

Starting to work at Brent, Nov. 1961.

Before I left Stoke, I received a message from the Yard Master's Office (YMO) at Brent asking if I had managed to arrange lodgings in the area. My answer was no. One of the other Goods Guards Clerks, Pat Guthrie (an Irishman, well he would be with a name like that, wouldn't he?) lodged with an elderly lady, Violet Rice, at 102, Brent Terrace. She had room for another lodger, so I took up the offer. Pat had been at Brent for about six months. His wife, Jean, was still living in Nottingham until Pat found somewhere for them both near to Brent. After a few weeks Pat was offered a railway cottage at Elstree, right by the station.

We used to do the rosters for the following week when on nights. It was a good system, because it helped us to keep awake. We had to take into account guards on holiday, off sick, or on special duties, etc. Those special duties might include helping to make a film (see below), covering a Station Foreman's position at Luton and/or St. Albans, or the guard who trained new recruits. We also had to provide guards for special passenger trains. These might be empty coaching stock (ECS) from Cricklewood Carriage Sidings to St. Pancras then a special boat train to Tilbury, turn on the triangle, and ECS back home. There could be trouble if you rostered the wrong man to one of those jobs. The man who thought it should be his would soon be complaining. You had to choose the man nearest to the booking on time for the special who had signed his route card for Tilbury. These were the older hands as this was a prestige job. Then, of course, his job had to be covered. If you hadn't a spare guard with the required route knowledge, then you would have to pick the next nearest man and try again.

Coming on duty with Pat one night during the second week there, as we approached the YMO, we could see bright lights around a 2-10-0 9F locomotive. As we got closer we could see that the engine was 'off the road'. Someone had apparently opened the engine's regulator on Cricklewood shed and the points were not set for it. I heard that a few weeks earlier Brent No. 2 signalbox, which controlled engine movements on and off Cricklewood engine shed, had received a 'phone message "Light engine Wellingborough". An 8F had gone down the Goods Line, through Hendon station, but the engine stopped on the incline that takes the Goods Lines up and over the Local and Fast Lines. The Hendon signalman sent a man up to the engine but there was no one on the footplate.

I had had two weeks' training, one on days (6am to 2pm) and one on nights (10pm to 6am). On the Thursday of the third week when I arrived at the YMO at 2pm, I found that Pat had phoned in sick. I was asked if I could manage on my own. Well, 2pm to 10pm was the quietest shift, so why not? All went well until about 7 o'clock when a guard came to sign on, and when I saw him, I knew he was the guard who had worked the 7/35pm Hendon - Derby freight train the previous three days. This was an important train as it connected with St. Pancras - Liverpool and Manchester fitted freights at Kettering. It also picked up traffic at St. Albans, Harpenden, Luton and Bedford on its way to Kettering. It was essential that this train ran to time if delays to many other important trains were to be avoided. Unfortunately I had not noticed that the time for him to book on for the Hendon train had already passed. I asked him what job he had come for and he replied that it was empty coaches from Cricklewood carriage sidings to 'Pancras for a relief to the night Scotsman as far as Leicester. I looked at the roster and there it was on the page where we entered special workings. Unfortunately Jim had not crossed his name out for the Hendon freight. When I had come on duty at 2pm and looked through the roster book to see if every job was covered, I didn't notice that his name was on two different jobs. What a good start to my career at Brent, I thought. Well, I plucked up courage and phoned Fred Gillard, guards controller at 'Pancras. "Fred, I'm afraid we've no guard for the Hendon - Derby. The guard who is down to cover it has just signed on for the relief to the Scotsman." I had already told the guard to go ahead and work the passenger train, but there was still time to change that if Fred thought differently. "OK Spen," he said. He could tell I was worried about it. It was great working with Fred. I think he knew I was only 19, and so he always made me feel at ease. "Don't worry, I'll see what we can do". Fred came back to me a few minutes later and said that they had cancelled the "Mill Hill shunt" so that that guard could work the Hendon freight. Our guard was rostered to work the train as far as Kettering, so Fred asked: "Has the guard off the Mill Hill shunt signed for Kettering?" I looked at his route card, then answered "No, he hasn't, only as far as Wellingborough" (Because so many Brent Goods Guard's rostered jobs took them north, all of them knew the

road at least as far as Wellingborough) “Right then, I’ll tell Leicester Control they will have to find a guard to work the train from Wellingborough to Kettering” said Fred. Of course the train had a late start. Mr Jones had a “skin” a few days later: “Please explain a late start to the Hendon - Derby.” I had to go into his office and tell him what happened. I am afraid Jim got a telling off too.

