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So, You Want to Be a Driver?

In my last few contributions to the eNewsletter, I have looked at the work entailed in preparing an engine for the road and putting it away again afterwards, and I have cracked open the door to give the reader a peek at the work that goes on behind the scenes to keep engines in fettle and placed to provide the service that makes the Railway its money.

This time I want to talk a bit about what it takes to work through the line of promotion and to give an insight or two about the quirks and foibles that the aspirant must get to grips with.

The folk revivalists Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl, in the [1958 BBC Radio Ballad](#) "The Ballad of John of Axon", capture an old driver saying that "*...railways run through the spine like Blackpool runs through rock!*" and another saying, "*it doesn't matter where you come from ... you must have to have a leaning for that job ...*". These are sentiments as true now as they were then. This is not to make special pleading for one department of the Railway. The sentiment is probably true for all the parts of the Railway: to be successful at the chosen path, the intending staff member needs to harbour something of a passion for the job. Only then will the inconveniences and unpleasantnesses be endurable.

But footplate work has always suggested a glamour that is highly seductive to the lay observer in a way that much of what we do as a Railway does not. As one of the old railwaymen in "John Axon" also says, "*On a steam locomotive, you create the power, you maintain the power, and you control the power*", and that is a very evocative notion.

Today our path to Driver (the guy who "controls the power") is rather less extended than it was for the footplatemen of old. For them it was lifetime of work, but nonetheless for our new entrant, there is more to learn *in one go* than the old salts

had. Nowadays we don't start at age 14 and work at five days a week, plus overtime, for most of the year, so learning is very compressed. Those of us who have been around were able to expand our knowledge at the same rate as the Railway has grown. I achieved the dizzy heights in six years, quick even for the time, but those who follow today have to assimilate more knowledge and all in one go than I did, in many cases from a lower start point, and it will take them much longer than it did my contemporaries.

It is a challenge for us to manage, but nonetheless someone coming to the shed to join our ranks with the purpose of becoming a Driver will require application, aptitude, and above all patience. Better, really, to want to join the department to take part in its work as an end in itself and see where the ride takes you. But if you do have a leaning for the job, so much the better, and the more time you have at your disposal, the more likely you are to move through the ranks more quickly. That much has always been true, but whether you make Driver or not, there is a lot of fun and satisfaction to be got out of the experience along the way.

My path to Driver was not so untypical of the time: six years of attendance for more or less every weekend, all weekend. It was a time for getting stuck in and learning on the job (although much knowledge and shared experience was absorbed round the lobby table and in the public bars of the Green Man and the Sloop Inn) and gaining experience to pass first of all as a Fireman. Then, finally in 1980, on the cusp of becoming a Driver, I was granted a weeklong test under Footplate Inspector Jack Owen on the Adams 0415 radial tank, the green one with No. 488 on the side.

Since No. 488 is currently in the news, it's worth just coming up with a recollection or two before moving on with the main theme of this piece.

Jack used to like using her for tests, because being an example of Victorian locomotive practice and design, not much is made easy. Engines of that period were designed to be looked at and admired rather than used. Witness No. 488's tanks that extend into the cab, making what should be spacious accommodation about half its apparent size. And what's more, those tanks get in the way. When shunting you can either look out or drive the engine; it's not easy to do both at the same time, unless you were born with eight-foot legs and one arm five feet long. No matter, what counts is that the arrangement shows off the engine very well as elegant and pleasing to the eye.

She is a very powerful engine for her size. Those 5 feet 7 inch wheels make her fly, and she would take six corridors to Horsted Keynes without thinking. But the 4-4-2 wheel arrangement is not ideal. Of her 57 tons, only 27 tons is available as adhesive weight, so backing up the Newick Siding light engine, she would lock her wheels if the Driver so much as sneezed. On line work in poor rail conditions, she would slither around like an eel on an ice rink, especially on the long curve into Horsted Keynes from Three Arch Bridge if she was not handled properly.

