

First impressions

My earliest recollection of the railway was when I was just about five years old. I remember going in a red, open top sports car belonging to a friend of my father's to Basford Bridge located by the Co-op dairy on the main Newcastle to Nantwich road. This was located about 2 miles south of Crewe station on the west coast main line. Dad lifted me up to get a better view of an express on the down fast, because I recall the engine going underneath the bridge directly below me. It seemed so close I could almost touch it. Just a wisp of steam was escaping from the safety valves. I must have been almost five, as I say, because mother used to tell me she was only a few weeks off giving birth to my sister, who was born on 5 October 1947, and since I was born 28 August 1942 that makes it close to my fifth birthday. My mother was worried that the jolting she got in the car might have started her into early labour, but it didn't.

First train spotting, Chatterley

Did you ever say as a child: "Mum, I'm really bored. What can I do?"? Well, I did once, when I was about eleven. "Why don't you go and watch the trains at Chatterley. You know where it is. Catch Brown's "White Fleet" bus for Tunstall, like we do when we go Tunstall Park, and get off at Chatterley, where the railway tunnel is." I knew it well from travelling on the bus, because I would always look towards Harecastle tunnel as the bus crossed the bridge spanning the cutting just before the tunnel. I caught the bus and arrived at Chatterley, located about 4 miles north of Stoke-on-Trent. There was another lad there, and he told me that at one o'clock there would be a "namer" coming through.

"What's a namer?" I asked. "An engine with a name, of course," he replied. Sure enough, almost exactly on the dot at one o'clock, (later I was to learn that the booked passing time at Kidsgrove, 1½ miles north of Chatterley, was 1.03 pm), the "double peg" came off for the Stoke direction, and after a couple of minutes the 12 noon Manchester London Road to London Euston came out of the tunnel mouth, headed by N° 45701, a "Jubilee" class locomotive. There on the side, and I can still see it now, was the name "Conqueror".

Crewe

It wasn't long before I found out where one could see dozens of 'namers' in a single day. That was Crewe, of course. Soon after starting at Wolstanton Grammar School in 1953 I found out that a lad in the same class, Malcolm Sutton, was also interested in 'train spotting'. We used to spend most of a Saturday on the footbridge at the north end of Crewe Station. There was always something different to see there. A "string" (three or four engines coupled together, one in steam pulling the other "dead" ones) would either come under the road bridge from Crewe South shed heading for Crewe Works, or going in the opposite direction. Those going into the works would appear rusty and dirty, those coming out clean and shiny. The air coming out of the open steam cocks would make a strange sound. There was some excitement when the cry "String" was heard, because often a string would contain engines we had not seen before, possibly from some faraway shed. What I remember most, I think, was standing on the footbridge looking down into the chimney of a "Duchess" or a "Scot" standing in N° 2 platform. Who cared if you got a black face, the smell was worth it.

Whitmore

Justin Ray, Malcolm Sutton and myself had been going to Whitmore for a year or so. One particular Easter Monday morning I went alone, and as the trains were few and far between I decided to go down by the box, even though the view of the trains was not as good as on the other side of the road bridge. The box door was open and I could hear the bell codes very clearly. I asked the signalman what they meant, and he said why didn't I come up and he would explain, so in I went. The signalman's name was Jack Woodcock, full name John Baden Woodcock, and he explained the function of the block instruments and simple bell codes. I remember what caused confusion for a while was how could you signal both up and down trains on one instrument. I don't think I was allowed to send any bell codes or 'pull off' on my first visit, but I was certainly hooked on the sounds and smells of a signalbox. Jack invited back some other time, which I think was on the following Saturday afternoon. After a few visits I was confidently pulling the signals off and sending bell codes. Jack would say: "This is the Royal Scot so I'd better pull off for this one", but soon he could trust me to do it all myself. Jack's locker in the corner of the box, and he always had the locker lid raised so I would know he was on duty. We had to keep an eye on the Station Master, Mr. Barnett, as his house was only 300

yards away, and he could see straight through the box from his kitchen window. We made sure that only one of us was visible at any one time. I later wore black trousers and a black waistcoat, which a signalman at Bradwell Sidings, near Stoke, gave me, to look the part.

To put a little extra cash in his pocket, Jack would cut the platelayers' hair, in fact anybody's hair which was getting too long. He used to cut mine as well, but since I could usually only visit the box every third Saturday when he was on "noons", it was a choice between having it cut after three weeks when it didn't want cutting, or after six weeks when it was too long! I do remember though visiting Jack several times during school holidays, on a weekday morning. Once or twice I was in the box when the 'pickups' was shunting in the yard. Jack said though that he had better work the box while it was there. The engine was usually a Black 5 or a Stanier 8F (super-power for the 'pick-ups'!!). When the 'pickups' had left, Jack cut a platelayers hair while I worked the box.

