



SOUTHERN FEDERATION of MODEL ENGINEERING SOCIETIES

Formed from the Federation established in 1970 by Model Engineers for Model Engineers
A Company Limited by Guarantee in England and Wales No. 9002737
www.sfmes.co.uk

Annual General Meeting - STEAM Swindon
The Future of the SF and our Hobby - have your say
2020 Polly Award to the young engineer of the year



*As the sun departed the signal illumination started to show up
Photo: Bill Putman, Secretary & Newsletter editor, RSME Gilling*

www.sfmes.co.uk

Editor: David Goyder Tel: 023 8042 1201 newslettereditor@sfmes.co.uk

Views and comments expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies

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EDITORIAL

As we leave 2019 and welcome 2020 we can anticipate that this year will certainly see continued change in our hobby.

I remember a recent quote from Andy Clark of Polly Model Engineering Ltd. who remarked that the new generation model engineer has not come 'off the tools' in a major engineering factory but does have the interest, has purchased a 'ready to run' locomotive, dismantled it and learnt how it was made and actually got it back together again (perhaps with a little help). This is the new source of the skills for a 'modern model engineer'! I can almost hear a Gilbert & Sullivan patter song, "*I am the very model of a Modern Model Engineer*"; with apologies to the Major-General!

In the same breath, we talk a lot about dwindling society membership and at the same time hear and see young people doing exactly what 'old' model engineers did in their youth. Some societies actually sparkle with new young members, helped on by the Southern Federation Trophy and Polly Model Engineering Limited prize - Hereford for example.

The Southern Federation is sensitive to these trends hence the initiative led by committee member, Dr. Paul Naylor, to bring out the views, opinions, inspirations and 'crazy ideas' of the member societies. We have to keep up with the times so at this AGM the Special Workshop is an important milestone and every society is urged to send a representative. And just to help with the decision, when will you get another opportunity to hug a King and have a free lunch in the same day. Three line whip ladies and gentlemen!

And to keep the focus on the next generation, The Plymouth Society has kindly let us use their article on the Wickham Trolley, ideal for learner drivers.

Bob Lumb of the West Riding SLS has sent us another ghostly story from Yorkshire.

So may we all at the Southern Federation wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year?

David Goyder - Newsletter Editor

VICE CHAIRMAN'S CHAT

The fact you're reading this suggests you're a model engineer, or at least are interested in the activity. Some enjoy the processes of making and for many there's nothing to equal the satisfaction of creating an artefact using basic materials and processes, often with special tools made for the purpose. These fortunate folk have the advantage of their craft skills and facilities to use them.

Others may prefer to sail model ships, fly model aircraft, drive model locomotives or traction engines or simply enjoy owning miniatures. Fortunately, models become available for the enjoyment of this aspect of our activity and Clubs and Societies throughout the world are often the means by which 'users' get to meet 'builders' to their mutual benefit.

In his wonderful story *Trustee from the Toolroom*, Neville Shute wrote about an international brotherhood of model engineers, a reality which I came to appreciate when looking after *Model Engineer* magazine as its editor. Many years after retirement, I still treasure friendships made at that time.

When Percival Marshall first published *Model Engineer* in 1898 he was told his magazine would be short lived because

its readers were elderly and the magazine would die with them. Well over a hundred years later, many still warn us that our hobby cannot survive, citing many reasons, not least being the perceived dwindling number of young people interested and involved in the hobby.

Privileged to organise the Southern Federation Trophy and Polly Model Engineering Ltd. Prize on behalf of the Federation and Polly Model Engineering Limited, I can assure you that Federation committee members never cease to be impressed by the abilities of the young model engineers nominated for this award. Please let us know of any young persons in your Club or Society suitable for nomination.

Just as our hobby embraces 'builders' and 'users' alike, membership of many Clubs and Societies consists of a few who make things happen and many who are content to let them get on with it. If you are one of the latter, you may well gain greater enjoyment from membership by active participation. Our hobby and our Federation need you!

Mike Chrisp - Vice Chairman

**Please keep your email addresses up to date
It is for your benefit after all**

The future of Southern Federation MES and the hobby

As you are hopefully aware, we already provide important services to affiliated clubs, traditionally orientated around boiler testing, club insurance and health and safety. We have recently been conducting a review of our longer term prospects, and necessarily those of the hobby that it supports.

Everyone is aware of changes in the hobby, from negatives like the reduction in home workshops (and training classes) and the significant increase in relevant legislation affecting both club and individual members' management and conduct, to positive opportunities such as the increased use of and interest in modern processes and products and improved communications through the use of computers and the internet.

