

My Best Steam Locomotive Race

This real life steam train race occurred on the summer bank holiday in 1961, with a “Black Five” steam locomotive, very much like the one shown in the photo below.

No:44949 at Manchester Victoria in 1968.



Attribution:

By Phil Sangwell (44949 Manchester Victoria Uploaded by oxyman) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

I booked on, late in the afternoon, at my home depot of Aston Shed 3D, to drive a returning train - a day trip Blackpool special - along with my fireman and two more sets of loco men. We were all due to travel as passengers on the same train to Crewe to relieve the men who had brought back our respective trains, mine from Blackpool North and the other two, from Morecambe and Southport.

The three trains had left Birmingham New St. that morning. They were worked by Aston men as far as Crewe, where they were then relieved by Crewe men who took the trains forward to their destinations. The Crewe men were due to return with their trains later in the evening, back to Crewe.

These holiday excursions were timetabled to stop at Crewe, only for the changeover of loco men and not for passenger services. This usually meant the trains travelled on the through road avoiding the platform, so that once the changeover of footplate crew was complete the train could depart immediately the signal turned to green. The 'All Clear' signal from the platform inspectors would not therefore be required. In effect it was like changing locomotive crews in a place where a station did not exist.

Our three return trains were due through Crewe at approximately ten minute intervals. The Morecambe train being first, then followed by my Blackpool train and ten minutes behind me would come the Southport train.

It had been a glorious sunny day and we were told that all three trains were full to capacity - this was before the days of the wide ownership of cars and therefore cheap day train excursions were still a very popular day out for the family. They nearly always started from “neighbourhoods” so that it would be a Walsall/Bloxwich train, or Kings Norton train, etc., with many of the passengers having been to the same school, are workmates, use the same pubs, church, etc., i.e. a local family community train.

When we had all signed on duty and received our 'job cards' giving us the detailed train timings, route, etc., we all set off together down the line on the five minute walk to Aston station where we were booked to catch the local train from Sutton Coldfield into Birmingham New St and then travel forward as passengers on the Birmingham to Heysham Boat Train express as far as Crewe.

Our timings would allow us ample time to get to Crewe and connect with our allocated trains. There was to be a twenty minute wait for the first men on the Morecambe train, followed by a ten minute wait for my Blackpool train and a further ten minutes for those working the Southport train.

We all stood about on the platform at Aston waiting for the local train-passing the time in friendly gossip. Eventually we started to become a bit concerned that the local train was running late-quite unusual for this line. The fact that there were no other passengers on the platform awaiting the same train did not concern us because, being a bank holiday, the weekday service became a Sunday service and the changed timetable caused many people to travel by bus instead.

The 'local' hadn't better be too late or we would miss our connection at "New Street."

It was when we realised that there were no station staff around that we decided to go to the porter's room on the opposite platform to see what was causing the hold up. My fireman said he would go and inquire and no sooner had he run down the steps to use the under bridge than he returned saying in a gasp, 'The doors are all locked-the stations closed!!'.

We had gained access to the station by walking along the line from the engine sheds and up the end ramps onto the platform, so by avoiding the main entrance we were not aware of this unusual fact.

Then someone recalled that there had been talk of closing the Sutton line briefly for emergency track work. Who ever had worked out our day's roster had failed to realise this late development and had booked us to ride on a non-existent train.

We needed a phone urgently but as all the staff rooms on the station were locked our nearest railway telephone was the Aston No,2 signal box at the northern end of the opposite platform. We quickly made our way there to get new instructions from Control. We now fully realised that we could not possibly catch the express from New St. But would 'Control' cancel our days work, send us home, and get Crewe men to work our trains through to Birmingham ?