One of my favourite trains to signal through was the 5/50pm Stafford – Crewe, 6/12pm passing Whitmore. This was a train of 3 coaches which came through on the down fast. A regular engine was 4-4-0 No. 40660 of Crewe North shed. Jack told me this train took mostly railway workers back to Crewe after working at Stafford. A curiosity of this train was that sometimes it would be signalled as 3-1 (local passenger), and sometimes as 4 beats (express passenger). It should really have been signalled as an express passenger, but perhaps someone at Stafford liked to go back to the old days when the train was a local passenger train stopping at all stations to Crewe.

Jack trusted me so much that on a couple of occasions he left me in the box on my own. Once was on a Saturday night when Jack said that just felt like a Guinness. "There's nothing about, Spen", he said. "I'm just nipping up to 'The Sheet Anchor' for a bottle of Guinness". The Sheet Anchor pub is on the A53 Newcastle—Market Drayton road, just off the railway bridge, close to Jack's Up Fast Starting signal. He was only gone ten minutes, but I felt very important on my own. I actually did give "line clear" for a down London before he came back.

The other occasion was on a Saturday afternoon when the local village (incidentally Whitmore box was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from the village of Whitmore, right on the border with the next village - Baldwin's Gate) put on a show in the field behind the box. "I just fancy a go at that clay pigeon shoot. Just look after the box a few minutes. Mr Barnett (the Station Master) has gone on his usual Saturday afternoon trip to Newcastle, so you'll be OK". I remember leaning on the balcony at the top of the box steps, in lovely sunshine, watching the goings-on at the village show. Jack was almost out of sight over the far corner of the field. He could have stayed there all afternoon as far as I was concerned.

Jack had a real scare one damp and foggy night. He said it was the closest he had been to having a pile-up on his hands. What happened was this:

Very often, when the weather was damp, the electrical circuit which released the lock on the Whitmore Up Fast starting signal refused to work. The other starters worked O.K. Also, it only seemed to happen when the next box to the south, Stableford, was switched out. Maybe it was a bad connection inside the switch in Stableford box which carried the signals through to Standon Bridge, the next box after Stableford. The lock on the lever in the box was released by the signalman in the box in advance when he turned a needle indicator on his block instrument to "Line Clear", if the line was clear up to his clearance point. This was usually 440 yards inside his first stop signal (the 'home' signal).

The result of this was that trains on the Up Fast, towards Stafford, had to pass the starting signal at danger. Of course, the driver had to be verbally instructed to do so, and told the reason why. Two factors made this procedure awkward that night. The Up Fast was the furthest line from the box, therefore three running lines had to be crossed to reach the driver. Also, it became very foggy, so crossing the running lines could be extremely hazardous. Each box had a 'fogging point'. This was a convenient location some distance away from the box, chosen so that if it was not visible during fog or falling snow, someone would have to assist the signalman to observe train tail-lamps. This was necessary to ensure that the train was complete and had not become parted whilst in the preceding section. Jack had to drag the 'ganger' out of his bed. A phone was provided for the purpose, and he only lived in the railway cottages close to the box, so he wasn't long in arriving. The "ganger" could do two jobs for Jack, look for tail-lamps and also authorise drivers to pass the Up Fast starter at danger.

All went well until about 3 a.m. As Jack said, "About 3 o'clock there comes a string of sleepers out of Crewe." ('Sleepers' meaning sleeping-car trains, not what the track is laid on). Because Stableford box was closed, the length of the block section was now twice the distance, through to Standon Bridge, 4.2 miles away. This meant that in the time it was taking for trains to clear the section to there, a following train would

