

Tales of the rails and other minor indiscretions

In one of my regular contributions to 'Bygones' about the railways of Derbyshire, I recalled how well over forty years ago a friend and myself journeyed to Central Europe to view their rail systems and the last of the Continent's regular steam loco workings. Within this piece I outlined a minor indiscretion, whereby as very young men we had collected returned coins from malfunctioning left luggage boxes and spent the proceeds on a welcome last meal before our return home to the UK and the East Midlands. As we spent the collection in the rail station cafe at the time, I looked upon the matter as little more than a contra item in the book-keeping. My pal Mike (I originally gave him a false name) thought very little of my long overdue admission of guilt as he had gone on to achieve a high ranking financial position in the transport industry south of the Thames; he quite rightly felt the incident was long best forgotten. However, it did make me question my own integrity and made me think of the actions of both myself and others and how conscience often rises to the surface after the passage of many years. For a short while in my early years working for the British Railways Board in Derby, I had a clerical position in the financial arena, often working upon a section termed Warrant Travel. British Rail as it was then operated a system whereby companies and various organisations inclusive of H.M. Forces, exchanged travel warrants for tickets with transactions and admin being dealt with after the journeys had been made. Because we collected monies for BR we quite often received letters from passengers of decades previous who would state something along the lines of; 'Many years ago I travelled on the Great Western Railway between Stroud and Gloucester and never paid my fare of three shillings and sixpence – I am now a committed Christian and would not only like to admit my guilt but enclose a postal order for two pounds which I believe will not only cover the original cost of the ticket but any interest due'. If I also remember correctly these late financial payments and other ad hoc incomings found their way to St Christopher's Railway Orphanage that used to be located on Ashbourne Road in the then town.

Sporting organisations inclusive of professional football clubs and County Cricket organisations used the warrant system and on one occasion upon receiving payment, a compliment slip was enclosed bearing the name and logo of Leicester City F.C. – I dealt with the remittance but retained the slip instead of binning it. I had an old school friend from Spondon who I knew to be originally a Leicestershire lad and a keen supporter of 'the Foxes' and couldn't let the opportunity pass to pull his leg a little. I persuaded a young lady in the Technical Centre typing pool to type a spoof letter from LCFC and forwarded it to his address along with the compliment slip but had it posted in Leicester by another railway colleague who travelled to Derby every day for his employ. The gist of the letter was as a prank treating him like a ten year old and addressed to Master Gibson and informing him that as a member of the 'junior blues' club, he had won first prize for his winning entry of the youthful terrace chant 'oomahwahka yakka craka City' – and as such would be receiving a free inflatable furry blue fox to place alongside his other club memorabilia. Over a year later and after holding a prolonged silence I was enjoying a pint with him one eve in Spondon Village's lovely old Malt Shovel pub, when I casually asked if he had recently been to watch his team play and if Leicester City FC had sent him his fox yet? I cannot print his reply- however; at Derby's Beer Festival a few years ago, he pointedly informed me he had still never received his fox mascot.

At an earlier point in time I was just as guilty of another minor indiscretion involving the Railways but long before I worked for them. When first coming to Derbyshire at the start of my teens from a more northerly location, I was grateful that my new pals from the locality not only welcomed me so heartily but aided my leisure hours by introducing me to the 27th Derby Scout Group and accompanying me to Raynesway Bridge to train spot and pass away the hours. (They were even understanding of my foreign sounding speech as a new pal's mother originally hailed from a Northumbrian village only a few miles from my previous home – she translated my odd phrases and removed the need for sign language!).

