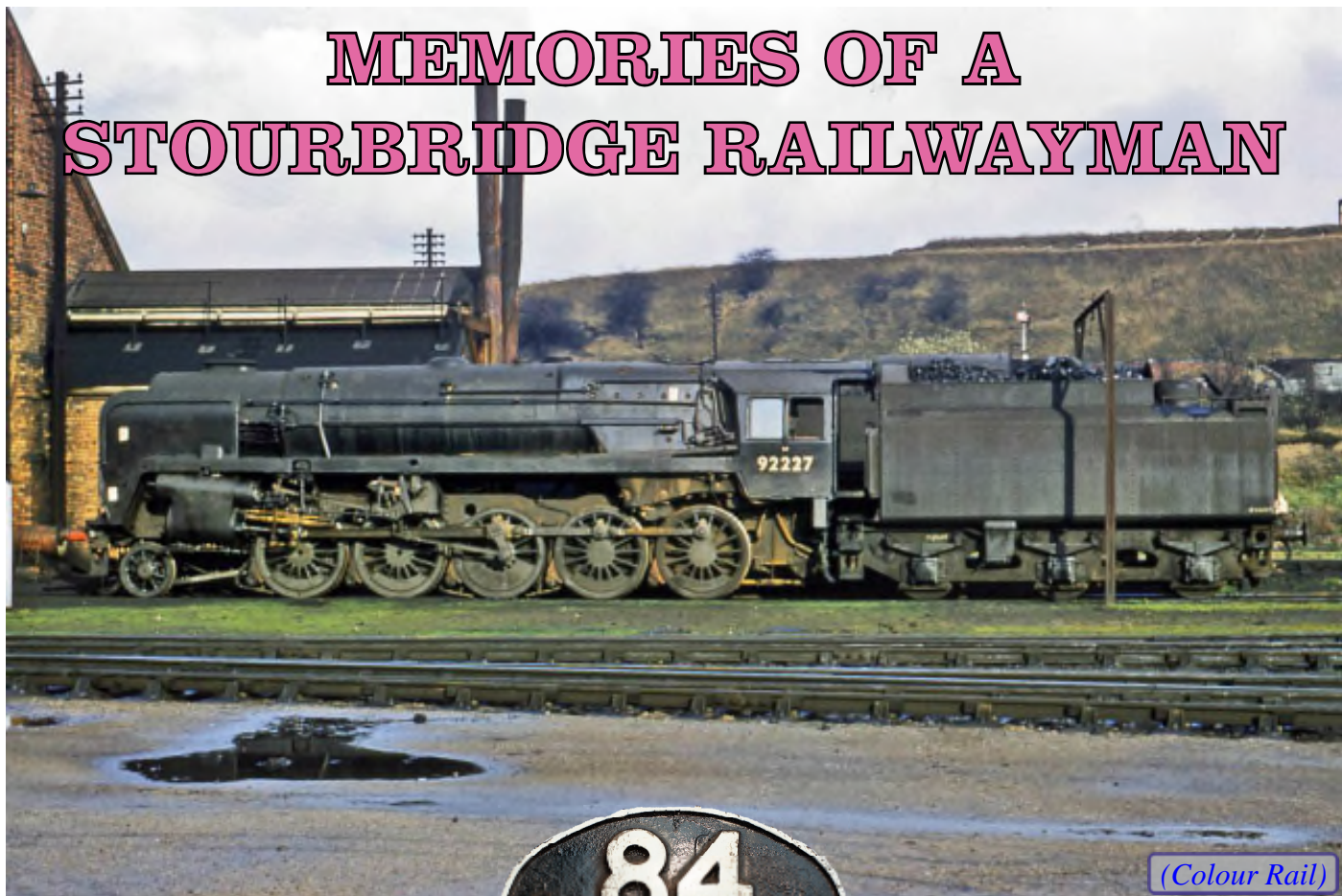




Platform 3



MEMORIES OF A STOURBRIDGE RAILWAYMAN



(Colour Rail)