reach Whitmore and stand there waiting for a line clear. The first train had left Whitmore, and as soon as Jack cleared the section back to Madeley, he was offered another train, which he accepted. They sat talking in the box, Jack just getting up to 'get the road' for a freight train on the Down Slow Line from Standon Bridge. He pulled off the signals for it, and sat down again. Just then Jack heard the clunk of the track indicator in the box which meant that the train from Madeley had reached the Up Fast home signal track circuit. The train had to stand at the home signal at danger a couple of minutes or so until the previous train cleared the section to Standon Bridge. (Usually, when a train was waiting to enter the section ahead, the home signal would be pulled off. This would allow it to creep up to the starting signal, hoping by the time it reached there the signal would have cleared to green. On this occasion, of course, the signal could not be changed to green, so Jack held the train at the home signal.) When Jack "got the road", he pulled off the home signal, and said to Harry the ganger: "He's coming up now, Harry. Can you go across and tell him I've got a line clear and he can pass my starter at danger because of the fault. Watch out for the Down Slow goods. It must be getting close now." Harry went to the foot of the stairs and waited for the goods to pass. Jack thought, "Go on Harry, or else you'll have to walk all the way up to the starter to tell the driver." The Up Fast train started to pass by the box, on the far side of the four running lines, a "Duchess" at the head, blowing off impatiently. In desperation Harry turned his small battery torch to green, held it up towards the driver, and held his other hand in the air to signify 'right-away, Driver'. Just then the Down Slow goods came by. Harry noted that tail-lamps were present on both trains, and came back up the steps into the box. He told Jack everything was in order. Jack cleared the line back to Madeley and was immediately offered another 'sleeper' on the Up Fast, for which he gave line clear. This train was now clear to proceed up to his home signal, about 200 yards on the approach side of the box. They sat down to await its arrival. The box door had been left open. All of a sudden Jack rose to his feet and said: "Hush, Harry. I can hear an engine blowing off. That Up Fast hasn't gone yet." They went to the door, and through the fog they could just discern the last coach of the 'sleeper' about 100 yards away. Jack realised that there was about 250 yards from his home signal to the back of the express standing there. (440 yards was the required distance, even in clear weather). In the fog the driver of the train coming from Madeley could have overrun the signal by that much. Jack said to Harry: "Go as fast as you can and tell the driver he has a clear road to Standon Bridge. I'll go and try and make sure the one behind stops in time." Jack grabbed his hand lamp and three detonators and ran towards the home signal. He placed the detonators on the rail, on the approach side of the signal, spaced out as required. He could hear the diesel pounding up the bank from Madeley. "He must have passed my distant at caution by now. Why doesn't he shut off power? Perhaps the driver hasn't been over this road for quite a while and isn't quite sure where the home signal is." Jack told me that all these thoughts flashed through his mind. At last Jack heard the sound of the diesel subside as the driver shut off power. As it approached, Jack picked up the detonators one by one, until the driver came to a perfect stand at his home signal. "Got a problem with releasing my starter, driver," Jack truthfully told him. What he didn't tell him that there was another train standing only 250 yards ahead in the fog. "If you can draw up to the box when the home comes off, the ganger will give you clearance to Standon Bridge." With that Jack made his way back to the box, but when he went inside there was a very irate Cockney driver pacing up and down. "What the ****'s going on here?" he asked, "some fellow is standing there at the foot of the box steps giving me the 'right-away', and when I get to your starter it's at danger. I've only got a 17-year old fireman tonight so I thought I'd better come back myself and find out what was going on." (It was normal practice to send the fireman to the box to advise the signaller of the presence of a train). "I've sent the ganger up to tell you to pass my starter at danger," Jack replied, "I've got trouble with the block instrument needle and can't pull the starter off. Haven't you seen him?" "I've seen nobody", the driver retorted. Apparently he had gone down one side of the train, the ganger up the opposite side. Jack didn't tell him there was another train 250 yards behind him. "Get going, mate", Jack advised. "You've got a clear road to Standon Bridge." He hoped the driver didn't hear the throb of the diesel engine on the other train as he walked back to the waiting fireman on the "Duchess". He also hoped the driver wouldn't report the incident. Jack would have to fix the entries in the train register after consultation with the signalmen either side of Whitmore. The time the expresses lost as a result of the extra delay could probably be covered by the problems with the signal release circuit anyway. Harry showing a green light, even if the driver had seen it, and raising his right hand, was no authority to pass the starter at danger. Jack told Harry that he couldn't use a small battery torch instead of a proper hand-lamp if he was working with him in future. The driver would possibly have seen the brighter light of a hand-lamp on the other side of the train when walking back to the box.

One Saturday afternoon in November 1958, as I entered the box, Jack said "You've just arrived in time, Spen. You've passed your O-level in English, so come and help me fill this report in." "What report's that, Jack," I asked. "I had some excitement last night," he told me. "You know how it goes quiet about six and I have my tea then. Well, as I sat there enjoying my boiled egg, I heard the signal wires rattling under the box. I jumped to my feet and looked through the window towards Madeley and there in the moonlight I saw five cows running towards the box. That was what rattled the signal wires as they tripped over them. An Up Fast had just gone by and frightened them all over towards the Down Slow. The trouble was I'd pulled off for the Broad Street — Carlisle fast freight on the Down Slow, and they were all running straight into it. That's as far as I've got with my report." "What happened next then, Jack?" I asked. "Well, I knew the freight was a fast runner and had probably passed my distant at green, so I put all my signals to danger, grabbed my hand-lamp and some detonators and after sending six bells ("Obstruction Danger") to Madeley and Standon Bridge, I chased after the cows, hoping to get in front of them." "OK, write 'Knowing the Broad Street - Carlisle to be a fast runner'", I suggested. "That sounds good", said Jack, "carry on."

