



## **Dancing on the footplate: Experiences as a fireman at Eastleigh Locomotive Depot**

**By Trevor Rumgay**

My interest in railways and trains started aged 5 when in 1950 we moved to Paulsgrove, a large council housing estate to the north of Portsmouth. I was sent to Hillside Infant School which was next to the Portsmouth to Southampton railway line. The different steam engines that chugged past drew me into train spotting which I took up seriously when I moved to Paulsgrove Secondary Modern School. This was next to the same railway line with a much better view of passing trains. I often got shouted at by various teachers for watching trains when I should have been focusing on such delights as Pythagoras. After some years of watching trains and sneaking around at Fratton and Eastleigh Locomotive Depots, I just wanted to work on them when I left school.

I started with British Railways as an engine cleaner at Fratton Locomotive Depot on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> March 1960 and retired from Network Rail on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2010. At Fratton as an engine cleaner I cleaned very few engines as I was often required to walk, for hours sometimes, to take out call notes to drivers and foreman to tell them of altered times to be at work. In April 1960, I went to firing school at Guildford to learn the art of fireman. I passed the exams/tests, the final one being stood in front of the shed master at Fratton and grilled on rules, regulations and engine management after which he declared I had become a passed cleaner. Still graded as a cleaner but qualified to carry out fireman duties.

My first turn of duty as a fireman came in my first week as a passed cleaner, I booked on at 8am for a cleaning turn but was told to get to the station and get the next train to Woking. In the freight yard, I would find the engine 34047 a West Country pacific named *Callington* and reported to the driver who was from Feltham Depot. I was to work as Driver Rice directed, I was elated but slightly scared at the prospect of a first firing turn on a big engine. Driver Rice was an older gentleman who kept a good eye on me but 34047 steamed very well and we worked a very heavy freight train from Woking to Feltham, disposed of the engine and I caught the train home.

I went on loan several times to Stewarts Lane Depot in London. There was a younger driver at Stewarts Lane who was very keen on ballroom dancing. He went to the Victor Sylvester School of Dancing and he berated me several times for my total lack of interest in dancing, "a sure way to get a girl", he said. One evening he and I worked freight with a C class from Battersea Yard to Penge tunnel, which I believe is over a mile long. I had, I remember a good fire on and the engine was romping up the bank, the driver then took it as a good time to show me some dance steps. What sight we must have looked to anyone seeing us in a dance pose gliding around the footplate. There were some great characters in the footplate grades.



While, at Eastleigh I fired many West Country and Battle of Britain engines to Basingstoke, Bournemouth, Salisbury and light engine to and from Southampton Docks (I was never rostered to work all the way to London). I prepared and disposed of several Merchant Navy engines but I only fired one, 35005 *Canadian Pacific* on the main line. It had just come out of the locomotive works after an overhaul so everything was new, clean and shiny. We were booked to prepare this engine for light engine work to Southampton Terminus station in the very early hours of the morning. Attach to the rear of the paper train that had come from Waterloo, swap over with the crew that had worked the train down from London and take their engine back to Eastleigh Depot. For some reason, they could not continue to Bournemouth and we were instructed to work the train forward to Bournemouth. 35005 was in great condition and steamed perfectly and ran like a dream.

I worked several times on, 'The Bug', which was the local name for the shunting engine at Winchester City Yard, and Frank Mills was the regular driver there. Frank had been struck with polio which left him with problems walking so the regular job at Winchester working day turns only Monday to Saturday suited him. Frank had been a fireman through the 1930s and the war and he often spoke of the experiences he had. From his description, it must have been a torrid experience especially in summer firing a heavy train at night with blackout sheets shrouding the footplate. Often not knowing what time you would get home, sometimes being delayed or put in loops or sidings for hours, working many hours of unexpected overtime and running out of tea and food. All that along with the chance of being bombed.

As the end of steam approached there were many rumours, stories and much speculation on our future. I was very interested in the engineering side of the railway and got bored riding as second man on Class 33 and 47 diesels (which was becoming more of a daily experience), Mr Hale made arrangements for me to interview with the ODM (Outdoor Machinery Department). I transferred to the ODM in summer 1966.

It was a great career and the bit I remember with the most affection was my time as a locomotive fireman; the camaraderie and the characters I met made it the best time.