# TO SWINDON AND BEYOND

Christopher Hext served an apprenticeship with the GWR and worked at Swindon well before the end of steam, but he started at Newton Abbot.



aving attended the South Devon Technical College at Torquay, the job I coveted most was to be a draughtsman and although it was possible to enter a drawing office as a trainee, the preferred route was to first serve an engineering apprenticeship, on the tools! I left the 'Tech' with what was called then a College Leaving Certificate and the one subject at Distinction was Engineering Drawing. In 1952, finding what turned out to be the ideal apprenticeship was not immediately apparent and certainly not immediately available. With full time education finished in the July, by early September and with my 16th birthday looming, I was still looking for an opening. My father, a Great Western Railwayman since

7 October 1918, took a hand and went to see Mr Christenson (known as Christie to the work force), the then Newton Abbot Divisional Locomotive Superintendent. There were no vacancies as such but he promised to look into the matter. Premium apprenticeships had long ceased. A letter arrived via the railway postal system with the offer of a job and I started on October 6 1952 (34 years less a day after my father), initially as a Fitter's boy for a probationary period of two months. The apprenticeship proper did not formally commence until December 8 1952 and accordingly finished at Swindon on September 17 1957, one day before my 21st birthday. All duly certificated by the Running and Maintenance Officer, Mr H A White. The trade to which I was apprenticed stated 'Fitting & Turning' and I was to be employed at the Running and Maintenance Department, Newton Abbot, the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Department, Newton Abbot and Swindon. The certificate was issued by the British Transport Commission, British Railways Western Region. It arrived in the post in a buff envelope. There was no formal interview and short chat with the Chief Mechanical Engineer as experienced by Wilson Neal twelve-years earlier!

I was fortunate in one respect. My first day at Newton shed was in a building that was not unfamiliar to me. As a boy and

Right: Smart 'County' 4-6-0 No. 1016 County of Hants waits to come off shed at Newton Abbot in August 1959. Locomotive changes, piloting over the banks, and supplying locomotives for up services from Torquay were among the main jobs at Newton Abbot. PETER GRAY/COLOUR-RAIL



► youngster growing up it was nothing to go into the depot with my father, an Engineman since 1941 after 21 years firing! It was a case of waiting for dead men's shoes, although firemen passed for driver long before they were promoted. I only discovered, years later, that the turns and crews at Newton were increased because fatalities were expected from aerial machine-gunning along the nearby coast main lines. Likewise, the locomotive allocation was increased and in particular the 'King' class (1938 three locomotives) allocation was increased to five and by 1950 all 'Kings' had gone elsewhere. It was with one of those Second World Warallocated 'Kings', No. 6018 King Henry VI, that my father (still a top link fireman) had a train out of Paddington, one night, with 18 coaches! They were passing Lavington and his driver told him to take a spell as they had 22 minutes in hand. Admittedly it was a warperiod timetable and times were slackened but to be that much ahead with that load was awe inspiring. The 'King' was supreme. My childhood visits to the shed would often occur on pay-day when the soon to be familiar copper pay token was surrendered for a small cylindrical tin with a tight-fitting lid that contained the week's pay. Also in the tin, with the notes and coinage, was a long and complicated tape of paper that was the pay slip. In my father's case this was copied into a black cashbook and kept for some future reference. These books survived

Below: Double-heading a 'Castle' 4-6-0, 'County' 4-6-0 No. 1010 County of Caernarvon departs Newton Abbot with a down express in summer 1958. Another down train waits at the adjacent platform, and the shed yard in the right background, is busy. B.J. SWAIN/COLOUR-RAIL

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#### **TABLE 1 NEWTON ABBOT RUNNING & MAINTENANCE DEPARTMENT 1952 - 1956**

	Fitters	Assistants	Apprentices ATC Electricians
1.	Wilson Neal *#	Len Warren	Ron Ferris # Les Venables
2.	Louis (Lew) Williams *	Percy Northway	Ken Caldwell Tris Bearne ~
3.	Reg Smale	Charlie Riggs	Chris Hext * #
4.	Frank Stutz	Fred Ashton	John Wooton
5.	Ernie Lang*	Bill Wills	David Love
6.	Ivor Davis*	Bert Bearne ~	Derek Waddell
7.	Maurice Blewitt	Harold Boyce	David Crimp
8.	Arthur Trendle *	Les ?	Eric Stinton *
9.	Bert Strutt	Stan Honey	Bill Bright *
10.	Bill Keys	Bill Johnson	-
11.	Les Ellis	Frank Webber	
12.	Dennis Evans	Sandy Powell	
13.	Tony Southcombe*	Len Coombes	
	Examining Fitters	Mechanical Foreman	Shedmaster
1.	Bill Harry	Campbell Thorburn	William (Bill) Bearne
2.	Walter Southern (ex Wolverhampton)		
3.	Harold Johnston		
All * v	were drivers' sons Brothers	~	

