

SIX YEARS A TRAIN BOY

Lawson Little - Heathcote House (1945 – 51)

In 1945 I “passed the scholarship” and rather than being directed to the nearby grammar schools at Mansfield I was allocated to Chesterfield, some ten miles from my home at Langwith Junction on the county boundary.

To get to school I was issued with a Pass by the then London & North Eastern Railway, entitling me to free travel on the 8.27 a.m. from “The Junction” and return on the 4 p.m. from what was then Chesterfield’s third station, located on West Bars but more grandly described in the timetable as “Market Place”.



The morning train arrived in town at 8.56 a.m. which meant a quick scamper through the Market Place, up Soresby Street, through the alley by the wood yard, across the churchyard and down to Sheffield Road, in time for lessons but not for Morning Assembly!

The reverse journey in the afternoon was equally hurried, as missing the 4 p.m. departure meant a two-hour wait for the next train, and a cold dinner!

There were 30-40 of us on the train, and because we were deemed unsuitable to mix with the (occasional) paying passengers, we were shepherded daily into a couple of special carriages at the front of the train. These were most unusual, being open saloons, with large plate-glass windows and long bench seats facing inwards; very rare in 1945 and extinct today, one had a long table down the centre which we utilised for playing half-penny football !



Over the next six years I learned every yard of the ten-mile journey, all the signals, sidings, stations etc., and in the process developed a love for railways which still continues seventy years later. The daily trips were not without incident – one fateful morning the train was running through a cutting near Arkwright Town where there had been some ground-slippage, and a mechanical digger was working to clear up the soil.

As the train passed, the vibration must have caused the digger to slip, and the unfortunate driver was thrown out of his cab, striking his head on the side of the locomotive. The train did an emergency stop, and the casualty was lifted into the

guards van before we made a spirited run to Market Place, where an ambulance awaited us. Sadly the man died later in hospital.

Another, potentially much more serious accident occurred later. The special saloons mentioned above were parked in Platform One at Market Place throughout the day waiting for their next journey in the afternoon. There was a diverging set of points under the front carriage, and somehow these had been moved across at some stage; when the train started the leading end of the carriage moved forward and the rear end went sideways.



At this date I had been elevated to the dizzy heights of House Prefect (I still have my badge somewhere) and one of my duties was to sit in the forward-facing seat at the end of the stricken saloon, to keep an eye on my slightly younger companions. I can still clearly remember that when we inevitably came off the rails, the carriage bumped heavily over the sleepers, causing puffs of dust to rise from the floor each time.

My first instinct was to look at the very large plate-glass windows, thinking that had we turned over they would have smashed to pieces with unthinkable results to all of us. Fortunately, we had a stroke of luck – the other heavy saloon behind us had safely negotiated the points and was now running on the track alongside, still coupled and holding us upright.

The platforms at Market Place curved sharply to the left, and I could see the locomotive barking away at the unusual drag through the left-hand windows, its crew, who should have been watching the platform as standard procedure, clearly oblivious to our plight. Then the second stroke of luck occurred.

The outer ends of the platforms were edged with wooden beams rather than the standard paving stones, and when we reached that section, the buffers on our coach, which had been sliding ineffectually along the stone, now dug into the wood and forced the straining engine to a halt.

Dusty and dishevelled, we climbed out of the wrecked coach, and for probably the only time in six years, were allowed into the 'ordinary' coaches for the trip home. Curiously, despite diligent searches I've never been able to trace any record of an official enquiry into this accident – probably it was hushed up by the local stationmaster to save the blushes of the signalman.

In those early post-war years there were frequent problems with reliability, and quite often we would arrive at the station in the early morning to find, not a train, but an East Midland bus waiting for use. The bus company was still modernising its fleet after the war years, and sometimes would only be able to send an old 'crush-loader' single-decker, with seats facing inwards (like our railway saloons), and lots of leather straps for standing passengers. The sight of one of those old AEC's struggling along with 40 schoolboys and a number of ordinary passengers can be imagined.

On one occasion we had a Guy double-decker for the afternoon journey. To avoid a low bridge we went all round Hasland, and on an unfamiliar steep hill the driver, attempting a quick gear change with his "crash box", found the gear lever loose in his hand! That was one day we had a cold dinner!

Another double-deck journey, in the opposite direction, saw us cautiously negotiating the low bridge under the LMS main line on the Bolsover Road when there was a loud rumble overhead. The driver leapt out, thinking he had decapitated the bus, but it was only an express passing above.

Yet another incident saw a double-decker trying to park under the overhanging canopy outside the station on West Bars, in the process taking out all the upstairs windows on one side, fortunately without hurting anyone – the upper-deck occupants were already crowding down the stairs ready to dismount.



Market Place Station Frontage

One of the less pleasant parts of the journey was through the noisome Bolsover Tunnel. This had been a headache for the railways ever since a parsimonious Head Office had refused to pay the Bolsover Colliery Company a fee not to remove the coal seam underlying the tunnel. The resulting subsidence played havoc with the tunnel (and incidentally gave Dad some lucrative overtime on Sundays, shoring up the tunnel sides) and there was supposed to be a strict speed limit through the bore. One evening I was on the 6 p.m. train after staying at school for some reason, and the train crew must have been in a hurry for their tea – we went through the tunnel at a speed which caused me, sitting in a normal compartment, to move away from the window nearest the tunnel side as I waited for the inevitable accident.

On that occasion I was lucky, but a later train DID hit the tunnel wall, after which one track was slewed into the centre and the other track lifted, but eventually even this was insufficient and the line was closed.

So all-in-all I had plenty to look forward to each day for six years. I left school in July 1951, and six months later the line, now British Railways-owned, gave up the unequal struggle with Bolsover Tunnel, and Market Place echoed no more to the sound of grammar-school pupils.

Goods traffic continued for a few years, but eventually even this ceased and the station buildings, after use by a paint company for a while, were finally demolished, and the GPO office building erected in their place. Now even that has gone, and if it were not for the pub which still stands next door, it would be difficult to imagine that a railway once ran here.



The former AGD building



Images courtesy of North East Derbyshire Industrial Archaeology Society (NEDIAS).

