

THE GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY 1910-20

The GWR was well known as the most efficient railway in the world. I agree with that. The engines were smarter and brighter, in bright green with a wide copper band round the funnel. Very different from the drab engines of the other companies. There were many small railway companies at that time. In 1921 railways were amalgamated into four. The GWR was the only one to retain its own name. The coaches were cream and brown. The GWR held the speed record made around 1912 with the engine City of Truro at 102 miles an hour. All passenger engines had a name after castles, counties, cities, flowers and others too. I remember very well Morning Star and Evening Star. They hauled the express train Birmingham to Paddington for over forty years. Now I expect they are clapped out in less than a quarter of that time.

In 1961 my wife and I were returning from a holiday in Falmouth. We joined the express at Truro. After a while it seemed to be slowing down. We were on a curve in the track. I looked out of the window. I could see the engine steam gushing from under it. I said to my wife that we would soon be stopping. Sure enough we pulled in at Par, which is an engine depot, where a steam express engine was coupled to the front of our indisposed steed. We rattled along better, arriving at Paddington one hour late, so missed our connection. We arrived home four hours late.

Railway stations were a kind of trading centre with coal, cattle, food, provisions for all local shops, farmers loading their corn, forage merchants loading hay and straw for the town horses. Hay loaded above the wagon slides had to be stacked in a special way. The load had to pass under a gauge. If the load touched it the guard would not take it. Coal merchants owned their own trucks holding eight to ten tons, with the names in large letters.

There were special wagons for all purposes - horses, cattle, timber, steel rails, low loaders, vans for Fyffes bananas, milk churns and salt, with others. Each day a short goods train called the 'stopping train' ran, one each way, dropping off coal, cattle food, etc, picking up hay, straw, corn, empty coal wagons. A charge of 15p a day was made if a wagon was not unloaded in three days. One driver on this train was well known. He worked them a long time. He had a thick black beard and wore a bowler hat. He was shunting one day when a porter pulled the hand points over when his engine was part way through them. Two wheels came off the track. It was soon jacked back on the rails. A breakdown van was always ready at Banbury for such cases.

There were two stations. The main one on the Oxford line, a smaller one on the Princes Risborough line. On this line it was a good service to Paddington, 55p return. All trains leaving Paddington left at 10 minutes past the hour. Passengers for Bicester and all stations to Banbury would be in the last coach which would be released from the express without it stopping. It was then picked up by a small tank engine for all stations to Banbury. The time for the journey from Paddington to Aynho was 1 hour 20 minutes. Not bad. There were 25 stopping trains between the two stations each day, starting with a workmen's at 6 am, the last one at 11 pm. The station master was Mr Tom Guerney, followed by Charlie Wrighton, then Mr Tom Miller. There were six signalmen, three at the platform box, three at the junction. My father was one of them. The station staff was two men porters, one boy and a clerk. The fare to Banbury, six miles, was 4¹/₂p return.

There was a cattle sale yard in the field adjoining the smaller station. Many of the cattle were loaded into rail waggons. The loading pens were only a few yards from our home. Sometimes loading wasn't finished till late at night. Some of the animals were very difficult and dangerous. A lot of timber was loaded on special trucks by a hand crane mounted on a truck. If the tree was extra large, then two cranes were used, one at each end. Most of the trees were brought in by three horse teams. It was a treat to watch the large, strong horses pull the trees from the trolley on to the stack. When the horses were hitched ready to pull the tree on to the stack, the carter would shout "Gee, Woah" and the horses would just tighten the chains. Then he gave the order "Gee" and off would come the tree. The horses would stop dead on the carter's shout "Woah". The horses would walk along the roads, single file, keeping to the side, brasses shining. Claridges of Heythrop brought the bulk of the trees, Braggins of Banbury some, and Smiths of Bletchington brought a few by traction.

During the first war there was an enormous amount of traffic. Troop trains, hospitals, munitions, tanks and the ordinary traffic - a train every few minutes. It was difficult to keep traffic moving. When on March 27 1917 a freezing blizzard broke off the telegraph poles with the weight of frozen snow, a temporary cable was laid after some months. Trains each had to stop at each signal box. It was allowed a certain time according to the type of train. Then the next one was sent on, hoping the previous one had got clear. It took the army a year to get all repairs done. The other freak weather conditions I remember both happened in the early 1930s. One was what was called a silver thaw, when heavy rain fell on severely frozen ground. Everything was coated in ice like a miniature ice age. It lasted until after midday. The other was when we were hay making in the afternoon when it came over dark. Then we could hear a very strong wind coming towards us. It swept past but not a spit of rain fell. We all thought it was the end of the world. It was very eerie.

In those days the embankments were mown with scythes. During the war it was made into hay, collected on to the workmen's trains and put in a rick when it had settled. It was trussed and no doubt went for army horses. What a contrast today. The platform at Aynho has trees growing on it where there used to be lovely flower beds. The passenger guards wore buttonholes of roses or carnations. The stations were painted every five years. It must have been piece work. I never saw anyone slap paint on so fast. There was an accident at Somerton, the next station on the line, Oxford direction, one foggy Sunday morning when a goods train ploughed into the back of a ballast train men were unloading. The goods train driver had missed the signal. He should have stopped but the men heard it coming and jumped clear. The collision upended some of the trucks. That was 1914 and that was the Great Western Railway.