The risk to life and limb is always not far away when working out on the line. I was doing the roster on the Wednesday night ready for the following week when Guard Richardson came to sign off, about 2am. “What have you got for me next week?”, he asked. “Nothing at the moment”, I replied. I looked at the roster book. “You’re 10am spare. I can bring you 8am if you like.” You couldn’t move a man more than two hours either side of his booked time unless he agreed. “Or 7am, if you want to get away earlier.” I was thinking of him covering for the late comers, or the non-starters. “I’ve been spare this week and last. I’m fed up of doing just bits of jobs, or sitting around waiting time in the mess room,” he moaned. “Haven’t you got anything at all?”. I knew that every job was covered, except the afternoon Queen’s Road shunt, down the Barking branch from Kentish Town. “Guard Kearney is off sick this week, and his job is uncovered if he’s still off sick next week”, I said. “I could bring you on at 12 o’clock for his job, the afternoon Queen’s Road shunt.” The job was actually 12/15pm on duty, 1/0pm from Brent with traffic for the Barking branch. “I’ll do that”, he offered, “you can usually get away by about seven on that job. Put me down for 12/15pm, that’ll be OK”. The following week he worked the job on the Monday, and I signed him off just before seven. He liked the job, and said it was a lot better than being spare. The following day, when I came on duty at 2pm, I knew something was up as soon as I walked into the main office, before I even reached the small room where our desk was. “What’s happened?”, I enquired. “Guard Richardson’s had an accident at Holloway. He’s in Park Royal Hospital,” I was told. He had booked on at 12 noon, and Jim told him that he had been told by Control that there was no traffic at Brent. He was to go on his engine, a Midland 4F, to Holloway, pick up a brakevan, then proceed to shunt the stations and yards along the Barking Branch. When they got to Holloway they stopped the engine outside the yard. Guard Richardson had to find a brake himself, as there was no yard staff there. He came back and told the driver there was only one brake in the yard, and that was at the end of a line of coal wagons. “We’ll have to draw the lot out onto the main-line,” he instructed, “then loose shunt the brake into the empty siding next to them, put the wagons back, and pick the brake up.” They drew the lot out onto the main line. Guard Richardson changed the points, gave the “hit-up” signal, and as the engine started pushing, he jumped onto the brakevan steps prior to going inside and screwing the brake down. Unfortunately he didn’t notice that a raft of coal wagons was standing foul on the next siding. Reg Gates, the Assistant Yard Master on my shift, went to the inquest later, and told me that the driver said: “When he gave the “hit-up” signal I started the engine, propelling them back. Then I heard an almighty crash. I said to my fireman ‘We’ve hit something, you’d better go and find out what’s happened.’” The fireman explained, “when I walked back, I saw the brakevan and the leading wagons up in the air, and they had lifted the wagons on the adjoining line up in the air as well. Underneath was Guard Richardson. He could hardly breath. He had been crushed between the brakevan steps and the first wagon of coal standing foul in the next siding. I ran up the embankment, found the nearest phone and called for an ambulance.” Sadly, Guard Richardson died later that afternoon. His uncle was the on the local Union committee. He saw me when he signed off just before 9pm that night. “What was he doing coming on at 12/15pm when he was 10am spare?”, he asked. I told him about our conversation the week before, and he seemed satisfied about that. What made it worse as well was that his fiancée was due to come over soon from the West Indies. He had been in England for some time, saving enough money to bring her over. Reg Gates, Assistant Yard Master on my shift, could see I was upset about it. “If only I hadn’t said anything, Reg, he would still be here,” I muttered. “It’s just one of those things, Spen, don’t upset yourself. He chose to do that job, he wasn’t forced to”, Reg said. Reg was one of the best. It was indeed a privilege to have worked with him.

In December 1961 Brent YMO was only closed on Christmas Day. In 1962 it was also closed on Boxing Day. It was my job to open up the office at 10pm. To do this I caught a local train to Stafford and from there a train to Euston. The train was very late getting into Stafford. What I didn’t know then was that there had been an accident at Coppenhall, just north of Crewe, when the Mid-day Scot ran into the back of a Liverpool — Euston train. I got to Mrs Rice’s at 9/30, just time to grab a bite to eat and then off to open up. It started to snow in London the following week. The first morning of snow, an Anglo-Indian guard by the

name of Gallyot came to work wearing pumps as we would call them then, or light trainers. A couple of hours later I got a call from Bert Ings, the Yard Inspector in EWS and local clerical union representative. "You haven't got a spare pair of shoes anywhere there, have you, Spen", he asked. "Shoes?" I replied, "no, I'm sure there isn't. Why?" "Well," he went on to explain, "Guard Gallyot's shoes were wringing wet from the snow, so he got a good fire going in his brakevan, and put his pumps on top to dry out. When he came to take them off again the rubber had melted on the hot stove and he can't pull them off." I bet he didn't come to work in pumps again when it was snowing. Come to think of it, it wasn't a good idea whatever the weather, bearing in mind the type of work a goods guard did.

