

## **Post 1960 working of the SMJ route.**

Sunday working was enabled to clear backlogs and was the only day that scarce signal men working overtime could be spared for the SMJ route. By the early sixties the attraction of high wages in the booming factories of Coventry and Birmingham had made a great impact on railway staff levels with many of the generation who had joined immediately after WW2 voting with their feet! The remaining men were older true railway men whose ranks were diminishing.

The heavy goods traffic that traditionally used the SMJ route in the fifties was almost exclusively concerned with connecting the steelworks of Sheffield and the north east with the furnaces and rolling mills of South Wales. Trains would be comprised of the slowest moving vehicles then in use, this was due to braking considerations and great skill was needed by the crews particularly over an undulating route such as the SMJ. They would come down from the north along the Great Central main line and turn onto the SMJ at Woodford West Junc. The Sheffield men and usually the engine would change at Woodford before the run through to Stratford. The trains ran through to Broom Junc where by virtue of a chord line (East to West) put in during WW2 they were directed onto the former Midland Railway route through Evesham, Ashchurch, Gloucester and on to South Wales. About halfway between Woodford and Stratford the SMJ line crossed the ex GWR Paddington – Birmingham main line on an over bridge at Fenny Compton. Due to the complex railway politics of earlier years there was no practical connection between the two routes apart from a short kickback siding in the yard although they ran parallel for around a mile. Each line had its own signal box and staff belonging to two different regions of BR! Just to the south of Fenny Compton on the GW line were extensive interchange sidings to tranship iron ore from the quarries of the Oxfordshire Ironstone Co into trains to take them to South Wales. The traditional route for this traffic was to head north through Fenny Compton and Leamington Spa and diverge west at Hatton station to run down through Stratford GW and on to Cheltenham and South Wales. These were also slow moving trains and even though the GW route was provided with regular loops to ease traffic problems these iron ore trains often slowed the progress of important express trains. The climb out of Warwick towards Hatton was on a stiff gradient and a banking engine was provided at Warwick to assist freight trains as far as Hatton. In the late fifties British Railways had embarked on implementing their 1955 Modernisation Plan. One of the flagship schemes of this was to electrify the West Coast Mainline between Euston and Scotland. In order to enable this to take place as quickly as possible it was decided that for the duration of the work between Euston and Birmingham New Street most of the London – Birmingham traffic would be transferred to the former GW route between Paddington and Snow Hill. For a few years the GW route would be carrying even more express passenger trains than ever before and the problems of fitting in the iron ore movements from Fenny Compton to Hatton graduated from a problem to a nightmare. Co-incidentally the steel billet traffic between Sheffield and South Wales was going through a period of growth.

In order to resolve the forgoing operating difficulties it was decided to spend a considerable sum on upgrading the line between Fenny Compton and Stratford so that the iron ore traffic could use that route together with the increased number of steel billet trains coming in from Woodford. During 1959 the layout at Fenny Compton was completely restyled into a modern interconnecting junction between the two routes, a new signalbox replaced the two older ones. The former station locations at Burton Dassett, Kineton and Ettington had their

passing loops extended and long & short token section instruments with greater operating flexibility were installed. The track was relaid with new heavy quality material for much of the route and the former platforms at the wayside stations were dug out and angled back in order to provide clearance for outside cylindered ex GWR locos. The route forward from Stratford via Broom and Ashchurch was not judged suitable for upgrading with the potential expense of renewing two bridges, across the river Arrow at Broom and the Avon near Evesham. The condition of the whole infrastructure of the Broom – Evesham section was very poor. So it was at Stratford Old Town that the biggest upheaval of all took place. The bridge over the Avon was strengthened (for the second time in its life) and at a point just past the signal box where the Broom line started to climb over the GW line and towards Luddington a brand new double track chord was constructed turning left across the meadow and joining the GW line at a new junction just south of the Racecourse Platforms.