No organisation can afford to be static, especially in the face of such change as our hobby has had and which, no doubt, will continue in the future. Because of this, we have recognised the need to 'take stock' of our own activities, the way we carry out our services and the need to reflect the interests of the modern club and its membership as well as the more traditional aspects.

The committee has some exciting ideas about what the future look of the SFMES could be ... but these cannot be delivered without change to the structure and resources of the organisation, or indeed without the agreement of the affiliated clubs!

As a volunteer organisation driven to meet the needs of its affiliated clubs, we are setting out to get input from our affiliates at the next AGM on 14th March 2020 at STEAM Museum, Swindon. This input will, if affiliated clubs are supportive, be the start of an evolution! As a result, it needs as many of you to be individually represented at the AGM as possible, so please respond to the distributed invitation and try to attend.

If you are unable to attend, then we will be pleased to receive constructive comments and ideas by telephone, email or letter ... although we would much prefer to see you in person at the meeting! My contact details are BobPolley@sfmes.co.uk or via www.sfmcs.co.uk

Bob Polley - Chairman

Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies Annual General Meeting 4th March 2020 at STEAM Museum, Swindon

STEAM

Museum of the Great Western Railway



Details overleaf ▷

**Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies
Annual General Meeting
4th March 2020 at STEAM Museum, Swindon**

Not often do we get to tread the same boards as some quite well known railway engineers but here we will be in the very Swindon works that produced Great Western locomotives, all those Kings, Castles and Saints and goodness knows what else! Will be a great experience!

Venue

STEAM - Museum of the Great Western Railway
Fire Fly Avenue (off Kemble Drive)
Swindon SN2 2EY

Car Parking

The main and closest car parking for STEAM is located at the Swindon Designer Outlet North and West Car Parks which are just five minutes' walk from the Museum.

By Road

From the M4, take junction 16. For all directions, follow the brown tourist signs for 'Designer Outlet' or the 'M' for museum signs (towards the town centre and Rodbourne).

If you are using a Sat Nav, please enter 'Kemble Drive' for the North car park or 'Penzance Drive' for the West car park.

Please note the bus lane next to the West car park should NOT be used. Cameras are in use and fines will be issued by Swindon Borough Council.

By Rail

London Paddington to Bristol line. Turn right outside the Railway Station and follow the pedestrian path until you come to the GWR tunnel (on the right) which is signposted to STEAM. Your route will pass English Heritage and Thomas Homes apartments, soon leading to STEAM Museum.

Blue Badge Parking

Parking for Blue Badge holders is available in front of the museum – this parking must be reserved in advance, with the SFMES secretary, not less than three weeks before the meeting

Entry

Free entry to the museum for delegates after registration at the theatre. Museum opens at 10.00 am.

Running Order

10.00am: Museum opens
10.00 to 12:30: Free museum time.
12:30: Lunch available outside the theatre.
14:00: Award of the Southern Federation Trophy and Polly Model Engineering Limited Prize. Nominees' work will be displayed in the theatre.
14:30 (approx): Annual General Meeting .

Parking tickets

Parking tickets from the Design Outlet Centre will be exchanged for free exit passes by the museum.

Where held

The theatre is the Daniel Gooch Theatre. Two lifts available to the first floor for access to the theatre. The museum has two wheelchairs and three mobility scooters available for loan at no charge. Phone 01793 466 626 to reserve.

Features

Workshop : 'The future of Southern Federation MES and the hobby.'

Lunch

No such thing as a free lunch, you have to come to the AGM to get your lunch for which there is NO CHARGE just enjoy your AGM experience!

An excellent opportunity outside the constraints of an AGM to make your voices heard and to influence the future of your Federation.

The new teacher

After retiring from the army, a former artillery sergeant took a job as a high school teacher. Just before the school year started, he injured his back and was required to wear a light plaster cast around the upper part of his body. Fortunately, the cast fitted snugly under his shirt and wasn't noticeable when he wore his jacket.

On the first day of class, he found himself assigned to the toughest students in the school.

The smart-ass punks, having already heard the new teacher was a former soldier, were leery of him and he knew they would be testing his discipline in the classroom.

Walking confidently into the rowdy classroom, the new teacher opened the window wide and sat down at his desk.

A strong breeze through the window made his tie flap. He picked up a stapler and stapled the tie to his chest.

Dead silence. The rest of the year went smoothly.

Passenger Carrying Miniature Railway Safety Group (PCMRSG)

This group continues to work assiduously behind the scenes to keep our hobby beyond reproach and under the management of the various bodies involved. It may be worthwhile reviewing who they all are!

