



END OF THE LINE

by

Ray Churchill

When I stepped from the footplate of Ian Riley's Black 5 No 44871 at Crewe on Thursday afternoon 28th of April it was for the last time, 59 years of Railway service had come to an end. 59 years in the line of promotion (as it used to be called) meaning the progression from cleaner to the ultimate position of Driver and it could be a very long haul if promotion was slow at a Depot.

At Burton-on-Trent for instance you sometimes didn't know which was the Driver or Fireman both looked ancient to a young buck like me. As for my own promotion it wasn't too bad really: I started at Bescot aged 15½ in 1957 as a Cleaner, was made Passed Cleaner at 16 which meant I was available for Firing Turns, made Fireman about a year later and stayed in that position until I was passed for driving Steam in 1966 (Passed Fireman) gaining my Drivers job in 1972. It wasn't all as smooth as it sounds though, I have to say there were times when I nearly packed it in when my late Wife Patricia started getting fed-up of the anti-social hours, and believe me for anyone like me who has worked at a Freight Depot the hours are really anti-social. There isn't an hour or a minute on the clock that I haven't booked on Duty, but I digress, now where was I? ... Ah yes, the last three days of my career began Tuesday morning 26th of April when my Wife Nickey and I made our way down to Exeter. I was to relieve WCR Driver Pete Roberts coming down from Waterloo with 'THE GREAT BRITAIN IX' and 46100 ROYAL SCOT at its head. I had driven 'Royal Scot' for the first time only the week before from Carnforth to Crewe but only with its support coach so I was looking forward to it now it would have some real work to do. Of course we should have had 44871 on the front and that position would have fell to me as I am always lead Driver but it had broken a Radius Rod en-route down the day before. All our steam trips to and from Penzance have been double headed because of the load over a tough road and the Driver of the train loco has always been Andy Taylor our Operations Manager (South). Indeed we are the only two steam Drivers to sign through to Penzance and I dearly wanted it to happen for the last time but it was not to be.

The train rolled in and I relieved a beaming Pete Roberts who told me they'd had a good trip. I'm pleased to say my Fireman was Chris Birmingham, we've traversed this route times past and he's a very good Fireman. We have a green signal this is followed by the RA and I gently ease the Scot out of the platform and accelerate along the Main Line. We're booked 'Inside' at Dawlish Warren for a flyer to go by and having pulled up there he's by after about a minute. We follow him out and after some vigorous waving from the tea ladies at the Red Rock Cafe I take it easy along the sea wall working up to about 40 mph as I don't want to catch him at his stop at Newton Abbot and spoil our climb of Dainton. Trouble is I can't dawdle too much or I might delay a 'Rattler' going to Paignton.

With the train weight grossing 500 tons we have a class 57 Diesel on the back to assist over the fierce Devon banks but I've told its Driver Pete Collins not to apply any power unless I ask for it and I know he won't. I'm hoping if we can get a run at it we can get away without assistance over the steep but relatively shorter climb of Dainton but I know it won't be the case up Rattery though. We have green signals approaching Newton Abbot and I work her up to the regulation 60 mph. In the station she appears to be slowing I look at the 'Speedo' and she's down to nearly 45... What the... It turns out that a support crew member has accidentally leaned upon the emergency air brake lever. Oh dear to put it mildly - it would have to happen here, but I say nothing though some drastic action will have to be taken if we're to go over unassisted. Chris has the needle on the mark and a good fire on, just off the end of the Platform the brake is restored and I set the Regulator to three Quarters and cut-off at 45% she protests loudly to the sky, sorry but needs must. Just past the site of Aller Jcn the needle is nudging 60 mph and I ease her a bit to 40%, at the quarry the gradient is fighting back I look at Chris he gives me the thumbs-up, needle on the mark. Round the final lefthander and the Tunnel is in sight but the speed is nearly down to 20 will she make it or won't she... Tune in at the same time tomorrow folks for the next episode of.. Sorry I'm getting carried away back to my Dick Barton Special Agent days on the 'Steam Radio'. Into the Tunnel now and she's under 20mph I've got both hands on the regulator ready to slam it shut as a slip here (which often happens) could kill us stone dead but good girl she keeps her feet and we're over the top and gaining speed. I shut off and let the downgrade show its advantage.