(Colour Rail)



(Colour Rail)

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A CONVERSATION WITH RAMON WILLIAMS: STOURBRIDGE RAILWAYMAN by Andy Cope

The number of people left that remember steam on the Stourbridge line is rapidly dwindling as are the number of people who remember the extensive freight and parcels operation the railway was responsible for before serious rationalisation of services began. I have known several railwaymen from Stourbridge over the years but recently, through lockdown, was fortunate to be introduced to fellow SLUG member Ramon Williams, now a Kidderminster resident but originally from a hamlet near Barnstaple in North Devon and named after Ramon Navaro the early film star. As a baby, his parents told him, he was a passenger on the last train on the long lost narrow gauge Lynton and Barnstaple Railway. He moved to Stourbridge when he was 12 so that his father could take up employment with Batemans the well-established Stourbridge timber merchant and sawmill owner. What follows is a record of the email conversations I have had with Ramon over the course of the last 12 months or so. Because several separate emails were involved, I have attempted to re shape them into a continuous prose without, hopefully, removing any of the content. Over to Ramon...

I was born in Devon in a small hamlet from which the nearest town was Barnstaple. This entailed cycling five miles each day to the village school, which was situated on the edge of Exmoor, where everyone between five and twelve years of age were all put in one class during the war. If the weather was fine, we went out on the local lanes looking for rose hips, which sustained many people as “Rose Hip Syrup”, a food supplement to the war time rations, but when it was raining we made camouflage nets for the Army. So, as you can see, my education was not great. I was told, however, that as a babe in arms I was taken on the last narrow gauge Lynton and Barnstaple train in 1935, my first involvement with trains!



Ramon's village school on the edge of Exmoor

In 1945, my parents, mother at 41 and dad at 40, cycled from North Devon so that dad could be considered for a Sawyer's job at Batemans at the top of Prospect Hill in Stourbridge, which in those days included a house with the job. Having cycled to Stourbridge, they then had to cycle back to the outskirts of Barnstaple.

Dad got the job and therefore we moved to Union Street in Stourbridge at the end of 1945. I went to school at the Grange. I was bullied a lot, especially because of my accent - for example, a gang took my dinner money off me every week during the first couple of months which meant I had no lunch.

The result of all these difficulties was that I left at 14 in July 1947. However, to try and catch up on my education I went to night school above Stourbridge library, taking Typing, Shorthand, Maths and English. After two weeks the Shorthand teacher, whose other job was as a council rent collector, tore my book up! However, I passed out on the other exams!

Later, when my wife Ann and I got married, we lived for a time in Pargeter Street and then moved to a terraced house in Union Street.

So, in July 1947 I started work as what was then called a "slipper boy", helping to look after the GWR barge horses, which were stabled in a cave below Gasometer Lane, Stourbridge, behind what is now Fieldings Auctioneers.

