

Memories of the Railway in and around Kibworth

By David Smith

In 1939 my mother and aunt took me to Kibworth railway station to catch a train to Leicester. But as we approached, the train was just leaving - we had missed it! This is my earliest memory of the railway, aged 5.

Even then I recognised that the train was not the usual steam locomotive and carriages: it was a diesel train. Later I realised that it was an experimental pre-war unit, but I never saw it again (but see photo near the end of this article). Although I was aware of the railway during the Second World War, train spotting and a special interest in railways did not start in earnest 'til 1946. Small handbooks were being published by Ian Allen listing all engine numbers and names for the region: one would underline a number when you first saw the locomotive. I still have my records. There were several local lads interested in trains.

We spotted Jubilees, Austerities, Garratts and even American engines coming through Kibworth as well as smaller local ones; allsorts of locos. I remember the large locomotive Coronation class 'City of Leicester' running south through Kibworth after being named at Leicester Midland Station on the 9th October 1944. The occasional royal train was pulled by a Royal Scot class engine but such locos were rare on this line as they were too heavy until after some years the bridges were strengthened.

The main station buildings at Kibworth and the 'down' platform were on the west side of the main double track, immediately south of the Station Road/Church Road bridge. There was an



Kibworth Station seen from the station yard in the early years of the 20th century, showing (left to right) the stationmaster's house, goods offices, passenger entrance, waiting room, then milk churns, and horse box bay. The goods sheds were off to the right.

'up' platform with a brick waiting room, close to the bridge end, and the station signal box at the south end. These were all built in the Midland Railway architectural style. Wooden steps led to and from both platforms at the road bridge and formed the only safe route to get between platforms. The station buildings were quite impressive and still exist today on the west side. Looking at the old photograph, there was the double storey station master's house on the left, then offices for goods and parcels. Passengers entered through the door with porch in the centre of the picture and inside the lobby found the ticket office on the left, with a waiting

room (and a warm fire in the winter) and ladies' toilet on the right side (the gents' toilet was at the north end of the down the platform). In the late 1940s and in the 1950s there were about 10 stopping trains each day to Leicester and a similar number to Market Harborough and beyond. Express trains did not stop at Kibworth; indeed there were dozens of trains each day, passenger and freight, which passed through Kibworth without stopping.

At Kibworth Station the tracks and platforms were orientated almost west-east. However the general line of the railway from London to Leicester and beyond was south to north, and so in this article 'north' means towards Leicester and the other compass points accordingly.

There were sidings to the south and north of the platforms. Immediately to the south of the main station buildings was a bay for horse boxes, used of course for transporting horses for hunts or

races etc. Slightly further to the south were sidings to two large goods sheds, one an old LMS shed (from London, Midland & Scottish region days) and one for Ellis & Everard (coal merchants), plus tracks for coal wagons, a coal merchants' office and a weighbridge. As well as coal, grain for animal feed was a major commodity passing through these sheds. There was also a spur to the old gas works for deliveries and taking away tar etc.

On the north side of the road bridge were sidings (on the 'up' side) to a ballast area (for railway track maintenance) and two lines to a cattle dock. These adjoined 'Station Hollow' and animals arrived or departed on a sloping road from the north east corner of the road bridge. A slow line, mainly for goods trains, also branched off from the main tracks on the 'down' side just north of the road bridge and ran northwards to Kibworth North signal box and beyond.



Station Road bridge over railway at north end of Kibworth Station platforms, looking north in the late 1950s/early 1960s. Shows wooden steps to platforms, and track sidings running from north side of the bridge; on the right to the ballast area and cattle dock, and on the left the down slow line.

There were several signalboxes in this area for controlling train movements. From north to south there were boxes at Wistow, Kibworth North (close to the Warwick Road bridge), Kibworth Station, Gumley (removed in the 1940s) and East Langton. All were on the 'down' side of the line except for the ones at Wistow and Kibworth Station which were on the 'up' side. The signalmen I particularly remember were: Ray Hunt, Ron Scott and Geoff Dickens at Wistow; Dennis Knight, Harold Mann and David Wade at Kibworth North; and George Knott, Harry Vears, Walter Butteriss and Bill Driver at Kibworth Station.

In railway language, the 'up' line or platform went towards London, and the 'down' side was away from London.

Apart from the number of levers for signals and track points, signalboxes were essentially alike and used the same system of communication and bell codes between boxes and control centres. Along the track sides were posts showing mileages and inclines. Telegraph poles had horizontal slats to hold the wires and these slats were always bolted on the London side (nowadays communication wires are mainly underground). Wooden sleepers were the norm under the lines in my younger days but were later replaced with pre-cast concrete ones, and the rails were upgraded both in their profile and length (60 foot replaced by welded track). In the days of 60 foot track one could estimate the train speed by counting the number of audible rail 'clicks' in a given time (the number of clicks per minute x 0.7 gave the speed in mph). Kibworth North to East Langton and Market Harborough was slightly downhill but that meant hard work for engines and railwaymen coming the opposite way.