We come to a stand at signal E94 this is where I ask the Exeter Signaller to hold us when we haven't got a clear run up Rattery and you can never get one if you follow one from Exeter or the Warren. E94 signal is three back from the far end of the platform at Totnes and when the signal turns to green it will give me time to accelerate to the limit of 60mph at the bottom of the dip at Totnes.

Now let us see how far we can get before I have to call upon Peter on the back engine, she's going well but I can now feel the Demons of Tigley clawing at our back and dragging us down like a Leopard on a Gazelle. Chris has the needle on the red mark as usual and we're very near opposite Tigley church but with speed down to 15mph I decide enough is enough and call upon Pete to supply us with a little Electro-magnetism to see off this energy sapping climb.

Soon we're hurtling down Hemerdon to pull-up in Plymouth. Here we detach, run round the support coach and toot off back to Laira via Mount Gould to turn the Engine then coal and water and the boys will oil round if necessary. Meanwhile the train had gone on to Penzance behind the Infernal Combustion Engine with Peter at the Helm.

Right it's time we weren't here. I now have the unenviable task of steering this ship down to Penzance Tender-first. Well it's nothing new to an ex-Bescotman; most of our work was Tender-first for the first half of the job so stop whingeing Churchill and get on with it.

We arrive just after 2100 and settle her down in the Station sidings then a taxi to our hotel and after a quick shower set out for Wetherspoons at the top of the Town.

The next morning is lovely blue skies and the view from our promenade Hotel is straight out to sea, I nearly ask Nickey if we are dreaming... are we really here... at work ?

Gee Whiz this is the life. After breakfast we pile into a taxi and make for the Station and walk round to our steed. We stow our gear on board and exchange pleasantries with the

boys. After the usual shuffling to-n-fro we're backed-up on our train and awaiting departure. We have the same crew: me as driver, Chris as Fireman, Phil Cowley as Traction Inspector and a support crew member. As usual we're booked to follow a train and usually there is a ten minute headway but this morning there is only 4mins. We shall get stopped at St. Erth and that will beggar-up our climb to Gwinear Rd. Nearly time to go the Signal is green...Yes that's it we're off, there couldn't possibly be a better way for me to finish my career than to drive a Steam Train out of Penzance bound for Bristol on such a beautiful morning and getting paid for it. Are you sure you want to finish Churchill...Are you? Come on stiff upper lip man no wavering.

When I first learned the 'Road' to Penzance I was shocked to find that there were three stretches of Single Line on it, the first of which we're on now between Penzance and Marazion. It was singled I believe when they built the Diesel Depot because they needed the room. No good rushing along here or we'll get stopped at Marazion on the other hand I mustn't hang around too long as there may be a Train waiting to come onto the Single Line from the other end. We're just pulling clear when a unit quietly rolls into view towards the signal controlling the Single Line which should go green for him any minute now. We get checked at St. Erth and we struggle up to Gwinear Road but I ask for no help from Peter at the back and will not do so until Hemerdon. Through Truro now and at the site of former Probus and Ladock Station was the second stretch of single line for a distance of 7 miles re-doubled in 2005 at a cost of 2million a mile and as they keep saying on TV you do the maths. I drove 3440 City of Truro down to Truro for the celebratory re-opening passing a Cross-Country Voyager on the new stretch. St. Austell flashes by down the big hill to Par, Lostwithiel and Bodmin come and go and now we're on the long climb of Largin Bank.

