

## Recollections of an Engineman – Part 2

By Charlie Bere-Streeter

Although only short in terms of mileage, the South Coast run between Enfield-Thirroul and return was among the hardest and everyone had some very bad trips.

Upon leaving Thirroul, you were virtually into the grade immediately. Although the grade was slight through Austinmer up to Coledale, it then became very heavy through Wombara up to Clifton, pick up the staff and then run down through Coalcliff single line tunnel. Then it was slog up through Stanwell Park, run down to Otford and then "bust your guts" up past Metropolitan Colliery at Helensburgh to Waterfall.

There is a small flat stretch just past Helensburgh we called "mug's flat" where lots of trains stopped to raise steam and build up water in the boiler before battling on.

There were always rumours about the "Big Australian", BHP at Port Kembla, overloading trucks of steel to save on freight charges so being me, when I became a driver, I waited until I had a bad trip. Having lost time in most sections, on arrival at Waterfall, I requested the train be put over the weighbridge.

After a lengthy delay, a traffic inspector and a loco inspector arrived by train about 2am. After I had been asked if I still wanted the train to be weighed, we proceeded to the weighbridge in the siding. It had been strongly hinted that I would be sacked if the train was not overloaded for as you can imagine, there was now a long delay to my train and also to other trains behind.

After weighing, the guard came up to me and said we were going to put two trucks off the train into a siding as we were 70 tons over the load. The inspectors vanished and I heard nothing further about lost time. Whenever I lost time on the coast after this, I would drop a note off at Helensburgh requesting weighbridge and, always, on arrival at Waterfall, a Control officer would say "forget the weighbridge and we'll forget the lost time". Put two and two together and how much weight did BHP have?

We had a couple of trains on the coast worked by 57 class engines and the clearance in Coalcliff tunnel was reputed to be about a foot or so. Not much chance of getting out if anything went wrong eh? On the Down trip, you always picked up respirators at Waterfall which you had to wear to get through Coalcliff tunnel as it was all uphill and with the engine steaming heavily, the temperature in the cab got up to 150-200 degrees F. The handrails would turn yellow from the sulphur fumes created by the heat and steam. Looking back I often wonder if we were brave or just plain stupid!

All goods trains were loaded to the capacity of the engines over the ruling

grades. Express goods trains which conveyed milk, fruit or other perishables and stock trains were excellent to work for they were limited to 75% of the full goods load and ran to much faster timetables. Thus engines had a good margin of 25% less weight.

On average, between 20 and 30 stock trains would arrive at the old Flemington stockyards from all directions on Wednesday and Sunday nights.

These were known as stock days and the livestock was taken to Homebush abattoirs to be slaughtered. Just think what must be under the Olympic stadium they are building on this site for the 2000 Olympics!

A friend of mine who was a P.E. teacher and deputy principal of a local High School had an amazing collection of scale models, mostly of steam engines. He pestered me for many months to take him for a ride on a train so when rostered to work to Goulburn on a Saturday morning; I rang him up and invited him to come along.

We were lucky to get a "pig" (36 class) on this day so I sent my fireman home and made Col my mate. I prepared the engine, spread and banked the fire and showed him how to put a fire on, one shovel right front one left front, one each side, two around each corner, four or five under the door and one down the middle for good luck.

Well everything went well. The old "pig" was singing and he did a good job. I helped a bit and sprayed a few shovelfuls when he didn't get black smoke but mainly we had a good trip to Bargo where we cleaned the fire and continued on. We continued on and I kept him at it and eventually we made Moss Vale on time and I asked Col "How was it?" He said "Good but thank God it's over." When I told him we were only a bit over halfway, he almost collapsed.

Anyway, with a lot of help from me, we arrived in Goulburn yard, cut off and ran to loco. After signing off, we went to barracks, had a wash, cooked and ate a meal and I said "Let's go" and took him into town. It was almost a mile to McDermotts Railway Hotel (he was the mayor then) where we downed a few ales.

A couple of hours later, we caught a cab back to barracks and went to bed. We were called to work a train home about four hours later which was the norm in those days but you should have seen my mate, he was R.S. After all, he was a physical education teacher not an engineman but boy, had he learnt a lesson! Needless to say I worked very hard on the trip home but luckily, we again had a good engine.

Col's wife rang two days later and asked what I had done to him as he'd spent both days in bed! I don't know why but he never asked to come for a ride again.

