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REMINISCENCES OF THE NORTH LONDON IN L.M.S. DAYS

PART ONE

By J.P. Summers

I was born in 1921 and had the good fortune to have a grandmother who lived in a house overlooking Kensal Green station so although I have, unfortunately, no conscious memories of the passing trains in L.N.W.R. colours, I can remember the passing traffic as entirely in Midland red and black. The only Pre-Grouping colour was the plum of the L.E.R.-L.N.W.R. joint stock used on the Bakerloo trains. I did once see a L. & Y.R. open coach in light and dark brown livery on a Cup Final excursion. Sounds were very evocative, and I could always tell when a G class 0-8-0 was coming (chuff, CHUFF, chuff, chuff), or a 'Cauliflower' 0-6-0 (chuff CHUFF chuff CHUFF), but one sound above all remains in my mind - the distinctive sound of 7505 or 7519, the N.L.R. 0-6-0Ts (a sort of clank CLANK clank, clank CLANK clank). Another treat was on Cup Final day, when the 12-coach, close-coupled N.L.R. set of four-wheelers in teak livery clattered past on the down slow line, hauled by a 'Jinty' 0-6-0T.

When I left school in 1937, I went to work in a City office, and out of my princely salary of £1 a week, ten shillings went to my mother, five shillings was my pocket money, and the other five shillings was spent on a weekly season ticket from Willesden Junction to Broad Street.

My ambition when I left school was to have a career involving travel and the use of languages, my favourite school subjects. It was suggested I should seek a job with the Continental Division of the Southern Railway, which I did, but there were no vacancies, and they suggested that I tried another of the Big Four companies with a view to a transfer at a later date when there were vacancies. Living near Willesden Junction, I applied to the LMS, and was accepted, but there were no immediate

vacancies, and I had to wait till they sent for me in March 1938, when they asked me to report to the Station Master at Willesden Junction, where I was to be a Junior Clerk at a salary of £55 pa. As I had matriculated, I was exempt from the entrance examination, but had to study railway passenger and goods accounts, forms and routes, as well as shorthand and typing, in preparation for the examination when I was eighteen, which would lead to my appointment as a Class 5 clerk at a salary of £90 pa.

To see Willesden Junction now, it is impossible to realise what the old station was like. There were nine main line platforms, three High Level, and four New Line - sixteen in all. Platform 6, the down fast platform on the Main Line, had a refreshment room, and so did the High Level platforms. In 1938 there were three booking offices at Willesden Junction: No.1 (Main End), the chief office, was between Old Oak Lane and the footbridge connecting the north ends of platforms 1 to 9 (the main line station) and the booking hall was reached from the parcel van access road; No.2 on the High Level, lay between the up and down Richmond platforms behind the refreshment room on platform 11 (the down Richmond) which was only open from about 6am to 8pm; and No.3, College Park, where I started my booking office training. This was reached by a long footpath from Harrow Road that ran between the up Richmond line and the Hampstead Junction lines. Halfway along the footpath a footbridge led across these lines to Tubbs Road.

Originally the College Park booking office was Willesden No.4 because No.3 was the booking office at the end of platforms 3 and 4 which were still called "The North London Bay" in 1938. (In the same way, when I was at

Euston in 1946 platform 8 was still called "The York"). With the disappearance of Chalk Farm main line station under the 1912 rebuilding scheme, Willesden Junction became the ticket-collection station for Euston and many passengers from the north wanted to catch an N.L.R. train to Broad Street from bay platforms 3 & 4 which were between the south ends of platform 2 (down slow) and platform 5 (up fast). On platform 2 & 5 there was a large TTC (traveling ticket collectors') office and they had wonderful tales of their experiences collecting tickets on the move from crooks and from amorous couples on the sleeper trains.