TABLE 2 CHARGEHAND BOILERSMITH : - CYRIL LUSCOMBE				
Boilersmiths:	Assistants	Apprentices		
Vic Adams (ex Swindon works).	Reg Ellis			
Bob Perryman	Melvin Northcott	Norman Penhalogan		
Wally White (ex Swindon works).		-		
Percy ?	Percy Rickards	AN Other ?		
	Walter Prout			





and are part of my archive! The pay tin was immediately emptied and returned through a small metal-lined hole to the left of the pay window of the wooden hut that served then as the time office. It was located on the Eastern side of the factory traversing table. Egress to the town was via Dark Arch (under the rail tracks East of Newton Abbot station) into Quay Road and then Queens Street, where haircuts were often undertaken for men and boys in Webbers at 1s 6d and 9d respectively. When I started, the pay tins had been discontinued and the buff pay packet (small envelope) was in vogue. Footplate staff at Newton Abbot shed, (NA in GWR parlance and 83A with BR) were allocated pay and token numbers in the first two hundred range and fitting staff were listed in the four hundred range. My father's number 128 remained with him from the time he returned from South Wales in 1927 until he retired in 1966. Footplate staff, although allocated with copper tokens for paydays, booked on and off without the familiar brass token that the remaining shed staff and adjacent factory operated. My number was 460, which I kept (except for the year spent in the 'factory', a completely separate department under the Chief Mechanical & Electrical Engineer, when a new number was issued), until 1956 and what was to be my final departure to Swindon. The pay and daily token system was standard throughout the Great Western empire as I was to learn, were so many systems. There were different shapes and patterns but the copper and brass differentiation was standard practice throughout. Pay-day was colloquially known as Golden Eagle day and related to something that bird did from time to time. I have subsequently obtained for \$3, an oblong brass daily check, embossed GWR

(top) LOCO (left) CARR (right) DEPT (base) sides. The number stamped on it is 437, quite close to my initial check!

At 5ft 4in, I was guite short and small for my age at the commencement of the apprenticeship but in those five physically demanding years, a further six inches were added. At the Torquay tech, in the last annual spring term boxing tournament, I well remember the weight of both my opponent Roy Ashford (who joined the local Electricity Board) and myself as being a mere 96lb. Being small had its advantages, or perhaps not, in that I was a convenient size to enter water tanks and similar cramped areas. Small was definitely a disadvantage in the strenuous tasks that were to become an all too familiar daily routine. There were 13 sets of fitters and assistants (mates), three examining fitters (senior, time served men of considerable experience); three apprentices, an office clerk, all under the control of the mechanical foreman. The hours varied for the sets of fitters. Two sets worked the weekly night shifts, early and late nights and a set, the late turn. The remainder either worked a five or five and half day week. All apprentices worked the five-day week and 'booked on' at 7.30am - 5.30pm with an hour mid-day break. The sets of fitters working 8am-12noon Saturday half day, commenced at 8am-5.pm Monday-Friday. The day men carried out the routine four and eight monthly examinations and longer overhauls as well as the routine maintenance tasks associated with the daily 'boiler washouts'. The night men and late turn

Above: Returned to steam in 1957, celebrity 4-4-0 No. 3440 City of Truro toured the west country with a Westerward TV exhibition train highlighting the launch of the new commercial TV channel. On 19 May 1957 No. 3440 was at Newton Abbot. PETER GRAY/COLOUR-RAIL

sets concentrated on tasks of locomotives arriving and departing that had urgent faults requiring immediate attention.

The mechanical foreman arrived at 8am and allocated work for the day to those who were not otherwise engaged on routine maintenance. A small team of three sets of boilermakers and mates under a chargehand boilermaker also occupied the workshop. There were two boilermaker apprentices and demarcation between the two locomotive skilled trades was well defined. An incidence of such demarcation came to a head at Swindon some years later but more of that in the drawing office experience to follow

#### Maintenance staff, fitting and boilermakers

At that time Newton Abbot had 70 locomotives allocated to the shed. The staff (Table 1) were the mechanical and electrical staff there to maintain these locomotives:-

The running shed apprentices would rotate with the factory. The first five were all R&M (shed) based and in order of seniority, the remaining four were the factory intake.