Most engineman had a close call or two during their careers so I will recall a couple I was involved in. I was booked off in Thirroul barracks and was

rostered to return on No.28 milk train when the load shifted on a steel train causing a massive pile up in the cutting at Jannali. It blocked both lines and because of the position, it took several days to clear.

As the milk had to get through, they called a Thirroul crew to work No.28 up to Moss Vale via the Robertson line and we went passenger in the van. We were to relieve them at Moss Vale, reverse the train around the triangle, clean the fire etc. and head for the 'big smoke'. By the time we got to Picton, we were getting a bit long in the tooth so I put off a 'zona' (request for relief).

When we arrived at Campbelltown, we were informed our relief would be at Liverpool and if we got our finger out, we would be kept on the main line but if not, we would be put into the refuge at Ingleburn to cross an express goods which was fast catching up. Being nearly 11 hours on duty, we didn't want this so we took off and went like the wind. On arriving at Enfield, we were told the express goods had derailed at Ingleburn, wiping out the siding and ending up piled up in the road. We were very, lucky that we weren't refuged there. What a week it was for the breakdown gangs - two main lines blocked.

Another close call occurred when I was working a load south with a 38 class. After being refuged at Bargo, we started to pull out of a siding and approaching the platform, a bogie wheat train started to pass on the Up line. Suddenly it jerked to a stand. Up past the platform a massive cloud of dust appeared and it started raining wheat. I stopped the train and ran up the platform to look. What a mess!

Half a dozen or so bogie wheat hoppers were in a heap, the fettler's huts had been flattened and there were great heaps of wheat everywhere. Evidently an axle had been overheated by a hot box and chewed off leaving the wheel about a mile back up the track. The ends of all the sleepers had been busted by the axle but it didn't derail until it hit the crossover just before Bargo station. Pretty close eh?

This trip turned into a real experience as we then ran around our train and hauled it back to Picton. We were then piloted by the rail motor driver (Hoadley) up the branch line to Mittagong. It's a real pity the camera buffs didn't know. Imagine a stock train hauled by a 38 up through Thirlmere! It was quite an experience and it didn't end there. We booked off after being relieved at Moss Vale and went to barracks there.

After the mandatory 8 hours, we were called to work home and as the line still wasn't cleared, I was informed a loco inspector would meet us at Mittagong for we were to return via the loop line again. On arrival at Mittagong, Bill Wadey introduced himself and said he would show me how to work on the loop line. Boy! I wish I had learnt it first as I didn't learn much from him. My mate and I were kept busy winding on engine and tender hand brakes all the way down, to try and help control the train as he almost ran away on more than a couple of occasions.

I'm glad I wasn't around when this was the main line! Bill didn't appreciate my

opinion of his ability as he had a few good shots at me in later years. I suppose most of us don't like being called a dickhead.

One occasion I thought he had me was when I was coming off the Botany line engine and van tender first along the embankment towards Marrickville loop. I opened the regulator a bit; my mate closed it, fooling about. I opened it, he closed it and so it went on until I pushed him aside and opened it up fully. As the boiler was full, the old TF primed and primed all over the heads from the Chief Mechanical Engineer's office who were playing bowls in their whites in Fraser Park just below.

When we got to Enfield, Bill was waiting and he marched me into the chageman's office. Old Brownie was in charge and he asked for the engine number. He looked it up in the record book and said "No wonder! She's four days overdue for washout."

I was saved! I'm sure Bill didn't know we were only engine and van and I wasn't going to tell him.

In my early days as a fireman, I worked No. 167 South Coast with driver Chook Frazer. On booking off at Thirroul, we adjourned to the pub and got into the Tooheys Country Special. This was more potent than our Sydney beer and we were soon the worse for wear. Anyway, Chook started to play up and tried to get into the ladies parlour and the publican tried to put him out, without success. Unbeknown to me, he called the police. When they came, I tried to talk them out of arresting him but they took us both to Bulli and threw us into a cell and said "Stay there till you sober up."

I must have gone to sleep as next thing I remember is a constable leaning over me and saying "You've been here long enough. If you've got 10/0d each, you can go." I couldn't remember what time it was but we were nearly due to sign on to work home. And I didn't have any money left. So I did a real crawl act and begged the officer to at least ring Thirroul loco. He wasn't a bad copper for he found the phone number and let me ring the booker-on.