In my days the North London office had long been closed and was just a dilapidated old storeroom. I think the College Park office had always been Willesden No.3 in L.M.S. days because some of the tickets which were rarely issued had been printed in L.N.W.R. style with just "L.M.S.R." replacing "L.N.W.R.", the 'R' overprint on returns being of the large L.N.W.R. type but the issuing office was shown as "Willesden No.3". I have 3 L.N.W.R. tickets from Willesden No.4 to Brondesbury, Liverpool and Watford (see figs.1,2,3).

In 1938, there were still many traces of the old station that was swept away in the 1892 rebuilding. Looking out of the window of the Main End booking office, I could see the embankment and the abutments of the bridge which had carried the original Hampstead Junction line over the LNW main line, and down to join the goods lines near the bridge over the Grand Union Canal. When approaching Willesden Junction from Kensal Rise, one saw a tall junction signal which rose above the pavement of Honeypot Bridge (carrying Wrotesley Road over the railway). These signals controlled the four-way Kensal Green Junction at the bridge. The signal on the extreme left controlling the electric line down to the Low Level station, the next controlling the goods line which split off the electrified Richmond line immediately after the electric sidings under Harrow Road bridge. From Harrow Road bridge to the High Level station, the two tracks - down goods on the left, and

electric down Richmond on the right, were on the alignment of the lines once used by the Outer Circle trains from Broad Street to Mansion House. In my time, the goods line was electrified once it reached the High Level Platform 12, and was used by the LNWR Siemens EMU's for the Earls Court service - all that was left of the former Outer Circle. Returning to the signal at Honeypot Bridge, the third signal, the tallest, controlled the down Richmond line, and finally the extreme right hand signal controlled the line down to the main line, which it joined just before Acton Lane bridge.

Looking down from Honeypot Bridge, the original Hampstead Junction station (Kensal Green & Harlesden) was still in existence on the down side. I was always surprised at how low the platform was compared with modern platforms. The structure survived until the 1960's, when a lorry on the Harrow Road skidded on the bend and demolished the building.

My training was of the "sitting next to Nellie" type, that is to say for the first week or two I was on middle turn with Freddie Roffe, Cyril Ballard and Ralph Locke, getting to know the layout of the ticket racks and having a bundle of plain pieces of cardboard the size of Edmondson tickets with which to practice on the dating press at the Workmen's ticket window.

We had a good supply of printed tickets including some never issued like Croydon via Clapham Junction and Hounslow via Kew Bridge, but there were some anomalous fares for which tickets were not printed and these harked back to North London and District days. We had tickets to Central Line stations via Oxford Circus, Piccadilly Line stations via Piccadilly Circus and Northern Line via Charing Cross but we had no tickets to District Line stations via Charing Cross. All our fares to the District Line were strictly via Earl's Court. If a passenger asked for, say, Mansion House he was asked, via Charing Cross or Earls Court?" If as was usual the passenger said "Charing Cross" then a ticket to Charing Cross was issued

and the passenger told to re-book there. Then S.P. Viant was elected as MP. for Willesden and he started presenting House of Commons travel warrants asking us to issue a ticket from Willesden Junction to Westminster via the direct and cheapest route. So we had to write out blank card ordinary returns and very soon we ordered 100 printed tickets Willesden Junction to Westminster via Charing Cross but we put a note on the ticket rack "MP only".

There were three turns in College Park, early 5 am to 12.20 pm, middle 12 noon to 5.20 pm, then 6 pm to 8 pm in the Parcels Office, late 5.20 pm to 12.40 am. In High Level there were two turns 6 am to 1.20 pm and 1.10 pm to 8.30 pm late turn. The Main End had three turns: Ernie Cleaver, the Chief Booking Clerk (a class 4 post), worked a permanent middle turn checking Train Books in the morning and working in No.1 B.O. in the afternoon, while Ernie Rawlings and Joe Brommidge took alternate early and late turns at the same times as College Park. It was interesting how pre-grouping loyalties persisted; Ernie Rawlings would be referred to as "A good clerk, he joined the North Western at Euston in 1911" while Joe Brommidge was an ex-Midland man and if he ever, very rarely, made a mistake others would say, "What can you expect from a Midland man?"