Jack was too late, of course. Three of the cows ploughed under the steam locomotive hauling the train. The other two ran as far as Stableford, almost 2¼ miles away. They had run over 5 miles. The train came to a stand in the derelict Whitmore station platform. Jack had to send for the platelayers to come and scrape the cows from under the steam engine. The smell of burning cows was too much for some of them and it made them sick. Apparently a farmer at Madeley had bought the cows that day, and they had suffered a long road journey before being let out into a field alongside the railway. After the first train went past, they had charged the fence and were through onto the line.

I visited Jack one Saturday morning, and he told me that his usual relief that afternoon, Lawton Davies, had hurt his leg and would appreciate someone pulling off for him. (No time off sick with pay then) Could I stay for the afternoon as well? Could I!!! Of course, after a few minutes Lawton could see that not only could I pull off, but also I could operate the block instruments expertly as well. So I had another friend whom I could visit at any convenient time.

Mostly Whitmore was just a block post, passing trains on down (or up) the line, and nothing much out of the ordinary happened from day to day. There were several things that I remember though that were unusual. For example:

The new Deltic prototype diesel, a very powerful locomotive, was regularly hauling the "Red Rose", non-stop London to Liverpool. It was running so fast that it was catching the train up in front. When that happened, Jack would be standing at the block instrument waiting for Les Harrison at Madeley to clear the previous Down Fast train, and I would be there with my hands on the signal levers waiting for the line clear. On receiving the 'train out of section' signal, Jack would rattle out the code for a down London express, 4-2-4, and on 'Line Clear' being given, I would pull off as fast as I could, hoping that at the driver would catch the distant at green. One particular time with the Deltic, he didn't. The curvature of the line at Whitmore was such that a driver of a down train could not see the home signal until he was almost on top of it. So drivers of steam trains, if they had missed an 'all clear' distant, would open up the regulator and try to get a run at Whitmore troughs to pick up water. The troughs were only about ¼ mile away. Maybe the Deltic driver thought he was on a steamer, or maybe just hoping to regain lost time, but as the last carriage went past the box he must have opened up a notch or two. The carriage literally jerked as the locomotive snatched at the train. I thought the carriage was going to come off the trails. No steam engine could do that. I remember a 'Jubilee' being opened up for the same reason one dark night. The fireworks that came from the chimney had to be seen to be believed!

On another occasion I remember pulling the signals off for the down "Midday Scot", and it approached the box hauled by the unique BR Standard 8P, 71000, "Duke of Gloucester". As it went by the box, however, I noticed that underneath the footplate was glowing red hot. I pointed this out to Jack, who got onto Control at Crewe. "Everybody's ringing us to tell us about it, Jack. We've arranged for a couple of fitters to meet the train when it rolls into Crewe", was their response. I wondered what a couple of fitters could do in Crewe station? – Turn the bag on the water column on it?!!

Stableford

Jack could see how interested I was in railways and especially signalling. He used to test me on the

Rule Books, and he reckoned I would pass for a signalman easily. He arranged for me to visit other boxes, like Stableford, the next box to the south of Whitmore. There was only one regular signalman there, a kind and quiet gentleman named Percy Hall. Percy lived in a caravan on the nearby caravan site. His usual shift was 8am to 4pm, but in summer when traffic was heavy he might work 12 hours. If a reliefman was available he would fill in time there too, perhaps keeping the box open all 24 hours, but this was rare. Stableford, as previously mentioned, was only a block post, that is, there were no points, crossovers, or sidings, only two signals for each of the four lines. It was therefore a very simple box to operate. Perhaps it was too simple. Let me explain. One morning I had been at Whitmore with Jack. Before he finished work, though, he fixed up for me to visit Stableford that same afternoon, but not with Percy, but with a reliefman named Harry. "He's really hot on the rules, Spen" Jack told me, "he'll be glad to help you." Off I went round the country lanes on my bike to Stableford. Harry introduced himself and I went into the box. I had worked the box many times before, as Harry could see. All went well until I had expresses approaching the box from both directions, one on the Up Fast, the other on the Down Fast. The Up Fast went past first. I gave train entering section to Standon Bridge, put the distant signal and stop signal back (no starting signal), saw the tail-lamp, and gave train-out-of-section to Lawton Davies at Whitmore. The next thing I heard was the screeching of brakes. There was a very limited view of northbound trains from the box due to a footbridge close by. Just then a "Duchess" with the "Red Rose" headboard came under the bridge, speed dropping rapidly. What had gone wrong? Harry looked at the frame and could see that I had put the signals back for the Down Fast instead of the Up Fast. He grabbed a green flag and held it out towards the driver, who must have had a shock when the signal went back in his face. He seemed to guess what had happened. He could see the Up Fast signals still off for the train that was now half a mile past the box. The reason for my mistake was that Whitmore, where I had been that morning, was on the down (west) side of the line, Stableford was on the up (east). In Whitmore Up Fast levers were on my left, Down Fast levers on my right. At Stableford they were the other way round! Oh dear. Needless to say I didn't feel like visiting Harry again, even if he would let me. Jack told me quietly later that Harry had to go to Crewe over the incident. That was all he said. We all make mistakes, I suppose.

