Locomotive Working on Sussex Branches Fifty Years Ago

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Photo] [O. J. Morris

View looking north, showing the locomotive shed at Bognor in 1903, shortly after its completion. The pumphouse of the old shed is on the left

AT the beginning of the present century, the working of the locomotive depots at Littlehampton, Bognor, and Midhurst on the former London, Brighton & South Coast Railway exhibited many interesting features directly traceable to Mid-Victorian practice. These depots were included in the Horsham Locomotive District; Midhurst and Littlehampton had four engines each, and Bognor two engines. At least one engine at each shed was designated the "branch engine," a relic of the practice established by John Chester Craven, Locomotive Superintendent of the L.B.S.C.R. from 1852 to 1869.

The locomotive foreman at Horsham made a tour of his district on the last Wednesday of each month. Leaving Horsham at 10.30 a.m. the circuit of inspection occupied no less than 7½ hours, unless, as sometimes happened, Bognor was omitted on a verbal assurance being given by the fitter in charge at Littlehampton that "they were all right there"; this reduced the time by 2½ hours.

The choice of the day was a relic of the past; it had originated with an old instruction which held the foreman personally responsible for certifying that the reserve coal stack had not vanished in whole or in part, and that the oil stock was according to the books, and had not been diverted to other purposes. Occasionally, on the second Wednesday of the month, the foreman paid a visit to Littlehampton only, but this was an exceptional measure of supervision. The reason for the choice of Wednesday was that on this day the Outdoor Locomotive Superintendent regularly visited the Chief Offices at London Bridge, and therefore was not likely to descend upon Horsham, and find the foreman absent.

For all practical purposes the telephone was non-existent, the only means of communication, other than by rail-borne letter, being the single-needle telegraph, known as the "speaking instrument."

The immediate responsibility for these out-depots therefore rested upon the man in charge of the shed, and so long as he was conscientious in the discharge of his duties, everything worked satisfactorily. The standard of locomotive maintenance at these depots compared favourably with any other shed on the system, the mileage run between shop repairs averaging 65,000 in a period of about 2¾ years. The general arrangements were primitive by modern standards, but were well suited to the conditions of railway working at that time.

Variations of the standard engine workings, as diagrammed, were confined to local adjustment at the time of the annual revisions of the timetables, and at holiday times, when late running of the London-Portsmouth trains resulted in unscheduled trips on the Bognor and Littlehampton branches. During the Goodwood Race period (the week before the August Bank Holiday) some slight adjustments were made to the train service on the Midhurst branch.

All clerical and administrative work was done at Horsham, as were repairs which could not be carried out by the fitter stationed at Littlehampton. The sole boilermaker visited the out-depots if necessary, but such occasions were exceptional, engines being worked up to Horsham on suitable duties and changed over as required. Additional personnel, other than repairs staff, were provided from Horsham to cover sickness, leave, and other similar contingencies, as well as for special traffic requirements. Engine power for the latter was usually supplied from Horsham as well. In practice, if any member of the staff fell sick, provisional arrangements to cover his duties had to be made by the local man in charge of the depot until a substitute could be procured from Horsham, which ordinarily was not until the following day. That life on the railway was much less strenuous in those days probably accounts for the fact that Horsham was not frequently troubled by such applications.

When a vacancy at any of the four depots occurred, it was filled by the senior man in the junior grade in the district, unless he expressed his desire not to do so, in which case the offer went to the next senior and so on. In the event of the post of fitter-in-charge at Littlehampton becoming vacant, the appointment was made by the Outdoor Locomotive Superintendent, Brighton.

The shed at Littlehampton, in which four tank engines could just be accommodated, was situated alongside the station, and locomotives enthusiasts could obtain close-up views of the engines from the public highway. There was consequently no occasion for any contravention of the law of trespass, or fear of prosecution for loitering such as was the case at Bognor and Midhurst. Nevertheless, warning notices exhibited on the company's premises against loitering and trespassing were so numerous and conspicuous as to suggest to visitors that the local inhabitants possessed a particular flair for such offences, but the present writer knows of no case in which it was necessary to summon assistance from the Police Station immediately opposite the shed.

At Littlehampton, the fitter was in charge, and during the daytime he usually was to be found there, except on Mondays and Wednesdays, when he visited Bognor and Midhurst respectively to carry out repairs to the engines stationed there. Having but ten engines to look after (a small number for those days) the post was considered to be an easy one, as it undoubtedly was if action was taken to forestall mechanical troubles.

