

FEBRUARY, 1938 — AYTON

In February, 1938 I secured promotion to the post of Station Master at Ayton (Berwickshire). My start here was just a little difficult both with the office work and the condition of the Station House and surrounding grounds as my predecessor had done a 'moonlight' flitting. The grounds had been well laid out with shrubs, hedges and trees but had obviously been neglected over the years. It took months of spare time work to clear the unwanted growths, etc., before a desirable appearance was obtained.

I took a lot of trouble in sowing out a patch of the large garden to form a lawn, and in the latter stages found need for a heavy roller. We had one at the local cricket ground and one day I accompanied our motor driver, tied the roller to the rear of the lorry and towed it a mile along the main road to the station causing a lot of noise—and comment. On the odd occasion when I fly past the place in a train I feel a tinge of pride to see the lawn is still in fairly good condition after 35 years.

I experienced my first 'do-it-yourself' sweeping of chimneys from underneath. On an afternoon off duty I obtained the requisite brush and canes from the local Coal Merchant. My wife stood by as I screwed in cane after cane which I kept on pushing up but not counting. At length I asked her to go outside to see if anything had appeared up top. She returned laughing to say the brush was waving in the sky about 6 feet above the chimney can.

There was a 4-storey 'Granary' building in the Goods Yard which provided us with a deal of work. The ground floor was used as a Store for Silcock's Animal Feeding Stuffs. My staff performed all the storage work, I kept the clerical records, and our station lorry delivered daily orders over a very wide radius. We were the Agents for J. & W. Henderson's cement and lime which was also stored on the same floor.

The upper floors were unused prior to the outbreak of war, but from 1940 they were used to store Oats and Baled Hay for railway Cartage Department as an alternative to Portobello stores. These traffics were hoisted by means of an endless outside chain, and we all suffered sore hands and arms as a result. We were also called on to store emergency rations for the district on behalf of the Ministry of Food—corned beef, biscuits and condensed milk.

In October, 1939 we had been home for a short holiday at Ladybank and when returning our train was stopped at Dalgety—between Aberdour and Inverkeithing. There was much activity by 'planes in the air, but we were given no reason for the delay. On crossing the Forth Bridge we noticed all the crew lined up intently on the deck of a destroyer but thought little of it. On leaving Dalmeny I overheard a conversation of passengers who had just joined the train and asked if there had been some word of enemy 'planes, only to be told then of the attack on the Bridge and shipping which they had witnessed. When we got back to Ayton the staff were disappointed we couldn't give any first hand details, as they had watched a crippled Heinkel hedge-hopping across country and out to sea over Eyemouth in the afternoon.

Another wartime experience at Ayton was when a 'plane just in off the sea dropped a stick of five bombs. One landed in a railway embankment and another beside the main

road to Berwick. The result was both road and rail were closed to all traffic for the day—a Saturday. An emergency road service was instituted by a side road passing close by the station and up over the hill. Clouds of dust. A bomb disposal squad extricated the bomb from the railway line, took it to Coldingham Moor and detonated it there with a terrific bang ringing around the countryside.

When the evacuation scheme was introduced a trainload of children from Edinburgh and Portobello was directed to the East Coast area. There was much speculation among the housewives the previous evening as to who they were likely to have billeted on them. My wife was to get a mother and daughter. It was pathetic to see the strange children and some mothers alighting from the train and being directed to a fenced-off corner of a field with identification labels round their necks. Numbers expected were not fully realised, and we got nobody.

Up to the outbreak of the second war we had a good cricket team at Ayton—Ayton Castle by name. My love of the game which started more than 15 years earlier at Dunbog, Fife was rekindled. Captain of the team was a big jovial fellow, Campbell Burn, and I was appointed Vice-Captain. We played with some good clubs—Manderston, Berwick and district. etc. I thought I had achieved the height of fame with two mentions for bowling in the “Berwickshire News” in the weekly “men of mark” section. On two occasions we felt real proud to have an England ex-professional in our team—Tom Shepherd of Surrey. Remember? — Hobbs, Sandham, Shepherd, Strudwick, etc. He came on holiday to visit a relative- my signalman, John Henderson. After Ayton I had only one more serious game of cricket at Jedburgh—Old versus Young. I was in the Old team. I had a surprise just 3 or 4 years ago when an Ayton man, Ramsay Turner, called on me in St. Andrews to say Ayton Village people were trying to raise funds for a new Playing Field. They had unearthed an old Bank Passbook of Ayton Castle Club with a little money still at credit showing my name as Joint Treasurer, and required my signature to have the cash transferred.