Madeley

Jack knew how interested I was in railway signalling so one day he told me he had had a word with a signalman at Madeley, the next box towards Crewe, and I could visit him if I wanted. Edgar Bedson was his name, and he was over the 65 retirement age. He enjoyed work so much he was staying on over his time. This was a help to the Staff Office who had a difficult job filling all the posts at times. Since Edgar was getting on a bit, Jack thought that some one "pulling off" for him would be a good idea.

Jack said that Edgar had suggested I approached the box in a roundabout way from the main road so that I wouldn't pass the railway cottages where one of the bosses from Stoke station lived in the Station Master's house. The lane I went along came to an old railway line that came from Leycett colliery down to Madeley. This line ended in four sidings the other side the box. Coal wagons were usually stabled there, waiting for the 'pick-ups' to take them to Crewe. Just before the box and sidings, between the Leycett line and the main line, was a single road engine shed where the Leycett colliery engine could be serviced between trips. I had a look around, but there was just a few tools, an inspection pit, lots of ashes, and not much else.

Although I visited Edgar many times, there wasn't much happening out of the ordinary. The box had a different lever frame from the other boxes I had visited. Madeley had a cross-over from Up Slow to Up Fast. The only train booked to use this was the Sunday Fleetwood - London fish. I just had to be there one day to set the points from Up Slow to Up Fast. It was booked to follow an Up Fast express. From what I can remember everything went well. The train was hauled by a black five.

Edgar could see the interest I had in signalling. What with Jack at Whitmore and Edgar teaching me the Rule Book, I was sure I would be sufficiently competent to take charge of a box if ever I had to. Edgar introduced me to a signalman, Jack Leigh, at Wrinehill, the next box down the bank towards Crewe. Jack Leigh had a break from railway work for a time, working for the Co-op Insurance. In that job he called on some neighbours of ours, and my mother knew him. She knew he was a decent sort of fellow.

Wrinehill

Wrinehill was interesting, even though, like Stableford, the next box to the south of Whitmore, it didn't have any points. Also, there were no semaphore signals. Even though the stop signals were right outside the box, one for each line, they were colour lights. It was just a block post to break the section up between Madeley

and Betley Road. It was set on a high embankment, and if Jack hadn't told me how to get there, I don't think I would have found my way. One bell code used there which I hadn't come across before was 1-2-1, 'train approach'. Trains coming down Madeley bank towards Crewe could be gathering speed as they approached Wrinehill, so as soon as 'line clear' was given to Madeley, the road was asked to Betley Road and providing 'line clear' was received, the signals were pulled off. When the train was passing Madeley and Wrinehill received 'train entering section' for it, Wrinehill would give 1-2-1 to Betley Road. Betley Road would then ask Basford Hall Junction for a 'line clear', and if he got it, we would see the yellow of Wrinehill's signal change to green. Trains coming out of Crewe were signalled on as soon as Wrinehill gave Line Clear to Betley Road, (no 1-2-1).

One Saturday afternoon at Wrinehill the pick-ups went down to Betley Road. The train would have to stand on the Down Slow at Betley Road because there was nowhere else to put it while the shunting was carried out. So, a few minutes later, the "Paethorpes" sausage van arrived outside the box, behind a "Jubilee". I found out about this "Jubilee" about 35 years later. At GEC, Kidsgrove, where I worked, there was an ex-fireman from Crewe North, Sid Barnett. He told me that on a weekday this van was attached to a train at Wolverhampton and came to Crewe, worked by Crewe men. However, on a Saturday this train didn't run, so a Camden engine and Camden crew off a London - Wolverhampton train took it to Crewe. The engine stood on the Down Slow right outside the box, blowing off impatiently. The driver motioned with his hand for me to come the door. "What's holding us up, then," he asked. "The pick-ups at Betley Road," I told him. I daren't repeat his response, but it wasn't very complimentary towards the pick-ups, suffice it to say that it was in a broad Cockney accent. Jack said "You know what's up with him, don't you?" "No, what?" "He wants to get to Crewe and go and watch Crewe Alexandra play at Gresty Road."

