

The Mighty "P"

By Charlie Bere-Streeter

There were many bigger, stronger, faster and more glamorous locomotives developed in later years but none were as honest, versatile, easy to work or better performers, pound for pound, than the 32 Class.

It was the most widely used of all the classes, operating on all lines throughout the State and for much longer than most other locos in service. Most of the P Class engines were in service in excess of 70 to 80 years, a life equivalent to the men who operated them.

When working within their limits, they gave very little trouble and as a result, there were very few bad trips. In fact, to my knowledge, the least of any loco in service during my time as a driver, I spent most of my railway career on "freighters" but I did experience a fair bit of P Class working in my early years so I'll head back to the 1950s and try to recall one such trip.

It is 12-35 pm as we sign on at the Guard's Foreman's office at Central station to work No. 95 passenger to Nowra and return on No. 236. My fireman this day is R. Knapp and he is a fully qualified and O.K fireman from my point of view. We check the daily report sheet, the STNs (Special Train Notices) in case trackwork is being done on the line and to see if there are any new speed restrictions.

Having been told that our train is to depart from platform 12, we proceed there forthwith and relieve the shed crew who have prepared the engine in Eveleigh and brought it through the dive and coupled it onto the train. Our engine is 3324.

On approaching, I notice a certain sub-inspector dressing down the young inexperienced acting fireman for having black smoke and the engine blowing off while standing at the platform. Being Saturday, I ask him if he's on duty and he replies "No, not officially" so I tell him to "buzz off". I thought that the young bloke had done a good job having the engine ready to go and I tell him so for I could see that he had also scrubbed down everything in the cab.

Even the handrails were shining. I guess I made his day but I'll probably get another "bung" for getting up the inspector's nose.

I check with the outgoing driver that the Westinghouse brake test has been completed and then I inspect the fire, check the water level in the boiler and also the tender by holding the deck hose in the air. Then the drip feed lubricator is checked to ensure that it is set correctly and the fireman checks the sand boxes are full and the marker lights set correctly on the engine and extinguished on the tender.

Meanwhile the guard has collected the "sheet" and imparted that the load is the usual eight car LUB set with two LFX "dogboxes" added for a load of 258 tons. He then returns to his van to give a continuity test.

At 1.05 pm, we get the "right-a-way" from the guard and it is repeated by the station assistant on the platform. I open the regulator, reversing screw on the block, cylinder cocks open to drain any condensation while standing and open the sand valve in the case the old girl stamps her feet (slips) when the pressure is applied.'

We start to move and after about 20 or 30 yards, I close the cocks, wind the screw back a couple of turns and apply slight pressure to the regulator to maintain 15 mph. This is the permanent speed restriction in Sydney yard due to the many sets of old points and crossovers here. 30 Class tanks and the veteran 79 Class diesels fuss about shunting and making up trains as we pass.

We pass through Redfern and then take the turn off the main line to go down through the Illawarra dive, picking up speed as we come up beside Eveleigh loco and join the Illawarra line approaching Alexandria yard with Erskineville signal box on our left. Macdonaldtown car sheds are on our right with the big gas tank behind.

Through St. Peters, we do not stop at Sydenham but coast along. The old girl burps from the dome occasionally, signifying a full head of steam (160psi). We light steam through Tempe, over the Cooks River Bridge then pick her up at the Wollie Creek signal box. The old tramway Way & Works depot is on our left here and we steam on to Arncliffe, through the former tunnel which has been opened out into a large cutting, drop down to Banksia and then steam through Rockdale, Kogarah, Carlton and Allawah to our first stop at Hurstville which is to pick up passengers only.

At the turn of the century, suburban trains often terminated at Rockdale and Hurstville, both locations having storage sidings for this purpose. Tank engines were mostly used so turntables were not necessary.

After receiving the guard's "right-a-way", the same starting procedure applies, and we run down I in 73-80 grades through Penshurst, Mortdale and Oatley, the terminus of the first suburban electric train service in 1926. We look for a clear signal approaching Como Bridge which is equipped with gauntlet track and catchpoints protecting the approach from each side.