When first I went to Ayton Mrs Muriel Liddel-Grainger, a widow, was the occupant of Ayton Castle. She was a breeder of ponies and we had fairly regular despatches from her. However about 1938/39 she married Sir Malcolm Barclay-Harvey and as he had been appointed to a high government post in New South Wales they departed for Australia leaving the Castle temporarily vacant. There was an auction sale of some ponies and the retained balance were sent to their estate at Dinnet, Aberdeenshire, with a number of despatches by rail.

Result of this development was that The Esdaile School for Ministers’ Daughters, etc., was evacuated from Edinburgh to the Castle for the duration of World War II, which caused quite a stir at our small station and gave a welcome boost to the revenue. At vacation times the school secretary provided advance lists of booking and luggage requirements. No snags were experienced once we had all the necessary fares quoted from headquarters.

Late one evening my wife and I stood on Ayton station bridge and listened to the unmistakable drone of enemy aircraft passing high overhead, having apparently just come in from seawards. We knew something special was afoot, but of course could not guess. It was the night of the big Clydebank raid.

Each night—Monday to Friday—a spectacle was the line-up of 7 or 8 fish merchants' vans from Eyemouth awaiting the arrival of the 8 p.m. train, which conveyed their daily supplies of fish—mainly filleted haddock—from Aberdeen.

When the train arrived in the platform, 2 or 3 merchants entered the van and handed out dozens of boxes to their counterparts on the platform for loading to barrows. All the porter had to do was gather in the empty barrows after they departed. While awaiting the train these men related many interesting—some tall—tales of fishing days at sea.

This particular train was always referred to as “The Mail”. Apart from officially ‘named’ trains it was a common practice to have such local names the origin of which was sometimes rather obscure. For instance the 2.15 p.m. passenger train Dundee to Edinburgh via the Fife Coast was known all along the line as “The Hawick”, and a local Goods train—10.20 a.m. Dundee to Ladybank —was referred to as “The Ferry Goods.”

My signalman was named John Henderson, sorely troubled with arthritis by the time I knew him. A lasting friendship developed between his family and mine which still continues. The same applies to Alex. Edwards and his family. Alex. was head gardener at Ayton Castle, and a keen member of the cricket club. Now retired, he lives near Perth. Ayton signal box was only operated on a middle of the day turn, and at other times the signals were left at “clear” position.

Late one Friday evening a train stopped unexpectedly and the driver called at my house to inform me one signal was showing an improper light. Going to the site I clambered up the 45 feet iron ladder in inky darkness to find the Green aspect glass had been shattered. Returning to the station I procured a small green flag, got my wife to sew tapes to its corners, went back to the signal post and tied the flag in position to indicate the proper colour. The Hampden Football International was due to be played next day and I was aware a number of special trains were booked to pass during the night. All went well—no further delays. I returned to remove the flag before the signal box reopened.

A big disruption to traffic was caused one foggy evening when a south-bound Goods train had a vehicle derailed in its middle- ordinary 3 link couplings were in use.

A farmer telephoned me at the station to say he had been in his fields, heard a mighty clanging of buffers then silence except for the sound of an engine blowing off steam, but his view was limited by the fog. On investigating I found the Up Main line blocked by the derailed vehicle, ordered the breakdown crane and arranged emergency working on the Down Main. The impact burst open a van door and dislodged a hogshead of beer which careered down the 50 foot high Millerton embankment into a field. We retrieved it 2 or 3 days later by station lorry. You can read more regarding this same embankment in connection with the part it featured in the big Border Floods of 1948. The findings of subsequent investigation on this mishap were that when passing through Reston station one trailing coupling slightly longer than normal had struck the sleepered barrow- way between platforms, bounced up and knocked the coupling in use off the hook thus dividing the train. The front portion gained ground running in the Section but when slowed by braking to negotiate the curve before

approaching Ayton the rear portion gained sufficient momentum to crash into the leading portion derailing one vehicle.



Ayton, with Granary (right background) 1938.