The Scot sets to with a will and I'm hoping...Yes the Distant is off for Largin West a nasty place to re-start if you're unfortunate enough to be stopped there for something coming the other way as this heralds the approach to the final stretch of Single Line on the Cornish Main Line. I don't know when it was singled and I'm guessing it was because of the weight on the three viaducts East Largin, St. Pinnock and St. Pinnock East and being single all the train weight is centrally over the stone piers. It runs for roughly just over a mile. Clear of this now and its one last effort to the top not far away at Doublebois. Going down the Bank towards Liskeard, Moorswater Viaduct comes into view at virtual right angles and looks nothing to do with us but the front of the Loco keeps nosing round to the left until we're in alignment with it. Once through there it's virtually all downhill to Saltash. Over the 'Royal Albert Bridge' for the last time at the Regulator I give my last saluting whistle. We arrive at Plymouth detach and shuffle over to the Dock for water.

That done we back-up again and prepare for the off. She makes a clean start out of the Platform and up to Mutley Tunnel as soon as we cross the Plym River Bridge I get stuck in. Passing Plympton the gradient is making its presence felt and by Hemerdon woods I ask for the diesel to supply us with a few amps. Over the top now and the Diesel reverts to idling. I shan't ask for assistance again today (I hope). We're soon through Totnes and on the nursery slopes of Dainton at Coombe Fishacre I open up and lengthen the valve travel as the steeper slopes are staring me in the face, up we go and as the Tunnel mouth comes into view the roar at the Chimney quickly becomes individual beats but we're into the Tunnel now and she's done it again.

Through Newton Abbot now and along that famous sea wall for the last time at the front end. Exeter comes and goes then it's 'inside' for some H2O at Tiverton loop. Hmm... Where's the Tanker...No Tanker... Then someone spots him on the opposite side of the line and we wait while he shunts around to us. That done we're off again and run well until

we get to Worle Jcn where the line from Weston-Super-Mare joins us and it becomes evident that we are following a rattler from that place. This quite often happens here and it spoils the run into Bristol, I slacken the pace so we won't keep getting stopped by his Station stops en-route. We eventually roll into Bristol about right time and that's it - my last Cornish turn, for me there's something magical about Cornwall and from the Footplate of a Steam Locomotive doubly so.

Next morning saw me on my very last turn with 4871 on day 3 of 'THE GREAT BRITAIN IX' along with my Fireman Jack and TI Phil Cowley. It was to be a complete ant-climax to the previous day. We set off and about three parts up Filton Bank Jack came across and said "Look" pointing to the Pressure Gauge, it was back to about 180psi. Gee whiz I thought we've only just left Bristol.

Young Jack is relatively inexperienced but he's ok. I looked in the Firebox, he had enough fire in there but there was no heat in it and it looked quite ashy, the lack of steam pressure could not be attributed to Jack. I got him to run the chisel bar through it but it made no difference meanwhile I asked John Rogers for a push from the Diesel on the rear.

On emergence from the Patchway Tunnel it's a long downhill stretch through Pilning and deep into the lowest part of the Severn Tunnel, after the long pull up out of the bowels of the earth we cross over the metals at Severn Tunnel Jcn onto the Down Relief and shortly after we roll to a stand at Magor our first water stop. Hmm... No Tanker, somebody spots him on the other side. Well I'll be jiggered this happened yesterday it's never ever happened before, well not to me anyway. Mental note Compass for Xmas present.

Jack meanwhile is giving the Fire a good seeing to and watering done we proceed under easy steam to Maindee where we swing right onto the North & West Route. We take some assistance on the long climb up to Pontypool Rd. and again up Llanvihangel, eventually arriving at Hereford for our second water stop and a complete rebuilding of the fire. Andy Christie took over from Jack, Andy like Jack doesn't look old enough to Fire a Steam loco but believe me he ranks among the best. With a clean fire and Andy keeping it thin we did a lot better and arrived into Crewe about 10 mins down. I was glad to see my Relief, Driver Gordon Hodgson of Carlisle and Diesel Driver James Marshall. I told them of our woes and said assistance would probably be needed somewhere along the line. And that was that... Finished. Well this is where I usually end by saying, see you next time but I won't will I?

Finally I would like to say a big thank you to all those connected with Tyseley that I have come into contact with for the kindness and courtesy shown to me throughout my time there; it has been a pleasure to work with you.

Ray Churchill