

The Engine Driver's Memorial

Nottingham Road Cemetery is the last resting place for many former railway employees. One of the more unusual memorials is that of Abel Boden, an engine driver for the Midland Railway.



The headstone is conventional in appearance but it is complemented by a stone at the foot bearing a picture of a Johnson 4-4-0 locomotive and this epitaph:

My engine is now cold and still, No water does my boiler fill,
My coal affords its flame no more, my days of usefulness are o'er,
My wheels deny their noted speed, no more my guiding hand they need,
My whistle too has lost its tone, its shrill and thrilling sounds are gone,
My valves are all thrown open wide, my flanges now refuse to guide,
My clacks also once so strong, refuse to aid the busy throng,
No more I feel each urging breath, my steam is now condensed in death,
Life's railway over each station passed, in death I'm stopped and rest at last,
Farewell dear friends and cease to weep, In Christ I'm safe, in Him I sleep.

Abel Boden was the son of John and Catherine Boden, born at Scarthin Nick, Cromford and baptised at St Mary's church, Cromford on 10 May 1835. He is not to be confused with another of the same name, also born in Matlock, also in 1835, who became a baker.

While they were in their early teens, both boys would have seen the construction of the Manchester, Buxton, Matlock and Midland Junction Railway along the Derwent valley between Ambergate and Rowsley. For Abel Boden of Cromford, the railway was to be his escape from a life working in one of Arkwright's cotton mills.

When Abel married at St Peter's church, Derby on 6 February 1859, his occupation was given as "stoker", that is, railway engine fireman. His 21-year-old bride was Mary Ann Clarke, mill hand, daughter of Thomas Clark, lace hand. Abel was 23 at the time. Both gave their address as 93 Oxford Street which is taken as meaning that they lodged in the same house, not that they lived together.

Oxford Street was then two rows of terraced houses between London Road and Osmaston Road, within walking distance of Derby engine shed. A small part still exists as the main entrance to London Road Hospital.

Their first child was baptised John Thomas in the Chapelry of Long Eaton on 4 March 1860, Long Eaton then being part of the much larger parish of Sawley. A year later, they had moved again, for the 1861 Census gives their address as Derby Road, Sandiacre and Abel had been promoted to Engine Driver. He would be based at Toton engine shed where the opportunities were limited to driving shunting and goods locomotives.

Promotion to driving passenger trains resulted in another move. By 1863 they were back in Derby when their daughter, Elizabeth, was baptised. Another daughter, Lily, was baptised on 23 September 1868, at St Andrew's church, London Road – sometimes known as "the railwaymen's church" because so many Midland Railway employees worshipped there. They were then living at 36 Barlow Street, a street which still exists off London Road, although the original houses have gone.

It is assumed that Abel reached the "top link", driving express passenger trains. The locomotive depicted on his grave would have been familiar to Abel, although out-of-date by the time of his death.

He clearly saved enough to be able to retire early as the 1901 Census shows that he had moved away from the railway to St Luke's parish, where he was described as "living on own means". Many older people had to continue working as the state Old Age Pension of 5 shillings a week from age 70 was not introduced until 1909.

The statement on the memorial, that Abel and Mary Ann "both died Sept 19th 1921" led to speculation that they were together in a fatal accident. Nottingham Road Cemetery burial register records the burial, on 23 September 1921, of Abel Boden, age 86, engine driver of 8 King Alfred Street, Derby in plot 49747 in general ground. There is no entry for the burial of Mary Ann Boden. Furthermore, her age given on the memorial is incorrect for 1921. Searching the registers for late September 1916 and 1917, when she would have been 79, was equally unsuccessful. The inscription is incorrect, but the true dates have yet to be found.

The memorial to Abel and Mary Ann Boden, and some of their daughters is in Nottingham Road Cemetery, zone A38. From either entrance to the cemetery, turn right, so that you are walking in a westerly direction with Nottingham Road on your right. The grave is easy to find as it is alongside the path near the top of Cemetery Hill. The National Grid reference is SK37095 36640.

Peter Barnes

