

# Recollections of an Engineman – Part 1

By Charlie Bere-Streeter

Unlike most enginemen, I never kept a memo book and therefore didn't keep any written records of my experiences whilst a railway employee. Nevertheless, I still retain a lot of memories of those days and while a lot of names may be lost, events are still quite vivid. So, armed with my official history record (which was given to me on my retirement in 1985), here goes!

I started at Eveleigh as a probationary cleaner on 9th November 1947 at the hourly rate of 3/1d. There were about 120 cleaners at Eveleigh at this time with a weekly turnover of about 20 as it was such a shock to be thrown into such a position of dirty, oily, black conditions and to be treated as we were by the overbearing chageman and head cleaners. Most of the guys starting then were just de-mobbed from the services and a lot had been in prisoner-of-war camps so not many stayed for long.

Anyway after seeing how the top fire-men on the Mail roster prepared their engines in dirty overalls and then changed into spotless ones (Eric Lloyd even wore a tie) to whistle out with Special Class drivers like Ned McDonald, Deaffy Springthorpe (deaf as a post), Willie Tye etc., most of us got ambitious enough to try and make it ourselves.

Then in 1949, the railway was brought to a virtual standstill by the big coal strike. Not much has been written on this but the workshops at Eveleigh went on a crash program of converting K class engines to oil burners. They called it oil but it was more like tar and they had to run steam pipes inside the tank to make the tar run by heating it up. It worked O.K. but it still kept blocking the tubes so the fireman had to spray sand into the firebox with a long funnel to clear them.

These engines remained on goods working for many years after the coal strike was resolved. A lot of enginemen used to become quite ill with all the oil fumes but I loved them. It was much better than using a "banjo", especially to Lithgow or Goulburn.

I transferred to Enfield in late 1949. That is when I discovered what life was all about. It was renowned as the hardest depot in the state with the worst engines and the worst western coal but as I soon discovered, the best bunch of blokes anywhere. There were a couple of bad apples but nearly all stuck together and helped each other when possible.

Some of the names that come to mind are Ted Cassidy, Harold Emery, Basil Woodward, Charlie Osborne, Eric Bird, Tom Butler, Jim Barnes, Wanko Godby, Steve Little, Tom Scott, Yank Dawson, Statics Pierce, Dave Kirk, Truthful Bob Sutherland, Hydraulics Lawes (he'd lift anything) just to name a few. I have only recalled some of the older brigade here but we also had a great bunch of younger drivers who could match up to them any day.

One of my early experiences on coming to Enfield occurred when I was rostered on No.169 South Coast returning on No.28 milk train with acting driver Charlie Harrison. After taking water at Waterfall, we started down towards Helensburgh. I put on a light fire, put the injector on and sat down allowing steam to drop a little and just relaxed. Shortly after, Charlie came over to me and said 'Is this how they fire in Eveleigh?' to which I replied "Yes". Then he said 'Well you're in Enfield now and if you don't get off your butt and raise steam, we won't get over Otford.' Then he turned and went back to his side and sat down.

Well I wasn't very impressed but I got busy and we made it O.K. We didn't talk much for the rest of the trip as my opinion of him wasn't great but later, on looking back, I realised I had learnt a valuable lesson. When doing something new, always seek advice and so avoid stupid mistakes. Charlie became a role model for me as he was a first class engineman and a really good mate.

On a lighter note, one night after booking on at Moss Vale barracks, I was firing for Tom Scott. We pulled into Berrima siding to shunt and were waiting for the guard to come up so Tom grabbed his billy and headed back to get some milk out of the truck we had just picked up at Moss Vale.

It was a freezing cold night and I was huddled up to the firebox to keep warm. Next thing Tom arrived back and handed me the billy of milk and said "Come with me. I've lost my watch." We walked back to the milk truck and Tom started getting undressed. I said "What the hell!" He then explained to me "The watch fell out of my pocket into the milk tank. I can't leave it there because they'll know it's mine and I'll get the sack."