The signalman was most surprised to see us all climbing up his steps and to then walk dirty shoes over his immaculately polished floor. 'We need to phone Control straight away, we hadn't been told the Sutton service was cancelled' said the the driver of the first train. Phone to his ear, hand over the daffodil mouthpiece fixed in its wooden box hanging on the wall, he relayed to us the message that Control said we were to hang on for a while to give them chance to try and send a taxi down to collect us and get us to New St in time to catch the express. The minutes ticked away until it became clear that no taxi could get us to New St in time now.

The only hope was that they would hold the express for us but this was extremely unlikely as it had to fit into a web of timings through other busy junctions as it travelled north to Heysham docks to connect with the ferryboat to Ireland.

Eventually the driver put the phone back on its hook, 'Control' said they couldn't get a taxi in time and they are now going to get onto Crewe to see if they can work the trains forward - we're to stay put and they will come back to us in a few minutes'

The phone rang-the driver snatched it off the hook again - 'Yes, yes', he said, our hopes all rising -'Yes, yes, OK, I'll tell them.'-- 'Control said that they wanted Crewe men to work the trains now because by catching the next express from New St. we would be at least sixty minutes late getting to Crewe and all our three trains would be kept standing blocking the entrance to the station.

'The problem for Crewe is that the sunny weather has meant that stand-by trains have run too and they are having a job finding men to work them back as far as Crewe, let alone working our three trains forward to Birmingham. They will phone us back shortly to let us know what is going to happen'

We all stood around in the signal box considering the various outcomes. Ten or fifteen minutes passed and we wondered what had happened to all the urgency that was required. 'When's Control going to make their mind up-if they'd have wanted us to catch the next train to Crewe they should have said so and at least we could have been catching a bus up to New St-if they aren't careful we will miss the next express too'

The blessed phone again at last 'Yes, they're all still here, yes. O.K. we're on our way' - Well after all that they still want us to work the trains because Crewe haven't got a man to spare. They said to catch the bus to New St and they will hold the next express up for us if we're late, we've got to report to the platform foreman on number five platform when we get there.' We now have difficulty getting access down to the road with the station being locked.

The signalman showed us how to get through his own gate (It's supposed to be locked at all times but if you put your hand through and lift thus it opens-the key got lost during the blitz) and then directs us how to get to the nearest bus stop. (Don't catch a 64c,they go the long way round now, your best bet is a 64b or a Midland Red 115).

We eventually arrive at New St as the train is due to leave and letting the platform foreman know of our safe arrival we all nestle down comfortably, our overalls thick with the grime of honest toil amongst coal and oil, placed upon seats next to receive the spotless dress of some young lady. It's an empty compartment so who's to know? What the eye don't see the heart won't grieve about. At least we have not held this train up.

Later, as we eventually approach Crewe Station through the scissors crisscross of the complex South Junction we could see our three trains over on the far right. Two of them were standing in platforms five and six, and the third one on 'five through'. The train we were on slowed down to a gentle halt but as the platform was on our left and our trains were over on the right, to save time we jumped down the off side onto the track and scrambled over the many lines and single wires and rods to our respective trains. The platform inspector was anxiously pacing to and fro waiting for us-he called over, 'Are all three sets of you there?'. 'right I'll phone South box, get you all right away-trains are queuing up waiting to get in—where the hell have you been. What kept you?'

My train was in platform five - a 'Black Five' engine with ten coaches - within seconds the Crewe men had climbed down from the footplate with nothing to report and I whistled up to let the inspector know I was ready to depart. I wondered in which order the control would have us leave. Common sense said in the order we were booked, but some times, when trains are running late and other priorities arise, the sequence of departures needs to be altered. As I looked ahead of me up along the line I could see for several miles the dead straight lines, four abreast, (reading from left to right, Up Fast, Down Fast, Up Slow, Down Slow). They ran up a gentle gradient towards Betley Bank.