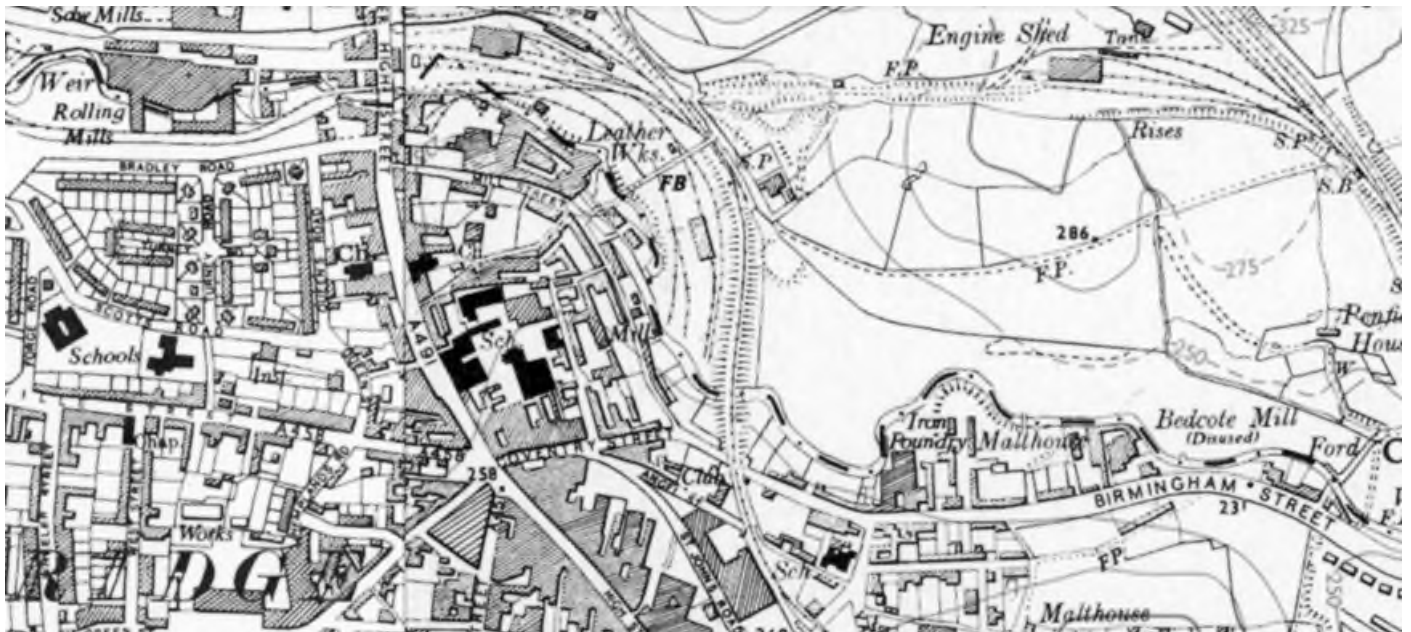


The goods yard canal entrance under Lower High Street after canal trade had finished

(Kidderminster Railway Museum)

The gent who looked after them was a Bernard Caitlin who had worked with the horses so long, he actually smelt of them! In those days, the only telephone was a small telephone exchange in the goods office. When a message was received about incoming goods by boat someone would run over and say, “the barge coming from (say) Richard Thomas and Baldwins of Swindon (Staffs) requires another horse.” So we would saddle one up, I would get on top, and amble across Lower High Street (I would not like to do that now!), ride to Stewponey, and when the barge came along, harness my horse to the barge horse and make our way back towards Stourbridge.

As we got towards the Bonded Warehouse the bargee would shout to “move them along a bit quicker” and then throw the towing rope off and glide under the roadway into the basin as there was no towpath under the road. After a while of doing this type of work, I managed to get into the office as a messenger.



Downstairs at the end in a small office was the Goods Agent, Mr Bullas (who lived at Stourton) who often took charge, but really it was the Chief Clerk Mr Keene who ran the yard staff outside included two shunters, the Yard Foreman Norman Niblett and a weighbridge lad. There was also a man who drove the Ruston Bucyrus crane in the yard, while the GWR also had a flatbed lorry to deliver local goods. At the opposite end was the office of Thomas Bantock whose company had a lot of Scammell three wheeled lorries which did most deliveries further afield.



*Town Goods Yard 1965 and same location 2021
(Kidderminster Railway Museum)*

When a train came down the incline into the Town goods yard, the yard foreman, Norman, would go up the offside of the train, and take the labels off the trucks - as an example, some might say from Cannock Chase to H S Pitt & Leasons. He would enter them in a book and take the labels into a clerk who would make out an invoice, which I would immediately take to their office, just up on the right in Lower High Street, as none of these coal merchants had telephones around 1948. There was at that time six coal merchants serving the people of Stourbridge.



