

Here Comes British Railways by J Crosse

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Few people like change and the coming of British Railways on 1st January 1948 must have been viewed with considerable apprehension by the workers and management of the Big Four railway companies.

The big railway companies had provided a genuine life support system for their staff, especially in the big centres where housing, schools and institutes had been built by the employers. What was going to happen now? Would state ownership mean 'all change' or 'steady as she goes'?

With hindsight we can see that for the first few years virtually nothing changed in respect of the motive power, the services or the infrastructure. Yes, services did improve, but this was more a function of the recovery from the second world war than any directing hand from above. The rural branch line and the seaside excursions continued as before and it seems doubtful if the average railway worker noticed anymore differences than the colour of his cap badge and the liveries carried by the engines and carriages.

It is taught on management courses that good communication is vital in keeping the staff 'on side' when changes do take place and thus The British Transport Commission produced, in November 1947, a small document to inform senior management about what would happen on 1 January 1948.

This had the wordy title 'Memorandum for the Information and Guidance of All Officers and Staff of the Main Line Railways as to The Procedure During the Period Beginning January 1st 1948'.

Firstly it dealt with ownership stating that the Main Line Railways and other undertakings specified in Part I of the Third Schedule of the Transport Act 1947 would be vested in the British Transport Commission.

Under Section 5 of the same act the Commission was able to delegate its powers to the Railway Executive to manage, maintain and operate the system on its behalf, the Executive thus becoming the employer of all officers and staff of the railway undertakings.

The memorandum then went on to set out the regional structure that would apply from 1st January but mentioning that changes and adjustments would take place as the organisation developed. Whilst the Southern and Western Regions would see no change of boundaries the Eastern and Midland would lose part of their empire. Whilst the North Eastern was essentially just perpetuating a former LNER district it would have been the creation of a Scottish region that might have led to the most apprehension or joy, depending on one's point of view. It could either be seen as having to work with 'the enemy' or the establishment of 'home rule' for Scottish railways. Each region was placed under the general supervision of a Chief Regional Officer. These officers, together with the Chief Departmental Officers would be advised of their responsibilities in due course by the Railway Executive.

A number of 'minor and joint lines' were also involved at nationalisation, but clearly these individual situations had not been thought through as the memo simply said that detailed instructions would be issued later.

All potential BR staff were advised that their bosses, lines of communication and responsibilities would remain unchanged for the foreseeable future.

The ancillary activities of the railway companies were however affected by the change with things such as hotels and shipping services being retained under the management of the Railway Executive.

Of most importance to the employees were arrangements for their pay! The leaflet went on to advise that in respect of Superannuation, Pension and other Provident Funds there would not be any change in the short term. However any applications previously made to the Directors of these funds would in future have to be made to the Railway Executive.

Conciliation Procedures were to remain unchanged with authority being in the hands of regional management. Specific mention was made of the two new regions where it was clearly stated that any existing arrangement would remain in place until a new agreement could be reached with the unions. It could be imagined that this made life a little complicated in Scotland where it was likely that LMS and LNER procedures would have differed. Now management would have to work with both systems until they could sort out one unified way of doing things.

Instructions were given on how documents should be headed, this being 'The Railway Executive' followed by the appropriate regional title. The memo went on 'In the interests of economy this alteration will generally be effected upon existing stationery, so long as supplies are available, by means of overprinting if possible'.

The memo concluded with a personal message to all staff from Cyril Hurcomb who was chairman of the commission and Eustace Missenden (Chairman of the Railway Executive). This read:-

The Commission and the Railway Executive fully appreciate the difficulties which Railway Men and Women of all grades are experiencing in the operation of the railways in this time of stringency and stress. They know that magnificent work is being done and will continue to be done by all sections of the staff to serve the travelling public, and to meet the needs of industry. Railway Men and Women are rightly proud of the great traditions built up by their Companies in the past. The Commissions and the Railway Executive desire not merely to maintain those traditions, but to strengthen and unite them under British Railways.