With this, we climbed onto the truck and I watched as he disappeared into the milk. On the second time down, he came up with the watch and I literally had to drag him out as he was almost frozen stiff and going blue. The guard had arrived when we returned to the engine so we hosed him down with the deck hose and rubbed him down to get his circulation back. I still have a good laugh when I think of that day and wonder what the people of Sydney would think as they drank that milk.

The first time I was reduced in grade, (which was the most severe penalty) from fireman/acting driver to cleaner, occurred when I was rostered as engine turner. The duty of the engine turner was to take engines from the examiners pit to the de-ashing and coaling bank and return them to the roundhouse and stable. Many of these engines had the fire fully removed for washout or major repairs and so did not have much steam left in the boiler. In such cases it was necessary to get them into the roundhouse via the turntable as quickly as possible.

I took charge of engine 5804 at the de-ashing bank with Floyd Bennett (the same mate of Jim Bain) to stable in No.1 shed where all the 57s and 58s were kept. The engine only had about 100 lbs of steam and no fire so I asked Floyd to hurry and turn me into an empty road. I then released the brakes and the

engine took off. I had kept the cylinder cocks closed to save steam when the mongrel picked up the water and bolted.

I applied the brakes but it was too late. She jumped the stop blocks and went straight through the wall of the roundhouse. I was charged with misconduct for not having the engine under proper control and found guilty. I was reduced to a cleaner for three months. Anyway some good came out of it as they put a doorway in the gap when they rebuilt it and it saved the crews 50-60 yards when carrying kits to No.1 shed.

The next time I was reduced in grade was the episode when 6029 collided with 5364. My mate this time was Bill Summers so I'll let him tell this story at a later date.

Seeing Harry Wright's name in Roundhouse reminds me of when he was a raw cleaner and even then a very keen photographer. We spread a story around that the C.M.E.'s office were trying to recruit a good photographer to ride on the front of engines and take official photos. We were so convincing we got Harry to make an application for the job. It was a great joke then but I guess Harry is now having the last laugh.

On cold winter nights, I used to carry Bonox in my tucker box and a flask of Dad and Mum to add to same. One such night I was working No.161 west and my driver turned out to be Steve Little, a great bloke but a teetotaler so I wasn't game to take a sip as he would surely smell it.

Anyway after cleaning the fire at Valley Heights, Steve said to boil the billy (they had a copper boiling continually beside the pit for this purpose) so I said "How about we have Bonox". He said that would be great so I threw caution to the wind, made the Bonox strong and hit it with half a flask of rum.

I watched closely as Steve started to drink and to my surprise he drank it all and got another mug full. Soon it was time to go as the pilot engine had been attached. I went to pick up the shovel and Steve took it from me, said he felt great and for me to sit on his seat. Boy, he sure did a good job of firing up to Katoomba! Whenever I met him after that, he asked if I had any Bonox.

On a sour note, back in 1956 I worked No.111 south with Bill Stannard as my mate. We had a dog of an engine and we worked our guts out but still lost time in running in most sections. A couple of weeks later, I was rostered for the same train and of all things, Bill is my mate again. We went on the train in Enfield yard when up climbed a certain senior inspector who informed me he was going to travel with us because of the time we had lost on the previous trip.

Well we had no trouble to Bargo then while Bill was taking water, this so called inspector came up to me and said "Charlie, we have a file on this fireman. It appears he is a troublemaker and an active communist so if you make a statement that all this was his fault, I'll see you get out of it.' Dumbfounded I replied 'F - Off!' and walked away.

He didn't speak to me again until approaching Mittagong when he said he was going to get off and catch an Up passenger home. I said "if you want me to stop out-of-course, give it to me in writing so the guard can endorse my daily report sheet re: the lost time." He got off when we arrived at Moss Vale. Subsequently I was severely reprimanded for mismanagement and as you know, Bill became one of our strongest Union reps.

The next time I was reduced in grade (yes, three times!) I was working No.613 south with my regular mate on 6007. We were supposed to take water at Picton but like most crews, we ran through as with experience, we knew we could make Bargo where we were timed to stop and have crib. This gave us a longer break. All Enfield men know the logic of this (liquid refreshment). However as we started to run down the grade at Tahmoor, the injector blew off. I stopped and checked the back tank. It was empty!