Bottom of Lower High Street

The level crossing at the bottom of Lower High Street has long been a distant memory but I remember it well as I was the one that helped the yard foreman open the gates. As I remember the track went by the side of Lunt's coal merchants, past Stourbridge rolling mills towards Bradley's (now the Lion Surgery). I remember they had a tractor with a buffer on, which was the same height as the wagon buffers. I also remember that D & F Fellows had a siding into their premises and that they had a horse for shunting purposes.

The large factory off Lower High Street (top photo, page 6) was William Turney's Skin Factory, the one at front advertising cement was D & F Fellows, who at that time was making tiled fireplaces, which most people had. They were also coal merchants. If you look to the left of the photo, you will see a tall chimney, which was the water treatment factory, on the opposite side of the incline from the goods yard.

The bottom photo on page 6 shows the usual way footplate men went to work, down Duke Street (off Coventry Street), down a steep path, over the river, over a footbridge and up the path to the shed.

While I was at the Town as a messenger, I used to cycle to the Lye Goods with invoices every day, with documentation pertaining to their area. The Goods office there was very small so, up against the buffer stop near the office, there was a GWR coach. This was fitted out as an office, mostly used by lady clerks.



William Turney's Skin Factory

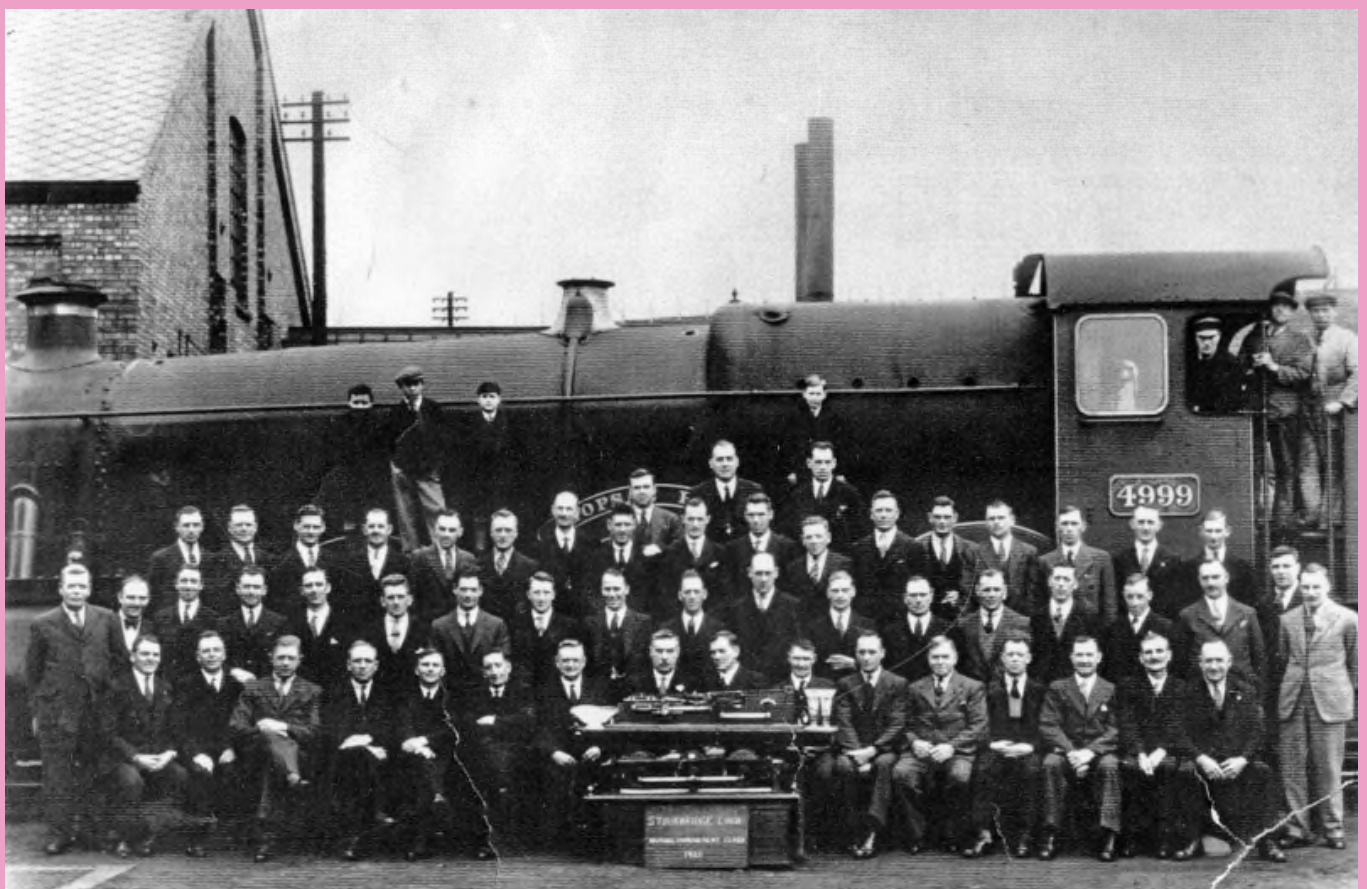


Route that footplate men used to go to work

So back to the Town Goods, I had to go to Snow Hill, for a clerical exam, which I failed, so was passed on to the motive power department which included the footplate grades. At first, we were “Caller Uppers”, cycling around Stourbridge knocking on footplate men’s doors to get them up for work. The Health and Safety of today would have a fit, with young lads of 15 cycling around the Stourbridge area during the dead of night. One of the “Caller Uppers” had a nasty accident on Grange Hill near the Junction station. This lad who was on the call up with me and a few others, came to the top of the hill where he saw what he thought were two lads walking up the hill with bikes. So, he decided to frighten them by cycling between them. Cars had a small light on each mudguard then and what he thought was cycling between his two mates coming up the hill turned out to be a car! We understood he was in a bad way after the accident and sadly never saw him again!