All signals on both fast and slow lines were showing green—I could see possibly four or five pairs of signals ahead, spaced as they were about three quarters of a mile apart. Suddenly, the red signal for the train on platform six turned to green, the Morecambe train, and the first due out - the platform inspector looked back along the train to get the alright signal off the guard and then turned back towards the driver blew his whistle and raised his right hand in the 'Right away' signal. The train slowly pulled out, the driver giving the engine plenty of steam causing the wheels to slip as he tried to get maximum acceleration in his endeavour to pick up some of the lost time.

His train was the same as mine, ten coaches and the same class of loco.

He was going out virtually straight ahead onto the up fast line, which meant, if I was going next, I would probably be going slow line and would have to wait until his last coach had cleared the junction by one coach length before the signalman could change the points over and give me the green signal by which time he would be well ahead and into his stride.

My fireman was putting coal on the fire for all he was worth, preparing for the long climb up the bank, knowing that I intended working the engine very heavily indeed. No sooner had the train in front cleared the junction than my red signal turned green.

I looked back down the platform for the inspector's hand signal - there it was. I now had green signals as far ahead as I could see, the line was all clear for miles, no slow trains ahead to obstruct me, so it was up to me now to see just how fast I could climb the bank. We slowly negotiated the junction, our train snaking over to the right through the many tightly curved crossovers at a little over the maximum speed of 15mph and when I judged the rear coach was now safely on the straight line, the slow up mainline, I tried opening the regulator (throttle) fully - It was very stiff - I put my shoulder under it and pushed it right up and over to its maximum open position and left the reverser (type of gearing) on full travel. As the Morecambe train had not been restricted to the 15mph exit as I had been he was now almost out of sight. I couldn't leave the reverser fully down for long because experience taught us that driven flat out no engine of this class could maintain itself with maximum steam pressure and a boiler full of water for long especially as the speed of the engine increased.

However, I kept the reverser valves open on full travel for a few more minutes and was intrigued at first to find that this engine seemed to be pulling extremely strongly. I wound the reverser back just a few notches as we smartly picked up speed. The barking roar from the chimney exhaust fast becoming spectacular-hurling large cinders into the sky, half hidden in thick black smoke. By now, the steam pressure should normally be starting to fall as I drove the engine flat out, and some would say to excess, but not so!!

The boiler steam pressure gauge needle was not budging from the red line. I could see my mate had already got his exhaust boiler water injector on replacing into the boiler the water/steam I was using extravagantly. The level in the boiler gauge glass showed that we were already down to about a three quarters full boiler. After my mate had finished putting yet more coal into the firebox, I indicated to him-in such noisy conditions spoken words are inaudible unless shouted within inches of the other persons ear. I gesticulated my amazement at the engine's super-strong performance by pointing at the steam pressure gauge and then turning my eyes towards the reverser to show the puzzle of it-working the engine flat out ,now at a speed approaching 50mph,and yet we were still accelerating.

If this had been a Royal Scot loco, with its three cylinders, I could have understood it, but this was a common mixed traffic 'Black Five'-though it's number was new to me, not one I had seen in our division before. The fireman came over and shouted into my ear, 'I know, she's bloody great isn't she, we had her last week, she's a bloody flier, she's from up north somewhere.'

Whatever causes one loco out of a hundred of an identical design to perform so untypically strong I have never found out, but I certainly wasn't going to waste the opportunity to put this one through its paces. I continued thrashing the engine and in spite of being on a severe hill we were still showing slight acceleration and maintaining top boiler pressure, though there was a slight concern now that the boiler water level had fallen to just under half, I saw my mate eyeing the problem too and we exchanged glances -he recognised the quandary I was in.

What should I do? If I eased off the regulator steam ,we would lose speed, if I kept it where it was for very much longer the boiler level would only be kept safely at half full by putting on the second boiler water injector, and this additional cold water would almost certainly of itself reduce the boiler steam pressure.

In the end I decided to risk keeping the regulator steam at the maximum open position but bring the reverser back a few notches and use the second injector which was behind me on my side of the cab.