The period of apprenticeship for Apprentice No. 3 was October 1952 - September 1957, the last year was spent at Swindon Works and he entered the Locomotive Drawing Office as a Draughtsman, on completion of an apprenticeship. Not all apprentices chose to go to Swindon for their final year. Those who did are indicated (table 2) #.

Other staff, apart from the footplate crews, were under the direct control of the  $\blacktriangleright$ 

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▶ shedmaster, these being the shift clerks, three running foreman in direct charge of the footplate staff, the shed labourers, washout gang, cleaners' ganger and cleaners all on shift work. The cleaners also acted as 'call boys' who cycled around the town calling out footplate staff throughout the night. Yes, the shed bicycles were painted GWR chocolate too! The ash pit and coaling stage had further labourers all on shift work.

That first October day I was put with a fitter, Frank Stutz and mate, Fred Ashton, day men working the five-day week. Both men had served in the Second World War Frank in the Army and Fred in the RAF. The very first locomotive I worked on was No. 9440 a Hawksworth 0-6-0PT, the job being valves and pistons. On that class, to get to the cylinder heads and valve covers meant dropping the buffer beam and the buffers. These were placed across the pit to allow access to the slide valves once the covers had been removed. Depending on how worn the bronze valves were, we would replace them. The same if they were serrated. New castings meant they had to be fitted and bedded into the ports casting and that required applying red lead to each face, filing and scraping to achieve a lap fit.

My weekly pay for the first year at 35s 3d (176¼p) was significant. If it had been 35 shillings (175p) or less, then my father's free pass allocation would have been maintained. As it was not, then I started on the basic, two free passes and privilege tickets. Working on the railway was truly a family affair. Of the 13 fitters, six were sons of drivers, as were the apprentices and among my contemporaries a further four drivers had obvious. It was not unusual to see staff

sons serving similar apprenticeships.

Keeping clean, or perhaps as clean as possible, was something to be learned and at first, faces and other more private points of the anatomy were smeared with dirt. It was possible with a little care to keep cleaner but all too often, depending on the job, overalls became heavily grimed in grease. soot and all manner of filth. There was a 2oz monthly ration of soft and hard soap. The latter was of very poor quality and was often rendered down and mixed with sand to produce a home-made soft-soap concoction to supplement the small portion issued.

Remains of animals were frequently found lodged up in the gear and very occasionally if a locomotive was suspected of being involved in a trackside accident or perhaps a suicide it would be put on an examining pit to one side and no unauthorised person was permitted near.

### Running and maintenance

Before any maintenance was carried out it was important to safeguard those working, that 'NOT TO BE MOVED' boards were strategically placed on the locomotive's lamp irons. It was vitally important, not only to protect staff but the locomotive could be damaged if moved at certain times of disassembly and the fact that motion would be out of cyclic order. It was unfortunately not uncommon for the stripped locomotive to receive a biff or longer push and outcries of cursed dismay would resound, aimed at the culprit. I had been warned never to walk between two sets of buffers, the consequences of an accident being all too

Below: An early BR colour view at Newton abbot in 1951, shortly before the author started work there, as 'Hall' 4-6-0 No. 4966 Shakenhurst Hall departs Newton Abbot with a down local which, in typical GWR fashion, carries express lamps. ERIC OLDHAM/COLOUR-RAIL





foolishly and lazily walking between two parked locomotives rather than ducking down below the buffer beams! We were told not to jump across maintenance pits but invariably did, rather than use a full pit plank or walk around.

Quite often, even if a locomotive was under a longer-term investigation and the late turn set were either not available or it was before 10 o'clock and they had not arrived, programmed work was deferred and engine off shed maintenance was assigned.

This varied immensely and could be anything under the sun from a new set of brake blocks to injector and vacuum brake problems. It was always amusing to find certain drivers who were confronted with a locomotive that they did not like, adopting a last ditch attempt to have it changed by finding something dramatically wrong. These men were well known, not only to the fitting staff but also, as we all believed, to the shedmaster who had a footplate background Austerity 'WD' locomotives were often in this category as were the 'ROD'2-8-0s and LMS '8F' 2-8-0s, returning to South Wales sheds. Many were the times that a locomotive from a Welsh location was quickly fitted out with new brake blocks to get the driver 'off' the shed. They all seemed to arrive at Newton in want of brakes! Not that fitting blocks was such an easy task on the 'RODs', when it had been known to take all day with seized brake gear to contend with. Brake blocks were held in a locked compound at the rear of the factory stores and the fitter's mate was

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despatched with a 'bogie' (a two-wheeled hand truck, with pouch compartment) very suitable for all manner of uses including the transfer of six/eight or even 10 brake blocks, each weighing on average close to half a hundredweight. The knack of changing brake blocks was soon acquired and the whole exercise was achieved and often completed in less than 20 minutes. The fitter's mate would plunge into the maintenance pit with long handled brakespanner. He would slacken off the brake gear adjuster, to allow the pins to be withdrawn on the brake blocks. Dropping a block into the pit was frowned upon and raising the heavier, new block on the upper knee was the knack. To begin, I often experienced swollen areas of the knee but these seemed to become established fleshy areas capable of withstanding such treatment.