Night after night, particularly in the summer months we would hang out at Raynesway watching the often steam hauled trains depart Chaddesden sidings for places far and wide. Sadly however, like teenage boys of all era's we were prone to the pangs of boredom and in between passing trains, looked for other outlets. Firing pellets of clay from springy hazel twigs at one and other was one such pastime but on another occasion, we hatched a plot of a more sinister nature. I was reminded of our actions shortly before I left the railways employment in the capacity of a Public Affairs Manager at the Rail Tech Centre, when I received a letter from the TV presenter, Adam Hart-Davis. He was compiling a book of all things on 'British Toilets' and wanted to know how the railways had dealt with this very human need over the decades. At British Rail Research and Development, Derby based engineers had devised many advances in this area for rolling stock and along with ergonomic studies for comfort and practicability; the disposal of waste was treated with utmost respect in relation to hygiene and subsequent treatment. In the steam era, toilet waste from trains had been disposed of onto the track whilst the train was in motion; plate-layers and permanent way workers had the unpleasant duty of track walking their section with a container full of a chemical-based liquid to pour on to advance decomposition and reduce the risk of contamination. An early report we had at BR R&D described how in the late nineteen forties the former LMS Railway in Derby had pioneered changes by organising a test train in the Castle Donnington area, whereby white-wash was poured down the trains toilets at speed to determine the fallout area and spread not only on to the track but underneath carriages. This research not only aided engineers and scientists to better design loo's in railway coaches by more effectively containing spread on to the track but restricted spoil to a more specific area. Historically it must have been a very unpleasant task for workers at Derby's Carriage and Wagon Works and other venues when repairing the underneath of such vehicles and finding waste still adhering to undercarriages. As teenage lads in the sixties we were well used to seeing dollops of effluent and toilet paper deposited on to the track, it was not a pretty sight. However, like most boys we had an exceedingly base sense of humour and the plan we devised was equally base. Spondon House School which sadly no longer stands had only recently moved to its new location in then, modern form. I felt I was lucky enough to have a new school to attend of only a few months old with a wide range of facilities including a swimming pool, science labs and other attractions. One such prized area was the art department which boasted its own kiln and pottery making facilities- a welcome outlet for the artistic minded. With clay working in mind we decided that if we placed a visual target on the tracks under Raynesway Rail Bridge, we could carry out a dam buster type operation of the sort famously devised by Derbyshire's celebrated son Barnes-Wallis: also, we could use the expertise gained in pottery lessons to achieve our aims.

Every summer Saturday for a period of weeks in the mid-sixties, a holiday train bound for Paignton and the Cornish Riviera left Nottingham and picked up at other East Midland stations such as Long Eaton, Spondon and Derby before taking excited holiday makers to the south west coast. Unlike most passenger trains which took the existing tracks past Alvaston Park and over the Derwent, the holiday special left Spondon under the bridge and took the tracks through the sidings which are now covered by the A52. An older compatriot who spotted with us at Raynesway elected to put the target on the tracks, we had never been on running lines as trespass onto the railway was a real no, no. Under the cover of arriving darkness the leading senior fugitive who we shall call 'Mick' crept down the small embankment and armed with a scoop of white marl unearthed from beside the old canal side he drew a ring and inner dot right across the wooden sleepers at the entrance to the bridge. As errant youths our part in the covert action was to mould a bomb of clay to be deposited in the W.C. and flushed from the train when we travelled on the short journey from Spondon station to Derby Midland – the intent being to see if we could manage a direct hit and bull's-eye. We used excavated orange coloured clay that had been churned up by diggers underneath the bridge and using the skills acquired in pottery classes created a tapered missile of clay that disgustingly resembled a large piece of human waste. On the Saturday morning of the operation we made our way into the train's old compartment stock as it picked up at Spondon and with lookouts posted at each window giving positioning and command we flushed the offending clay rocket down the pan and hoped for the best. The following Monday eve at our spotting venue we were elated to see our bomb had hit the target circle and was only inches from the bulls-eye. The amazingly realistic and lifelike 'poo' stood erect with a tilting spire not unlike Chesterfields famous church: a couple winters came and went and eventually the frost and rain reduced it to an orangey splodge upon the ballast that lasted right up to the time the rails were sadly lifted.

I never admitted my youthful misdemeanour to either the 'would be' author on the unusual subject matter or my superiors during my rail career spanning three decades- never the less, I was a willing participant in the incident and have to admit it is just another small indiscretion in my flawed and lengthy past. Derby's St Christopher's Orphanage is obviously no more so I cannot make a conscience saving donation but there is a charitable organisation called 'the railway children' that looks after orphaned and destitute children worldwide that sleep on stations and live on other railway premises – I'm sure a donation won't go amiss.

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