The Old Town yard was reduced in capacity with many sidings removed or just disconnected awaiting the scrap men. The original connecting line to the GW turning north from Old Town and joining up at S M Junc was reduced to single track. In order to control this new layout a brand new signal box was built alongside the existing small box at Evesham Road. This location was dictated by the need for the signalman to observe the level crossing. When all the works were commissioned the old Evesham Road Box, S M Junction Signal Box and Stratford on Avon (Old Town Station) Box were taken out of use. By virtue of a modern installation Evesham Road now controlled all movements over the former GW line between Milcote and Stratford West Box and from Clifford Sidings to the new junction on the SMJ route. The line between Old Town and Broom closed completely at the same time. In the hurry to get all these works operational a number of things occurred that made little economic sense. When the engine shed had closed the turntable was retained because the ex LMS locos that historically used the line were of the tender rather than tank engine type. The loco working the pick up goods normally turned on it once a day and because of this when the new track was put in a fresh connection was made to the old turntable from the new down running line on the chord. Access to it was by a lever frame released from the new box. In reality of course the new layout formed a triangle of lines all controlled by one signal man and from the day the new box opened every time it was necessary to turn an engine rather than go through the procedure involved to access the turntable, including the manual pushing around of the locomotive, they would simply be run round each face of the triangle and sent back the way they had come but facing the opposite direction. I never saw or heard of the turntable being used after the new works opened apart from an occasional test carried out by the PW men turning a Wickham trolley! so that installation was a waste of money. There had never been a turntable at the GW shed as most of the local trains used tank engines but once the facility to turn was available at Old Town any tender engines needing to turn at Stratford were sent down there rather than go north to turn on the nearest available GW triangle of lines at Hatton. Apart from these engine movements it was not anticipated that there would ever be much traffic using the “old route” from Old Town through to the GW at the former site of S M Junc. In order to save on equipment space in the new Evesham Road box the junction in Old Town yard to access the “old route” was also controlled by a small lever frame released from Evesham Road once the loco crew had phoned the signalman to ask him to unlock the levers (electrically). It was this lever frame that had the honour of being the only installation ever to officially bear the Old Town name.

It had an impressive pressed alloy nameplate that read "Stratford upon Avon Old Town Exchange G F"

The works were more or less complete by the spring of 1960 and the opening was scheduled for the start of the summer timetable. A number of special trips were laid on for enginemen based at Woodford and Gloucester to come and inspect the new route so that they would be familiar with the revised layout, in particular the location of the line side telephones that allowed them to communicate with Evesham Road Box. The Woodford crews turned up in LNE class L1 tank locos hauling three or four brake vans! It was then very unusual for a signaller to be so remote from the junction that his box controlled. In earlier times this work would have warranted a box at the Junction itself near the end of the Racecourse Platform as well as having to retain the existing Evesham Road box but instead economics dictated that the lone signaller could only observe the progress of trains from Clifford Sidings over the new chord on the illuminated track diagram above his levers. It was also unique at the time in being the only mechanical signal installation in the UK where the signaller was not able to observe whether or not the rear vehicle of each train (on the SMJ route) was carrying a tail lamp and therefore complete. The illuminated diagram and the provision of run away trap points at the Racecourse Junction were considered sufficient protection as the SMJ route was freight only. Complex electrical interlocks protected much of the installation and as these were actuated by track circuit there was often a problem if the SMJ route had been little used for a few days because of rust on the railhead.

The traffic over the "renewed" SMJ was very healthy and for a couple of years the facilities performed the job that they had been designed for until the summer of 1963 when the labour shortage that had blighted the railways for years suddenly became a crisis. A combination of leavers, retirements, lack of recruits and summer holidays for those that were left meant that there were simply not enough signallers available to man the boxes between Fenny Compton and Clifford Sidings and because of shortages at more important locations particularly on the Banbury - Leamington main line the few men that were available for the SMJ line were transferred elsewhere. The line was not open for traffic at critical periods but because of contractual obligations to keep the furnaces of South Wales supplied the iron ore traffic was still sent out. On the busiest summer Saturdays during 1963 the slow moving ore trains had no choice but to take their old path via Hatton and cause operating problems to the busy main line through Leamington Spa. The investment in upgrading the SMJ had been defeated by a lack of manpower! The empty iron ore trains coming north but now proceeding straight through the Racecourse Platforms at Stratford and on up the bank to take the Leamington route at Bearley West added to the summer operating problems. It was an almost masochistic act for an empty class H goods train to appear amongst the returning holiday trains on a summer Saturday afternoon but appear they did causing great distress to an already overloaded system!

After the summer of 1963 and throughout 1964 the SMJ route was open for traffic whenever there were enough signallers available. At times the line returned to its nocturnal role of earlier years with the traffic being passed during one twelve hour period between 10pm and 10am. In the true tradition of railway service the remaining men that worked these extended shifts were mainly older employees whose loyalty to the job was part of a tradition that stretched back to Victorian times. The final demise of the route came with no warning at all when early in 1965 senior BR regional management announced that the line had closed. The reason given was that the steel industry had withdrawn their

custom from the Oxfordshire Ironstone Co because it was now cheaper to import Spanish ore of better quality via the South Wales docks. The decision came as such a surprise to local railway managers that they had no plan in place to supervise an orderly shut down of the line's infrastructure. At first it appeared that the "closure" might be temporary. With experienced men in short supply it was ironic that management decided to instruct the signalmen to attend their boxes to test the instruments regularly in order to prevent deterioration and vandalism although they had no trains to handle. This arrangement lasted a few weeks and during that time the final official train movement over the line was a trip by the Stratford banking engine as far as Clifford Sidings Box to convey a churn of fresh water to the signalman there. A hastily arranged "farewell" enthusiast passenger train was the last train to use the section of line between Old Town and Burton Dassett on April 24th 1965 by which time the rails were red with rust and the railway that had survived against many odds since 1864 really was finally gone for good.