There was a lot of variation in the railway jobs carried out at Stourbridge at that time. One was carriage cleaning. There were two carriage cleaning sites, one next to where the town car ran, on the Oldswinford side of the station, and one on the island side platform where the disabled parking spaces are on the current station car park.

I went to the improvement classes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Improvement classes were a voluntary thing whereby you were able to learn about the workings of the railway and of locomotives in particular. The classes were run by volunteer senior enginemen. The class was situated in a railway carriage on some spare ground on the Amblecote side of the shed.



The 1935 Mutual Improvement group for Stourbridge Shed. Some years before Ramon attended.

So, eventually I became a fireman and then a “passed” fireman. A passed fireman meant you could drive under supervision. There are lots of tales from those days. And, of course, one of the things enginemens were noted for was their ability to have a fry up of bacon and eggs on the shovel. It was important that you had a good shovel to allow for this activity. One driver that always had a special shovel for this purpose - and I never discovered where he kept it - was Gerry Young. Gerry also had a chimney sweep round in his spare time. We were in what they called a spare link in which there were usually eight men, that is four pairs of men, when we were on the afternoon or evening turns. We always seemed to click for the evening freight job from Kingswinford to Crewe, Gresty Lane (I am not sure if Gerry bribed the roster clerk!). This was the 1120 pm (2320) Kingswinford Junction to Crewe, returning light engine. I would do the driving that week as a “passed” man. When we got to Crewe the shunters would come and uncouple the engine and say something like “when you have had your breakfast, phone the signalman for the road.” I would make the tea while my driver filled up the firebox. He would then cook his food on the shovel. By the time we had turned the engine on the triangle and started back light engine to Stourbridge, he would be fast asleep with his overcoat around him - with the fire banked up, we could usually steam to Stourbridge without any more attention to the fire. The route we took was via the long closed line through Market Drayton then we would use the single line through Wombourne. We had to hold back a little as there was a freight booked in front of us which may mean we were held at (say) Himley until the freight had cleared the section.



