



Travelling in WWII

By Douglas Parish

I was born in Portsmouth in 1925, approx. a quarter of a mile from Fratton Station. Of course, in those days our principle means of travel was the railway. One of our family holiday destinations was Rowlands Castle, with which we had some sort of family connection. So Bank Holidays generally we would get on the train at Fratton and go to Rowlands Castle and then walk to our favourite picnic spot which over looked the line coming down from Petersfield to Rowlands Castle. The other thing I can particularly remember is at about the age of 5 we had a Sunday school outing to Petersfield, which of course we travelled by train with a special reserved coach for the party. In 1939 we moved to Plymouth, leaving behind grandmas and grandpas in Portsmouth, so again if we had to visit them it was invariably by rail from Plymouth to Portsmouth on the once a day direct train.

Then in 1942 I joined the Navy in Plymouth at the Engineering College to do my engineering training. My family moved back to Portsmouth in 1943 when my father returned from sea. So, I had to travel on leave back from Plymouth to Portsmouth. One particular feature of this was that obviously, we had leave three times a year but in between we would get a half term. The half term was scheduled only to start after work on Friday evening which meant that all the fast trains to London and any other destination had gone by this time. There were certain hardy souls who would skip off during the afternoon in the hope of not being caught, so they could catch the last Great Western to Paddington or the last Southern train. Those of us who stuck to the rules had only one option the 4.50 from Paddington...from Friary Station in Plymouth. This was obviously the milk and mail train because it stopped at literally every station between Plymouth and Salisbury. We arrived eventually at Salisbury, if my memory serves me right at midnight having left Plymouth at 4.50. Then on to Eastleigh where we had to wait if we were going to Portsmouth. We had to wait for the 2.40-night train from Waterloo to Portsmouth, arriving home in the very, very early hours. But there was one advantage to that train. Those of us that were railway enthusiasts because it was late at night there were no inspectors or other high ranking staff around. So, if you could find a friendly driver there was a chance of a footplate ride certainly between two stations, which was a great advantage.

We did notice some strange new modern locomotives, around I suppose would be 1943, when the Merchant Navies suddenly appeared. These peculiar locomotives which didn't seem to have any motive power or even a boiler. It was just this slab-sided machine which derogatively were called by many people flannel jackets rather than Channel Packet but we soon got used to them. I remember travelling behind, I can't remember what engine but I remember the ride from Exeter to Plymouth to Salisbury behind one of these new



remarkable engines. Travel of course during the war was pretty hectic. Coming at half term and going back I had to take the train from Portsmouth to Salisbury then pick up the train from Waterloo, usually the 11 'clock from Waterloo at Salisbury. The trains at that time were anything up to 14 or 15 coaches long, and I can remember that at Salisbury that some of the coaches were actually beyond the platform. Even though it was wartime the restaurant cars were still going and the staff must have been quite incredible because they would serve at least three sessions of lunch between Waterloo and Exeter. If you were lucky when you joined at Salisbury, you could manage to get a ticket for lunch in the dining car.

The trains during the war were so completely crowded. I think that quite honestly the 11 O'clock from London to Exeter and on with all the various parts was as crowded from London to Exeter as any modern commuter train. Joining at Salisbury the chance of getting a seat was absolutely nil. You could almost count that you would, even with a first-class ticket as a young Naval Officer end up sitting on our suitcases in the corridor. The government in those days even gave young Naval Sub-Lieutenants a first-class ticket but even our chance of getting a seat was pretty slim. For a start the guard had no hope of keeping people out of the first-class seats whether they had a ticket or not. Even I may say sometimes the toilets were pressed into use as accommodation. Yet as I say, the buffet or the restaurant car staff did an absolutely magnificent job in producing meals well beyond the standard of most restaurants at the time.