I yelled to my mate to keep trying to get the injector working and took off for the guard's van to get a wrong line order to run light engine to Bargo for water as I knew that when we started to go uphill again, water would run back from the front tank. I was stuffed when I got back to the engine then the bottom fell out of everything. My mate had panicked about burning the boiler and dropped the fire.

We then had to arrange to be hauled back to Picton. If only I had stopped long enough to tell my mate what I was doing, I possibly would have been only reprimanded but instead I was reduced in grade for one month, a drop in pay from around \$100 a week to about \$25 per week. Some fine eh!

I passed the staff examination for fireman on 6th February 1950 and was promoted to fireman on 13th March 1950. On 14th July 1952, I failed the staff examination for acting driver. I arrived 10" late and after a lecture by Mr. Snare on being punctual, was failed without being asked one question. "Come back in four months" he said.

I returned on 28th November 1952 to be re-examined. I deliberately arrived 10" late. All Mr. Snare said was "Sign here" and I was failed again.' Come back in four months." At this I sought of gave him my version of his pedigree and wished him to hell. Well I was a bit upset and I didn't expect this to happen but he did go where I said and after his death, Mr. Walter Hepper took over. He was a well liked inspector.

I returned on 9th May 1953 and Mr. Walter Hepper was the examiner. I had been told he kept bees so knowing a bit about bees, I was successful with very few questions being asked. On 18th August 1957, I was promoted to driver. He was a very strict Jehovah's Witness and several years later when this religion was preaching Armageddon and the date the world was to end, Walter gave all his possessions away. When the world didn't end, he was destitute and disillusioned. So be warned and beware of the God squad!

I had a very chequered career as a driver, in and out of trouble like a yo-yo

but as my name was on the top of the sheet, I always took full responsibility and never took my mate down with me. Of this I am proud. For the education of those not familiar with the internal procedures of the railways, I have set out a resume of my history record. I am sure it will open a few eyes and mouths to see how we were treated in those days.

Firstly my minor offences:

17.3.48	Spoken to by C.M.E. -	15" late for duty
20.1.50	do.	32" late for duty causing 5254 to be 50" late ex loco for No.41A goods to Menangle.
12.11.53	Spoken to -	5426 derailed at Darlings siding
30.11.54	do.	Lost 20"--short of steam on 5264 on 276 goods
8.12.54	do.	Dropped and damaged watch No.5146
11.8.55	Written to	Absent without leave on 3.8.55
18.9.55	Spoken to	10" delay-No.20 suburban. Taking crib without authority.
21.3.56	do.	64" lost to No.329 at Moss Vale-fail to fill oil tank to capacity.
21.11.56	Written to	Late on duty, 5.11.56 and 6.11.56
27.6.57	do.	Late on duty causing 5139 to be late ex loco for 974 goods
17.3.59	Spoken to	Fire in poor condition on 5269. Delay to No.256 goods and No.46 electric run.
12.4.59	Written to	Failing to book defective cylinder cocks on 5447.
11.5.59	Spoken to	Failed to book defects on 2028 during preparation causing 58" delay to No.52 pick-up at Liverpool.
27.7.59	Spoken to	Reported late for duty on 16.6.59
do.	Written to	Allowing 5169 to prime at Marrickville.
16.9.59	Spoken to	Failing to answer correspondence.
1.3.60	do.	Failing to see boiler blowing light at dome during preparation of 5241.
11.3.60	do.	Fail to book defective cylinder cocks on 5250 with the result that it was 37" late ex loco.
30.5.60	Written to	3379 derailed at Liverpool on 29.2.60.
9.11.60	Spoken to	Absent without leave.
30.7.73	do.	Left guard behind at Waterfall, No.23 South Coast.
29.10.63	do.	Drawing fire on 3658. 40" delay to No.305 south.
11.12.63	Written to	Failed to report to chargeman for further work when less than 7 hours on duty on 24.10.63.
26.10.64	do.	4460 collided with HCH 32787 derailing same on 24.7.64.
3.3.65	Spoken to	5435-15" late ex loco for No. 1 67 South Coast.
30.10.67	Written to	4102 derailed at Cooks River on 28.9.67.
25.7.68	do.	3130 derailed in Sydney yard.
8.8.70	do.	48123 demolished buffer stop at Burwood.
9.3.72	do.	48144 derailed at Gosford.
16.2.73	do.	Asleep on duty. Delay to engines for No.709 South Coast.
8.11.75	do.	44206 derailed Enfield yard.

