



Going to work with my father By John Whitaker

We lived on a branch line of the Great Western Railway, in the suburbs of London on the line that ran from West Drayton to Uxbridge. We lived at a place called Cowley which was midway between the two. And there were a few trains that ran from Uxbridge, joined the main line at West Drayton and then ran all the way up to Paddington. And on a Saturday morning occasionally my father would take me with him. We'd get on the train at Cowley, sometimes we'd have to change at West Drayton which was the main line, and then we'd go up to London to his office. I'd spend the morning sharpening pencils on a machine, of course that was fascinating. And then when he'd finished work – I don't think the bosses were in on a Saturday morning, I don't think they worked terribly hard on a Saturday morning, so we usually finished quite early. And then we would always go down to get the train home from Paddington to Cowley.

We'd always go down to the station in plenty of time, so that we had plenty of time to inspect all the trains that were standing in the terminus there and go and speak to the engine drivers and inspect the engines. And I remember distinctly standing at the cab side of these huge green engines and looking up and seeing the fireman and driver in their – they always wore faded denim overalls, always absolutely regulation, the jacket and the dungarees. And they had peaked caps with a PVC peak on it, I always remember that. And the other thing that sticks in my memory is the heat that came out from the firebox and the light. And you could feel it on your face and you'd look up and you'd be hit by this wall of heat coming out from the cab door. And then the smell, the smell of the coal burning and the hot metal, with oil and metal and steel all mixed together, those three smells. Quite distinctive, there's nothing else like it. And smell is a very evocative sense I think, and whenever you smell a traction engine or something like that going by on the road it brings back this memory of standing beside these Castle or King Class locomotives. And of course, the Western Region of British Railways, and I'm talking now of the early-mid 50s, it was still very much the Great Western Railway. Their locomotives were always still painted in green, their express locomotives, lined green, they were never black or anything like that, they always kept their colours. And that's what I remember most was these Saturday morning visits up to London.

And in the weekdays very often if it was school holidays we would go and see my father off on the train up to London because we had a station five minutes from our road. And we would go down on to the platform and the train would come in – and the through trains were always steam hauled. And after he'd got on the train and gone off we would be taken into the station master's little office – it had a staff of two, our local station, a station master and a porter – and he'd always have a fire in the grate. And the coal was always delivered off the engine. When the engine stopped in the station a bit of coal would be chucked down and the porter's job would be to go and collect it, put it in the coal bucket. And we'd have a glass of hot milk and ginger biscuits – this is my sister and I. And if they'd run out of biscuits the station master would send the porter up to a little shop (laughs) which was on a



bridge that was over the railway to get biscuits specially for us. And we'd sit round the fire and have our hot milk and ginger biscuits.