

The careers master, Mr Kershaw, at Wolstanton Grammar School which I attended, had arranged for me to take up a job with British Railways at Stoke for a junior clerk's position at Kidsgrove Central station. I started to work there on Monday, 8th September 1958, eleven days after my 16th birthday. I cycled from my home about 3 miles away. Arriving 20 minutes early, I waited under the railway bridge on the canal towpath until it was almost 8 o'clock. I reported to the Station Master, Mr Donald A. Walker. Mr Walker was also responsible for Liverpool Road station on the Potteries Loop Line, which ran from Kidsgrove Liverpool Road Junction, ¼ mile north of Kidsgrove Central, to Etruria Junction, 1 mile north of Stoke station.

He introduced me to the Booking Clerk on duty, Jack Poole. Jack was on the early turn that day, which was 6.15am - 1/15pm. Jack showed me how to issue tickets, and date stamp them with a cumbersome machine. If you weren't careful you would hit your thumb joint as you pushed the ticket hard inside the machine. Perhaps a couple of times per shift you would do a quick balance of the books on the booking office window ticket sales. The tickets were in racks, and they were taken out one at a time from the bottom of the pile. Just above the bottom of the pile was a slate on which you would write in chalk the number of the first ticket you issued out of that pile. When you did a balance you could see how many of a particular ticket you had issued by comparing the chalked number with the next ticket number. There was a small amount of outgoing parcels traffic, but the amount of incoming parcels traffic was quite heavy. These were the days when mail order catalogues had really taken off. After the arrival of a parcels train, the porters would bring the parcels inside the booking office, and it was my job to write down on a delivery sheet all the addresses for the parcels. Every morning the lorry driver, George Wiggins, would load them onto his truck and deliver them to the surrounding area. The clerk on the opposite shift to Jack was Malcolm Haines. For some reason Jack and Malcolm had got a bit behind with the monthly returns, and balancing the books at the month's end. So we had to concentrate on bringing everything up-to-date.

Of course, being more interested in signalling than booking office work, it was not long before I managed to work my way into Kidsgrove Central signalbox.

The best signaller there was Harry Thomason. There was a box-lad named Bob Watts on Harry's shift who kept the train register and looked after the phones. Kidsgrove Central is the junction where the Crewe branch leaves the Stoke - Manchester main line. The Crewe line branches off to the left coming north from Stoke, and descends on a gradient of 1 in 100 towards the Cheshire plain. Because of this fairly stiff gradient coming from the Crewe direction, the box could accept trains coming up from the Crewe direction even though the actual junction was less than the usual required ¼ mile clearance past the outer home signal. This meant you didn't have to think about whether the junction was set correctly before accepting a train from Lawton Junction, the next 'box towards Crewe. Most of the freight traffic went up and down the Crewe branch. The usual practice every hour was that after the Crewe-Derby DMU had departed at 34 minutes past the hour, a freight would be accepted from Lawton Junction. When this reached the outer home signal track circuit, I would pull the signal off to bring the freight up to the inner home, which was situated right on the junction at the platform end. This would then be about 45 minutes past the hour. The up Manchester-Stoke DMU would leave at 53 minutes past the hour, and the freight would follow it towards Stoke. I was usually up the 'box while Don Walker, the Station Master was on his lunch break, providing Harry was in the 'box. The Crewe-Derby parcels followed the 12/20pm Crewe-Derby DMU, which left Kidsgrove at 12.34. The parcels would arrive about 45 minutes past, pulled by a Stanier 2-6-4T. Its booked path was to follow the up Manchester-Euston which passed at 1/03pm. Sometimes, if there weren't many parcels to deal with, the driver would whistle for the road just turned ten-to the hour. The Manchester-Stoke DMU would probably be leaving No. 1 platform on time at 12.53. The up London would have been wired when passing Macclesfield Moss box, the boundary between Manchester and Stoke Control areas, say, "2 down", booked time 1/03pm passing Kidsgrove. I would then press the button on both Control phones, hoping someone in Stoke Control would pick one of them up quickly. "Can we have the Derby parcels before the up London," I would ask. The parcels was right away Stoke from Kidsgrove, so if it could keep up express speed to there, it would run into Stoke No. 1 up platform and then quickly propel its train into the cattle dock out of the way. A quick check by Control to see there was nothing on the Up line to Stoke, then it would be "Let her go". I would get the road from Chatterley, pull off the inner home and up starter, and away she'd go as fast as a 2-6-4T could, the driver giving us a wave as he went by.