- 10¼" Gauge Railway Society
- 7¼" Gauge Society
- The Heywood Society
- Midland Federation of Model Engineers
- National Railway Museum
- Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies
- Northern Association of Model Engineers
- Britain's Great Little Railways
- Passenger Carrying Miniature Railway manufacturers / suppliers

One reads in various member societies newsletters the society's updates on the work being done with some interesting variations. It may be useful to quote from the group itself and show the 'official' words.

"In our last update we said that the consultation period had closed and that we would be reviewing the comments

received. We would like to record our thanks to all those that submitted comments, over 150 were submitted and all were considered. Your input is greatly appreciated. In addition to comments from individuals, clubs and societies and other interested parties we also received comments from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) with whom we have kept in close contact.

Since the closure of the consultation period we have held several 'round the table' meetings in order to discuss amendments, additions and deletions to the draft wording. The HSE have been extremely helpful in this task and indeed have attended two of our meetings in order to discuss first hand.

We are now at the stage of completing the final draft which will be sent to the HSE who hopefully will give their approval and endorsement. The plan is for the new document, 'HS2020 – Managing health and safety at passenger-carrying miniature railways', to be available in the early part of next year.

An appeal ...

There is a need for a small number of suitable photographs in the guidance document MR2020:

- A raised track with anti-tip rails and a train in view
- A ground level track with a walkway alongside
- Raised track coaches fitted with valances between vehicles
- Sit-in style ground level coaches
- A ground level or raised track with barriers alongside to keep visitors a safe distance from the train

- Colour light and semaphore signals alongside a miniature railway
- A portable track in use

The railway featured must be identified and the agreement of the photographer to use the photo obtained. Credits to both will be given in the document.

Please send to Peter Squire who can be contacted by email secretary@sfmes.co.uk or by phone (see www.sfmes.co.uk).

Boiler Inspectors' Seminars 2019 – 2020

A Joint Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies and Northern Association Boiler Inspectors' Seminar was held on 2 November at Morecombe and Lancaster. Gratefully received by all.

Future plans include, a Spring date in the East Midlands then to the Furness in the autumn in 2020.

The location of further seminars is influenced by delegate

interest so it would be wise to indicate your interest now to Peter Squire. He can be contacted by email secretary@sfmes.co.uk or by phone (see www.sfmes.co.uk).

Equal in importance to the location is to find a club with adequate premises and a desire to host the seminar, possibly in the north midlands or the north west this Autumn.

Peter Squire - Secretary & Boiler Seminars

The Birth of a Wickham Trolley - by Tim and Max Symons

I've been interested in railways, and in particular the miniature variety, from an early age. This was mainly due to my father, who had many different jobs on the big railway. This had its advantages, mainly the privilege tickets for free travel. We travelled to all four corners of the country, and some of Europe, visiting railways of all shapes and sizes. Every year for my birthday, I was allowed to invite a few friends for a day trip to Dobwalls. This awesome line ignited my interest in the smaller scales (I wonder what my son, Max would have thought of the place?) Other early memories include a ride behind either *Sian* or *Katie* on the original 15in. gauge Fairbourne Railway, the Age of Steam complex at Crowlas, near Penzance, and the raised line in Central Park.

Fast forward a few decades, and again the interest in small stuff was brought back with the arrival of my son, Max. It was inevitable that he would have an interest in railways, and miniature lines seemed the ideal outlet.

After a chance meeting with a guy on Buckfastleigh station, we were invited to the private Kensey Valley Railway in Cornwall. The only way to describe this place is that it is just like a real life *'Peter's Railway'* from the children's books. Little Max was in Dreamland. Imagine from the perspective of a 6-year-old boy being faced with a railway with no fences or signs, the only rule being 'use common sense'. The added incentive came in the form of a well-travelled battery powered tram, which had previously run at the original Buckfastleigh Miniature Railway and at Woody Bay. Max was shown the very primitive controls (a lever moved onto a copper bar to 'make the circuit', and a simple footbrake. The owner said "*off you go then, lad*". For the rest of the day I only saw him occasionally as he trundled by, honking the horn. I'll never forget the look of absolute sadness when the batteries ran out. I can't blame him to be honest, I'd have been the same if I'd had the chance to drive a tram at that age. As Max became more confident, he was allowed to drive (with supervision) a lovely blue 0-4-0 *Romulus*, which went down very well. For those of you who haven't visited the Kensey, it's not the easiest line to drive due to its gradients (1 in 20 in one place). Max seemed to cope very well though. The drive home was always full of question, with the most popular being "*Dad, when can we have our*

own miniature loco?" "*One day, son*", I'd say, but never really thought we'd actually have one.