Soon after I had finished my training, and was just about competent to be left alone in the College Park office, there was an emergency, and I was sent as a relief clerk for the afternoon to Brondesbury. Like many NL line stations, Brondesbury had a cathedral-like booking hall, but when I went there a new passimeter office was in position. I had only been there about an hour, when a man came in and said he wanted to send a canoe to Sheppey by passenger train! I should have been lucky to find out how to issue a passenger ticket to Sheppey, let alone a canoe! I took the easy way out, and told the man to come back in the evening.

Another time I went to Canonbury on relief for a week, early turn, but I have few memories of it except for an argument with one of the regulars because I refused to issue a Workmen's

Ticket to Bow after the last Workmen's train had left for Dalston, and a misprinted ticket from Canonbury to High Barnet via South Acton (see fig. 4).

Gradually I acquired dexterity and knowledge and eventually I used to do a Sunday turn in the Main End office which had a far wider range of printed main line tickets and far more passengers than the College Park office. Looking out of the window across the tracks I could see the embankment which used to carry the N.L.R. from the original N.L.R. High Level Station beside Old Oak Lane to the low bridge over the Grand Union Canal and on to Acton Wells. Crawford's biscuit factory was built on part of it.

My next NL memories were as a relief clerk late in 1939 on the N.& S.W.J.R. at Acton Central and South Acton. Initially I was sent to Acton Central which, although small compared to Willesden Junction, was a large building and apart from the booking office, there was a large and busy parcels office with three 2-ton Ford vans for collection and delivery over an area including Chiswick, West Ealing and the Great West Road. The Station Master, Mr Caldwell, told me once of his early railway days as a booking clerk on the Furness Railway, when an old lady came to the window and asked for a ticket. When asked where she wished to go, she told him sharply to mind his own business and just give her a ticket.

After a few weeks at Acton Central I was sent to South Acton where I spent the next few weeks and it was a very interesting period for me at the beginning of World War II. This booking office was quite a change from Willesden Junction. I worked turn and turn about with John Cousins who had spent all his life at South Acton. He lived in Bridgeman Road, opposite the Station, where he was born, and when he joined N. & S.W.J.R. before World War I. He was put in the booking office at South Acton and there he stayed all his working life. I was only at South Acton for a few weeks so never got to know him but I have always wished I could have talked over the old days with him. Imagine! He would have seen the L.N.W.R. rail

motor to Hammersmith and L.S.W.R. trains to Hendon. I did find a N & S.W.J.R. uniform button at the back of a drawer and treasured it till 1983 when I was burgled.

Approaching the station from Acton Central, there was a junction signal with three posts: the left referring to the line to Gunnersbury and Richmond, the centre one referring to the line to Kew East Junction, and the third being without a signal, but at one time it had controlled the line to Acton Town on the District Railway. The District track was still in use, but the junction had been completely removed. The Hammersmith & Chiswick branch was still in operation for goods traffic, and there was daily traffic in milk tanks to the Express Dairy depot adjacent to the Richmond platform. There were also coal trains from the Midland line at Cricklewood via Acton Wells, hauled by 'Jinty' 0-6-0T's which passed through South Acton and then took the Richmond line as far as Bollo Lane Junction, where they took the left hand branch to join the LPTB District Line at Chiswick Park, and then worked through to the Kensington coal depots.

Of all the occasions when I have longed for a camera, I think the most frustrating time was in October 1939. I was standing on the up platform outside the booking office at South Acton, when I heard a steam loco coming from the direction of Acton Central. It was an LSWR 'T9' 4-4-0, and as it drew nearer, I saw it was

hauling the two Metropolitan Railway red Pullman cars 'Mayflower' and 'Galatea'. Recent correspondence in "Underground News" (May 2002, pages 217, 218 and July 2002, page 302) shows they were probably going to Hampton Court. I watched it pass and carried on watching it out of sight towards Kew, when I heard the points go over, and looking towards Bollo Lane, saw a 'Jinty' hauling a 5-car train of Central London Railway 1903 stock which had recently been withdrawn. It was presumably en-route to the breakers via Acton Wells Junction. If only I'd had that camera!...Better still a cine camera - imagine a panning shot from the Pullmans to the CLR train!