On the morning of November 11th 1958, I was sitting in Kidsgrove booking office when I heard a Stanier whistle, which was a bit unusual. I looked through the window and saw Duchess 46224 "Princess Alexandra" with the "Royal Scot" headboard on. I was really surprised, so I rang the signalbox and asked

Harry Thomason why the “Royal Scot” (London-Glasgow) had come through Kidsgrove (it always went the direct West Coast Main Line between Stafford and Crewe via Whitmore), and how was it that a Duchess had been allowed through Harecastle tunnel, just south of Kidsgrove, as they were banned from going through. There had been a serious accident the night before, just south of Crewe, and trains were being diverted around the blockage. I sent a note to *Trains Illustrated* magazine about this rare occurrence of a Duchess going through Harecastle tunnel, and the precautions taken, as Harry told me, and this is what appeared in print in the January 1959 edition: “Next morning the down “Royal Scot” was diverted through Stoke-on-Trent. It was hauled by its usual Pacific, No. 46224, a type which normally is prohibited from this route; as a result the adjoining line had to be kept clear of traffic when the train passed through Harecastle tunnel, where a speed limit of 15 m.p.h. was imposed on the Pacific”. It was good to see my name in the acknowledgement section.

About this time, one Friday when the staff called for their wages, the Yard Foreman from Kidsgrove Liverpool Road Yard told me about one of the new Type 4 diesels (later Type 40) which was coming into the yard every weekday on crew training runs from Longsight near Manchester. He asked if I would like to go and see it. Of course I said Yes, so the following Monday I walked to the yard and the Foreman had a word with the driver, and I climbed up. It was very impressive. I was surprised to see a cooker installed. The engines were just ticking over, of course, but even so, I remember thinking how noisy they would be when pulling a heavy train. While at Liverpool Road yard, I took the opportunity of asking if I could visit the box for a few minutes. It was literally a few minutes too, but it was another box I had visited.

In the summer of 1959, I was sent to the next station towards Manchester, Mow Cop and Scholar Green. The Station Master was on holiday for a week, so I had to do the booking office work, and help the porter. I enjoyed sitting in the Station Master’s Office, pretending I was in charge. The only trouble was, I couldn’t find the hat with “Station Master” in gold letters on the front. I took the opportunity of going in the signalbox, of course. This was only small, but did control level crossing gates.

Later I went to Alsager, the next station towards Crewe, to help out. While I was at Alsager, a relief signalman I knew, Jim Allen, worked Alsager Station box. He knew I was at the station, so when things were quiet he said I could pop up the box for a look around. Even though I was only there for probably a few minutes, it was another box to add to my list of boxes visited. There wasn’t much to do in Alsager booking office, except on Fridays when everyone came for their wages. The locomotive shed staff picked up their wages from the booking office too, so we were kept busy. The Station Master took me to the small station of Radway Green & Barthomley, further towards Crewe. There was a 3-year backlog of amendments to be inserted into the Station Handbook. The summer of 1959 was glorious. I sat on the platform with a small bowl of water to wet the glue, and stuck the amendments in. There was not much to do there. Passengers were few and far between. So I asked the porter if he could ask the signalman whether I could visit the box. The signalman gave me permission. I was only there for a few minutes. I remember that he was rather abrupt and obviously didn’t like visitors, but it was another box to my visited list. My father was delivering bread, cakes etc at the time, and he came within about a mile of the station, so a couple of times a week he would bring me a cake or two. If you saw “Radder” station at 5pm you would think it was such a busy place. That was when the Royal Ordnance Factory workers streamed out onto the Crewe bound platform to await their train home. There was a separate station where special trains came from and departed for the Stoke direction. One of these, the 6.17am Hanley – Radway Green, had a late start from Hanley one morning, see below.

One morning, the 9.20am Crewe – Derby passenger train stopped in the station, and an elderly lady got off. She walked over the crossing and onto the Crewe platform. The porter followed behind, carrying her suitcase. She had caught a Crewe train at Meir, the other side of Stoke, on her way to convalesce at Llandudno. She said that nobody told her to change at Crewe. She sat in the train in the bay platform at Crewe, and when the train started off again in the direction from which it came, she realised that she was going back towards Stoke. So she thought she had better get off at the first station the train stopped at. Unfortunately, the next down Crewe didn’t stop at Radway, so it looked like she would miss her Llandudno connection at Crewe, and the person waiting for her at Llandudno would wonder where she was. I telephoned Stoke Control and told them what had happened. They issued the driver of the Crewe train with a special Stop Notice, to stop at Radway and pick her up. She was very grateful.

One day I was asked to go and help out at Sandbach, on the Crewe-Manchester line. I was only there a few days, but I did manage, with the Station Master’s permission, to visit the old signalbox for a few minutes.

Later that evening, as I had about half an hour to wait for my train home, the SM asked me if I'd like to visit the new signalbox at Sandbach, which was then being commissioned. I went to have a look, but I'm afraid it was all foreign to me!