One weekend at the KVMR, I got talking to a guy called Simon, who was driving a small American-looking steam loco. I knew that he had built a couple of 'minimal' locos, and we discussed various ideas for a simple, easy to build, entry level loco. Simon invited me to his railway in Calstock, to have a look at his various stock. For those of you know the geography of Calstock, it doesn't really lend itself to railway building. He had built a very small, but perfectly formed 7¼ in. gauge garden railway, complete with a tunnel, engine shed, and a curve radius of just 8ft. We crunched some numbers over a cup of tea, and worked

out we could build something for around £500. I wasn't so sure, but I started stockpiling some parts. Simon ordered the mechanical bits (sprocket, idler axle and chains), which came to just over £100. I had ordered two cheap 12V 250W wheelchair motors from China (£21 each delivered), and a rather extravagant £145 on a Parkside speed controller with reverse and re-gen braking. The wheels and axles were £140 from



Engineers' Emporium. The costs were starting to mount up and I hadn't any materials to build the chassis and body, plus I hadn't even decided what I was going to build. I had looked at many Minimal designs, but with my limited skill in making stuff from scratch, everything looked too complicated. Step forward a company called 'Ride On Railways'. I make no apologies for ashamedly copying their idea of a 7¼ in. gauge Wickham Trolley.

Simon and I sat down over another brew, and scribbled down some drawing and measurements. We decided to make the chassis out of 2 x 2in. steel angle, with 6mm steel for the chassis horns. We would also need some thick metal for the buffer beam. For ease and cheapness, the body was to be made from plywood.

Now this was where I start my scavenging. A friend from my Road Rallying days owned an engineering firm: AC Haines in Estover. I popped up with a tray of ring doughnuts, and handed over a list of metal I needed, and enquired how much it would cost me. To my surprise, he cut all the steel to size and said, "*Sounds like an interesting project ... just take the*



metal and send me some pics of the finished article." The plywood and 6mm aluminium alloy for the buffer beam came from my employers: Princess Yachts. It was all saved from the scrap bin, so technically I was doing them a favour by taking it.

One Sunday, all the raw materials were loaded into the car and taken to Simon's new house near Callington (his new railway at the new house has already been started). A basic box frame with chassis horns and brackets for the idler axle was achieved in a few hours. It was then given a protective coating of red oxide primer. Due to our working patterns, and family life getting in the way, progress ground to a halt for a few weeks. In the meantime, I ordered two 12V 32AH mobility scooter batteries from eBay. After a conversation with Colin Edmondson, these were chosen because the load on the batteries would be similar to that of a mobility scooter (a constant load, with an occasional hill to contend with), whereas car batteries are designed for a very big initial load.



now bring it home and finish it all off.

I found a drawing online, and made up some templates for the front and rear panels. The dimensions looked okay, so I carried on and cut them out of plywood. I cut a hole out of the front panel, and routed a recess for some wire mesh. Some unplanned additions were a battery kill switch (again from work), some two slot couplings from eBay, and some front and rear LED lights from the Pound Shop. The running boards are offcuts from a length of garden decking. The trolley was finished off in BR Green(ish) with black Hammerite for the chassis. It was approximately now when I had a sudden thought - will it fit in the back of the car! We lifted it towards the car, "It'll never fit" my mate said. Luckily it fitted in the back of my Skoda Roomster with 14in. clearance either side.

It was now time for its public debut, so I packed it all in the car (remembering to take the batteries off charge) as well as my son Max and his little sister Grace and set off for deepest,

Build day 2 consisted of mounting the centre shaft, bearings, wheels and sprockets, which had been machined by another friend at the Robey Trust in Tavistock. We also mounted the floor and one of the motors and made a cut-out for the chain to run down to the idler shaft. The next day, we made a start on the electrics. For a lot of people, this can be the scary part. Luckily, as my day job, I make complex wiring looms for multi-million pound motor yachts. I also added a circuit breaker to protect the speed controller.

Then it was the moment of truth - test time. We bolted together some pre-made track panels, and surprisingly it all worked perfectly. The only issue was that I had connected the wires to the motor the wrong way around, so when I selected forwards, it went backwards!

During the following week, Simon built the wooden box onto the chassis, which doubled up as the seat. I could

darkest Cornwall. At the Kensey Valley, we got unloaded and connected the batteries (it's a lot easier to lift without them inside.) I think the regulars were quite impressed that it actually worked. It ran faultlessly all day and still had plenty of juice in the batteries. However, I didn't get much of a look in driving the thing, as Max seemed very attached to it. It coped well with the railway's gradients, and even managed to haul their Beer Wagon around.

