

A day on a top link job !

I was very privileged to be given the chance to act as guard on the first passenger carrying train to leave Moor Street for some twenty five years. The last steam locomotive to depart the old Moor Street station was "Clun Castle" in the late 1980's. Clun is partway through overhaul at Tyseley, so 5043 "Earl of Mount Edgecumbe" made a worthy substitute. The train was originally routed to Bristol Temple Meads via Reading, but due to scaffolding currently on some of the canopy awnings 5043 was deemed to be out of gauge. The destination was switched to London Paddington, some may say a far better option!

I hardly slept the night before, the combination of nerves and excitement keeping me well awake. When the alarm finally did go off, I made my way to Tyseley yard along the deserted leafy suburbs of the Warwick road. Walking along the path in to the depot, I'm left to wonder just how many enginemasters and train crews have preceded me in the depot's history, booking on to take expresses to London, South Wales and the West Country. Probably walking down this very same pathway.

Once in the depot, it's like being in the 1960's. Pannier tank 9600 is scuttling around the yard, 5043 is being watered and coaled up, D1755 is on the front of our coaches providing electric heat. After a small shunt 9600 takes the Birmingham end of the train ready for departure. Driver Ray Churchill arrives and I hand him the driver's slip, 10 vehicles (including both locomotives) weighing 315 tons, maximum speed 45 mph. 9600 proudly displays express headlamps; Ray and I agree that it should be put in its place, so we changed them to ECS – more befitting the panniers role for today! 5043 is on the rear of the train, with Inspector Andy Taylor, driver Ray Poole and fireman Bob Meanley. 5043 proudly displays "The Intercity" on its headboard, along with "Driver R. Poole – Bushbury" on the cab side. Did Bushbury men drive castles?

Right Away From Moor Street

At 0750, I give the right away to driver Churchill on 9600, who crows the rear crew that we are ready to move. 9600 erupts in to life up the embankment towards Small Heath probably waking half of Birmingham in the process, 5043 is taking its own weight but it's quite clear that 9600 is doing the majority of the work. Rounding the curve past Caledonia yard, under the camp hill lines and through Bordesley, the new signal protecting moves in and out of Moor Street is illuminated with a single yellow with the number 4 in the route indicator.

Ray takes it gently in to the platform, a great many people are here taking photographs. Ian Baxter is on the platform in a uniform befitting a Great Western general manager, Mr Felix Pole would be proud. We come to rest just short of the buffer stops and 9600 is uncoupled from the train. I complete Ray Poole's driver's slip with the revised train length and speed, now nine vehicles maximum speed 75 mph. After chatting to envious Chiltern colleagues, it's time to get the train away.

We have a ceremonial pressing of the "train ready to start" button; the platform signal almost immediately comes off showing a green and letter U for the up line. A quick check of the doors, then

my watch, I wave the green flag with a long blow on the whistle. Eight coaches away 5043 whistles back and the train accelerates away to the 20mph speed limit past a huge gallery of photographers.

The Up Intercity

After leaving Moor Street we head to our first station at Solihull, long gone are the days of the 20mph chord at Tyseley junction, we go through at the maximum speed of 60mph, then accelerate through Acocks Green and Olton. On reaching Solihull the Chiltern dignitaries including Adrian Shooter, Sir William Mc Alpine and Ian Baxter leave the train. Another right away gets us on the move, but not for long as we are booked in Dorridge UP passenger loop for twenty five minutes. A cross country train bound for Reading and a Chiltern bound for Banbury pass before the signal clears, we come to stand in Dorridge platform, for our next station pick up. Then it's on to Warwick Parkway for the next pick up, we leave right time but encounter a double yellow just before Warwick station, coming to a stand at LN46. We are held here for eleven minutes, a call to Leamington PSB reveals that there is a scheduling error with a cross country service heading from Bournemouth. Its booked to go via Coventry along the branch line, so we must wait. The signal goes to single yellow, as we are behind the Chiltern that passed us at Dorridge which has also met with the same delay. The Chiltern service departs the station, accelerating to the maximum 90mph permitted between Leamington and Banbury it is soon out of our way. The train restarts and to our relief LN 41 is showing a green with M indicating we are to pass through the middle, we pass through at the regulation 40mph, increasing slowly to the maximum 75mph once clear.