Returning now to Kibworth Station, the ticket office was on the left as one entered the lobby from the station yard. This office had only one window for communication between staff and passengers, and had many racks of pre-printed tickets. Tickets, oblong in shape, were made of cardboard, mainly in green, and showed the starting point (Kibworth), destination and fare paid and would be single or double depending on whether it was for a return journey. The date of ticket purchase was stamped on the reverse side. Some tickets had blanks for destination and fare and these would be filled in by the clerk for non-regular places.



Class 4 0-6-0 passing Kibworth Station 'up' platform in late 1950s/early 1960s.

Behind the ticket office (that is, north of the entrance lobby) were the goods and parcels offices. Considerable volumes of goods were handled. Key activities were the transport of day-old chicks for Evans, and shop/store display materials from Slaters. Passengers could send large items of luggage 'in advance'. A few days prior to the journey they would bring their trunks or cases to the station and after payment and labelling the railway would transport the items to the designated hotel or B&B at the resort.

In 1946, stopping trains from Kibworth to Leicester took 19 minutes (14 minutes non-stop) and stopping trains from Leicester to Kibworth took 22 minutes (16 minutes non-stop). The most popular trains were early morning and late afternoon ones used by people going to and from their work in Leicester or Market Harborough. For many years there were reduced workmen fares for these journeys. Local passenger carriages did not have connecting corridors in the 1940s and 1950s. Each compartment (1st or 3rd class) was separate from the next. Each had a door and windows at either side of the compartment (door windows were lowered or raised with an attached leather strap). There were two long upholstered bench seats, luggage racks above and often one or two scenic pictures or mirrors. Usually compartments were steam heated as well as lit by electric light. Carriages with side corridors and a sliding single door to each compartment had been gradually introduced over pre-war years and were normal on long distance trains. Open style central corridor carriages eventually replaced all previous designs.



Crab 42931 2-6-0 passing Kibworth Station 'up' platform and signalbox in late 1950s/early 1960s.



Farewell party for Ted Harrison, stationmaster at Kibworth (photo taken on the up platform by the waiting room). *Left to right:*

Back row: Len Sewell, Ray Hunt, Arthur May, Dennis Knight, John Carr, Joe Hassell, Walter Butteriss
Front row: Alan Bell, George Knott, Ted Harrison, Harry Vears, Cyril Brooksby, Reg Knight

The first station master I can remember was Mr Hankins and he was followed in 1949/50 by Mr Freeman. After that came Ted Harrison and the last stationmaster before station closure was Brian Edge. Mr Edge then moved to Crewe, an important railway town. A system of promotion existed whereby a junior clerk would gradually take on more responsibility and would apply for a more senior job. Similarly, signalmen at larger boxes attracted higher wages.

As a lad I can always remember a chocolate dispensing machine on the up platform. There was never any chocolate in it in my memory, but it stood there for years. But I can't remember much about commercial adverts on Kibworth's platforms. I

do recall the era when posters advertised holiday destinations and sought to encourage the public to use the railway for leisure journeys as well as for work.

Kibworth never had a water tower for replenishing steam locomotives. The station itself and signalboxes were supplied by spring water collected further north in a small reservoir. Water was of course essential for daily use in the offices and toilets etc.

Cattle would arrive at the Kibworth cattle dock en route for fattening up in farms and fields in this area. One principal source of cattle was Ireland. There was good grazing grass around here. I don't recall any other animal species such a sheep using this station facility.

Kibworth Station was closed on 1st January 1968. Almost immediately both platforms were demolished and removed, along with the waiting room on the up side. The signalbox stayed into the 1990s.

Train spotting eventually led to a desire to work on the railway. So I left school in the spring of 1949 and applied for a job in the British Railway's motive power department at Leicester. But there were no vacancies and so I accepted an offer to work as a railway van boy. Len Weston was the driver in charge of the Gallowtree Gate and Granby Street round and I delivered parcels with him in the mornings to shops in the city centre. These included heavy boxes of fish for Mac Fisheries, coins for the Midland Bank, dresses and gowns for Paige's, tobacco to Brown's, and ice cream tubs to the main post office canteen. There was one little shop that looked after me with sweets (still on ration!). In the afternoons we collected parcels to take to Leicester station for onward transit: these included very many types but I well remember printed materials from Bell's (such as sheets of HP sauce labels). All this led to discoveries of numerous small businesses down side streets. In these days we had a horse drawn van (two motorised vans served outlying districts; at night one was used to transport train crews to Wigston to relieve other crews).

After a year on the road, I was transferred to the engine shed at Leicester. At first I cleaned engines and assisted in shifting coal and removing ash from pits under locomotives. As opportunity arose I learnt how to fire steam engines and went out on journeys with experienced drivers. There was a 'links' rota covering 12 weeks with named drivers and firemen. One had to pass tests at various stages to become an approved fireman and later to be a driver. There was regular training so one understood technical details of how engines and trains worked, how to maintain locos and deal with breakdowns. Instruction was always 'on the job' (no college classes). Days-off could be negotiated, especially after working on a bank holiday. People are usually familiar with stories of enginemen frying eggs on a steam engine: that was true, but we also did toast and onions - wonderful! The onions cooked for a couple of hours on the steam manifold above the regulator in the cab, such as in the cab of a Black 5 or a Stanier 2-8-0, mainly on trains being worked to Sheffield, Rotherham etc.