There were two distinct locomotive turns that might require urgent action well before 9am, the 'Salop' a double home trip to Shrewsbury and the 'Torbay Express', both required 'Castle' class locomotives and were lavished with attention. The 'Salop' took over its train that had come up from Plymouth (North Road). Invariably the 'Torbay Express' engine would have come up from Kingswear light engine, the early evening the previous day, tender first, having worked the down 'Torbay'. It was ready to return

Above: Since preserved, '45XX' 2-6-2T No. 4566, the last locomotive to go through Newton Abbot works, has received some special treatment and gleams in the evening sun in July 1960.

to Kingswear that morning and then turned at Kingswear for that day's up 'Express'. It merely worked a local branch line train down to Kingswear where the 'Express' stock was held ready. It was always a very busy scene around both of these locomotives and there was obvious pride shown in particular by the cleaners.

A job quickly learned was re-packing piston glands and often in a hurry to get an engine off shed. There were two sizes as I recall. Measured lengths were positioned above the rolls of graphite-coated cords and uncoiling the correct length, one simply cut off the packing required with a single hammer blow across any sharp metal edge Slackening back the two retaining nuts with special lightweight single-ended gland spanners exposed the gland box and brass cylinder, the old worn packing was discarded and the fresh packing was inserted, turning the holding cylinder to spiral the packing material as an insert. The heel of a pin bar was used to enable the gland box to be pulled-up quickly and with one nut tightened the second was spun into place and tightened forthwith. The oil swab holder was set in place - job done. Packing a gland with a very hot engine was another matter and doing likewise to inside cylinders on 'Kings' and 'Castles' required skin like ox hide. I watched once in the through running road ➤ at Newton station while the fitter I was with re-packed an inside cylinder gland, (cat on a hot tin roof) I rendered all the assistance I could muster having tools and packing at the ready. It was not an easy occupation dealing with a superheated piston rod! Fingertips were scalded with every touch. Hopefully there was appreciation en route as the train powered away...

The camaraderie in the fitter's shop was second to none. The leg-pulling was a constant source of amusement and, of course, there were those who were regular targets. Any newly-arrived apprentice was dealt the now well-recorded and all too familiar sets of practical jokes. Being sent to the stores for a long weight, the bucket of steam; I do not recall being caught this way but did have my leg pulled from time to time which is in my view as good as any training for life generally. I well remember one incident, which still gives great pleasure to recall, when during a mid-morning break for tea, a certain fitter's mate departed to the lavatory per usual leaving his freshly poured cup of tea residing on the workbench. In a flash, a second cup, well prepared earlier was produced, complete with carefully drilled hole in its base. The cup with grommet fitted screw was fastened to the bench and the tea poured back in. Our intrepid tea drinker returned, settled on the bench next to 'his' cup of tea, only to find great difficulty in lifting the cup, common

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to all railway refreshment rooms, to his lips. Presumably thinking it had momentarily been stuck by some overspill, he wrenched at the cup, which disintegrated in his hand amidst howls of laughter by all that had gathered around.

Below: A broad view of Newton Abbot showing one of its signal gantries, which were to become a well-known landmark in later years. '5101' class 2-6-2T No. 5158 dominates the scene. L.F. FOLKARD/COLOUR-RAIL applause, by onlookers and victim alike.

Each week in turn, an apprentice would, upon his 7.30am arrival, walk around the shed with a small piece of hardboard and draw up a list, on familiar Western cream yellow paper held in place by a bulldog clip, of all locomotives on shed. The list was divided up into the six lanes of the shed covered and uncovered areas: a siding known as 'under the wall', adjacent the coaling and fire pit and a length of track called 'down the back'. Each engine number was listed in the precise location the locomotive occupied in the lane or siding. The completed list was presented to the mechanical foreman when he arrived. Although this task was disliked by many of the apprentices, I liked to know what was about and almost relished the quick trip around our domain. Of course engines would be moved but it saved endless time for fitters and others when the shed was full and a locomotive would be hard to find. ወ

To be continued...