- 2.6.76 do. No.501 A west delayed Springwood. Guard left behind at Valley Heights.
- 7.2.83 Spoken to Unnecessary delay to T.113 at Darling Island on 29.10.82.

Most of the old hands were very good at getting a drink one way or another as in those days, lot of trains carried beer, especially the express goods trains out of Darling Harbour or Alexandria. Wooden kegs were used and so drivers and guards carried sharp gimlets or meat skewers in their tuckerbox. In those hectic days, most of us drank to help us survive such hard and medieval conditions.

The guard would locate the grog while taking his wagon numbers before departure. When put into a siding to cross a faster passenger train, they would race back, drill a hole in a keg, then fill whatever was at hand - billy, bottle, mug, sometimes even a bucket. Then they would race back to engine and van.

There were a few of these trains I worked as a fireman with my regular mate Jim Barnes who had another method. He used to clean up spare water gauge glasses, 14" long. When we stopped, he would race back with a pick and knock in the bung on a large keg and we would lie on top and suck out the beer with the gauge glasses.

Needless to say most of our working at Enfield was at night. If you were lucky enough to find a 5 gallon keg, you took it back to the engine and buried it in the coal after drilling and putting a tube in with a clip on it. Kegs in those days were 5,9,18 and 27 gallons and all wooden.

There were a few trains we worked during the day and if going west, Jim would give me 3/0d and his billy approaching Penrith where we cleaned the fire and took water. I would jump off going through the station and run to the Red Cow pub, fill the billy, drink a schooner and run to the end of the yard to the de-ashing pit. Jim would have the fire cleaned and be up taking water. I'd give him the billy (it held 2 schooners and a middy) and crawl under and rake out the ashpan.

Often we would again be refuged at Springwood waiting for earlier trains to clear or to cross passenger trains and the billy trick was repeated. It was impossible to obtain bottled beer in those post-war days. When going south, this trick was repeated at Picton, Bargo, Mittagong and Bowral. With some drivers, we could also knock the publican up at Bargo during the night and get beer on credit.

On the north, pubs were scarce but there was a wine shop at Ourimbah and pubs at Wyong and Morisset if refuged there.

If we had very, very, bad coal going west (it was always bad), Jim and I would throw every second shovel out the side from Penrith to Valley Heights and then call the chargeman and say we were short of coal and get permission to

fill up the tender at the coal stage there for Valley Heights always had State Mine coal for the pilot engines. This was 100% better than the Cullen Bullen rubbish at Enfield. With this trick, we had an excellent record on the mountains.

On south trains, we often had 5 or 6 "S" trucks of Newcastle coal going to Demondrille to coal the 38 class locos returning on the expresses. When Jim saw these, he would lose time to Bargo and then ask the S.M. to let us cut the engine off, run back on the main line beside these trucks and we would madly shovel the good stuff into the tender. This meant no more lost time and it was not necessary to clean the fire at Mittagong and we therefore made Moss Vale on time.

A little insight on barracks working or book-offs as they were called. You had to take enough food etc. for a couple of days as the railway department only provided beds, fuel stove, pots and pans. There was a barrack's attendant who made the beds and cleaned the rooms. The sheets were washed and dried daily. You also had to take plates, cups, knife, fork, spoon, billy, tea, coffee, sugar, milk, salt, pepper, sauce etc.

We also had to carry timetables, safe working books & forms, towel, soap, wet weather gear and usually a change of underwear and pyjamas, as it was an offence to sleep naked with a female attendant. Lot of enginemen slept in their clothes as they were so tired after working 10-12 hour shifts.

