



Recollections of the Civil Engineer's Department, SR

By Basil Gunter

I joined the Southern Railway in December 1937. That's in the Civil Engineer's Department, new works section, in Waterloo Station.

When I started, the first thing I did was colouring new railway footings, surveys, very full-length scale drawings, and small works outside such as repairs to stations or construction of new stations. My first sort of large project was small construction works on existing stations, such as changes to the kiosks and stuff. Later on, I started on larger projects, building new signal boxes.

Working in Waterloo station was quite interesting. Waterloo, I think, was built on marshy ground, and had arches underneath. Most of the arches were let out, mostly to the liquor trade. There was a bonded store for the whisky so there was a smell of whisky underneath the station.

The drawing office over looked the roof, over the whole station. If you went down one floor all the windows overlooked the concourse which was quite a sight in the days of Ascot, where the trains went off to Epsom Downs a popular approach. Of course, in wartime the concourse would be a different sight. Instead of troops of boy scouts going on holiday somewhere you would get positions of troops on their way to the coast or camps across the country.

The office was moved during the war and this was planned in 1938. I was a junior and went with some senior people in the department to Dorking in Surrey to look at a proposed place for the whole drawing office and other sections of the engineers, and other departments of the railway. On top of a hill, there was a building like a big hotel, very old, quite a reputation, I think it was run by a load of Italians. Some of it was in dreadful condition, the kitchen would never have passed any tests. Some of the toilets had been blocked for years, and there had been no attempt to open them. I say it was a magnificent building, it would be alright to be partitioned up for quite a few bedrooms.

I was part of the Home Guard and this was quite easy. You just stood around in the huge grounds to this hotel. We mounted Home Guard around in case you had saboteurs coming in but it was quite uneventful. The fire service was more fun, in fact you got to practice. We had a fire pump for throwing the water around. One time the whole board of the railway came down to see a demonstration and when it came to displaying how the mobile pump went, I was in first with the hose. Unfortunately, one member of the board didn't know quite how far the hose could project the jet. The man in charge duly proceeded to open the



throttle, anybody that knows anything about fire engines, it takes more than one man to hold the thing when there a full throttle on the water. I was holding the hose in my hands as hard as I could but the pressure increased and increased and the hose proceeded to jerk upwards and the jet fell where the members of the board were standing. Fortunately, the Chief of the Board found the funny side of it and burst out laughing, so the other members of the board almost had to follow suit and suffer it.