There was not a vast volume of traffic through South Acton, yet ironically enough, there were two separate stations side by side. There was the N.&S.W.J.R. station with booking office, booking clerk and porter for LMS trains to Broad Street, Richmond and Kew Bridge, then up about ten steps from the booking hall there was the LPTB station, also with booking office and staff to serve the single car shuttle to Acton Town. In these days when many North London stations have only a 'bus shelter', it sounds like Utopia to think that for such a small amount of traffic, there were two fully staffed stations, each with working toilets, which were always clean and working, with not a trace of graffiti or vandalism.

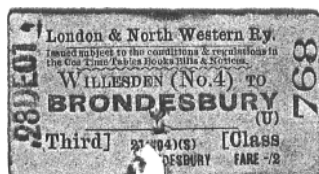


Fig. 1

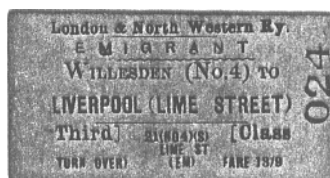


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

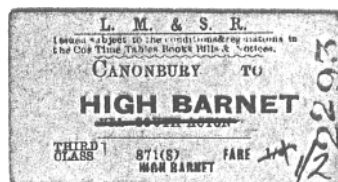
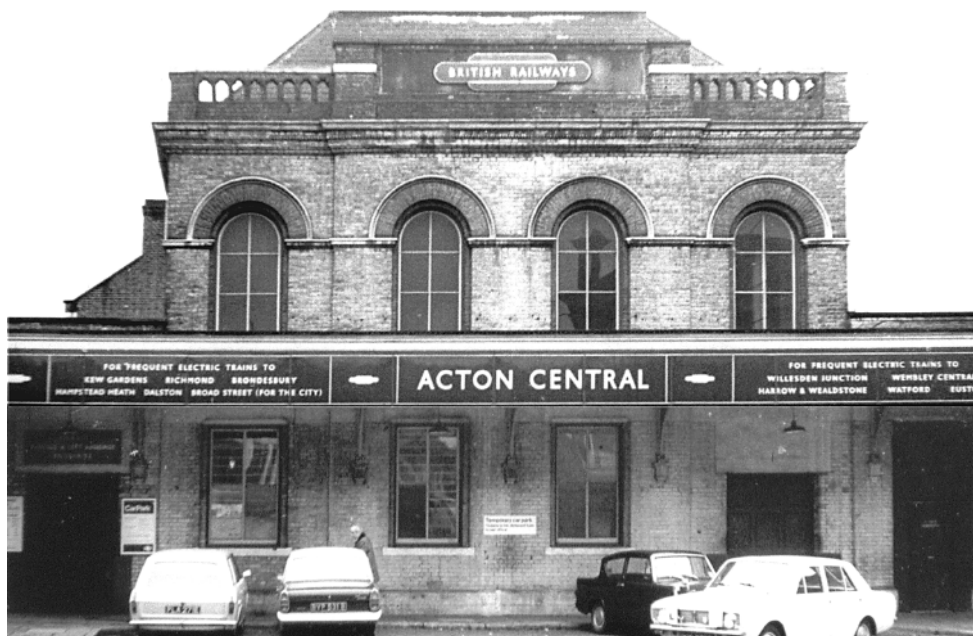


Fig. 4



Two views of Acton Central: Above, in BR days, at least 1968 by the car registration numbers, and below on 15th August 1998, on the occasion of the Society's "Passing Old Ford" outing. Despite its new name, at least the building still survives.

