

Account of Purley on Thames

The GWR Gangers

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By Bill Fisher

Purley Railway People

Charles Fisher - Ganger Sots Hole, no 3 Glebe Road

Jack Iles- second man - Purley length - No 5 Glebe Road

The ganger for Purley before, during and after the war was Charles Turner of Thames Avenue, Pangbourne. His son lives in Chapel Hill, Tilehurst.

Alfie Nash (Ian's father) worked on the farm prior to joining the GWR

Maintaining the Railway

The GWR Permanent Way between London and Bristol consisted of the Up and Down main lines and the Up and Down Relief lines. Geographically the permanent way was divided into 1 ¼ mile sections.

These sections were maintained by a ganger and four platelayers. The responsibility devolved on the ganger and one of his duties was to walk each railroad track daily and inspect all the keys and where necessary knock any loose ones into place with his sledgehammer. In the case of a four track railroad his second man assisted.

The members of his team were called platelayers because, when the railroad was in its infancy, the rails were secured to the sleepers (crossies) by means of a steel plate and steel spikes. This of course was too rigid and did not allow for expansion and contraction commensurate with the seasonal vagaries of temperature. The consequent jolting which the rolling stock was subjected to caused structural damage to the carriages and did not improve the tempers of the travellers either.

This resulted in a change of practice which confined the rails within steel chairs, bolted to the sleepers. The expansion and contraction of the rails were accommodated by the use of a hard wood block situated between the chair and the rail in an outside position. These were called keys and when properly in position, maintained the track in perfect alignment. Also the vibratory effect was greatly diminished. Hence the reason for the ganger and second man's daily task. On Sundays the ganger walked alone.

Periodically the Authorities despatched what was known as the Whitewash train over each track between London and Bristol. This train had a large tank of whitewash underslung with a trapdoor giving direct access to the rails. The trapdoor operated when the train experienced any track deviation which exceeded a certain degree + or -. I regret I do not know the exact figure. The offending section was liberally splashed with whitewash and was an indication that the keys were loose. A record was made and taken into account when the prize of £5 for the best kept length was awarded. Not unnaturally gangers used to go beserk when they saw any whitewash on their lengths.

Each ganger was provided with a hut containing a desk (you had to stand to use it), a bench, a stove and all the necessary tools.

Fogging

The ganger was not eligible for fogging duties. The platelayers used to eagerly look forward to the onset of Winter and the inevitable fogging duties. They consisted of twelve hour duties day and night with the resultant overtime pay. The duties were not onerous. The train drivers were unable to see the signals and relied on hearing a system of detonators as their train passed over them. The fogman's duties entailed placing the detonators on the track prior to the train's passage. They were approximately two inches in diameter, circular and half an inch in depth with two lead lugs or tails to fix them on the rail.

They were fitted approximately ten yards from the signal and there was a 3 tier system

- 3 detonators in succession - Danger ahead immediate stop
- 2 in succession - Apply brakes and stop at next signal
- 1 - proceed with caution.

The detonators were coloured and all unused ones had to be returned to avoid deterioration. New stock was issued annually in a different colour to those of the preceding year.

A friendly rivalry existed between the platelayers and Telegraph and Signal linesmen. This didn't always extend to wet weather conditions. Both were provided with the finest waterproof clothing I have ever seen. The platelayers were allowed "wet time" but the linesmen were not and this was always a bone of contention.

May I ask you to visualise a typical winter's day with the rain coming down in torrents non stop. The gang of platelayers peacefully snoozing in their hut round their warm stove, whilst the linesmen battled with the elements. Occasionally they purloined a detonator and just before moving off to their next job they would drop it down the hut chimney. The resulting bang would blow out the fire and before the enraged platelayers could emerge they would have happily departed. Needless to say it would be some time before they returned to that locality, usually switching duties with another team. I am indebted to Eric Wilcocks for his help and confirmation of much of the foregoing.

PS

The concession Wet Time did not extend to the operation of re-laying which was usually undertaken by the amalgamation of three to four gangs of platelayers.