

Why the Demonstration Goods?

An oft overlooked point about Heritage Railways is that, back in the day, the railways were by and large almost entirely constructed for the movement of goods, especially coal and mainly in the north of England. Generally, railways went where the canals had gone before and for the same purpose.

Outside of the industrial areas, where landowners reliant on agriculture realised that they could benefit from faster transport to get goods to market, and especially to London, the web spread its fronds to many an idyllic rural setting. That is why our line was built.

Another often unremarked feature is that braking systems on these early railways were primitive, and, in the beginning, no better than those used on stage-coaches. Gradually as speeds improved and trains got heavier, engines were provided first with more powerful hand brakes (often on tenders only), then “brake vans” were provided also with a powerful hand brake.

Ultimately, power brakes were added, on both the engine and tender only. However, as speeds continued to grow, these basic systems became less suitable and in the wake of a series of catastrophes involving loss of life, the public cried out that enough was enough: if passengers were to be carried, the railway companies must make better provision for their safety. Indeed, these passengers had been viewed as not much more than a pesky nuisance by the companies who, in those days, never saw them as much more than a useful secondary income stream.

So the Regulation of Railways Act of 1889 empowered the Board of Trade to require companies to provide continuous, automatic brakes on all passenger trains. However, this regulation did not apply to goods traffic, much of which continued to rely on the engine brake and a brake van at the rear to control speeds and stop trains when needed.

These trains were of necessity slower than automatically braked trains, but cheaper to provide and maintain, and the system lasted well into the 1970s. You can see why when you understand that the LMS railway, alone, at the height of the depression in 1931, moved 27 million tons of coal, all of it in unfitted trains. The railway never saw a cost/benefit in spending money “fitting” slow moving bulk mineral trains, which could be worked well enough with archaic methods. It was the end of that traffic that sounded the death knell of the unfitted train.

Besides the skill needed to stop these trains, considerable skill was needed to work them generally. Much arithmetic was required by guards to calculate the true gross weight of a given train, and what brake force was required to stop it. Drivers were required to know what their engines could stop unaided, and much team was required between footplate and van to finish the job properly.

All of these trains were also “loose coupled”, which means that they were coupled by a simple long “three-link” coupling, which, when stretched, allowed about 9 to 12 inches between the buffers of wagons. This set-up made starting heavy trains easier, because the engine could “pick-up” one wagon at a time, but done badly, couplings

could break. Worse still, stretching the whole train quickly and in one go meant that by the time the van at the back was collected, a train of (say) 40 wagons may have lengthened by about 28 feet, and the van could accelerate from a stand to 20 miles an hour in one go. There was more than one guard catapulted over the veranda or left with his teeth embedded in it because of inconsiderate starting.

Footplate staff cut their teeth (so to speak) on goods workings. Firemen started in the shunting links, then progressed to goods links (at some sheds these were known as “rusty buffer links”). Indeed, on such trains, braking was the fireman’s job, which is why a tender brake is on his side. And it was only when they had served time on these tricky jobs did they start to bask in the glamour of passenger work, before reaching the heady heights of the “Number One” link where, at many sheds, the express passenger work was to be found.

If these railwaymen were lucky to pass the Inspector and get promotion for driving, they headed back down to the bottom links to start the climb up again, but at the higher grade. Hard and time-consuming work, but it meant that old hand drivers got to see all aspects of the railway’s work and were able to learn all they needed to know, by practical experience.

So why does our Railway run a demonstration goods? To add to the heritage scene and to show our visitors that railways were about more than glamorous passenger work. But we also use them to train our staff in some of the knowledge needed to work a loosed coupled, and an unfitted train, thus keeping those skills alive. We but scratch the surface in what we do, but at least it gives us an insight into the work those men of the past did, and it pays tribute to the skill that kept the wheels of commerce grinding for the better part of 150 years.

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