The picture here is a pretty one with oyster leases everywhere and baths and boats moored down to our left but we don't have much time to enjoy the scenery for this is the ruling grade for the entire trip and with clear signals, I let her out a couple of notches on the screw to steam heavily up the I in 40 grades to Sutherland. We stop here at 1.43 pm for a minute to pick up more passengers. This is the junction for the suburban line to Cronulla and was once the junction for a short branch into Woronora cemetery, the cutting still

being visible. The CPH railmotors which connect with the suburban electrics to Waterfall and Helensburgh are serviced here and have their own siding.

In the 1930s, a special goods train ran to Cronulla hauled by a Standard Goods engine to deliver seafood to the numerous fish shops at this seaside resort. This was later replaced by a "Fast Electric Parcel Van" and many railwaymen had fish for dinner the following day. There is also an Up refuge loop just north of the station where brakes were once pinned down on goods trains before descending the steep grade to Como. This has now been removed.

Back to 3324 and we now know we are to have a great trip for the old girl is still singing, riding smoothly and easily maintaining a full head of steam. We have 1/4 of a glass of water and Knappy is enjoying a tender-full of good quality South Coast coal. It has plenty of heat and is slow burning which gives him plenty of time to sit down and sight-see.

Heading off, we pick up speed on the down grade to Loftus in order to get a good run at the momentum bank just past the junction of the line to The Royal National Park, one of the oldest national parks in the world. At the turn of the century, up to 20-30 trains would run to this location on a sunny Sunday with all classes of locomotives being used and even cleaned-out cattle trucks equipped with bench-seats for rolling stock.

Through Engadine and Heathcote we top the highest point on the line and run down through Waterfall to our first set-down stop at Helensburgh. Waterfall once had a loco depot of its own with fifteen 50 Class engines stationed there and it was also the base for the 26 Class bank engines which were used through the old Otford tunnel when it was single track. That tunnel was an engineman's nightmare! Waterfall also reminds me of my first contact with the mighty "P" Class. Back in the 1930s, I used to catch the train from here to school at Sutherland and on most winter mornings, all of us kids used to crowd around the loco to warm ourselves. I did not realise that one day I would be driving them.

We're all stations to Bulli from here so its head down and at 'em as the running times are pretty tight with only minutes allowed between stations. Past Helensburgh, we cross and run under the line to Metropolitan Colliery and steam uphill and down dale through Lilyvale, Otford, Stanwell Park, over the impressive viaduct and then curve around, high above the beach and along to Coal Cliff, scene of numerous landslides. As we run down the yard, there are coke ovens on our right and a colliery on our left. At Coal Cliff South, we pick up the staff just before we enter the long, single track tunnel which is approximately a mile in length.

Fumes are a problem in this tunnel, particularly if the wind is blowing in the wrong direction and crews on the "big engines" often use respirators.

Our train is light and fast and so we can do without these today. The single track ends just before Scarborough station and we return the staff to the

signalman here and head down the grade to Wombarra, Coledale, Austinmer and Thirroul.

Passing Wombarra there's a string of "flat tops" loaded with steel on the Up Line with no engines attached. Then we see the guard protecting the train from behind the van and I realise the K Class and TF we saw in Scarborough siding have "stuck up" on the grade and divided their train. When we passed, they had been placing the front portion of their train in the siding at Scarborough and will shortly return on a guard's wrong line order to retrieve the other half. Possibly another case of A.I. & S. overloading!

Running down the grade into Thirroul, we see the 57 off No. 581 goods being turned ready to head back to Enfield on No. 582. Also at the "whistle-out" point, there is an old round top boilered "pig" waiting to change over with the P Class returning from Nowra with the South Coast Daylight Express. Many of the older enginemen preferred the 'round-tops' to the later "Belpaire" variety for they considered them better steamers, easier to fire, better riders at speed and faster locomotives where high speeds were possible.