Having to carry so much, we all had a large tin barracks box, about 2' long and 1' wide. At Enfield, as we also had a lot of local work, we only did one or two box jobs a week, so we also had a local bag, usually a Gladstone bag of varying sizes, for you were still required to carry timetables, safe working paraphernalia as well as billy, mug and lunch. In depots like Lithgow, Goulburn, Taree and the like, it was almost all book-off working. A bit different today with air-conditioned, all electric modern facilities and ample food outlets.

I'll endeavour to give an idea of the archaic Rostering system at Enfield. There were a couple of set rosters but as most goods trains were provisional (ran as required) and put on or off daily, the majority of crews were on roustabout roster and you only knew tomorrow's sign on time when you signed off. It was almost always different daily and still subject to change as some trains would be cancelled due to shortage of loading or extra trains put on if loading increased.

As we were always short staffed (no-one wanted to work in that hell hole) it was almost impossible to get a day off and sometimes you worked 18 or 20 days straight. If you complained to roster clerk Vic Hamilton, he would say it only costs 2d (cost of a phone call) to get a day off sick. Then when you rang O.K. for work, he would say "You don't sound too good. You better have a couple more days off," even if he had to cancel trains due to shortage of staff. A thorough bastard!

Working passenger trains (or toy trains as we called them) was always easy

on heavy falling grades as they had good brake gear and very little weight but driving heavy goods trains was a definite art as any wrong move could cause disaster.

The old steam compressors working flat out couldn't keep pressure up if brakes were not applied judiciously. To be able to maintain air pressure on most very steep grades like Katoomba-Springwood, Sutherland-Como and Cowan-Hawkesbury River, brake boards were displayed and drivers had to apply hand brakes on all trains at Katoomba, and portion of the train at Sutherland. From Katoomba, there were several 1 in 33 grades with dips in between so it was imperative, after several applications of the brakes, to release them early enough to run through dips with hand brakes applied.

On one occasion I was coming from Lithgow on a TF with Dave Harridine (a gentle giant of a man). At Katoomba, he said "Please don't talk to me going down the mountain as I have to concentrate 100%." Boy did he concentrate. He released the brakes too late to run over Leura and we stuck up in the dip. I had to go back and release all the handbrakes. Dave hauled the train to the top of the dip and I went back and re-applied the same handbrakes. He did the same thing at Lawson and again at Linden.

I thought we might make it at Faulconbridge but no such luck. We stopped about 100 yards before the station. Did I earn my pay that trip. I almost knew every sleeper on the mountains personally. It was a great lesson as I never had any problems when I got to drive west which was many years later. In later years, all vehicles were fitted with grade control valves which when placed in the H.P. position, retained some air in the brake cylinder and therefore kept the brakes partially applied, eliminating the necessity of handbrakes.

Once I signed off to go on 5 weeks annual leave so for a stir, I stuck my head in his window and asked my job on resumption day, 5 weeks hence. Without even looking up from his desk he said "11.47pm for No.329 south and book off." The worst job in Enfield. When I returned from holidays and rang for my next job, he said "I gave it to you 5 weeks ago" and that was that. As would be obvious, with daily rostering it was not possible to have any social life that any outsider could understand so all your friends were railwaymen.

It was hard to explain that you signed on and off at a different time each day and could work all shifts in one week, early morning, day, afternoon and night. How the hell did we put up with it? Some may think 5 weeks holiday was quite generous but it was actually 2 weeks annual leave, one week good conduct (later changed to shiftwork allowance) and one day for every public holiday worked and we worked most of them and got no penalty rates. In later years, you could accumulate holidays and get paid double time.

I hope the younger generation realise how hard our Union worked to change these conditions and make their life so much more livable than ours. But then most of them listen to the media who paint Unions as unnecessary ogres. What rot!