The fireman knew he couldn't delay any longer using the second injector so came across and turned it on, hanging his head out over the side to observe the waste/overflow pipe behind the engine step to see that it was picking up all the water correctly.

He returned to his shovel and continued piling coal into the hungry firebox, and still the boiler pressure held up. Here we were, climbing a fairly steep long hill, engine flat out, both water injectors on and the loco flying like the wind. Whereas most 'black fives' in this situation would be slapping about in the axle boxes, banging and clanging, vibrating roughly, this loco was extremely sound and tight - how exciting she was to drive.

By now we had completed the straight line section and were negotiating the long series of bends that would eventually bring us out onto the level at the top of the hill where we would pick up water over the troughs that ran for a quarter of mile, between the lines, at Whitmore. But what was this I could see ahead as we rounded yet one more tight curve in the deep cutting towards Madeley?, 'It was a faint show of smoke; it could only mean one thing, we were catching up our mates on the fast line, the Morecambe train.

I shouted and pointed ahead to my fireman - he picked up the same message as me, and instinctively knew what we were going to try and do-have a race and see if we could pass the others.

I dropped the reverser down a few notches, as much as I dare, without lowering the boiler level below its current half-full level. Sure enough, as we got round the next curve there ahead of us was the tail lamp on the rear coach of our quarry. Bit by bit we reduced the difference until eventually we had got level with the rear coach. We were now passing slowly past each window of the other train as the passengers looked back out of their compartments at us in amazement. One by one we overhauled each coach of the Morecambe train until we had got up to the tender of their loco.

Suddenly, I saw the die blocks go down outside on his reverser. This meant the driver had at last heard me approaching and had made a decision that he was not going to have me pass him and had dropped his reverser gear down to increase his acceleration. However, it takes some time for the engine to respond to the increased steam pressure to the cylinders and in the meanwhile we had drawn level with their cab as we all waved across at each other in determined ways-each intending that we would be the winners. Dead ahead lay the water troughs of Whitmore, the top of the hill, and suddenly, just at the point where our engine had passed theirs by a short head, the injector on my side shot off, a barrage of steam emitting from the overflow pipe. I jumped to and tried fiddling with it to get it to operate again, but to no avail. These second injectors are rarely used and accordingly seem to get gunged up with hardened water scale and consequently prone to breaking down.

Worse was to come, the boiler level gauge glass was now showing only one inch of water covering the boiler crown, once we had gone over the troughs and started going down the other side of the hill it would be even more dangerous as the water in the boiler would surge forwards. If the boiler crown becomes dry and exposed for only seconds, a fusible lead plug melts allowing the boiler steam to enter the fire and hopefully extinguish the fire before the copper firebox distorts and the boiler explodes.

What to do? I had no real choice but to ease back on the regulator and allow our train to slow down while we tried to get the second injector working again and build up the boiler water to a safer level. As we ran over the troughs, we were already slowing down slightly. Our two cabs were side by side again as the firemen operated the handles to drop the water pick-up scoop into the trough. I signalled to the other driver the reason we were forced to fall back, by pointing down at the steam emitted from behind my steps. He knew it was all up with us and laughed victoriously.

We ran off the other end of the troughs with a full tender of water but the boiler water level bobbing about in the bottom of the glass, at times disappearing from view. And to the pleasure of the passengers in the other train waving at us in our despondency as they now in their turn passed us one compartment at a time. Of course, they thought their driver had accelerated away from us, they thought they were winning the race, not aware that it was us that was losing it.

By the time we reached Stableford their train was almost out of sight, but at last we had managed to get the second injector working again and as soon as there was an inch of water in the glass I decided to have a go at catching them again. Given that the two injectors would remain on I knew I could pound hell out of this engine and she would run like a Duchess. On to the straight and level track at Standon Bridge and once more I could see smoke in the distance and slowly we crept up on their train again, but now I was faced with a dilemma. They were on the fast line with a maximum speed of 90mph, whereas I was on the slow line-the freight line-restricted to 75mph, I was already doing over that and catching up on them but the problem was going round the tight bend at Norton Bridge and over the junction where a line goes off to Stoke and Manchester. What was I to do? Ease off and take the bend at just a little over the speed limit or keep her going and stand a good chance of passing them?