Without any hesitation he arranged to have our engine prepared and drove down to Bulli, paid our fine and got us out of loco on time. That was the first and last time I went to the pub with Chook. I wish I could remember that booker-on's name as he really deserves a mention. He saved our lives.

Unlike George Washington, I guarantee my stories are true. But to give Jim Bain his due, when he was a fireman, he was a very good athlete for he could run like the wind. He was metropolitan loco champion over 100 yards for 3 or 4 years. This race was held annually at the metropolitan picnic at Gunnamatta Bay and embraced all depots in the Sydney area including Enfield, Eveleigh, Clyde, Hornsby, Penrith, Richmond, Valley Heights and all electric depots.

Towards the end of the steam era, I was on a 20 class at Campbelltown preparing to work to Camden when Mr. Cardew came up with his camera and

asked for black smoke to enhance his photos. I obliged with a heavy fire and thick smoke; just then, a train came into the Up platform and over raced "the praying mantis" (nickname for a certain inspector) and he informed me that he was going to report me for excessive smoke while standing at a station. He was sort of embarrassed when Mr. Cardew walked up and took responsibility. *[Editor's note - for the benefit of those who don't know, Con Cardew was the Assistant 'CME' - Chief Mechanical Engineer, at the time, just about the highest officer a driver would report directly to!!!].*

When the Garratts came to Enfield, I was 'travelled with" on the north by inspector Bob Brennan. It was so hot in the cab, the lagging around the firebox door was red hot and it was a hot summer's day to boot. On arrival at Awaba, Bob said "Stop here" and we all got off and sat in the shade of a tree for 10 or 15 minutes. After this, all 60 class engines went to the workshops and an improved double firebox door (butterfly) was fitted.

On the old steam roster we had a couple of passenger trains to keep Enfield men available for all working. The two on the south coast were called the fisherman's specials. One was the drunks express to Kiama being the last train on Saturday night, book off, and return first train on Sunday. The other was a day train to Nowra on Sunday and return first train on Monday.

The first time I was rostered on the Sunday train was with Keith Pierce's father, Arthur. (Statics was his nickname as he stuttered a bit.) Did he give it to me! He panicked and went like hell between the stations, worried about being on time and he kept over-running platforms and had to back up losing even more time. At Kembla Grange, he went two train lengths past the platform. He was going so hard he nearly blew the top out of all the small tunnels. Was I glad to see Bomaderry (Nowra). Then the proverbial hit the fan!

There was no fuelman on duty Sundays and I had to knock down the fire, rake out, shovel the coal forward in the tender, and then shovel out the de-ashing pit. These were not only our ashes but the two previous engines as well. if I had some way of getting home, I would have resigned then and there. Anyway, after doing the fire and shovelling forward, Arthur said "I don't drink son but if you like, you head for the pub and I'll shovel the ashes." I didn't taste the first two beers but the next couple were great.

When I got back to barracks, Statics had prepared a massive meal which I thoroughly enjoyed. He had a full fore-quarter of lamb and masses of vegies. I think one of his sons was a butcher. I always took a sickie when rostered on that job again.

Old Statics had an on-going aversion to 'Hydraulics' (Arthur Lawes). On one occasion, he put a sign in "Hydraulic's" garden "For sale. Oil feeders, flare lamps, coal picks etc.' On another, he wrote on a light pole lying near Hope Street "Do not remove. Property of A. Lawes." Next day, Lawes declared him on outside the sign-on room and they threw punches at each other from about six feet apart. Needless to say none connected.

I was firing for Arthur Lawes coming home from Broadmeadow on a 59 class oil burner with a string of 'S' trucks, mostly loaded with coal but in the middle was a truck load of pumpkins. We were put into the siding at Morisset to cross a passenger train and Lawes went back to the pumpkins and cut a couple of bags open to get two to fit in his tuckerbox. There were three kids sitting on the fence watching him so he gave them one each to shut them up.

On coming back to the engine, he said 'If you want any, get them yourself' and he went to put them in the sandbox. I picked up my box and got off the engine. "Where are you going?" he said. I replied "I'm not staying here with stolen property on the engine." He then got off with the pumpkins and took them to the second truck and buried them in the coal so I got back on. On arrival at Enfield, he told the roster clerk never to roster me with him again.

