

Filming "The Titfield Thunderbolt"

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Photo]

[Philip M. Alexander

The Liverpool & Manchester Railway 0-4-2 locomotive "Lion" near Monkton Combe, on the Limpley Stoke-Camerton branch, during filming of "The Titfield Thunderbolt." Midford Station, on the Somerset & Dorset line, is in the background

FILM producers always have been enthusiastic about railways. From the days of the early "flickers" of 1897, when Lumière put on the screen the first motion picture of a train—"Arrival of Train at Station" (filmed in Paris)—audiences have endorsed this enthusiasm. Since then, a steady flow of railway dramas and comedies has not satiated the irresistible appeal of the locomotive flashing past the camera.

Older readers may recall the hair-raising series, "Hazards of Helen" 1912-14, a cowboy-and-Indian saga in which the pretty heroine (a telegraphist at a whistle-stop station) and her pony performed unbelievable feats of daring midst thundering freight trains. The episode in which her pony operated the signals during the temporary absence of her mistress (who was lashed to a telegraph pole by the wicked train robbers) was immortalised by Stephen Leacock in one of his short stories.

Buster Keaton drew on historic events of the American Civil War for the background to a classic comedy, "The General," which was the name of a locomotive which changed sides several times. In England, too, railways have received much attention from producers, and particularly from Sir Michael Balcon, whose productions with railway backgrounds include "The Wrecker," "Rome Express," "The Ghost Train," "It Always Rains on Sunday" and "Train of Events." In "The Wrecker," filmed in 1928, a real train smash was staged at a level crossing on the Reading-Basingstoke line, filmed by no less than 22 cameras simultaneously. The same line was used by the Twickenham Studios in 1933 for "The Last Journey," a hair-raising story of a mad engine driver—and this old film has been televised recently by the B.B.C.

Once more Sir Michael Balcon and the Ealing Studios have turned to railways

for their newest Technicolor production "The Titfield Thunderbolt," in which the title role is played by that fine 115-year old Liverpool & Manchester Railway locomotive, *Lion*. The story of the film concerns the reactions of a village community to the news that their little branch line is to be closed. The locals buy the line and run it themselves, in the face of road competition, but almost come to grief as a result of sabotage by the villains who run the rival road transport. Feverish efforts are made to keep the service running for the visit of the Ministry of Transport inspector, and the line's only locomotive being derailed, the ancient *Thunderbolt* is brought from the museum to save the day.

Directed by Charles Crichton and produced by Michael Truman from a story by T. E. B. Clarke (the team who made "The Lavender Hill Mob"), the comedy idea has been developed in the style for which Ealing is famous. George Relph plays the part of the Vicar of the Parish, a railway enthusiast, who becomes amateur engine driver, with Sir Godfrey Tearle (the Bishop) as his fireman, while Stanley Holloway is the genial toper who provides the cash to buy the line.

Producing a film is a slow and laborious process; and progress is even slower when a lot of complicated facilities or "properties" are required in the action. Add to this the uncertainty of the English weather, and you have an undertaking which is likely to become a headache. The script requirements called for railway co-operation in a big way, involving several weeks' exclusive use of a single track line passing through pleasant countryside. In addition, a junction with a main line (preferably with branch and main-line metals running side by side for a quarter of a mile or so), a level crossing, a pleasant country branch terminus, engine sheds with a turntable, and a busy junction station on a main line. The assistance of the Railway Executive was sought, and various branches were surveyed, including the East Kent Railway, the Kelvedon & Tollesbury Light Railway, the Kent & East Sussex Railway, and various branch lines in Suffolk. Each one of these lines had possibilities, but did not fulfil completely the producer's requirements. Turning to the west of London, the Maidenhead-High Wycombe line, the Lambourne Valley Branch and

finally, the Limpley Stoke-Camerton branch (near Bath) were visited. The latter branch had been used in 1931 for scenes in "The Ghost Train," when Camerton Station was the main location.

The producer was particularly impressed with the scenic possibilities of the Camerton line, which not only fulfilled most of the requirements of the script, but also turned out to be an excellent centre for other exterior scenes, such as Titfield village, the church, the old inn, and picturesque farms. Colour tests, shot with a 16 mm. camera, confirmed that the pleasant Bath stone buildings, the growing corn and crops and the undulating skyline were ideal subjects for Technicolor.

The Camerton line had been out of regular use for about two years, but an occasional freight train had been run until the end of 1951. The stations at Monkton Combe and Dunkerton already were in a poor state, and the platforms and halts at Radford, Timsbury, and Combe Hay had almost disappeared. Nevertheless, a very complete survey by the Western Region revealed no serious deterioration of the line, and it was even possible to bring into use one of the colliery siding tracks at Camerton, including a road through two or three sets of points operated from ground frames. These had been oiled periodically, though many of the sleepers and chairs on the sidings had rotted away.

The film unit commenced operations by reconditioning the station at Monkton Combe, and putting up new name boards, Titfield, together with other appropriate signs, and hiding as far as possible a quantity of bridge material which had been dumped in the station yard. Sections of the main track were treated for weeds, and a dummy home signal and signal-box were erected at the north end of the platform. The level crossing gates south of the station were removed and a dummy (removable) buffer-stop provided to simulate a terminus. Two hundred yards south of the station, a dummy water crane was erected. At Dunkerton Colliery sidings, a picturesque occupation crossing was built, with cottage adjoining, for the scenes in which the Titfield train is engaged in a battle with a steamroller.