The line rises slowly to a summit just beyond the short tunnel at Arbury, 5043 takes this with ease. No sooner as we have stopped we are on the move again, aiming to rid ourselves of the eleven minute deficit. Going past Aynho Junction, we soon pass in to Network Rail's western region and under the control of Oxford panel. Yellows again then a red at Wolvercot whilst an FGW HST comes off the branch to Worcester, the signal clears to yellow, and we proceed through Oxford station and in to the up and down goods loop where we are to take water.

We arrive with 1100 gallons of water in the tender; ideally we need it to be the full 4000 gallons upon departure. The support crew spring in to action with ladders to climb the fence that gives access to the fire hydrant, driver and fireman are on the tender pulling coal forward. Alistair Meanley walks around with the oil feeder topping up where needed, whilst I act as look out. The water pressure is very low on the hydrant, so we leave 15 minutes late having taken our booked time of 30mins, but about 500 gallons short of the maximum we need.

Exiting on to the mainline, we head for Didcot Parkway, for our operational stop. We swap Bob Meanley for Duncan Ballard on the footplate, two cross country voyagers pass by and we depart along the up relief towards Reading. 5043 accelerates rapidly to the maximum of 75mph, any delay here will cost big money in compensation to First Great Western. We then slow for the 30mph restriction through the platform at Reading, driver Poole opening the regulator to give the photographers a good show. Shortly after an HST pulls alongside on the up main, there are plenty friendly exchanges between the crews. The HST doesn't stay for long, the driver opening the power handle and shows off his superior horse power!

By Slough our deficit has been reduced to around six minutes, we soon pick up the over head live wires at Airport Junction and slow for the 15mph restriction at Hayes and Harlington. One of the

support crew points out one of the massive airbus A380's leaving Heathrow Airport. The section of line between Hayes and Paddington is extremely busy with express trains to the west, the airport shuttle trains and FGW local trains. We are now pulling the time back well only being one minute down passing Acton Mainline. We soon pass Old Oak Common and the empty shell of the former Eurostar North Pole works, why would any TOC waste such a modern facility? At Ladbroke Grove we use the ladder crossover to end up on line 4 and then cross over to line 1 at Royal Oak. We pass the class 37 that will take us to Southall and enter platform 1. Driver Poole opens the regulator to give some "chuff" and the sound of a castle can be heard once again at Paddington. We come to a stand some 30 seconds early.

Round about the London Suburbs!

Whilst the footplate crew bask in the glory of photographs and a job well done, it's time for the guard to get down and dirty. 37 7706 rounds the corner and I remove the tail lamp and call the driver on. I couple the locomotive on, this is not easy as 37 706 is fitted with snow ploughs meaning room is at a premium, more so for a six foot five guard! I then walk the length of the train pulling the vacuum chords, and give driver Pete Roberts his drivers slip. The exhauster on 37 706 is in poor condition and it takes an age to create the brake. I inform the dispatcher we are ready as soon as 21hg is shown on my gauge. The miniature banner repeater turns to 'Off' and I give the dispatcher a green flag, he then presses the RA button. Then letters RA then illuminate in front of 37 706 and we move away. Speed is limited to 45mph as 5043 is running tender first at the rear of the train. Heading through Kensal Green we get two yellows, then single yellow, then a green for the Wycombe Single. This is a wrong route for us, luckily driver Roberts is on the ball and calls Slough New panel, telling them we are booked via Drayton Green and Castle Bar Park. 5043 obviously fancies her old stomping ground to High Wycombe and Bicester!

The signal goes back to red and then green and we are soon on our way along the down relief. Passing through Ealing Broadway we veer off along the Greenford branch passing Drayton Green and through the short tunnel. Passing over the A40 we take the Greenford curve, coming to a stand behind a solitary lower quadrant semaphore signal.