Here are my "major" offences:-

28.1.48	Reprimanded	Absent without leave.
13.6.48	do.	Failure to raise sufficient steam in shunting engine at Elstons siding.
1 7.9.48	Severely reprimanded	Failure to advise intended absence from duty
7.10.48	Fined 2 pounds	Failure to clean the top of 3337 to the satisfaction of the Head Cleaner and when spoken to, used improper and offensive language to him.
9.11.48	Appeal heard	Fine reduced to one pound.
6.12.48	Fined 5/0d	Failure to forward advice of intended absence.
5.3.49	Fined 1 pound	Absent without leave.

*29.10.49 Transferred to Enfield*

2.2.50	Fined 1 pound	Absent without leave.
1 3.3.50	Injured off duty	
21.4.50	Reprimanded	15" late for duty.
29.8.50	Fined	Absent without leave
28.5.51	Reprimanded	Failed to return holiday pass within 48 hours of expiry.
10.6.53	Reduced from	fireman-acting driver to cleaner non-acting fireman for 3 months. Failed to have engine 5804 under proper control when stabling in No.1 shed resulting in engine running over stop blocks and causing extensive damage to wall of roundhouse.
9.7.53	Appeal. Disallowed.	Punishment mitigated to one month.
1.10.54	Severely reprimanded	Failing to see that points were properly set before proceeding over same causing 5718 to derail at Enfield.
5.11.54	Reprimanded.	Failing to ensure water tanks were filled to capacity on 6032 working 695 north on 3.9.54 causing failure of engine due to shortage of water.
4.3.55	Reduced to	cleaner non-acting fireman for three months. Whilst moving 6029 from the de-ashing bank to No.3 shed on 28.11.54, failed to exercise care and have engine under proper control resulting in collision with 5364 causing extensive damage to both and derailing 6029.
1 7.3.55	Appeal disallowed.	No mitigation.
29.3.55	Severely reprimanded.	Failed to have engine 5547 under proper control, collided with two S-trucks damaging same.
2.4.55	Injured.	Jarred back off duty.
28.8.56	Severely reprimanded.	Misconduct. Failed to promptly submit X138 casualty report and reply to Departmental

- correspondence re: delay to No. 613 goods on 12.6.56.
- 4.9.56 Severely reprimanded. Mismanagement of engine 5558. Failed to run No.111 south to time between Enfield and Bargo. Changed to engine 5345 and still failed to run to time, Bargo to Mittagong. (This was the trip referred to earlier.)
- 1 3.12.56 Reprimanded. Misconduct. Failed to comply with chargeman's instruction to sign off at 1:10am on 25.9.56 to avoid expenses payment and falsifying report sheet to claim 35" work he was not authorized to perform.
- 4.12.57 Injured in motor cycle accident off duty. Workers Compo paid.  
12.8.60 Reduced to fireman non-acting driver for one month. Whilst working No. 613 south with 6007 on 8.6.60, ran out of water at Tahmoor and was seen by inspector Wade when going through Carramar to be reading a newspaper and not keeping a proper lookout.
- 19.9.61 Fined.  
27.2.63 Injured. Absent without leave. Badly bruised great toe when engine ditty box fell on foot. 8 days off duty.
- 12.11.67 Injured. Strained muscle in left leg and abrasions when foot slipped off step of engine.
- 10.4.70 Awarded \$10 bonus. Whilst returning from Botany on 4450 via Chullora junction, struck an object causing engine to lurch. On stopping, found a lashing chain jammed in crossover. As it was impossible to remove by hand, he reversed the engine and attached loose end to undercarriage of locomotive and moved forward successfully removing the chain. His actions are commended and very much appreciated. Signed by C.M.E.
- 2.1.73 Fined \$1 0. Whilst working No.43A Trip with 48159, passed signal I B at Chullora junction at stop and derailed engine at catch points.
- 31-1.74 Fined \$6. Whilst changing over on D487 (engines 48143/48136/4825) divided engines at Enfield South contrary to instructions of signalman and did enter into an altercation with him and used improper language to him.
- 21.12.81 Approval given for payment of \$599.65 representing percentage loss of hearing.

I was a good boy then until I retired on 6th September 1985.

*(To be continued)*