The additional fact to consider was that I knew from experience that if we could pass him at Norton Bridge and be the first to touch Stafford Signalbox's 'Train on Track' detector, then we stood every chance of being given the priority through Stafford to enter the one-line track first upto Wolverhampton. Stafford box was miles away and the signaller could not see what was going on, blindly they depended on their track layout board that showed up a red marker light as each train passed over detectors in the track. The crucial one I was aiming for was the first one that operated on the boundary changeover just about half a mile south of Norton Bridge signalbox.

'Stuff it,' I thought, 'we will stay in the race!'

Rounding the first part of the sprawling 'S' bend prior to Norton Bridge I had caught up with their rear coach and once again passed him compartment at a time, smiling broadly to all the passengers I had now seen for the third time. Most of them recognised we were all in a race together and many took sides, either cheering me on, or resigning to their losing fate, some fathers even leaning out of the door windows with their young children cheering us on. As we approached the last curve of the 'S' bend it was our turn to be on the inside. I caught up with their loco but this time their driver did not alter his reverser settings. This class of engine did not have speedometers so we had to use our experience to judge the speed - not easily done at high speed on a wildly bucking footplate. As we passed their cab the driver's face registered concern and alarm as I hurtled by on the inside of the bend, both locos leaning to the right into the curve on the heavily canted track. Passing through Norton Bridge station the line ahead straightens up and, as I expected and hoped, he had not been given the green signal - his priority timings meant nothing here-it was first come first served. Both our sets of signals sequenced down through double yellow, yellow and reds as far as you could see.

Usually the first one to strike the electric indicator midway between the double yellow and single yellow would gain first acceptance by Stafford signal box to become first onto the Wolverhampton line. I kept the regulator open until the last minute, determined to remain my, by now, coach length in front, gambling that I would get the red signal to clear to all greens and thereby avoiding the necessity of heavy braking to bring the train to a standstill in time. Pass that signal at red and you would be for the 'very high jump'. Silently the red on my gantry flicked into green and all my signals as far as the eye could see automatically flipped over to green. All his remained on red! It was his turn to make an emergency brake stop.

That was it, I had won! He could not pass me now. I carried on driving as fast as possible up the incline through Four Ashes and leaving the regulator open as we negotiated the tight right hand junction at Bushbury and up to Wolverhampton High Level.

After the briefest of stops we were off again flying along the Stour Valley line all signals in our favour and eventually arrived in New St. doing the journey in my fastest time ever with a steam loco.

We were First-the 'winners'.

Once the passengers had decanted and all the carriage doors closed we were signalled out and down to Vauxhall Duddeston Road station where we unhooked from our train on the fast line, leaving our coaches to be taken back to the carriage cleaning sheds by the shunting engine while we carried on to Aston Shed where we stabled our wonderful loco on the 'Firedroppers' road. Still hyped up on adrenalin from our successful 'once in a lifetime' race we booked off but instead of both going straight home we couldn't resist going into the messroom to do a bit of crowing. Relaying the entire story to those enginemen sitting about waiting for their trains. After about twenty minutes the other half of the race came, and in answer to the many questions regarding, 'Is it right what young Johnah says (I was 24years old) about you losing the race and you being on the fast line and you a top link man?' etc., He replied in a most vexatious manner, that it had never been a race and what's more, Jones had behaved stupidly in going as fast as he did round Norton Bridge curve.

And that wonderful engine, that fantastic 'Black Five'? I never saw or heard of her again-she had been spirited away back to her home up North- and it was just as though it had been an engine I had known only in a dream.

• • • • • *The End* • • • • •