When Vic Hamilton retired as roster clerk, his replacement ran an SP bookie business on the side. Needless to say the best punters got the most overtime. He had a couple of heavies employed as shed labourers who patrolled the pay queue on pay day to collect his money from all the losers.

Later we got some younger roster clerks who made life a bit easier.

Another memorable trip from way back in the 1950s occurred when I was firing a TF for Pastor Williams. (He didn't swear, smoke or drink and was a very poor driver). We were coming home in the middle of winter; it was freezing cold and raining like hell when we approached Coledale. Suddenly he made an emergency brake application and when I looked at him, he had turned white. I asked him what had happened and he said "We just ran over a boy!" then he fainted.

I jumped off the engine and clambered along the track looking under engine and train as I went. It was too dark to see so I ran back to the engine and got a flare lamp. When I climbed back on the engine, Pastor was coming too and crying. I yelled at him to come and help but he took off heading for the van to get the guard. By this time a couple of local people had arrived so I got them to help me look and we found a lad about 14 under the second truck.

While a local chap and I crawled under the truck, a woman ran to call an ambulance. We could see the lad was alive so we slowly pulled him out. He soon came to and to our relief and surprise, he was not seriously hurt. Pastor had returned with Alan Tucker, our guard, and was complaining about getting wet. I can tell you that he learnt a lot about swearing that day as I gave him a pedigree that would take a week to write down and every word had several XX's in it. I had no time for him after that.

Recently I came across the names of Cullen Bullen and Ben Bullen and my body involuntarily shuddered for those names were the worst nightmare of all Enfield enginemmen. The cheap coal from both of these mines was the worst coal ever supplied to the railways to fire locomotives. It was more like shale and so high in ash content it was almost impossible to successfully work

trains. We couldn't pass a single pit without having to stop and clean the fire. Most trains lost time due to poor steaming. State Mine coal from Lithgow, although also high in ash, was a day off compared to the other western coals.

Another coal which caused a lot of trouble was Minmi coal. It looked good and shiny but it was like chewing gum and sort of melted together and filled the firebox with clinker which in turn stuck to the grates in a solid mass. We only saw "dynamite" (Newcastle or Maitland coal) when working home from Broadmeadow and I can tell you this also was a day off for no Enfield enginemen lost any time returning from the north.

My favourite was south coast coal, preferably from Helensburgh State Mine. It was a real lazy man's coal. You fired the same as with dynamite only you could forget every second fire as it was very slow burning and therefore very economical. There was another south coast coal we occasionally got coming home from Thirroul. I don't know what mine it came from but we called it deaf & dumb and it didn't burn without constant use of the pricker.

All the good coal in those days was reserved for passenger trains as evidently it was much more expensive. On one occasion, they sent some western coal to Eveleigh for a trial period. It lasted about 3 weeks as every passenger train lost time and some even had to have their fires cleaned at places like Valley Heights and Moss Vale, losing more time.

The timetables were a shambles so the experiment went out the window. It sort of gave us, goods depots a boost as the so called special class always joked about us always being late. Talking about coal reminds me of when I was firing regular with Gordon Kchenka. He was a very good fireman but I always ran rings around him when we had south coast coal as it was just about my speed. Gordon always worked too hard and never gave it time to burn.

He was a great bloke and taught me most of what I knew about safe-working and engine and air. He lived at Chullora camp then and he used to hold classes in his own time for his neighbours in the camp. I lost a great mate when he transferred to Lithgow.

I got another great mate in Jim Barnes when the staff examiner made a final failure out of his regular mate, Ken Meredith who to my mind, would have been one of the best enginemen around if it hadn't been for the stupid system.

Among the characters in those days, we had a south roster between Enfield and Moss Vale. The three drivers on the roster were Bill Purcell, Les Dargan and Joe Day. What a diverse group. They ran a competition among themselves as to who arrived at Moss Vale on time the most over a period. As you can imagine, the poor firemen used to get hell knocked out of them. Firstly, Bill Purcell was a fitter's nightmare. He always got to work early and went over his engine with a fine tooth comb looking for things to be fixed. As a result, he was usually late leaving the depot which in turn caused the train to be late away. Then he would belt the engine hard to make up all this lost time

at the fireman's expense.