When the snow was at its deepest, a guard who lived just down the road came to sign on for the 10.10am Brent Empty Wagon Sidings – Toton. Very few trains were running because of the snow, so he said to me: "Are we running today?". I said "No". "Good", he said, and turning to the ever-present guards playing cards, "deal me in lads". "Hang on", I said, "there'll be an engine off shed in about half an hour. You're to go and relieve a Welling-borough guard on a freight train stuck in a snow drift between Luton and Bedford." Not only the goods guard needed relieving, the locomen and the engine did by then! I believe he got about 13 hours in that day.

During December, I think it was, 1962, we had to suffer possibly the last real smog in London. To get from my lodgings to Brent Yard Master's Office about ¼ mile away I used to take a short cut across "The Kop" (the north end of Brent Loaded Wagon Sidings marshalling yard), across the Up Sidings behind Brent No. 2 'box, then across at least six running lines (Up & Down Local, Up & Down Fast, Up & Down Goods), and coming off the Goods Lines, right on the boarded crossing, were the entrance to the loco shed, the South Sidings, the Carriage and Wagon Repair Shed, and the Up & Down branch to Dudding Hill (eventually Kew and the Southern Region). Even in broad daylight it could be dangerous, but I really had to watch my step when crossing when it was dark. However, when the smog came down, there was no chance I would go that way, so I walked almost ½ mile down to the North Circular Road, where the traffic was completely at a standstill on both carriageways and abandoned vehicles lined both verges. I turned left for Staples Corner, and left again at Staples Corner up the Edgware Road. I caught up with a gentleman with the essential handkerchief over his mouth because of the smog. I could tell from his clothes that he was a railwayman, and obviously going on duty for 10 o'clock. "Is that you, Jim", I asked. "Yes, who's that?" he asked in reply. "It's Spen from the Yard Master's Office." Jim was the man at the shed who rostered engines and their crews to their particular tasks, and I had spoken to him several times on the phone enquiring about which engines were coming off shed, so the guards wouldn't miss their ride. We walked along Edgware Road together. Just after relieving the other Jim at the Y.M.O., the guard for the 11/10 Brent Empty Wagon Sidings (EWS) —Toton would sign on at 10/15pm. That night it was Jack West who lived in the railway cottages at Cricklewood, half-a-mile away. He walked in on time. "Deal me in, lads" he said. There was always somebody playing cards in the mess room. I don't think some of them had a home to go to. He reached the signing-on hatch. "I suppose we're cancelled", he said. "Sorry, Jack, you're running", I informed him. Jim had told me that there was a lot of perishables in the EWS and they had to go that night. "But the driver won't be able to see the pegs (signals)", he protested. "No good, Jack, the perishables have got to run tonight." It took Jack about 14 hours to get to Wellingboro' and back.

During that very cold winter of '62-'63, (the coldest January in London since 1838) the first job on nights, before I took my coat off was to stoke up the fire in the boiler room until I could get no more coke in. Every night, after our 10 o'clock cuppa, Reg Gates, the Assistant Yard Master, would go into his office and read The Log Book and the messages from Mr Jones, the Yard Master. Reg always called him "Guv", even to his face, but I always called him Mr. Jones. About half-past eleven Reg would call out: "Going 'round the houses, Spen, see you later". 'Round the houses' meant he was going to visit all the marshalling yards: 'The KOP' (north) end of Loaded Wagon Sidings (LWS), south end of LWS, West End Yard at West Hampstead, Empty Wagon Sidings (EWS), and South Sidings just outside the Y.M.O. Two other yards had no permanent staff. They were: Up Sidings behind Brent No. 1 'box, and Down Sidings by Cricklewood station. January 1963 was a very, very cold month. One night, Reg came back from his "walk around the houses", as usual, about a quarter-to-three. "Put your coat on, Spen, and come and have a look at this", he said as he walked in. I put my overcoat on and followed him out. We walked about 30 yards, far enough to look towards

