MEMORIES OF A WARTIME (1939/45) RAILWAY CLERK

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(Written February 2002)

To provide some background knowledge, I should advise that I was born some 6 years after the end of the Great War and brought up in Birchington in the years preceding the start of the 2nd World War.

My father was a Counter Clerk (and Some-time Acting Head Postmaster) at Birchington P.O. and I was the eldest of 7 children (4 boys, 3 girls). The population of Birchington at that time (1920's-30's) was about 1200, a far cry from today's figure, which, with much development and an influx of new residents, is, I believe, around the 12,000+ mark. Things have certainly changed considerably over the past 70 years or so.

I attended the old C. of E. School in Park Lane and at the age of 11 years, gained a place at the Central School, Margate. After 3 years, a new school was built at Birchington and I became a founder member of King Ethelbert's. (It opened on the 3rd May 1938.) I was there for just one year when, at the age of 14 ½ I obtained a junior clerk's position at Walmsley & Barnes (Solicitors) in Westgate. Unfortunately, within 2 weeks of the outbreak of war in September 1939, my services were dispensed with and I joined the ranks of the unemployed, after just 5 months work experience.

It was at this time that my father prompted me to apply to the 'old' Southern Railway for employment as junior clerk (I was now just 15 years of age). Following successful educational and medical exams in London, I was accepted, and so began 34 years of association with the Railway Industry (interrupted by 4 ½ years Army Service, followed by a 3 years spell with an East African Railway, some years after the war.) I was fortunate to obtain a position at my 'home' station, a short walk from where I lived. My employment began in early December 1939 and terminated (temporarily) in December 1942, when I was conscripted into the Army for war service (mainly spent in the Far East).

I can recall the first day at the Station as if it were yesterday. The weather was cold and frosty and I was handed a book of regulations to study, by the clerk on duty, and seated beside an open coal fire, I thought, if this is a sample of a Railway Clerk's life, it can't be too bad.

I was gradually introduced to the intricacies of a Railway Office routine – Birchington Station, at that time, dealt with many of the various aspects of operations, including the issue of passenger season tickets, parcels and freight – an excellent grounding for a young recruit to the Railway Company. Of course, I found the work very strange at first (having only recently left school) – there was so much to learn and absorb, especially as we dealt with more than one activity, but I gradually became familiar with the basic requirements.

After one month as a probationer, I attended an intensive 6 weeks' course designed for new entrants, at Chislehurst. This period coincided with some severe weather conditions at the start of 1940 (the first winter of the war). At that time (for reasons that I cannot now recall), it was necessary to

change trains at Herne Bay, and I can vividly remember the platform there being regularly covered in several inches of snow and the air bitterly cold.

Shortly after successfully 'passing out' from the training school, I was considered sufficiently able to cover a shift at Birchington (shifts were 6 am – 2 pm and 2 pm – 10 pm, 6 days a week, with alternate Sundays on duty – 8 hours 'split' turn). One weekend we finished at 2 pm Saturday and resumed at 2 pm Monday, but the other was all work – late duty Saturday, all day Sunday and early turn Monday.

The staff in 1940 comprised Station Master, 2 Clerks, 2 Signalmen, 2 Platform Porters and one Goods Porter, in contrast to the one employee today. The collection and delivery service for both parcels and goods traffic was carried out by Horse and Cart, operated by Walker's Garage, located just close to Birchington Station. Villages such as Acol, Sarre and St Nicholas had a delivery / collection once per week. Unusually, being wartime, when the incumbent Station Master was promoted, his successor was appointed from the existing Staff, and not from outside the area, which was the normal practice.

During this period (mid-February – end May 1940), known at the time as the 'phoney war' era, things were almost like pre-war days, although we had RAF Manston close by, and many troops stationed throughout Thanet. Large private houses and schools had been commandeered to accommodate the latter. We did deal with long nominal rolls for troops and airmen proceeding on leave. I remember particularly those members of the Hampshire Regiment – I became acquainted with every town and village in that county as a result of preparing their rail tickets.

All the while, we dealt with the civilian population, whose need to travel and despatch goods and parcels seemed unabated. We had workers employed at Chatham Dockyard, who travelled in the early morning at a special workers' rate of 1/9 ½ d (equivalent to 9 p. today). It is worth noting that my salary when I started was 5/= per week (25 p. today) on appointment. What inflation over the past 60 years!!

Our freight operations were very busy, as you must remember there were very few lorries on the roads then, and later in the war, petrol was in short supply, further increasing the load on the railway system. We dealt with all manner of general goods (food, clothing etc.) and specialist traffic such as bulk loads (seed potatoes from Scotland for local farmers), oil tankers, even livestock. A freight train would arrive early morning and detach as many as 12 wagons into the sidings and Goods Shed. Every item was accompanied by an invoice, which the clerk had to tally with the relevant goods – quite a major task, considering the volume of traffic. In the early evening, a freight service operated in the opposite direction, bound for a marshalling yard in the London area, where the wagons were re-directed to their various destinations. The main traffic originating from Birchington comprised farm produce (corn, sugar beet, potatoes and cauliflowers). Each day, many tons went by rail, plus a small amount of general goods.

