

Christmas Fortnight at Redhill

By M. W. G. SKINNER

BECAUSE of its cramped layout, Redhill Station is one of the most difficult places, from the operating point of view, on the Southern Region. The important cross-country lines from Tonbridge and Reading join the London-Brighton line at the south end, the junctions facing London. There are one down and two up platforms, and two through roads, but, as the Reading line is connected only with the platform roads, all through trains to and from Tonbridge and Reading have to occupy a platform to reverse; normally, a turnover engine is provided. The through lines are used largely for light engine and shunting movements, most non-stopping trains being routed *via* the Quarry line, which avoids the station. There are two goods yards and a motive power depot.

A considerable amount of mail traffic is handled, and there is a large G.P.O. sorting office on the down platform. This deals chiefly with local and Kent mail traffic to and from the trains, some of which have scheduled vans throughout the year. A short mail siding, into which vans can be shunted clear of the main lines, is provided on the down side, adjacent to a two-way conveyor belt to the sorting office. Mailbags from the up platform are fed into the sorting office by means of a chute.

The train service at Redhill, both passenger and freight, is intensive and there are many shunting and engine movements to be made on the running lines. In these circumstances, delay is often unavoidable, and one late train can delay several others. Another source of delay is the fact that many of the trains are longer than the platforms.

One of the busiest times every year is during the Christmas mail rush period—the fortnight before Christmas. Both the G.P.O. and British Railways take on casual staff to cope with it. The B.R. casuals load and unload the parcels mailbags in gangs supervised by regular railwaymen under a relief stationmaster on each shift, with another relief stationmaster in command on a middle turn, in addition to the resident stationmaster. Extra clerical staff also have to be

employed to deal with the casual staff paybills, insurance cards, and so on.

During the 1957 fortnight, as in other years, the working of the station was greatly affected by the additional mail traffic. Two passenger pilot engines, an L.B.S.C.R. class "E4" tank and a diesel shunting engine, were provided continuously, one at each end of the station. It was not unusual for these pilots to be shunting to and fro along the down platform with twenty or more vans which could not be dealt with in the mail siding, the mailbags being stacked high on the main platform.

Several extra mail trains were run daily between London and Brighton calling at Redhill to attach and detach vans. Special van trains also were run on the Reading and Tonbridge lines. The 1957 fortnight was further aggravated by diversions following the Lewisham disaster. Freight trains normally travelling to and from Tonbridge *via* the demolished bridge were diverted, some *via* Norwood and others *via* Feltham and Guildford. Redhill dealt with all of them, the Feltham trains having to reverse. About a dozen of these specials ran daily, having to be squeezed into the very few gaps in the normal service. The marshalling yard at Tonbridge and the goods yards at Redhill frequently became congested, and extra trains had to be run at very short notice.

Other freight trains had to be shunted at such places as Chilworth, Gomshall, Godstone, Edenbridge and Coulsdon North, to be "specialled" away when the yards were able to accept them. It did not help matters on Sunday, December 15, when one of the specials became derailed at Nutfield, necessitating single-line working between Godstone and Redhill. The diverted traffic was often considerably heavier in one direction than the other, resulting in an abnormal amount of light engine running.

Both passenger and freight trains from the Tonbridge line, many of which come from beyond Tonbridge, were often very late, because of the general delays throughout Kent after the Lewisham

accident. In some cases, the engine workings were so disrupted that trains were delayed waiting for an engine which was only just going into the motive power depot, and had to turn and take coal and water before coming out to work the train. The combination of mail traffic, diverted freight, and late running caused chaotic working at times, and many serious delays resulted.

For the last week before Christmas, it was decided that the "B" signalbox, which controls the junctions at the south

end of the station, should be double-manned from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., the excessive traffic, late running and continuous telephoning having become more than one signaller and signal lad could handle efficiently. Many of the station staff and shunters were working twelve-hour shifts throughout this very trying period.

A letter from the Stationmaster was issued to all the staff, thanking them for "sticking it out" through one of the most difficult periods ever experienced at Redhill. None of them will easily forget Christmas, 1957.