Betley Road.

What got me access to Betley Road box was the fact that the father of relief signalman Freddie Brookshaw, Charlie, was signalman there. Freddie was another reliefman that Jack Woodcock introduced me to. Charlie was a very nice chap, and made me very welcome. Locomotives of the trains on the Up Fast would be working very hard up the 1 in 177 of Madeley bank. They passed right outside the box, and the noise as they went by was deafening. It was satisfying to now be on the receiving end of the Train Approach signal, 1-2-1, from Wrinehill, and then ask the road for the train from the important Basford Hall Junction box. Down expresses to Crewe would really be shifting as they passed the box. Drivers of certain trains were required to whistle as they passed Betley Road. Trains not stopping at Crewe, or trains booked to travel over the Goods Avoiding lines around Crewe, would whistle the appropriate code. The signalman would then advise Basford Hall Junction of the train's route.

Basford Hall Junction

Edgar Bedson at Madeley was one who encouraged me to learn more about railways, especially signalling. Madeley box had a telephone that was connected to Crewe Control and Colwich, south of Stafford. I used to like listening to the box lad at Colwich reading out the train passing times to Crewe Control. Edgar said he would see if he could get Crewe Staff Office to fix me up with a holiday job as a box lad somewhere. Unfortunately I wasn't old enough at 15. What Edgar did for me, though, was to fix up with a mate of his for me to visit Basford Hall Junction, the first box south of Crewe towards Stafford, where the lines from Basford Hall Marshalling Yard and the Crewe Avoiding Lines join the West Coast Main Line. I was made welcome by Edgar's friend. It was a busy box. I stood back, watching and listening. Two things stand out in my memory. One was that I was asked if I would like to "get the road" for a down London from Crewe South Junction box. Would I!!! It was great knowing that I had caused the block bell in such an important box to ring, especially the 4-2-4 bell code. I can't remember pulling off, so maybe he didn't trust me *that* much. The other incident I remember was that I was astonished when an express coming out of Crewe, headed by a "Royal Scot" locomotive, came right under the box windows, going flat out. I had been watching for some time, and I knew that the previous train on the Up Fast hadn't cleared the section to Betley Road box. "Why is he going like the clappers when you haven't had a line clear from Betley Road?", I asked. "We've got IBS's at Chorley, between here and Betley Road on the Up lines," he replied. "Intermediate Block Signals act like another section between the two boxes," he explained. "He's coming up to a yellow now, then the IBS at Chorley at red, until I get the road from Betley, then when I pull off the IBS and the yellow will go to green. He has plenty of time to stop on the rising gradient if for some reason the 'line clear' is refused." Just then Betley Road rang out 2-1, 'Train Out Of Section'. "Go on then", the signalman said

to me, “offer him 4 beats for the express”. I did so, and it was acknowledged by the Betley Road signalman repeating 4 beats on the bell, and turning his indicator to ‘Line Clear’. The signalman pulled the short lever to change the Chorley IBS colour light to green. That was my one and only acquaintance with IBS’s.

Standon Bridge

When Stableford box was closed, the next box to the south of Whitmore was Standon Bridge. What was a 2½ mile section became a 5 mile section. As a result, if trains were following close behind each other, the one in front would not clear the section from Standon Bridge to Whitmore in time to give the following train clear signals. It wasn’t as bad in the other direction, though, because once over the top at Whitmore they could speed through the long section almost as fast as a following train through the shorter, previous section. I only went in Standon Bridge box once. That was when a reliefman I knew was on duty there. It was a tall box to give a clear view of up trains approaching the other side of the bridge in Standon Bridge. The signalman on Jack Woodcock’s shift was named Ernie. He was the worst “tapper” I ever heard. I always knew he was on duty as soon as I heard him tap out a down London, 4-2-4. It sounded like a fairy dancing on the key. It was something like 1-2-2-1-1. Even 4 beats would come out like 1-2. Only when Stableford was closed would Ernie at Standon Bridge be through to Jack at Whitmore.