On my first visit to Goodwin Park, not everything went to plan. Both the trolley and the newly constructed flat truck kept derailing just before the tunnel. So, the next job before I return, is to fit some rubber suspension to try and stop the derailing.

Future visits planned include Buckfastleigh and Newport MES in September, and Bath & West Showground in October.

Do you use the reverser when you drive an engine? - by Dave Andrew

Do you use the reverser when you drive an engine? I have sometimes observed drivers arriving at the station desperately rushing round to fill the tanks with water and get it into the boiler while struggling to revive the fire to regain pressure before setting off on another lap of the track on a wing and prayer, hoping to return to do it all again.

What has the reverser to do with this? Well consider this: using approximate figures, when the reverser is in full forward gear the valves open allowing steam into the cylinders filling them up to about 80% full on each stroke and after about 30° rotation of the wheels later you chuck it all up the chimney and start again. For one turn of the wheel you will need the equivalent of 3.2 cylinders full of steam on a two cylinder engine (filling each end of the cylinder x two cylinders, i.e. $80\% \times 2 \times 2 = 3.2$).

If you move the reverser back to about half full gear the valves will only fill up the cylinders for about 40% of the stroke before closing. That dose of steam will remain in the cylinder for roughly the next 100° of rotation of the wheels the before it is sent up the chimney. So, now for one turn of the wheel you will only need 1.6 cylinders full of steam.

Does this mean the engine will stop or have little or no power? No! When the valve is open you are pumping in the steam at near boiler pressure and using that pressure energy to force the piston along the bore of the cylinder. But the steam is a gas which you have raised to a high temperature (about 160°C at 90 PSI) so as well as pressure energy it also possess potential thermal energy. When the valve closes the gas (steam) continues to expand using up this energy and in the process cooling down. The amount of thermal energy you get is proportional the change in temperature that takes place during this phase.

In full gear you put loads of steam into the cylinder using its pressure energy but it is not there long enough to extract the thermal energy before you throw it away up the chimney.

If that all sounds far too technical and a load of 'gobbledegook' then let me try to explain the relevance of notching up.

For the given amount of steam you put through the cylinders for each turn of the wheels it requires you to generate that by boiling water into steam and then raising its temperature / pressure to its working limit.

So, the more steam used, the greater the demand for water. The energy required to boil the water comes, of course, from having to burn coal, so the greater the demand there is then the greater and more intense the fire needed.

Trying to remember back to my school days I can recall that it required one unit of heat energy to raise one cubic centimetre of water by one degree Celcius. However, when you reach 100°C, liquid water begins to change into steam (at normal atmospheric pressure) but requires about 650 units of energy to change state to a gas but still at 100°C. It is called the latent heat of vaporisation. This is where all the energy goes and when you have used the steam and thrown it away up the chimney it condenses and turns back to liquid without providing any useful work. Apologies for this bit of a science lesson.

So let's back to our steam engine. If you follow this through then it can be summarised as follows: The more steam you throw up the chimney - the more water you require to boil - the more coal you need to burn in the firebox.

If you notch up to reduce the amount of steam by using it more efficiently you'll need less water, consequently less demand on tending the fire and, of course, less coal. You might also find it less stressful and more enjoyable driving your locomotive!

You might also like to consider this: burning less coal might also make you more popular with our treasurer because many model locomotives can be shown to be running at an efficiency of about 1% or even less in some circumstances. If you put that into pounds and pennies it means that for every £100 spent on the coal you are buying you are only using £1 worth of the potential energy you have bought.

Thanks to Ed. Robin Howard of the Aylesbury Link

What Confucius DID NOT say ...

- *Man who wants pretty nurse, must be patient.*
- *Lady who goes camping must beware of evil intent.*
- *Man who leaps off cliff jumps to conclusion.*
- *Man who eats many prunes get good run for money.*
- *Man who drives like hell is bound to get there.*
- *War does not determine who is right, it determines who is left..*
- *Man who stands on toilet is high on pot.*



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of
MODEL ENGINEERING SOCIETIES

*Formed from the Federation established in 1970 by Model Engineers for Model Engineers
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www.sfmes.co.uk*



**Have you a young member
in your Club or Society
eligible for the**

**SOUTHERN FEDERATION
TROPHY &
POLLY MODEL ENGINEERING
PRIZE?**

The Nominee shall be no more than 24 years of age at the date of nomination.

Nomination shall be made by a Club or Society affiliated to the Southern Federation of Model Engineering Societies and the Nominee shall be an active member of that Club or Society.

The Nominee shall have demonstrated the acquisition of skills in the use of appropriate materials and metalworking hand tools and / or machinery / equipment by producing a model, other mechanical item or piece of workshop tooling associated with the hobby of model engineering, complete or part built, constructed using metalworking hand tools or equipment normally found in the home, school, Club or Society workshop.