Cricklewood loco, where I could see several steam engines on fire. Strange to say 'on fire', isn't it, because if they are in steam they must be on fire. This time, though, the fire and smoke was coming from under the footplates, and licking around the cabs. "What's going on, Reg," I asked. "It's so cold, Spen, the injectors are frozen solid. They can't get any water into the boilers. So they've wrapped oily rags around the injectors and set fire to them, hoping the heat will melt the ice." We made our way back to the office. "Ever likely hardly anything's running tonight then", I said, as I put the kettle on. Reg needed a hot cup of tea after walking round the yards for over three hours. "You would think the injectors wouldn't freeze up, being so near the firebox", I continued. "Shows how cold it is", replied Reg. I expected a few trains to start running after that, but Reg came to me about an hour later to say that things were even worse now. The point rodding on the loco shed, because it hadn't been moved for a while, was held fast by the ground in some places. The intense cold had swollen the ground so much that it was preventing the point rodding from moving. Picks were used to try and break the soil away. Things didn't get any better until the weather became less cold.

Part of the film "The Password is Courage" starring Dirk Bogard was made at Scratchwood Sidings. I had to roster a guard every day to go there on the engine and make up the train until the spectacular crash took place. He came back day after day, done nothing for 8 hours, and said: "No action yet". Cricklewood driver stood in for Dirk Bogard on the footplate until a few seconds before the smash. April 2nd 1962 Fowler 4MT 42325 and train of 25 wagons wrecked. 10.25am St. Pancras - Manchester stopped specially at Radlett to pick up actors being filmed. Radlett was decked out as a wartime German station.

"The Condor" was the name given to a fast freight train between Hendon, just ½ mile north of Brent, and Gushetfaulds depot in Glasgow. A Carlisle goods guard and footplate men worked the train from Carlisle to Hendon and return. The guard arrived to sign off about 5.45am. He would sign on again at about 6pm to work the train back to Carlisle. However, after a very bad snowstorm in early 1963, he appeared at the hatch to sign off about 2/20pm. (This could possibly have been February 6th, as that was the day the up "Royal Scot" was diverted via Newcastle and up the ECML to King's Cross due to Shap being blocked with snow, which probably became blocked after Ais Gill) "Where've YOU been?" I asked. "Line blocked by snow over Ais Gill, so we had to come over Shap, and I had to wait for a pilot at Preston to get us back onto our proper route". The poor fellow had spent about 16 hours all alone in his brakevan. I phoned Fred Gillard, Guards Controller at St. Pancras, and told him: "'Condor' guard signing off. Do you want me to send him home?" "If he gets his skates on he'll be able to get the 'Caledonian' from Euston. It leaves at a quarter to four. Oh, and find us a guard for the 'Condor' down to Leicester tonight, will you Spen?" I can't remember what day it was now, but we had a spare guard about 'Condor' time on three nights a week. His booked job on Tuesdays and Thursdays was to travel passenger to Leicester, get back to Knighton South Junction and relieve a train of empty petrol tanks from Duddeston Rd, Birmingham. If it wasn't a Tuesday or a Thursday I would probably be OK. There were rarely any spare guards between about 4 and 10pm. If I couldn't cover the Condor, Fred would have to look elsewhere, perhaps a St. Pancras goods guard (there weren't many of them though), or he might have time to get a Wellingboro' guard up to Brent to work the Condor back. Of course, the importance of 'The Condor' justified even cancelling a local trip job to provide a guard. That would be up to Fred and 'Pancras Control.

We did make the occasional bad mistake with the rostering, of course. One particular day I heard that a returning Brighton – Bedford day excursion for old age pensioners had arrived at Clapham junction to change engines, locomen and guard. Our guard had booked off sick the day before, and Jim hadn't covered the job. It was the sort of job you'd take a guard off a freight for and report the freight as 'no guard' to St. Pancras Control. The train stood at Clapham Junction for well over an hour before a guard who had signed for the road to Brent could arrive to take charge of the train. I felt really sorry for the OAPs on the train. But why didn't the locomen on the engine know they had to pick up the guard as they came off shed? This was an area, looking back, that we could have prevented mistakes like this.

Looking back now, I guess I was guilty of breaking the law one Saturday night. I came on duty at 10pm and Jim told me that a guard due to sign on at 2.10am had just reported sick. There was nobody to cover