In the days of steam, Thirroul was the major locomotive depot on the South Coast and was equipped with a partial roundhouse, 75' turntable for turning the 57 and 58 Classes, coal stage and marshalling yard. In the early 1960s it was closed and Port Kembla became the centre of railway operations.

Away from Thirroul on time, we race across the speedway to Wollongong, the track being mostly straight and on undulating grades. Along the way we pass the many small steam engines of the private collieries such as South Bulli Colliery, Bellambi, Corrimal Coal & Coke and Mt. Pleasant. Many of these private lines previously crossed the NSWGR on the level to private wharves however this was deemed to be unsafe and all such crossings have been removed.

We stop for water at Wollongong at 3.12 pm and I swing the column to my mate on the tender and turn it on. I then have a quick look around the old girl to see that nothing is hanging off or running hot. The timetable provides that the two LFXs are to be detached here.

With the tender full, the water is turned off and we get ready to go. We only have 8 minutes here but a lot of passengers jump off and head to the Refreshment Room on the platform for a beer or a pie or a cuppa. The stationmaster eventually gets everyone out of the "ref" room and we depart a couple of minutes late. No matter for our faithful old P Class is going like a dream. At Coniston, the line to Nowra curves away to the right while two tracks go straight ahead to Port Kembla and the industrial area surrounding the steelworks at Cringila and the "port".

We turn onto the single line, picking up the staff as we go and tear off to Unanderra where we hand in the staff and cross the Up South Coast Daylight Express and No.24 goods from Moss Vale. Our next staff station is Dapto but flying through Kembla Grange, the air goes...! It's a provisional stop and

evidently someone told the guard at Wollongong to stop here but no-one told me. And it's not even a race day!

Anyway the guard waves us back to the platform, someone gets off and away we go. Bloody late again. The poor old loco and the fireman will be working harder as I podge her to catch up time. The bloody guard will be drinking on his own at Bomaderry!

Next staff is to Albion Park then up the hill to Shellharbour tunnel, the shortest on the system. In the old days, there was a small platform here called Croom where all the dairy 'farmers' kids caught the train to school. The locals still call the tunnel by this name today. Then it's down Shellharbour bank to the station of that name. The town is 3-1/2 miles away on the coast adjacent to Bass Point and it is really Dunmore. A line to the local blue metal quarry veers away to the right here.

There is a freighter (Standard Goods loco) sitting on a load of ballast in the siding probably waiting for our staff before heading off to Thirroul.

Over the Minnamurra River to the station (I love that name) then around the cliffs to Bombo, our next staff change. Another blue metal quarry is sited here to the west of the line and together with the one at Dunmore, provides much of the ballast used on the NSWGR. This was once the terminus of the line and it is right on the beach.

A similar stop and staff change at Kiama, site of the famous blow-hole. A small 2' gauge tramway once ran down the main street here and the ballast was loaded into ships in the small harbour which is now the base for the local fishing fleet and a popular tourist attraction. While many trains terminate here, we don't and it's off to Berry, making sure the fireman keeps the firehole door shut and the blower on while going through a series of short tunnels at Omega otherwise the back draught pushes the flames back into the cab. Many crews have suffered burns as a result for the funnel is close to the roof of the tunnel.

The last lap is into Nowra (really Bomaderry) and we cut off the loco and run onto the pit after turning on the turntable. The fuelman will clean the fire, rake out and replenish the coal (or shovel forward) for the return trip. We have a break for a meal but mine was mostly liquid at the local over the road.

At 6.10 pm we depart for Sydney on No. 236 with the same engine and cars to arrive at Central at 10.20 pm. The trip is uneventful and while it has been a long day, it has been enjoy able and satisfying thanks to our faithful P, considered by most to be to the loco world what the Austin Healey was to the automotive world. Sleek and graceful as any filly in her early days, she maintained her grace and dignity to the very end of the steam era.

The mighty P!