Badnall Wharf

The next box south from Standon Bridge was Badnall Wharf. Jack Woodcock, signalman at Whitmore, arranged for me to visit Whitmore box one Saturday afternoon when he was on holiday. The reliefman was named Peter Adams. Peter also invited me to go to Badnall Wharf when he would be there. Peter still runs his market garden business he set up about 1957 from his bungalow 300 yards from where Badnall Wharf box used to be. The box had a 100 lever frame, quite large to me. The frame, and the instruments above it, were facing away from the traffic. In other words, as you stood at the block instruments, or “pulled off”, you would have your back to the trains. Badnall Wharf box was enlarged, probably early 1940s, because R.O.F. Swynnerton came up to the railway at this point, and a some extra sidings were installed. At the time of my visits though, half the 100 levers were spare, because traffic was no longer what it used to be. The box was unusual also in that it had a flat roof. I didn’t visit Badnall Wharf very often, partly because the bike ride was getting a bit too far, and the bus service was almost non-existent.

Great Bridgeford

I visited Great Bridgeford box, between Norton Bridge and Stafford N° 5 just once. The only thing I remember was that it was very low down on the ground. I used to think that Peter Adams was the one who invited me to go there, but speaking to him in 2002, he says he never worked that box. Time plays tricks with the memory. I wish I knew who it was!

That really covered all the boxes between Crewe and Stafford, except Norton Bridge. It was a great stretch of railway between Crewe and Stafford. There were four running lines, lots of expresses with Stanier Duchesses, Princess Royals Scots, etc, in charge. However, the closest point to my home was about 8 miles away. But, from my bedroom window I could actually see, about two miles away, just a couple of hundred yards of the line between Stoke and Kidsgrove Central. To get there I had to cycle through Bradwell Woods, something I wouldn’t recommend a fifteen year old boy on his own to do today. But things were different then. The rough track through the woods brought me to a bridge over the railway. To the left, or north, about 300 yards away, was Chatterley Junction signalbox. To the right, or south, about 200 yards away, was Bradwell Sidings box. Chatterley was the junction for the Chesterton branch. This was a steep climb through the woods, past Parkhouse Colliery, under the A34 main road, over a bridge in Chesterton and into the coal wharf by the Audley road, less than a mile from home. I can see the “Jinty” 0-6-0T engine 47633 of Alsager shed now, crossing the bridge as I walk under on my way up Crackley Bank and home. I also remember, in 1949 or '50, going on a picnic in Bradwell wood with my mother and some friends. We sat in a field alongside the Chesterton branch. The 0-6-0T “Jinty” came down the bank towards Chatterley Junction with the empties from Chesterton and the loaded ones from Parkhouse Colliery. The driver gave us (or should I say the ladies) a toot on the engine whistle. Years later, when I worked in Kidsgrove Booking Office, I would see the

Chatterley Jinty shunter, just before 8am, coupled to two other engines, on its way from Alsager shed to Chatterley. One day I managed to attract the attention of the signalman in Chatterley Junction. His name was Stan Pedley. He invited me inside since it began to rain. I told him how I had visited Whitmore and the other boxes on the West Coast Main Line. After a while he trusted me to offer and accept "Line Clear" codes on the block instruments. I preferred the old London & Northwestern Railway instruments such as at Whitmore. You tapped the key down to send the bell codes, whereas on the North Staffordshire Railway like at Chatterley, it was a plunger which you pressed in. The plunger protruded out from the block instrument, and in my view was rather cumbersome to work. They also required a different method to work them. I also preferred the LNWR lever frame as at Whitmore as it was easier to get into a swing when pulling off. The levers in the frames used by the NSR were more vertical in their normal position in the frame. In fact, the Up distant was particularly difficult for me, as it was about ½ a mile from the box. Now, this was not a long way, especially for a distant, but there was a banner repeater at the far end of Harecastle tunnel. This would not clear unless the distant was right off. Across from Chatterley Junction box, over the up and down main lines, was Chatterley Yard. Freight trains were shunted here ready for their forward journey. Most freight trains went north. They joined the down main just before Chatterley's down starting signal. The points at the exit were motor worked. Stan give me the word to change the points. They would either take the left fork at Kidsgrove Central for the Crewe direction, or straight on for the Macclesfield line. There was at least one trip though which made its way south for Stoke Yard, leaving from Derby Sidings at the north end of Chatterley Yard, and out onto the Up Main. I asked Stan Pedley why the group of sidings was called Derby Sidings. He said that many years ago trains used to run through from Chatterley to Derby. One evening when I was in Chatterley Junction, I asked Stan if I could get on the footplate of one of the engines. The freights came down the Goods Line ("down the straight"), leaving the main at Longport Junction, past Bradwell Sidings to Chatterley. The first engine I went on was a Midland 4F. There were lots of these around Stoke. In fact, they were the biggest engine at Stoke shed, except they used to have a Black 5 occasionally. I remember a couple of years later, when I worked at Stoke Yard Master's Office, seeing a Black 5 on the Cockshute (Stoke) — Barlaston Power Station coal trains. I think the Black 5 was at Stoke mainly for the summer SO 7.45am Stoke - Euston passenger train. Anyway, the fireman on the 4F told me to throw a few shovelfulls into the firebox. It was hard enough with the engine standing still, never mind moving, to get the shovel through the firehole door without hitting the side. The driver said: "This is the brake. When I tell you, move the lever over the other way to put the brake on." I did so when prompted, but I should have moved the lever gradually instead of in one sudden movement. "That was a sudden stop," the driver said. "You could break the wagon couplings if you're not careful." He was just joking. After a few minutes they were ready to go. "Lift the regulator here," said the driver. "Not too far, now." I did so, it was quite easy. The engine started to move forward, then suddenly the footplate began to bounce up and down, and a column of smoke from the chimney shot into the air. "What's happening", I asked. "She's just lost her feet for a moment," the driver answered. "leave the regulator alone, she'll soon find them again." And she did. "You can come with us through Harecastle Tunnel if you want," the driver said. "Well, I would like to," I said, "but my bike's here and I have no way of getting back." That was an excuse really. I didn't care to go through the smoke filled, mile-long tunnel. On another occasion I went on the footplate of a 2-6-4T. I remember how more enclosed the cab was compared to the 4F. The next box north from Chatterley was Kidsgrove Central, the station where I would start my time working for British Railways. The next box south was Bradwell Sidings.