The signal now lowers and 5043 takes the lead, we head back to Drayton Green turning right at the junction and head down the west loop. We emerge at Hanwell Junction, the whole train having been turned so 37 706 is now London end. We head down the relief line and cross over to Southall West Loop changing direction again to gain access to the former DMU depot. No need to pull strings this time as the valve on the 37 limits the pipe to 21hg. On arrival 5043 is uncoupled and run on to the pit for servicing.

I take the hours break as a chance to clean myself up and check the coaches over for any defects that may have occurred on the way up.

At 1535 we retrace our steps to the west loop and wait for a path over to the up relief, a HST goes by and the signal comes clear. We head back to Paddington crossing over to line 4 at Portobello Junction then line 1 at Royal Oak coming to a stand in platform 1. I squeeze in between the 37 and the first coach to uncouple and am caught on camera by Heathers dad doing so!

The Down Intercity

The passengers are rapidly boarding the train; I have a job to explain to a passenger that he can't travel to Birmingham Moor Street on this train with his standard ticket. He finally understands after I explain it's a special charter with a steam engine and it will take longer!

At 1618 the TRTS button is pressed by the dispatcher and the miniature banner repeaters for SN1, the platform starting signal, clears to "OFF". I give the dispatcher a green lamp signal; he then presses the RA button. Out of sight around the corner and beneath the footbridge 5043 whistles in acknowledgement. The train starts to slowly move, at the end of the platform it's like a thunder storm with hundreds of camera's flashing and 5043's bark echoing off the retaining walls of Royal Oak. Mr Brunel looks on from his statue beside the cab rank.

We quickly cross to line 4 and accelerate to the 40mph speed limit at Ladbroke Grove, then beyond Kensal Green to the trains permitted 75mph along the down relief. Nothing to do now until Didcot Parkway, I spend the time catching up on the journals along with a walk through the train to chat to some colleagues and friends who are on the train. We slow for clearance restrictions at Southall, Hayes and Harlington, Twyford and Reading, we come to a stand at Didcot Parkway platform 5 right on time. An Oxford local goes around the curve behind us, and we move off towards Hinskey Loop for our water stop.

The support crew climb the fence to the industrial estate where the hydrant is located, the water pressure is better than this morning so the tender is soon filled. Alistair cleans the fire using the long irons and bent dart, with a few rounds of coal to build a sloping great western fire.

On our way again, we pass Oxford station arriving Banbury platform 1 for the twenty minute photo stop. The support crew use the opportunity to bring some bags of coal forward to top the tender up. A Chiltern service to Birmingham passes by on platform 2, the semaphore signal comes off and we accelerate on our way towards Leamington.

The run down to Leamington spa is largely downhill, passing the former art deco cooker factory by the grand union canal through the middle road at Leamington Spa general. Then under the grand union canal in the famous 'dip' and coming to a stand at Warwick Parkway four minutes early.

As soon as everybody is off, I give the green and 5043 gets stuck in to the 1in167 gradient of Hatton bank with no clue of a slip. The gradient steepens to 1in110 at the start of the goods loop, 5043 now becoming very vocal in her work, driver Poole acting in complete harmony with his machine. Hatton station is passed at approximately 60mph, the gradient easing off to 1in172 for a short time before levelling off at the former Rowington troughs.

Arrival at Dorridge is some six minutes early, as we are set down only I get the train away to the next stop at Solihull. Heading back through Bordsley we get the number 4 for the Moor Street bay platforms. 9600 is sat waiting for us in the sidings. We come to a stand in platform 4, I telephone the signaller at West Midlands Signalling centre (Saltley) to confirm the is room for 9600 to attach to the rear.

Pannier back to Tyseley

A short delay occurs as the Signaller has to manually key in the move to the computer as it has not been input in to the system. 9600 then attaches to the rear to drag the train to Tyseley, the signal comes off with a U for the up line. I give the green, 9600 whistles 5043, and moves away towards Tyseley, again 9600 is visibly doing the work judging by the noise and sparks coming from the chimney! Both engines whistling as they leave the platform.

We stop at the entrance to Tyseley yard, 9600 is then detached I propel the train back in to Warwick Road platform, put the handbrake on, gather my things and book off, a tired but very happy guard!