Supervisory input and items built as apprentice pieces in a training environment are acceptable. The work shall be the nominee's own but normally acceptable commercial fittings, fixings, fastenings or other components may be used.

Visit www.sfmes.co.uk for further information and an entry form

The Railway Lengthsman - *by Bob Lumb*

December 1940

The elderly man walked at a steady pace alongside the railway line, his shoulders hunched to give him some protection from the penetrating drizzle blowing in from the east on a gloomy December morning. Wearing a heavy coat with the collar turned up to the base of his cap he had some comfort from the cold wind. Nevertheless he could still feel that cold water had penetrated the inside of his shirt collar, forming into a trickle that ran down to the base of his neck. Rarely raising his head, he was careful to place his steps just beyond where the stone ballast shoulder ended on the outside of the wooden sleepers.



Occasionally he would pause, remove the long handled hammer from above his left shoulder, then deftly and precisely give a measured blow to drive home a loose wooden or metal key, these held the rail tight to the cast iron chair fixed securely to the wooden sleeper. Other times, less often he would bend his body briefly to look at the fishplate bolts joining the 45 foot long sections of rail line to each other. All the time, regardless of any of these distractions, his eyes constantly scanned the twin set of rails of the line near to him. For over thirty years now he had been looking for imperfections or signs out of the ordinary that could indicate a potentially dangerous fault.

The task was becoming laboured for the man now that his age was advancing, his shoulder soon ached from the pressure imposed by the hard wooden shaft of the hammer. His knees, after long periods of wearing wet or damp trousers in winter weather were arthritic causing him to walk painfully at times with a slight limp. His eyes once bright were now dulled with cataracts, his hearing muffled, more signs if they were needed, that very few parts of the human body improve with age.

The man's path followed the railway line through cuttings, alongside farmer's fields and on the top of exposed embankments before finally arriving at the signal box over seven miles down the line from his starting point at the country station. Here, his walk would halt with warmth from the coal fire that burned brightly in the cast iron stove. He'd converse with the signal box man while having a hot brew, settling himself comfortably into the old chair

prior to eating his lunch. After a while, with some reluctance, he would leave the snug warmth of the signal box to carefully descend the wooden steps and return to the track side. Crossing the track he would commence his return walk alongside the up line to the country station - from where he had started when daylight was breaking.

That day in December was no different from the previous days the man had walked this length, observing the track and reaching the signal box without anything untoward to note. The return journey had also stalled as normal. With a cheery goodbye from the railway signaller he had turned his coat collar up against the wind, pulled his cap down firmly on his head and soon was out of sight as he walked back down the line.

Just one mile away from the station, nearing the end of his walk, dusk was falling on that short December day. The rain had turned to sleet as the wind had increased, causing the trees in an adjacent wood to creak and whistle as they moved to its strength. Maybe it was because his hearing wasn't good - or maybe it was because the wind drowned the other sounds - the subsequent inquest left this conjecture open. Either way, the man must not have heard the approaching express as he painfully stooped to retrieve a wooden key that was lying alongside the rail.

Startled by the rush of air immediately before he was struck, the man was for a brief moment aware of his fate. Tossed to the side of the track he was instantly killed by a violent blow to the chest and temple from the locomotive of the passing train.

September 1942

As the war moved inexorably onwards, traffic on the line continued to increase with many additional goods trains being run together with a considerable number of troop and munitions trains.

At this time I was working the middle shift in the signal box. These days I was well aware that I was pulling the levers a lot more frequently than when I had started in this box about eighteen months previously. I didn't have to look in the train register log to see the increase in traffic, my arms



and shoulders told me just as clearly. Even so, we still had the odd quiet moment when my mind was not occupied with the job in hand. It was then that I would think about my son. A lad barely out of his teens, he was somewhere in north Africa with our Eighth army. Between pulling levers and acknowledging or creating bell codes I gave him some thought, forever scanning the newspaper for any mention of our troops in the north African desert.

Looking out of the elevated end window a local goods train came into view hauled by a Derby 4 locomotive. Chattering noisily it was approaching from the direction of the country station. Rodney, the young lengthsmen, was walking alongside the line with his back to the approaching train. I looked at the locomotive as it came closer, noticing the puff of steam from the whistle immediately before hearing the shrill sound. Raising his arm in acknowledgement before he stood back from the track, Rodney leaned forward on his long handled hammer as the train passed him by. I watched him, pondering, that the lad, who was a similar age to my son, had been rejected by the armed forces. This was due to a chest condition his medical report had stated which had left him dismayed, and I think, feeling a bit humiliated. It was no secret he'd taken the lengthsmen's job in the belief that the exercise would benefit his chest and hence help him pass his medical for the recruitment officer.