A quite dramatic change came about at the time of Dunkirk (May 1940), when the war suddenly seemed to be very close, following the fall of the Low Countries and France. With the very real threat of invasion, it was decided that all children of school age should be evacuated to a 'safe' area, and Thanet pupils were despatched to Staffordshire. My six brothers and

sisters left home (along with hundreds of others), in specially chartered trains in early June 1940 and did not return to Thanet until 4 years later.

At the same time, my father was directed to essential war work as a Wireless Telegraphist far from home, (a similar position he had occupied in the Great War, when he was discharged from the Army as medially unfit for active service).

Of course, at almost the same time, we had many thousands of Dunkirk survivors landing at Ramsgate and Margate, and dozens of special trains passing through Birchington, en route to inland depots for hospitalisation and re-equipping.

With evacuation of Dunkirk, aerial activity increased markedly over Kent and the Home Counties especially, and it was quite common for the air-raid sirens to sound as many as 8 or 10 times a day, signalling the approach of German aircraft. Sometimes the warnings lasted just a few minutes, but at other times it might be several hours before the 'All Clear' was given. I have to say that the numerous warnings caused remarkably little delay or interruption to our railway workings. There was an air-raid shelter located alongside the Signal Box at the London end of the 'down' side platform. Apart from one or two occasions when there was more overhead activity than usual, I cannot remember making use of it. (Maybe this was due to the fact that the Booking Office was sited at the opposite end of the station, some 100 yards or so distant and it was deemed wiser to shelter there, rather than risk exposing oneself in the open air.)

Following the Dunkirk episode and the children's departure, when a German invasion appeared quite probable, most of the civilian population elected to leave the area. At the time it was estimated that up 90% of Thanet residents hurriedly departed, bound for safer parts of the country, during a period of 4-6 weeks (June / July 1940). As can be imagined, this was a particularly busy time at the Station – a massive number of tickets to issue, personal household effects to transport, even complete household removals to arrange. Many of these people did not return to Thanet after the war, but remained in their 'new' surroundings. Some 'essential' workers were not permitted to leave, however, and I remember a poster being affixed to the Station Master's house, listing the categories involved, including Policemen, Railwaymen, Farm Workers, etc. All others were, in fact, advised to leave this 'restricted area', in the interests of safety.

Some casualties were sustained among the remaining inhabitants of Birchington and property damaged (our house suffered some damage to ceilings and windows from explosions nearby). Although not a target, the village was hit by German bombs when planes were thwarted in their attempts to raid London and other large centres – they would unload their cargoes before returning to occupied Europe. On a number of occasions, trains were machine-gunned by low flying aircraft, when crossing the marshes on the stretch of line between Herne Bay and Birchington. In the most serious incident, a young man sustained a bullet wound to his jaw – on the train's arrival at Birchington, we phoned for an ambulance so that he could receive medical attention.

Throughout the war, all trains were met by the Police or War-Reserve Constable and passengers' identities (all carried Identity Cards) checked and questioned as to their reasons for visiting a 'restricted' area. At night, the train

lighting was very limited – a small blue light affording hardly any illumination – it must have been extremely difficult for passengers to know just where they were.

Another ancillary duty we undertook was ‘Fire Watching’, which entailed turning out 2-3 times a week, keeping a look-out for any Incendiary bombs which might fall. Equipped with stirrup pumps and water buckets we were fortunately never put to the test. Our base was the platelayers’ cabin, constructed in the side of the embankment in the Station Goods Yard. My most vivid memories whilst on Fire-watch were the several nights when Canterbury suffered badly from fire-bombings, which in the event, caused quite a lot of casualties and damage. We had a grandstand view from the road bridge at the Station. I can still recall the sky in that direction brightly lit up, with huge fires, as a result of the bombing attacks.

Some of the more unusual items which were carried by rail in those days were churns of milk and Homing Pigeons, for release. These latter were conveyed in baskets, originating from the Midlands and North of England mainly, and on arrival were released for their flight home. They invariably circled the Station 2 or 3 times before heading to their destination. I often wondered whether they all arrived ‘home’ safely.

Apart from my office duties, I was regularly expected to meet the trains and collect the tickets from the in-coming passengers. This proved a somewhat hazardous task, especially at night in the ‘black-out’ and when attending the down-side (from London) trains. At such times, I had to jump down from the platform (Booking-office side), cross the tracks, and by means of a ‘foothold’, clamber up onto the opposite platform, all the while holding an oil-lamp in one hand and taking care to judge the distance and speed of the approaching train. I think it was just as well that at the time I was 16-18 years old and quite nimble too.

An interesting insight into the war-time situation in which we found ourselves was that the Embankment garden on the ‘Down’ side platform was always immaculately maintained by the 2 Porters in between their station duties. A good and relaxing therapy for those stressful times, I suppose.

Whilst it is true to say that the summer of 1940, post-Dunkirk, and the Battle of Britain, which quickly followed, was a time of great aerial activity over this part of the country, it was nevertheless, an exciting, if at times dangerous, period for a young man starting out in life. Looking back, I feel quite proud to have lived and worked through those momentous days.

I hope that through the memories recorded here, I have given a flavour of those days. I continued in the Railway Service until December 1942, when I was called up for Army duties.