Work clothes were provided by the company for a majority of railway staff. As a fireman and driver I had a bib & brace, jacket, surge coat and a cap (no shoes provided at first, but they were supplied later in diesel days).



I was a 17 year old fireman when this photo was taken.

A few women were employed on the railway in various roles, but at Leicester in the 1960s we only had two such clerical workers and some engaged in canteens and on carriage cleaning. So the major part of the staff was male in the post war years. As regards Kibworth, I was never aware of women being employed there.

It was May 1966 before I qualified fully as a driver and by that time diesel locomotives were the main source of motive power for trains. The last steam engine I fired was a class 8 2-8-0 48528 in April 1966. Training continued to become competent on the different classes of diesels. Diesel training was carried out at Leicester by qualified instructors. The basic loco was the AEI type 2, and then each week one was allocated to a different loco, such as Class 45, 47, 56, 60s, and so on. At the end of each week, if successful, one was competent to drive that loco class. Diesel multiple unit training was done at Derby. Also one had to be approved for different routes and lines.

Work rotas involved widely different start and finish times for being on duty. Sometimes it would be 6.00am to 2.00pm or 2.00 to 10.00pm, but the next might be a 3.00 am or 5.00am start. In the early days I had a motor bike to get to Leicester for these difficult hours. My work as a fireman and then as a driver took me to lots of different places: Manchester Central, Sheffield, Birmingham, Peterborough, London and many destinations in between. Weekly hours gradually reduced over the years until eventually a 40 hours week was normal. I understand that very long hours were worked during WW2.

Moving trains produce quite a lot of temporary noise, but this was always understood and accepted by Kibworth people. I can only recall a few occasions when complaints arose: one was to do with track repairs through the night and another was when I was driving a diesel through Kibworth at 6 o'clock in the morning when the horn stuck in the 'ON' position - oh dear! There was smoke from steam engines but that blew away quickly and was not regarded as a nuisance to folk in their houses and gardens.



Garratt locomotive on a freight train in the early 1950s, photographed from Kibworth North signalbox looking south towards Warwick Road bridge and Kibworth beyond.

Fog was a real hazard for railwaymen, and everybody of course, in the 1940s to 1960s. The main cancellations due to fog were freight trains but efforts were made to keep passenger services going, even if late because of slow speeds. Other weather conditions affected trains: people often laugh about 'leaves on the line' but they were a real problem for braking and for starting trains. Frost and ice were other challenges.

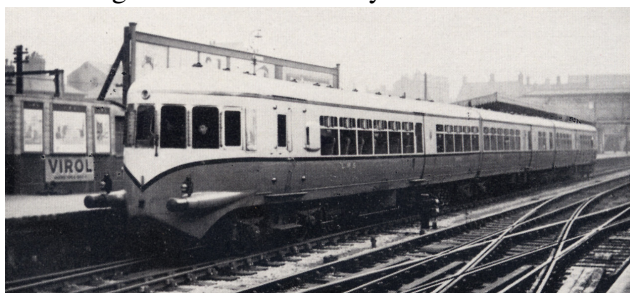
In latter years of my employment on the railway I became an acting inspector. This involved testing out newly manufactured diesel engines to ensure that each one worked properly. For example, one would

take a new class 60 loco on various runs to check out its performance; each one had to do 1000 miles of trouble-free running before it was accepted by British Rail. Far away destinations included Cardiff and Clapham Junction! Retirement came for me at privatisation of British Rail in 1993.

During my railway career I kept a fairly detailed log of my activities and correspondence etc. Thus for example during steam days I worked 976 different steam engines, mainly Midland region but some were former LNER locomotives (London & North Eastern Railway). My first job as a fireman was on number 43326. In diesel days I drove well over 1000 different locos.

There were particular highlights in my railway career that I remember. Working at night meant for instance that one could observe the occasional comet in a cloudless sky. The special night was when I witnessed a wonderful display of the 'northern lights' (aurora borealis). I recorded this as being at 0045 hours on Friday 26th May 1967 at Kilby Bridge. One surprise job took me to Theddingworth (west of Market Harborough). The 'Great Train Robbery' was being filmed there at night on the old Harborough to Rugby line. This was of course after closure of the line but before the tracks were lifted. My role was to assist the driver as 'second man'; the diesel hauled train (loco number D7575) was used for the filming. Afterwards we had to take the train back to Leicester via Market Harborough.

Daytime jobs included working on named expresses such as the Thames-Clyde Express from London to Sheffield or Leeds (a different crew took the train on to Scotland). Another highlight was driving the royal train: it was an assignment to take the royal train with Princess Anne on board from Nuneaton to Leicester on Friday 5th January 1989; the loco was diesel number 47837.



The experimental pre-ww2 diesel train unit on the Midland line in 1939. See paragraph 2 of this article.

Recorded in October 2009