I had some misgivings concerning Rodney although I was sympathetic to his condition and aspirations. Whenever I observed him walking the length it was obvious that the attention he was showing the track seemed to be only cursory, a glance here or there but no apparent interest. If the truth be known he was beginning to worry me.

Completing my entry in the train register after the train had passed I looked up as Rodney noisily entered the signal box, the door slamming shut from a gusty breeze. *"G'morning, is there any news in the paper about the Eighth? Are they still advancing in north Africa?"* he asked cheerfully. *"No, nothing that I've seen today Rodney, it's been a while since we've heard anything."* I replied. *"Well, I have a piece of news, I've got a date for my new medical, it's to be Thursday next. I'm sure that it should be all right this time, my breathing is much improved since I've been doing this job."* Rodney continued optimistically. *"Don't count your chickens Rodney, these people can be quite thorough."* I said, not sharing his mood, just before the conversation was curtailed by the call attention ring of the bell.

December 1942

With snow blowing more or less horizontally across the double track line, condensation was forming inside the signal box end window as the kettle simmered gently on the stove. Wiping the window with a hand towel I peered

out looking closely down the line, thinking about Rodney. He'd failed the medical last September with no immediate prospect of another one. I'd watched him leave yesterday in abysmal weather to start his walk back feeling some sympathy for his plight. I was glad my job kept me in the warmth of the signal box where a fire burned constantly in the stove, thanks partly to friendly engine crews who kindly tossed out some decent lumps of coal as they passed by.

The lad hadn't fully accepted that he wasn't going to get into the forces, unfortunately he wasn't showing any more interest in his job. As usual my thoughts were interrupted by the bell ringing, a Birmingham bound fast goods requiring to enter section. No sooner had I responded to this and pulled off for the distant when it rang again this time for the other line, an empty mineral train that was heading north.

It was while I was looking out for the tail lamp of the north bound train, idly noticing that the snow outside had turned to rain, that, in the distance I began to discern a figure approaching. A man walking slowly, his posture slightly stooped as he moved alongside the track. Occasionally he would pause, crouch down a little and look carefully at the southbound line.

As he approached it was possible to see that he was an elderly man, dressed in a heavy coat with a large collar turned up to his cap. Upon reaching the signal box, by the wooden steps he raised his head. I looked down into the face of a man who looked like he had spent a lifetime working outdoors, noting that his skin was deeply lined, before his eyes, that appeared to be lifeless met mine. Nodding my head in answer to his unspoken question, I received an acknowledgement with a return nod before he slowly began to climb the stairway up to the door of the signal box. Waiting by the inside of the door as he reached the top, I opened it as he stepped onto the small wooden landing, with a further nod of his head he entered the 'box and with a cursory look around sat himself down on the old padded chair normally reserved for Rodney near the stove.

I don't normally invite strangers into the signal box, but there was something about this man with his stooped bearing and weatherbeaten face that compelled me to offer him shelter from the wet conditions outside. I wondered if he had recently fallen, there was a nasty graze on the side of his temple. He sat quietly for a moment or two before he spoke in a low voice.

"Good day to you, and thank you for your kindness, but I'm not the one for small talk. I'm here to tell you that the boy you have for a lengthsmen is not up to the job, he doesn't look where he needs to look and he doesn't see what he



needs to see. Methinks the job isn't for the likes of him."
He paused after saying this and looked closely at me intently for a short time before he continued.

"Midway between here and the station over yonder, by the side of the derelict cottage," he raised a hand pointing towards the north whilst he spoke *"on the up line, an open crack has formed from a fishplate bolt. If the rail is not changed or repaired, the line might fracture, the consequences, if there is an express on the line could be severe."* He stopped there and looked up to me again, his dull eyes holding my gaze. Startled, I looked away, thinking about what he had just said and I thought also about Rodney, it didn't take much thinking to believe the man, yet who was he to convey this information?

"I'll talk to the lengthsman, he's due to call in tomorrow, I'll ask him to have a look. But, you know, you shouldn't be walking down the line, it's dangerous, especially in weather like today and the company can fine you for trespassing." Saying this, I still felt inclined to give the man a hot drink even though I found his remarks unsettling. However, before I could make the offer he rose from the chair, and, with a rather curt *"Good day to you."* he walked a little unsteadily with a slight limp towards the door. I closed the door behind him, watching him closely as he descended the steps before he turned right at the bottom onto the side road, via the wooden gate. Soon he was out of sight as light snow began to fall. Later, my thoughts well into the evening considered what he had said, I was also puzzled, who was he?

