxford, restored a long time after the War, and an express turn. No 4049 *Princess Maud* worked this train in her last years, as did Nos.7008 *Swansea Castle*, 5014 *Goodrich Castle*, and 5022 *Wigmore Castle*. Like the 8.40 am, this train went to Paddington direct (i.e. via Beaconsfield). Beaconsfield was printed on the tickets to avoid any confusion with the longer and slower alternative route via Maidenhead. This latter was the route taken by the 7.10 up in the evening, which used to pick up the milk churns on the way. The route itself later became known as 'The Milky Way' because of the habits of this one train.

Local goods traffic was mainly in the hands of the 61XX tanks from Oxford, but through trains brought both Moguls and 28XX 2-8-0s. during the war the first of the 'Yankee' 2-8-0 freight locomotives appeared on Great Western metals. They were very powerful locomotives, although one

driver of the time recalls taking a heavily loaded ammunition train into Horspath tunnel with one of these engines on a wet day, and coming to an ignominious halt half way through. This in itself would not have been serious but *for* the nature of the load. Matters were further aggravated when the train, having come to a stand, began to slide slowly backwards out of the tunnel towards Oxford. Help was eventually summoned and the train got safely under way with banking assistance. So far as is known, only two of these trains were actually shedded at Oxford, Nos. 2102 and 2280, although others did of course work over the line through Thame.

The establishment of an American Military Hospital at the edge of Wheatley village brought hospital trains from the east coast ports travelling via Cambridge, Bletchley and Oxford. Great Eastern B12s and O16s thus reached far into Great Western territory. The trains were always too long for the platforms, usually consisting of twelve *coaches*. Thus they had to draw up several times in order to offload their passengers. This inevitably meant delays at the station, and the hospital trains frequently conflicted with the regular trains in the timetable. Even greater problems were encountered if the pick-up goods was in the yard. It was a classic puzzle for the signalmen to sort out, but they usually coped quite well, even if they did have resource to some choice language!

The war also brought from time to time expresses for Worcester because the Reading line had been bombed. On one occasion a doubleheaded train for Worcester was approaching the station rather too fast, and the fireman of the train engine was concentrating so hard on picking up the staff carrying the single line token that he threw the one he was to set down on the post away, and it was only found after a diligent search of the undergrowth. These trains were able to maintain a great deal of momentum through the station, because the down starter was a very tall signal which could be seen as the train climbed to the station from the Thame river bridge.

There was something of a renaissance at Wheatley in the 1950s and Stationmaster Kimber and Porter Goodlake brought the station gardens alive again, and planted beds of flowers which tumbled down the banks of the road bridge, but alas, even the bridge is no more, having been demolished in 1971. It is interesting to note that even when the bridge's fate was finally settled, it took two large charges of gelignite to shift it!