Ramon on North End shunter firing duties at Stourbridge

I would wake him around about Brettell Lane to be ready to get off at Stourbridge. (When I was on the footplate, coming into Brettell Lane from Stourbridge, I also used to look out for my late father in law, who was a Foreman at Samuel Taylor's chain works). Over the 13 months I was with Gerry, I never found out where he hid that special shovel he used for his breakfast!

As well as the trips to Crewe we would go with freight trains to Hereford and usually travel back in the Guard's van and he would be asleep on the locker before we left Barr's Court in Hereford. It was tough firing some of the freight turns to Hereford as you had the climb up the 1:80 to the tunnel at Malvern/Colwall then you had the single bore of Ledbury tunnel. Sometimes we would take water at Malvern Wells which gave a welcome break from firing. There were occasions when the loco would slip to a stand in Malvern Tunnel. There was a "tell-tale" wire which ran the length of the tunnel which you were supposed to break with your coal pick if you got stuck in the tunnel to alert the signalman. There were occasions when we had to get on the floor of the engine in the tunnel as it was the only place we could get breathable air. All in all, they could be quite tough turns.



The water column, behind the signal, at Malvern Wells on the 1:80 climb up to the tunnel where "Top 'em up Ted" would often stop for water giving a well-earned break from shovelling for the fireman

(OPC Collection)

When we met crews off the "Midland" they had different conditions of service to us and used to drop their own fires whereas we Western men always had people to drop fires for us. It was in these circumstances of having no one to drop the fire that I once fired all the way to Carlisle Kingmoor. Not many Stourbridge men have ever done that!

A good overtime turn, when Bromsgrove were short of bank engine firemen for the Lickey incline, was to go over to Bromsgrove to lend a hand. We used to have a pass to travel on the Midland Red bus across to Bromsgrove station. A lot of the work there, though, was coaling up engines.



Ramon took this photo of Stourbridge Shed one Sunday in the early 1960s while waiting for engines on engineering work to have their fires dropped and be re-coaled.

We had lots of characters at Stourbridge. I remember “Floppin’ Vic” who was known by that name as he never swore. On one occasion he had a mishap when he accidentally ran a 6-car Diesel Multiple Unit into another set which required the breakdown train to sort it out. He did swear on that occasion but even then, only mildly!

Another was “I say” Charlie who started every sentence with “I say”

I was a regular fireman to “Top ‘Em up Ted” who was known for not passing a water column without stopping to “top ‘em up” even though there was often a good tank full of water shown on the tender gauge.

He was a good engineman though, except on one occasion when he managed to blow the fire out of the chimney of our 9F at Dunstall Park.... the fire brigade was involved with that one and a lot of questions were asked.

Anyone who had worked during a strike tended to be shunned by the other enginemen. I can remember one person who tended to be shunned and I asked my driver about it who said “well he worked in the strike”.

I thought that he meant that he had worked in the, then more, recent strike of 1955 but on closer questioning he meant he had worked in the 1926 General Strike! Such was the memory of footplate men!



Ramon on board a 9F by Stourbridge Middle Box...around 1964

Sometimes though, incidents were more serious and one of the serious incidents I was involved with happened in the early 1960s near Offmore Bridge between Kidderminster and Blakedown. It was a dark winter morning and we had left Kidderminster goods yard with empty wagons for Cannock with a ex LMS 8F. "Top 'em up Ted" was my driver. Being an ex-LMS engine the driver's position was on the left-hand side, unlike ex-GWR engines with the driver's position on the right-hand side. Passing under Offmore Farm bridge he shouted out to me on the other side to have a look out and see if I could see what was in front. It was still dark, but I could see a pinpoint of light. As we got closer, I realised something was across the track. I shouted a warning to Ted who immediately put on the brakes. We just couldn't stop in time and hit an agricultural tractor. The train bounced back on impact. There were clouds of steam, so I got down with my Bardic lamp and walked back along the train noting that the train had parted in three places and that two wagons had derailed. The guard, who had a cup of tea in his hand when we impacted, was thrown to the floor. I walked back to the engine and thankfully the tractor driver had been off his machine so did not appear to be badly hurt. As the rules required, I walked on the couple of miles to Blakedown box placing detonators on the "up" line to warn any approaching train that the line was blocked. After placing the detonators, a light engine came through and, although the detonators went off, it did not stop. The guard carried out a similar operation to the rear of the train. I sat in Blakedown box for two hours before we were able to limp back to Stourbridge.



