



A Fireman at Eastleigh

By James Marsh

We grew up with the realisation of trains and what they are and what they did. There was a signal right at the bottom, just opposite the bottom of our garden, the trains coming down towards St Denys had to stop at that signal. One day it was an American troop train, the cry went up 'the Americans' and everyone grabbed a bag and raced down the garden over the fence because the Americans by that time were throwing food out to us. They knew how short we were because of the rationing and everything else. That was unbelievable. I certainly will never forget that. It used to happen quite often during the war, they were on their way to wherever they were going and if they stopped at that station they always knew that there was a lot of people here short of food so they had plenty and they shared it with us.

I don't know why I went up to Eastleigh that day, but I walked down Campbell Road. I stood there looking at the engines standing outside and I thought yes. Then I thought no. And I turned away and I started walking back, I thought you come all the way up here what are you walking away for. So, I turned back again and I went in and I got a job. And they sent me for a medical on the same day I applied and I started as a cleaner as all nippers do.

On my first day I was on my own looking through this great big rule book. Crickey, it was a huge thing and I went home and I came in the next day into the same room. Today it was now full of boys and they had all been out firing the day before and now they were all back. Crickey what's this lot. Then we had the first day of being a cleaner, that's some of them doing the tender and others having to climb up on that rail that's runs along the side of the boiler, your standing on it and rubbing oil, and other cloths to clean it off. We did a good job, much better then, we were proud, we wanted our engines to look as clean, as nice as we could.

Every now and again there was, the names went up on a board outside the office and if your name was there with an 'f' was buy it you were firing the next day so you had to go and see what you would be doing, what time you had to, to turn up and everything else. And I loved it from the minute I saw it because I had gone through the training, I had gone out with another fireman. I was standing on the footplate, we only had to go outside the shed to get water for the tender, a matter of a few yards. And the driver said to me 'ok nipper, take her out', I said 'take her out?' he said 'yes, come on open the regulator' and I thought god and I opened the regulator and it moved, the engine moved of course it did but it moved because I had moved the regulator, I was momentarily driving that engine, mind you it became common place, drivers always put you in the driver's seat in various shunting yards to get



you used to it. But that was the first time I had ever driven a steam engine, a matter of a few yards

We did a lot of local runs, so it would have been one of those. When I talk about that I'm talking about places like Bursledon, Hamble, even north of here had a shunting yard as well so you had various things that you did and you had to go to these yards and shunt them and then come back. I had as usual been told to do the driving when we were in the yard and we had sorted everything out. It was all ready to go and I started to walk across the footplate to let the driver take his place and he said 'no you can work her up', I couldn't believe it, I had never done that but I remember everything about it. We had 44 trucks and 1 guards van on and I pulled out of Beavis Park, up through St Denys station, up past our house and I was in the driving seat, up through Swaythling and through Eastleigh and we had to go on up and up. Looked at the guard because he would be waving you on until he said stop and then you put it in reverse and then he'll start giving you signals to back up which we did, I did everything, it worked a treat, I was on cloud nine and we backed in. We put the train exactly where they wanted it and uncoupled and now with a single engine were going back into Eastleigh yard. I knew well enough, I had been doing it enough, especially in the top yards to know that you come up to a point just before you got to the signal box, there were 2 ground signals called 'dummies' one on the left and one to the right. Always showing red but when they were switched off they switched to green, you had to wait to see which way you were going to get. If you got the one on the left you were going that way on your own and then back through Eastleigh station and into the yard, if you got the other one you were going up the top yard because there's another engine up there and you would tie onto them and we got that one, we got the right-hand side. So off I went, now looking out for this other engine, there it was, it was where it should be and the fireman of that engine was on the ground ready to tie us on and I eased up to her and stopped and then eased up again while the lad in between threw the coupling up and then my driver yelled 'whoa' and I thought what the hell and I looked and there was another engine and it was coming at full pelt and I knew there was a man in between so I grabbed the steam brake and yanked it on, just before he ploughed into the back of us and sent me out of the chair and crashing down onto the footplate. But we were alright because it didn't do us any damage but my driver said you should see his engine.