After Sandbach, I helped out at Longport, Stoke Parcels (that was a busy place – I got writer's cramp from filling out the addresses on the parcel delivery sheets), Hanley Parcels, and then Hanley Booking Office. That was a quiet job, except on Monday mornings. I had to be there for 5.45am for the 6.17am Hanley – Radway Green. On my first Monday morning, I had very little 'float' in the safe. The passengers came to book their weekly tickets, and I had no change. The passenger were very helpful, and between us everybody got the right change. The Station Foreman had to hold the train for a couple of minutes while we sorted it out though. A few days later the Station Master got a 'skin' from Head Office asking for an explanation for a 2 minutes late start. I told him why and that was the end of the matter.

Stoke Staff Office knew I was interested in a move from the Commercial Department to the Traffic Department. In mid November 1959 they rang to say there was a vacancy for a Junior Clerk in Stoke Yard Master's Office, located on No. 1 platform at Stoke. I took the job, and started work there on 23rd November 1959. The Clerk there had moved to Basford Hall, Crewe, and the Junior Clerk had been promoted to his job. There was also the Chief Clerk, Alan Hutchinson, in the office. The Yard Master was Mr White, originally from Darley Dale in the Peak District. Most of my work was typing and filing. After a few weeks the clerk left to join the army. One of the Yard Inspectors, George Tittle, had suffered a heart attack not long before, so he moved into the Clerk's job as a less demanding job. Unfortunately, as I used to say, he'd never had a pencil in his hand, always a shunting pole. We had to work out the pay for the shunter and goods guards at Stoke, overtime, rest day working, Sunday rate etc. George just couldn't do it, so I had to help out. There were other things I had to do for George as well.

One day Alan was off sick. The Control phone rang on his desk. I picked it up. Harry Snape, the Loco/Guards Controller, said: "We need a guard tomorrow for a special ballast train from Cauldon Low to Warrington. Can you see what you can do. It's got to run for weekend work. Crewe South are sending an 8F specially for it" (Stoke had nothing bigger than 4F) I looked at the roster book. It was difficult. Not many guards had signed the road for Cauldon Low and Warrington, but there was one guard, Bill Bath, on the morning Burton, who had. Fortunately there was a spare guard who knew Burton, so I put Bill on the ballast, and the spare guard on the Burton. The time-keeper who signed the men on and off, both loco and guards, said: "Bill won't like that." When Bill signed off duty, he was told to book on for the ballast train the following day. He came straight in the office, and said to me "What's this job for tomorrow?" I could tell he was annoyed. "If it's cancelled, and I'm spare, then there'll be trouble!" "It won't be cancelled, Bill", I said, "it's got to run. A loco is coming up from Crewe South specially for it." The train ran, and give Bill his due, when he booked off he came in the office and said to me: "That was a good little job. I wouldn't mind that every day".

While I was working at Stoke, I was still visiting Whitmore box. Jack Woodcock told me one day that the signalman at Stableford, the next box south, was moving to Hartshill box as Stableford would soon close. Percy Hall was the signalman, and I visited him at Stableford a few times. Hartshill was the first box on the Newcastle/Silverdale/Market Drayton line from Stoke. This branch line left the Stoke – Macclesfield main line at Newcastle Junction, which was the next box after Stoke North. I passed by Hartshill box on my motorcycle as I went to and from home to work at Stoke Yard Masters Office, so it was convenient to call in and have a few minutes with Percy, which I did on a couple of occasions. Hartshill controlled the single line section of the branch which passed through the narrow tunnel under Hartshill. It was quite a climb for freight trains, and it was very unpleasant for the loco crew if the train come to a halt in the tunnel. Immediately at the other end of the tunnel was Newcastle station.

There came a vacancy for Assistant Loco/Guard's Controller in Stoke Control Office upstairs, but they said I was of more use in the YMO. I was getting a bit fed up, so I thought I'd show them I wanted to get out, and applied for the first job I saw on the vacancy list. That was for a Goods Guard's Clerk at Brent. I had no idea where it was, but I applied. A few weeks later the relief Yard Master called me into his office, and asked me what I'd been up to! I said: "Nothing Jim". He said: "Well, you've got an interview for that job you applied for." "Where is the interview?", I asked. "London St. Pancras", he replied. I went for my interview, travelling via Derby to get to St. Pancras in time. The train from Derby was double-headed by two black 5s. We were delayed at Harpenden and went slow road for a while. The station announcer at St. Pancras apologised for the delay when we arrived, saying a broken rail was the cause. That made me late for the interview. It went well, I thought. There were three men on the interview panel. One asked me whether it

was the bright lights of London that were attracting me. I told him no. I got the job, and started to make arrangements. I left Stoke in mid November 1961.