As soon as the new regions started operation they had to ensure that life went on 'as usual' and in the first days of January 1948 the North Eastern Region issued its 'General Notices' leaflet No.1. Most of the contents of this eight page document concerned amendments to the working timetable such as an update to the services on the Harrogate to Pateley Bridge line. The revision showed four trains daily in each direction with Harrogate departures at 9.5a.m. 12.25 p.m. (SX) or 1.25 p.m. (SO), 5.35 p.m and 7.20 p.m. with trains from Pateley Bridge at 8.12 a.m., 10.27 a.m.,

1.17 p.m. (SX) or 2.15 p.m. (SO) and 6.22 p.m. All trains called at all stations except the final train from Harrogate which did not stop at Ripley Valley.

Naturally in an organisation of its size things could get lost although quite how passenger barrows went walk about is a mystery but the notice requested the return of five such items. These were described as 'wheel 2115' which was required at York Passenger, 'wheel J26' for Hull stables (was this really a wheel barrow for the horse muck?) 'luggage 3032' for Wetherby Station, 'platform 4463' for Newcastle accounts and 'platform 4179' for Hunmnaby passenger. Wagons also went 'awol' and despite the new regime these were listed against their original owner's name. LMS van 283094 had been missing since September 25th 1947 and GWR van 48223 since October 11th. Both were required to be sent to Oakington near Cambridge.

The notice advised (apparently as a matter of routine) the random numbers that were used to indicate the validity of weekly season tickets with each week's issue displaying a different number e.g. w/c 10th January carried the number 21 whilst w/c 17th carried 80. Clearly these were intended to prevent forgery as the user would not know which number was allocated to which week. Booking clerks were instructed to ensure that purchasers must sign their ticket in ink or indelible pencil. Ticket collectors were also instructed to try to retain the season tickets at the end of their validity. All expired season tickets were to be sent to the Passenger Audit Office.

Under the heading of 'Payment of Wages' attention was drawn to 'a practice prevailing at certain stations' this being that the Railway Executive's representative, in paying the wages to an individual, had been withholding certain coins and subsequently handed these to a collector for a local fund to which the employee had agreed to subscribe. The note went on 'Such procedures must cease as the Railway Executive is bound to pay each individual the net amount of wages shewn (sic) on the paybill and the officer discharging that paybill certifies that the amount has, in fact, been handed to the individual concerned.

Subscriptions to the local fund concerned should be collected from the individual by the representative of the fund without interference with Railway Executive's pay procedure'.

On a similar subject was an item headed 'Railway Benevolent Institution Casualty Fund, 1948'. The item noted that a collection for this fund was being made. A one shilling (5p) subscription would secure payment so 3/6 (17.5p) per week in the event of disablement due to an accident up to a maximum pay out of £5. There was also a payment of £5 to the widow of a member killed in service or £3 to the widow if death was by natural causes during the year of membership. Details of, and payments to, the scheme were via the station master or Goods Agent.

As a final item details were given of awards made under the 1947 Best Kept Stations scheme, all the stations listed being in the new North Eastern Region area. 15 stations were awarded a First Class Prize of £5. There seemed to be a slight difference in the challenge in that the winners included Dinsdale, a small station on the Middlesbrough

to Darlington line, and Hull Paragon. In theory at least keeping Dinsdale spick and span must have been much easier than dealing with the sprawling Hull station.

50 Second Class prizes of £4 were awarded. Quite who received the prize is not known, but if it was distributed amongst the staff then those who had a share in the Newcastle Central payout would not have got many pints of Newcastle Brown Ale.

No fewer than 156 stations featured in the third prize list and received a reward of £3 whilst finally 46 stations received a Certificate of Commendation and here the likes of Fangfoss (on the Market Weighton –Stamford Bridge line)and Foggathorpe (between Market Weighton and Selby) rubbed shoulders with the mighty York.

No doubt in the years to come there would be some momentous news items appearing alongside the trivia of everyday life but we might have to wait a while to uncover the relevant issue of 'General Notices'.

The fact that a copy exists at all is clearly a breach of regulations as at the top of the very first page states 'This Circular is for the use of the Railway Executive's servants only and should be handed in at your station or depot when finished with- Save All Waste Paper. Perhaps recycling is not such a modern phenomenon after all.