And into the bargain the reverser was a very heavy, a traditional “pole” reverser acting on unbalanced slide valves, which meant that with the regulator open it was very hard to “notch up”. Nor could you easily open the “big valve” if the engine was under power; the technique was to shut off, pull it up into mid gear, push the regulator across, and let the engine out again. But then the reverser was now even heavier and with a mind of its own. Brute strength was the only way. With the right leg braced against one face of the Driver’s side tank, the left leg on the foot brace on the reverser quadrant, and a very straight back, the trick was to exert force on the pole to restrain it from flying out into full gear. If it got away, you would have to shut off, start again, and hope that most of the fire and boiler water had not been ejected from the chimney.

The engine is provided with a steam brake of a rather agricultural SR design, coupled to the vacuum brake via a copper pipe across the boiler back plate. This did work, but it was not especially graduable. The brake tended to be on or off, so overcooking the braking could bring the steam brake hard on, but it was reluctant to release, so the Fireman had to be ready to smack the lever back, before the wheels locked up.

But for all these endearing, if challenging, qualities, the engine was a lady. She glided along as though on air, and steamed her head off on practically no fire, seemingly without using water. So in that sense she made the ideal test engine because if, as the late Stanley Butler used to say, you showed her who was in charge, she would do nearly all you asked of her. I have long harboured a fantasy about working a five-coach train with her from Waterloo, fast to Woking. In brilliant Drummond “Pea Green” livery, along with the brown boiler banding and a rake of LSWR “pink” carriages keeping 1520 company, she would make a fine sight sweeping through Weybridge on the fast lines.

Anyway, to continue, during that June 1980 test week, after a familiarisation on Monday, we had a number of tasks to achieve. For example, make Horsted Keynes without firing en route; do it again without using injectors to top up the water level en

route; then another trip where we had to leave with minimum fire water and pressure and manage the engine while it was brought round. Another challenge was designed to test one's ability to manage poor rail conditions (see above). One more was to stop the engine without using brakes. The last day featured a day-long scenario which required coping with a Fireman of less than optimal ability (that bit was feigned; I had excellent Firemen that week), along with seeing that one could prepare an engine in a limited time and with faults to track down as part of it, and still be off shed on time.

And last of all, there was showing that trains could run to time with the engine operating on reduced boiler pressure and with water level in the boiler to be maintained in a band above a stated minimum and below a stated maximum. These last tests simulated with the application of masking tape to gauges.

The details of that week are tattooed into my memory, especially the task with very late notice, to stop a down train at Freshfield Halt with the brake van door on the platform. Not a great success. I didn't account for the "dump valve" in 6686 that translated my firm brake application into an emergency one, which caused the steam brake on No. 488 to bang on (see above) and for all the boiler water to surge to the firebox end, and some of it straight into the vacuum ejector steam take off to blow out over my hands and prevent me from getting the brakes off. We stopped short!

At the end of the week, Jack felt that he wanted to see me on a large engine as well, so in July we re-convened on No. 75027 for another day, which included leaving Sheffield Park with practically no fire and just 170lbs of steam (the brakes come on at 160lbs), and me firing and driving into the bargain (make Jack look out; then head down and arse up, as they say; bale coal in like its going out of fashion; and pray—imprecations to the Almighty worked on this occasion). We made it, and so did I.

But as with a car, the reality was that those of us "passing out", as it was known, were allowed out solo to learn to drive engines, something that today I am still doing. As Jock McKay says, "every day you learn something new".

Today, we are looking to enhance what is now a rather more documented and planned route through learning, towards staged recording of competences as they are achieved. We live in different times, operate in different circumstances, and do so with a new generation that structures its leisure time differently from us. And many have no grounding in the kind of Railway that we operate and take for granted because it resembles the one which used to run through our towns. But in the end no matter

what warm and fuzzy words you use about competences and undergoing assessments rather than tests, we can only decide whether we think someone is safe to go out on the road to carry on the learning, because no one will ever know everything. You just end each year knowing a bit more than you knew at the start. So getting that sought-after “pink” driver’s ticket is just the start of what everyone hopes will be a glittering career. It is not the end of graft and dedication.

So the route to Driver is still the same long road it has always been, which calls for the new entrant to put in the time, and it still requires the tyro to have “railways” run through his or her spine, like “Brighton” runs through rock.

By Russell Pearce, Driver