Stan Pedley, the Chatterley Junction signalman I knew, introduced me to the signalman on his turn at Bradwell Sidings. His name was Jack, but I don't remember his surname. Bradwell was interesting because there was an up goods loop between there and Longport Junction, so sometimes a freight train had to 'go inside' to wait for a path through the two track stretch between Longport Junction and Grange Junction. Jack gave me a signalman's waistcoat. Wearing that and a black pair of trousers made me look just the part. From then on that's what I always wore when visiting signalboxes.

I only visited Longport Station box once. A relief signalman I knew, Jim Allen, was on duty there while I was working at Longport booking office. There were crossing gates to operate there.

Another signalbox I visited with Jim was Cliffe Vale, between Stoke and Etruria. It was quite a busy place. I went there a couple of times. The signalman at Newcastle Junction, the next box towards Stoke, would send a certain bell code on the down goods line. A bell code on an instrument always meant that a train was coming. But this time that was not so. It was a train going into Cockshute Carriage Sidings, which had to enter the section between Newcastle Junction and Cliffe Vale. When it had got clear of the down goods line, the signalman would clear the line again.

And still another box I visited with Jim was Alsager East Junction. This box controlled the up and down lines between Alsager Station box and Lawton junction. Also, it was the junction for the single line Audley branch. An unusual thing, to me at least, was the fact that the down branch line joined the up line. It seemed strange to read on one of the plates fixed behind a points lever: "Down Branch to Up Main". This box also had an up loop, where goods trains could wait for a passenger train to overtake.

A friend of the family, Ken Edmunds, was a signalman at Tunstall Junction on the Loop Line. I also managed to add that box to my list. At the junction, the line going straight on continued towards Stoke, and the right-hand turn took the single line to Pinnox Junction then Longport Junction on the Stoke – Kidsgrove Central main line. The signalling of the single line section, and the handing over of the single line token was interesting to observe.

And one final signalbox I visited with Jim Allen was Minshull Vernon, about 4 miles north of Crewe. I still find it hard to believe what a large area Jim covered – from the Stoke to Derby line somewhere around Meir, to Minshull Vernon, and Crewe to Great Bridgeford. He didn't work all the boxes between these points of course. He didn't work Stoke Junction, Glebe Street, Stoke North or Newcastle Junction. Similarly around Crewe, he didn't work the big boxes, only the easy-to-work ones, and he didn't work between Whitmore and Norton Bridge. At Minshull Vernon an express signalled 4-2-4 was routed over the West Coast main line through Warrington towards Preston, and 4 beats on the bell was an express turning off at Weaver Junction for Liverpool. Between Crewe and Stafford a 4-2-4 was for an express train originating from the Trent Valley Line (usually from London), and 4 beats was an express off the Birmingham line at Stafford. This was so Crewe South Junction could sort out which train was which as it approached Crewe. So it was a bit of a novelty at Minshull Vernon to signal 4-2-4 and it might not have been a London train.