In the meantime, rolling stock was marshalled from various places: one old Great Eastern branch line coach, with



Photo]

[P. Harden

Monkton Combe Station renamed for the film, with Western Region 0-4-2 tank locomotive No. 1401 and a former Kelvedon & Tollesbury Light Railway coach at the platform. This train is wrecked by the proprietors of a bus competing for local traffic



Photo]

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Filming in progress at Titfield Station

longitudinal seating, two brake vans (in one of which was fitted a diesel-electric 300-amp. generator for arc-lighting), two "1400" class 0-4-2 tanks (Nos. 1401 and 1456) from Westbury shed, a cattle truck, and various con-flats. For the ancient locomotive, the Liverpool & Manchester Railway 0-4-2, *Lion*, (built by Todd, Kitson & Laird in 1838) was borrowed from the Liverpool Engineering Society, who gave permission for it to be repainted in bright green with red lining and fitted with a new name-plate: *Thunderbolt*. The *Lion* was in

marquees, and stores. A siding was used to store unwanted rolling stock, including con-flats used for mounting cameras and sections of sets. Two production units, each with a Technicolor camera, operated simultaneously. One unit concentrated on long-shot train scenes with the *Thunderbolt* at a safe distance along the line towards Camerton, while the other filmed scenes with principal actors round Monkton Combe Station, using tank engine No. 1401. Later on, the first unit took over the *Thunderbolt*, and the second unit carried on with "run-by"



Photo]

[Ealing Studios

"Thunderbolt" being removed from the local museum, at Mallingford, the junction with the main line in the film, so that the branch service may be kept running after the wrecking of the regular train

store at Crewe, painted its original dark maroon colour, and it was shipped on a low truck to Westbury, for overhaul and steaming tests, which proved satisfactory. The two original Salter steam pressure gauges were checked against a modern gauge, and were found to be operating quite well; one of them was correct to a pound. A pressure of 45 lb. was used.

Shooting the film proceeded smoothly, so far as the weather would allow. Monkton Combe Station was the centre of activities, and here was established a production office, field kitchen, canteen

shots of the tank engine and train, without principals.

Shortly after production commenced, it was found that the *Lion* consumed much fuel and water, probably due to the fact that it originally was designed for burning cöke. The engine was returned to Westbury to be fitted with a damper, and thereafter was able to simmer all day, awaiting sunny periods for actual shooting. The going was a little heavy for the *Lion* on the gradients of 1 in 100 between Limpley Stoke and Combe Hay when hauling the train of about 90 tons,

and an additional tank engine (No. 1456) was provided for banking when scenes were not being shot.

Marshalling and turning the train, as required for different camera shots, presented several problems, which were handled by Inspector H. Alford (of the Western Region, British Railways). Drivers S. Mitchell, and E. Burbidge, both from Westbury shed, drove the *Lion* and No. 1401 respectively. The former, appropriately dressed, doubled for George Relph (the vicar) in long shots,

marshalling could be carried out at Limpley Stoke or Monkton Combe sidings, and also at the Dunkerton Colliery siding. With three engines in steam on the branch line, precautions were taken to avoid accidents, and all train movements were carried out under the supervision of Inspector Alford. In addition, as the film company was the holder of a G.P.O. commercial radio-telephone transmitting licence, R/T communication was used between trains and also with the production office. This was extremely



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"Thunderbolt" in steam and passing the dummy water crane at Titfield

and the latter played the original tank engine driver in the earlier sequences, with F. Greene as fireman. Tank engine No. 1456, used for general banking and marshalling work, was driven in shifts by drivers H. S. Harris, A. J. King, and W. Copeland, also from Westbury. Driver Mitchell expressed great satisfaction with the performance of *Lion*, and admiration for the excellent craftsmanship of its makers.

The day's schedule of railway shots was worked out carefully to reduce to a minimum the turning of engines or rolling stock. Nevertheless, this was necessary occasionally, and the triangular junction at Bradford-on-Avon was used. Re-

useful for directing the starting or stopping of trains out of sight of the camera, apart from the many business and organisational messages it conveyed.

Every evening the film units returned to Limpley Stoke, where the *Lion* was stored in a siding for the night. In a disused mill building of the Avon Leather Works, close to the station, a projection theatre was improvised for judging the Technicolor "rushes." Here were viewed every evening the prints of the previous day's work, which were returned from the developing laboratory in London on the 5.5 p.m. train from Paddington, arriving at Bath at 7 p.m. In character with the

Emett-like atmosphere of the production, electric current for the high-intensity arc-light of the projector was provided by a generator driven by an ancient water wheel! This accounted for the cryptic notice board over the doorway: "Hydr-o-Deon."

The final scenes in the film, depicting the arrival of the triumphant old *Thunderbolt* at Mallingford Junction, were filmed on the platform known as the Fish Bay at Templemeads Station, Bristol. Here, special running facilities were provided by the Railway Executive, and it was a delightful sight to see the old engine come to rest at its destination, amid the joyous welcoming shrieks from "Halls," "Castles," and other stalwarts of the Western Region.

The film unit returned to London with the knowledge that the dignified official façade of the Railway Executive conceals a delightful unofficial sense of humour which makes such wonderful co-operation possible.