his job, which was one of the usual weekend track relaying trains somewhere down the main line. Jim went home, and I waited for Fred Gillard, the St. Pancras guards controller, to ring in as usual to see what jobs were uncovered. Just then a guard came to sign off. "No Sunday job for me, then", he dejectedly said. "No, I'm afraid not", I replied, "but wait a minute" — I looked at the clock — "no, sorry you can't do it, you won't be able to get enough rest." "What job's that then?" he asked. "It's 2.10am for a track relaying job near Elstree, but you'll only have four hours rest, you can't do it". "I'll be OK", he said. "I've had an easy job this afternoon. I can get some rest before I come back." Are you sure?" I asked. "I'll be here, 2.10am", he replied. "All right then, 2.10am. See you later," I said. He came on time at 2.10am, I signed him on, told him where his train was, Empty Wagon Sidings if I remember correctly, and off he went. However, somebody must have noticed that he was back after only four hours rest, probably one of the card gang in the mess room. There was nearly always a group of guards playing cards, any time, day or night. Word got round to the Guv, Mr Jones, and I was summoned to his office. I explained that although I knew a guard was entitled to nine hours' rest, I thought that if it was OK with him he could come back after whatever suited him. My priority was finding a guard for the job. A lot of men would be waiting around if that train didn't leave the sidings. The Guv told me in no uncertain terms that it was a Board of Trade Regulation, and that meant law. If a job was uncovered, and I could do nothing about it lawfully, then all I had to do was inform 'Pancras Control and let them decide what to do. And that was that.

Still being interested in railway signalling, I often thought as I passed within 20 yards of Brent Junction No. 1 on my way to and from work, that I would like to visit one of the boxes in the area. I never saw anyone in No. 1 box, because I was so close to it as I passed and couldn't see inside, it being rather tall. I asked Reg Gates, the Assistant Yard Master on my shift, if there was any chance he could fix up a visit to No. 1 box. He said that he didn't know any of the men who worked there, so couldn't help. This wasn't surprising, as Reg wouldn't have any need to visit the box or talk to the men there. Reg did say, however, that he would ask the signalman at Brent Junction No. 2 if I could pop up the box for a few minutes. Reg knew the signalmen there, because the box dealt with all the traffic in and out of Brent South Sidings. So I added Brent Junction No. 2 to my list of boxes visited. I was only there a short while, just to say 'Hello' and 'Goodbye, thank you'. The box had a large clock over the door. I thought it a bit strange that time was important enough in freight train sidings to warrant a large clock. Freight trains didn't run to time that well, did they? Having said that, it was noticeable at Brent that the Brent – Toton empties, which left Empty Wagon Sidings at 10 minutes past the hour, were nearly always departed on time. There were about 7 of these trains a day. The 11.10am, however, consisted of mixed freight, not empties. It was known as The Dust, because it called at Sundon Cement & Lime Works, north of Luton. They came past the Yard Masters Office on the down goods, and with a 9F hauling 100 empties, you thought the train would never end! The went through Hendon station, then up and over the Up and Down Fast lines to come down again onto the Down Slow at Silkstream Junction. By that time, the down local passenger, which had left St. Pancras on the hour, and Cricklewood at 12 minutes past, would be well clear of the junction to give the empties a clear run.

Working the 10pm to 6am shift one Saturday night/Sunday morning in Spring 1962, Reg Gates, the Assistant Yard Master, told me to be careful coming to work for 10pm on Sunday night. Workmen were laying 6 foot deep drains between the Down Local and Up Fast lines outside Brent Junction No. 1 signalbox. There was often a lot of water lying about in that area after a long spell of rain. Reg said that the board crossing across the lines would probably be taken out. As I walked down from the end of Brent Terrace towards the Cop end of Brent Loaded Wagon Sidings, I could see large bright lights in the distance. I got to the crossing. I stepped over the two rails of the Up Local line, and the first rail of the Down Local Line. I stood on the sleeper, looking over the second rail. If there was a trench, this is where it would be. I stared down at what I thought was the ground. It looked perfectly normal dirt. I stepped over, and down I went. I think the workmen cheated a bit because, after I had hauled myself to my feet again, I could just see over the top, so it was about 5 feet deep. There was a bright light that had been turned away from the trench. It made where the trench was even blacker. I got out of the trench, but could hardly walk. I had twisted my knee. I worked until 7am Monday, came back for 2pm in the afternoon. On the Tuesday Pat Guthrie had agreed to swap turns with me, so I was back again at 7am Tuesday. I was restdays Wednesday and Thursday, so I got one of the lads in the office to cover for me so that I left work about 1pm to get the train from Cricklewood station to St. Pancras, then the 1/55pm train to Manchester via Derby and Stoke-on-Trent, which of course took me almost home. I was carrying my suitcase full of dirty clothes for mum to wash as well, so by the time I got home my knee

wasn't half in pain. I was off work for 2 weeks, but I didn't let anyone know at Brent that it happened somewhere I was not supposed to be, although Reg Gates guessed, of course. My driving test at Cricklewood was due towards the end of my sick leave, so I had to travel to my lodgings with Mrs Rice, stay overnight, take my driving test (which I passed, thank goodness), and travel back home – a round trip of 310 miles just for a driving test!