



Trainspotting in the 1950's

By John Wood

In the area of North Acton you had the Great West mainline, the Great Western mainline which went from Acton down to Ealing Broadway off to all the stations to Bristol and elsewhere. Also, up there you had the old oak engine sheds which was where all the old engines which went out of Paddington were brought back to be serviced, to be coaled, it was a full round house. And then a little bit further away from that was Wilsden which was the round house and sheds for Euston Station. I was showed where the holes in the fences were and you could get in. You hid your bike somewhere and walked in. Alright the shed men used to find you, but as long as you were being sensible and no horse play. They just would say 'don't muck about' and they would let you walk round these round houses. Walk round the big turntable in the middle, walk up and down inside. The guys that were servicing the engines, oiling them and those sorts of things would chat to you and let you climb on the footplate. In one sense, no health and safety but in another sense, you were being watched and you were being trusted as well. Occasionally you got chased off when you got a grumpy one. But by and large as long as you weren't mucking around, weren't doing stupid things they welcomed the interest. So, that was where I learnt to go and look at LMS engines and Great Western engines, steaming either out to all stations to Glasgow or all stations to Bristol and Cardiff.

Officially we were not allowed and there was an element of trepidation. You didn't know they weren't going to call the Railway Police. There were guards on these places in the early days, but a little bit later on you learnt to go and find someone and say. I couldn't have been more than 9 at this point, but you learn to go and speak to someone and say 'is it alright if I do this, I just want to go there, I just want to do this' and they would say things like 'oh alright, stay off the track, if there's a moving engine make sure you stand well clear or come and look at this'.

I moved near Chiswick Station a number of years later. Chiswick Station had a little passing loop in the station itself and a two lanes good yard. Electric trains went in each direction half and an hour. About the same time, I had acquired a camera and the parents had set me up a dark room to do the processing down in the cellar of the house. So, I used to go and sit on the railway station and watch the varying types of electric trains come through. Then late morning every day, along would come the little goods train with maybe 6-10 trucks on it, and he would go up the line starting somewhere near Feltham and then come through every station dropping trucks off full of coal, full of parcels and picking up the empties from the day before.



And then from there I occasionally used to cycle on down to Brentford or to Ealing Broadway to see the expresses go past. But at that point I largely gave up the bike, I don't think it was laziness it was you could just do much more by jumping on a train. A day return ticket to Waterloo and you could get off either at Clapham Junction or get back on at Clapham Junction and go on to Waterloo and wander around Waterloo. Then get on a train and come back home. On a daily basis, I had to live with electric but that was the big attraction of going to Clapham Junction or to Waterloo because, that was definitely all steam. That was big, big steam interest. In Waterloo, you would see the big mainline steam engines. You would get some little small station pilot would pull the carriages in and sit at the end of the platform, hopefully steaming away but not filling the station concord with a load of smoke and stuff like that. Then the big mainline engine would come and back on and be coupled up and the little pilot would be uncoupled and when it was time to go it was heave-ho. The big one and the carriages were assisted out of the station with the little pilot pushing like hell on the back end and that was something like an M7 in those days. And it would push it all the way down to Clapham Junction and if it was a really heavy 13 or 15 coach train it would aid it through Clapham Junction. The engines couldn't go fast through there anyway because of the sharp curve, so the little engine on the back would still be pushing and would disappear out of sight round the bend still pushing.

So, at Waterloo for the long-haul distance trains they were just open platforms and in those days the two main platforms were, I can't remember the numbers. The express platforms were completely open because their tickets were checked on the trains. So, you could go right up the end of the platform, round-a-bout platforms 12...13, it's that sort of order. You would go right out on the end of those and they were really long platforms because of the trains they were handling. So, you were a long way out and you could sit on the end of there and no one would bother you. You could just watch all sorts of trains coming and going, occasional parcel trains. The big thing was about three times an hour something fairly massive would arrive and something fairly large would leave because they were sending trains to Southampton, Weymouth, and Exeter.

My favourite locomotives were the Bulleid's. They were state of the art and in those days, they were spam cans. They had the very square section. About 52/53 you occasionally saw a rebuilt one. But those were the ones that really caught my imagination and then from there you would move down to Clapham Junction station. You couldn't really change platforms at Clapham Junction because there were barriers. In those early days, they checked you on and off of every platform so I had to stay over on the north side of the station. The same tracks are still used today but that's where you would see big Merchant Navies or a big West Country pulling hard, going around the bend because the track was banked. In those days, it wasn't stopping at Clapham Junction. The next stop was Woking if it was get to Basingstoke as quick as you possibly could and if it was a boat train to Southampton it didn't



even stop at Basingstoke. So, these things were pulling hard, working hard, leaning over and on the back end of a little engine going huff huff huff not trying to keep up but just trying to get the thing rolling. And with hindsight now reading some of these reports, the Fireman was working like hell and these engines were getting to Basingstoke in the same times that the electric trains, normally doing a 100 mph get down there now. So, the really fast boat rains down to Southampton were really rocking along maximum speed on every bit of the track.