As Littlehampton possessed direct rail access from the Brighton, London, and Portsmouth directions, it never partook of the remote character associated with Bognor and Midhurst, and the engines stationed there were more generally visible, as they had a much less restricted range of operation. The Littlehampton goods engine worked from that station to Brighton *via* the Preston Park spur on Monday to Friday nights inclusive, the enginemen being on duty 12 hours a night, thus completing their 60-hour week in five nights. It was washed out by the pumpman on Monday mornings. The "local service engine," a Stroudley 0-4-2 tank in 1900, worked a turn daily as far as Three Bridges and back. This engine, and the branch engine, were washed out regularly after six days' work by the pumpman (but not on a Monday) the spare engine being used to cover their normal duties on such occasions.

The Bognor branch engine, a "Terrier"

tank, was washed out regularly every Monday, the spare engine (another "Terrier") being used only on such occasions. The latter was generally a run-down specimen waiting its turn for general repairs in the shops. On other days it reposed behind closed doors in the combined running shed and pumping station, the site of which is now in the centre of the main tracks, approximately half-way between the end of the platforms and Bersted level crossing. Its isolation rendered a clandestine visit a matter of some difficulty, but a persistent oral tradition records that more than one enthusiast awaited in ambush the hour (about midday) when the pumpman adjourned to a certain establishment in the immediate vicinity (to wit, the "Richmond Arms") to enter the well-guarded area and behold the *rara avis* ensconced therein. As the writer confesses to having acted similarly at Midhurst in 1901, he is prepared to accept the Bognor tradition as possessing, at least, some foundation in fact.

The cleaner worked, of course, at nights. He had to coal and light up the engine, as well as clean it, for the next day's work, which commenced with a light run to Barnham to "bring in the goods" from that station at about 6.30 a.m. The last trip out and back left Bognor at about 9.40 p.m., to connect with coastal services, after which the branch closed for the night. The shed was in charge of a driver who worked early and late shift alternately, but performed only about 7½ hours as a driver, the balance of 2½ hours being supposed to be devoted to administrative duties. The latter mainly consisted in sending up to Horsham the drivers' journals (total 2) the records of the daily coal and oil issues (about 30 cwt. and 4 pints respectively) and some other particulars of like character, all of which could easily be discharged in about 20 min.

Of the three depots, Bognor was the most primitive and the most isolated, as there was no facing connection with the main line at Barnham. The branch line was single, worked on the staff-and-ticket principle, the tickets only coming into use on occasions in the summer when excursions—mainly school treats—arrived from a distance. These trains had, of course, to shunt on and off the branch at Barnham. The enginemen and guards booked off and on again for the return journey, unless there was any major defect on the engine, in which case it had to be worked light to Brighton to obtain another for the up trip. Strange to say, this procedure was of the rarest occurrence. It is not recorded what happened if a Stroudley "Single" or a Class "B2" 4-4-0 showed signs of shortage of water in the boiler, but it is to be presumed that the pumpman "made the necessary arrangements" as there was no one else to do so.

The Midhurst branch passenger service required two "Terrier" tank engines to be provided from that depot daily, a third engine being held as spare to cover washing-out and repairs. It was not until after the turn of the century that the first "D" class 0-4-2 tank arrived to displace one of the "Terriers." Some few years elapsed before the "Terriers" finally disappeared from this shed.

The goods engine worked a trip from Midhurst to Three Bridges every week-night, but on Sunday mornings it arrived back somewhat earlier than on other days. The engine was washed out on Monday mornings. At one time this engine worked an occasional ballast trip from Midhurst to Beddington Lane (Croydon) and back during the daytime. The shed administration was on similar lines to that at Bognor, except that the pumpman, and not one of the drivers, was in charge.

The replacement of the "Terrier" tanks by "D" class 0-4-2s on the regular branch-line duties was necessitated by the substitution of six-wheel main-line stock for the five-coach four-wheel sets previously used, which entailed an increase in the tare weight of nearly 90 per cent. per passenger. The change had been completed by 1906. At Bognor, however, a "Terrier" continued to be held as a spare engine until 1919. It was used occasionally for working that branch, and on the Littlehampton branch, when the necessity arose.