Then there was Les Dargan. He would insist on giving his fireman a spell, usually between Picton and Bargo. Well he was such a poor fireman he would soon stuff up the fire and he'd have the long and short pricker and the dart down in the cab and coal all over the place but we would still lose time due to being low in steam. At Bargo, the fireman would work his guts out, cleaning the fire, raking out and cleaning up all the mess. Les would jump down and take water. On leaving Bargo, he would drive as hard as he could making up the time he had lost.

Then there was Joe Day. He was unique. He was very tall and he would sit on his seat and place his legs over the ditty box and keep sipping cough mixture ( I think it was made in Bundaberg) between signal boxes. Evidently Joe had lost his departmental watch years before and he knew exactly where the clock was in every signalbox. Well at some places he was crouching down to look at the clock in the signalbox while at others, he would get on the shovelling plate and at Mittagong, he was almost standing on his head. Joe was not very energetic and the only help you got was when he would hand up the chain on the water column taking water.

When I was rostered to attend the diesel school to learn how to drive diesels, I was called aside by senior inspector (sounds good doesn't it?) Jack Burke. When I first met Jack he was a fireman at Campbelltown. He was nicknamed "the travelling fuelman" for he shovelled coal like no-one else and on many occasions, emptied the bunker on the old "S" class tanks.

Anyway Jack said 'Fair warning. With your record, they don't want you on diesels but if you get the marks, I'll give you a go.' The school consisted of half Enfield and half Eveleigh men. Arthur Hurrell was one. On completion, we were individually examined. Then Jack said that he had done many diesel schools and had never had a better result. In fact two men achieved 100%.

The first was Perce Morgan from Eveleigh and heaven forbid, the second was yours truly. There was no holding me back. I headed for the pub and celebrated. All jokes aside, Jack Burke was one of nature's gentlemen.

Bill Tye, the Chinese driver, was also a great bloke but he really was quite nervous when we greenhorns were with him. For example, he would ask you the next signal but he would always come over and check for himself, virtually wearing a track across the cab.

Harry Kyle was another great guy. In 1948 I was firing for him on a P class passenger to Richmond. When approaching Riverstone, a cow ran onto the track in front of us. I yelled to Harry and he stuck his head out the window just as we hit the cow. She went under the engine and burst with all the bits and pieces of the cow coming up around the belly of the boiler. When Harry pulled his head in, he too was covered in bits and pieces of cow.

The engine lurched badly and as Harry had made an emergency brake



application, we ground to a halt. While he was trying to clean the mess off, I went back and found the cow lodged under the first carriage but luckily the train had not derailed. With the help of many of the passengers, we got the carcass out and continued on about 45" late.

When we signed off, I learnt how to submit a casualty form and a killed livestock report. I believe some of the local people had fresh meat for a while after we left.

During the steam era at Enfield I had a variety of fireman each with his own funny ways. For example on the south, Henry Ulryck always tried to kill a rabbit by throwing lumps of coal at them. I estimate it took about a ton of coal to get a bunny.

Needless to say we almost ran short of coal on occasions as I couldn't let him have all the fun. Charlie Costa had a different way. He brought along a .22 and we got more rabbits. He was well trained for he used to fire for Cyril McKenzie so he knew how to get to most pubs also.

My time with Jack Drady was by far my best era on the steamers. Jack was older than me and had previously been an acting driver in Orange for many years before rejoining the job. We always alternated daily, the side of the engine we worked. He drove today, me tomorrow and so on. We were together for approximately 5 years. We both loved mushrooms so after rain, we would run up some time and pull up and pick a feed on the south around Maldon or Picton or even up near Mittagong. He also liked an ale.

When the waratahs were blooming on the mountains, we also made up time in running. We would stop and pick a bunch to get in good at home. In those days we spent so much time away at work, you almost needed an introduction to your wife and family when you did get home.

In later years I had Trevor Walker as my mate. When he first said he was my fireman, I knew that he had been around for some time so I said "O.K. you're the driver." He almost passed out for he had been with another driver for about a year and had never driven a train before. He soon learnt. He wasn't into the grog and stuff like us as he hadn't been married for very long and was always in a hurry to get home and make babies.

Some of the older drivers had the ambition to be the No.1 driver in the state and became very upset when they were forced to retire at 65. For me I couldn't wait for my 60th birthday. On 6th September 1985, I signed on, tore up my daily report sheet, walked around Delec shaking hands with everyone and shot through!