I had a word with Rodney on his next visit, asking him to give a good look over at the line by the old cottage. He looked a bit bewildered but said nothing, other than to mutter that he checked the line carefully each time he walked the length and that's what he was paid to do.

It was a few days later when it was mentioned again, it had warmed up a bit although snow was still on the ground in places, a low lying mist having formed overnight. Rodney appeared at his usual time looking rather sorry for himself as he mounted the outside steps. I received a gruff acknowledgement as he entered the box.

"Everything all right Rodney?" I asked after returning his morning greeting rather more cheerfully than he had delivered his. *"Yes, of course it is,"* he replied curtly *"is there any reason why it shouldn't be? A lousy morning to be walking the length, but it looks like I'm to be stuck with it now unless something comes up."*

After the latest reply from the medical board the previous September, Rodney had talked little of joining the forces.

He helped himself to a brew, sat down on the old chair and drank his tea whilst looking sullenly into the fire burning brightly within the stove. I was busy with the job in hand, traffic had increased recently with many special trains and I didn't have the time to take any notice of his mood. It was when he was about to depart that my patience snapped a bit. He'd hardly said a word other than to grunt a reply to any question I raised.

"After we spoke the other day, did you check the line by the cottage Rodney?" I asked sharply, *"Did you see anything amiss?"*

He turned by the door with his hand on the door knob, *"There's nothing wrong with the line, and now I must be off."* he added as he opened the door and let himself out. I didn't shout after him, the bell began to ring again.

In the event, it wasn't an express that came off the line but the Birmingham stopper. It was an early evening train shortly before Christmas, a tank locomotive hauling just four coaches derailed on a broken rail whilst coasting past the derelict cottage. The train was full of munition workers returning home after having boarded at the country station, fortunately nobody was badly hurt.

The engine and carriages had remained upright after quickly coming to a halt aided by the drag of the ballast, the engine and first carriage were however stood fouling the down line. Quick thinking by the driver had then averted a disaster, he had despatched the fireman, complete with a gauge lamp to walk ahead to the next signal box. On his way, he had met a slow moving mineral train approaching on the down line, swinging the lamp he had attracted the attention of the loco crew, the driver realising that there must be something amiss ahead had braked heavily, successfully bringing his train to a halt prior to the derailment.

January 1943

About a month after the incident I noticed the stranger again, as before he was walking by the line. The same old man with the slight limp but regular paced walk. As he approached the signal box I moved across to watch him from the end window just as he was reaching the bottom of the outside stairs. As before, he looked up at me with that unspoken question, his eyes dull with cataracts. I nodded in return and he wearily climbed the stairs. For late January the weather was quite fair that day, not too cold and with a light breeze from the south. Opening the door for him, he stepped inside without too much preamble, just a short *"Good day."* as he lowered himself into the old chair. After a moment or two he looked up at me and spoke in a low voice.



"I did give you the warning about the line by that old cottage. You should have listened to what I had to say, you have been very lucky there, it could have been much worse."

"I know," I replied, "the permanent way inspector came by after they had cleared the line. He told me that the rail looked like it had been fractured there for some time. I did speak to the lengthsman after your visit. I asked him to have a closer look at the line, where you had said." I looked at the man more closely, he still had that nasty looking graze on the side of his temple.

"So, why didn't he do something about it?" the stranger asked after a short pause, puzzlement and a frown further creasing his lined face. "That's something we'll never know, the lad finally got call up papers to report to the RAF."

Apparently, they've now relaxed their medical for clerical personnel, he left for a training camp soon after the derailment." I wondered to myself, why was I explaining this to a stranger who trespassed on the line?

"Who's doing the job now?" the old man asked, standing up from the chair. "An old hand from the permanent way gang has taken the job. His name is Tom Evans." I replied, just as the call attention bell rang. Being alongside the shelf I acknowledged it quickly. "A good man," the stranger continued as he opened the door, "you'll not see me again now that you've got someone capable, I knew Tom well."

Feeling the draught from the door as it opened I turned and walked to the end window to watch him leave. The sun was low in the sky now casting long shadows but there was no shadow visible from the stranger as he descended the steps.

From a DC airport ticket agent ...

A Senator John Kerry aide (Lindsay Ross) called to inquire about a trip package to Hawaii. After going over all the cost info, she asked, "Would it be cheaper to fly to California and then take the train to Hawaii?"

I just got off the phone with a freshman Congressman, Bobby Bright from Ala who asked, "How do I know which plane to get on?" I asked him what exactly he meant to which he replied, "I was told my flight number is 823, but none of these planes have that number on them."

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