Ramon was firing an ex-LMS 8F engine when the incident at Offmore Farm occurred. Another 8F, 48424, based at Stourbridge shed, approaches Worcester Shrub Hill in 1965

(Pete Wilcox Coll'n)

Two days later the inquiry team descended on us, and we were all interviewed. It was discovered that, on the previous Sunday, the track had been relaid but the crossing timbers at that location had not been replaced. Consequently, after opening the gate the tractor driver drove onto the track but got stuck.

The result of the inquiry was that the ganger was 50% to blame and the tractor driver was 50% to blame for not opening gates at both sides of the track before attempting to cross. If he had done so, he would have seen that the crossing timbers had not been replaced. The driver of the light engine that did not stop when he ran through the detonators was suspended for three days. Sadly, the tractor driver passed away three months later.

There were, of course, lots of sidings and small goods yards around Stourbridge. Places like The Hayes where Eveson's manufactured tin baths or Walter Somers at Halesowen as well as Round Oak and the Pensnett Branch.

We went across the line to Longbridge often with a 74XX Pannier which involved crossing the spindly Dowery Dell steel viaduct near Rubery. The 74XXs were lighter than the regular Panniers but even so you could feel the viaduct sway as you went over it. When we worked into the Dreadnought Brick and Tile works at Pensnett they would fill your tea can for a ha'penny (1/2d).



An ex-GWR Class 7400 Pannier Tank No. 7428 crosses Dowery Dell Viaduct on 19 April 1957

(Neville Stead Coll'n)



A photo taken by Ramon of shunting at Pensnett north. The Dreadnought Brick and Tile works on the right would fill your tea can for ½d. The same loco appears in the photo below.



Stourbridge Pannier 4696 has Ramon firing as it shunts local yards around 1965. Unfortunately, we can't see what's written in chalk towards the front of the engine!

I passed out as a driver in 1963. In order to pass out I was accompanied by an inspector and had to take a Prairie tank plus the coaches for the Kidderminster portion of The Cathedrals Express down to Worcester Shrub Hill and shunt it onto the main train which had come though from Hereford. We then walked over to Tunnel Junction where a 28XX with freight was signalled to stop and I had to drive it through to Stourbridge. That was me then, passed out driver. The 28XX were one of my favourite types even over the more modern 9Fs.



*Ramon's first task to pass out as a driver was to take a Prairie tank to Worcester. A member of this class of locomotive (No. 4170) is seen at Churchill & Blakedown station
(Michael Mensing)*

In 1965 I got a permanent driver's job at Kidderminster. We therefore moved to Kidderminster in 1967 but I was made redundant in 1972. British Rail made it very difficult for those they did not want. If I were to remain a driver, I would have to move to Cricklewood in London and be away for four and a half years.

So, over 700 of us in the Midlands left the service and missed it a lot. The main line from Worcester to Birmingham via Stourbridge passes the bottom of my garden. The SVR is just down the road where I still observe the passing railway scene. I have a list of enginemen of Stourbridge from my time there but sadly most of these guys, who kept things moving through thick and thin, have now sadly passed on. They were different times and different days, but I am still count myself a railway enthusiast and wouldn't have missed those now far off days for anything.



Ramon preferred Churchward's 28XX Class of locomotive, first built in 1903, to the BR 9F locomotives, first built in 1954. The former is seen above approaching Malvern Wells in 1965 on a Hereford bound freight while the latter passes through Snow Hill station on 28 March 1961 (Tim Farebrother (above) and Michael Mensing (below))

