

Fragmented History.

Historians may often record the work and deeds of persons long dead and usually never even met, but all of my recordings are a first hand account with well documented, clear cut evidence.

Prior to World War II, Bacup was a mess, but its population included many with a heart of pure gold who were more than willing to share their last penny with any less fortunate being.

A problem that does not seem to be dealt with today is bullying, yet it scarcely existed in wartime Bacup for one clear reason, the teachers knew very well that children with older brothers and sisters at the same school had no problems at all, so in due course any child that was being bullied; was discreetly provided with a very capable substitute. And I clearly remember that when one new boy. Kenneth Pilling was being bullied in the schoolyard at St Saviours Junior School, the Head Master Mr Thornley and Teacher Mr Gaskell observed their experimental endeavours through the school windows, there was a slight bump, the bully was left sitting in the middle of the yard sobbing, and the teachers then left the scene unattended, to finish their lunch.

At the same school the wonderful Everett sisters and several other older girls, were used to mothering their own siblings, and they just carried on at school as they did at home, and from first hand experience of their support and protection, I can belatedly say, "Thank you Girls.!"

One fact not generally known was that the Bacup immigrants included the descendants of European aristocracy; in this instance the Burkes of Bacup; and herewith a little story of never to be forgotten "Tommy Burke"

"The progenitor of the Burkes in Ireland" was "William de Burgh"; the brother of Hubert de Burgh, Justifier of England, and the second most powerful man in the Kingdom next to the King himself, and it was Hubert who actually helped to draft the Magna-Carta at Runnymede.

A glance in the direction of the history of the Irish settlers in the Valley suggests that many were of French blood with forefathers who were actually trained mercenaries. First they were the Crusaders loyal to King Richard, and later to William the Conqueror who rewarded them with almost the whole of the West Coast of Ireland, Doon Castle itself actually belonged to my own ancestors, who with the closely related Burkes; tenant farmed County Mayo and other lands of the Western Area.

Tommy Burke.

Early one morning, four of us went by passenger train to Newton Heath; there was Edwin Ashford, Tommy Burke and myself, the other one was probably Jimmy Brown. We were all about eighteen years of age, except for Tommy who was about twenty –six; he looked much more mature than the rest of us' although Edwin was actually the most senior of the little group. On arrival at Newton Heath Shed, we all reported to the shed foreman and I was told, "Go into the mess-room, team up with Joe Kinaryly and work the Oldham Road shunting pilot." On going into the crowded mess-room filled with both pipe and cigarette smoke, there was a deadly silence as I said very politely, "Which of you is Mr Kinaryly please?"

There were a few sly grins, and a thin, sour looking driver of about fifty years of age gave a grunt that may have been of recognition and then he walked straight passed me, and I followed on behind. "What a day I am going to have" were my foremost thoughts, well endorsed when I saw the engine? It was one of those fussy little saddle tanks with no room at all to work in. Most of the available footplate space was taken up with the coal, because there was no bunker, or indeed anywhere else to store it.

After about an hour of boring shunting, and moving wagons about all over the sidings with no conversation at all from Joe, the penny finally dropped. At every request from the shunter's regarding the work, there came the reply, "I can hardly do this, or I can hardly do that." What on earth his name really was, I never did find out. The other lads had been allocated very similar jobs, and they were also shunting away in nearby sidings on the other side of the main line at the top of Miles Platting Bank, but of Tommy there was no sign at all. Then one after another we saw him on the main line, and he was actually driving a gigantic Black Five.

He drove past us in fine style, with his hand on the regulator of the giant locomotive that was far bigger and more powerful than anything based at our own shed, although we had worked them quite often on Control Orders in and out of Yorkshire. He acknowledged us mere mortals with a cheeky blast on the engine whistle. And with a roar from the chimney top, and the clatter of wheels from the empty wagon train behind him he was gone. We had to wait until the following morning for his story and here it is. Like us he had reported to the Shed Foreman, and Tommy had said, "I am one of the spare men sent here on loan, have you a job for me yet?" The foreman said, "Yes there is an empty wagon train going into Yorkshire, can you do it?" Tommy replied with his usual confidence, "Certainly can." The foreman then said, "Team up with one of our men, he is getting the engine ready, so you should get on your way pretty quickly."

Tommy was directed to his engine and he greeted his new mate, a young man of about his own age, possibly a little bit older. It was a common practice for compatible engine crews to share the duties, and to work together. Some times the driver would do the fireman's work and allow an experienced fireman to drive under his supervision. These two got on like a house on fire, and soon everything was done, the steel monster was oiled, the coal was stacked and made safe so that none would fall off, fire irons and tools checked, and the tender filled to the top with water.

The sanders were filled with sand, checked and working, ash pan clean, smoke box checked and empty, and finally, the footplate cleaned, oiled over and polished, these two most certainly knew their job. The fire was bright and clean, there was a good head of steam, the boiler was three quarters full of water and now they were ready to go. "OK mate, the signal is off, take her away when you are ready," said the Newton Heath man. "What a great bloke," thought Tommy as he grew another inch, and he gave the usual warning whistle before opening the regulator and moving off. Away they went down to the sidings, and by now his regulation cap was full to overflowing, with his head.

Down in the Miles Platting sidings the guard was ready; he had been waiting for some considerable time for an engine, and as soon as the engine arrived with these two very enthusiastic young enginemen in charge, it was very speedily coupled to a very long train of empty wagons, and they were away. Off they went, passed us in seventh heaven, no one ever did it better, through Miles Platting, Middleton, Moston, Castleton and Rochdale.

All familiar home ground to Tommy, he knew every siding and every signal like the back of his own hand having been firing goods trains in and out of Yorkshire almost every day for about two years. But Sowerby Bridge was the limit of Tommy's road knowledge, and on leaving Rochdale he was beginning to be a little bit apprehensive, so he said, "I don't know my road much further, you had better take over soon." "I don't know it either," said the Newton Heath man. Despite the heat of the glorious day, Tommy felt a sudden chill in the air, "You are the driver," said Tommy." "No I am not," said the Newton Heath man. "Bloody Hell! I thought you were, said a shocked and very worried Tommy. He was very wise for his years, and he knew that they were in a very serious situation. But he was soon on the ball, with the problem solved in a manner worthy of his very agile brain.

"I am going to whistle to be put inside at Smithy Bridge the next loop-line; and when we stop you put the handbrake hard on, and I will get on the phone and tell control that I do not know the road any further. You tell the guard the same thing, and if they send a driver to conduct us further, just keep your mouth shut. If they send a set of men to relieve us get off quick, in fact just try and keep up with me." A driver and a fireman did in fact arrive in due course, and they relieved a very relieved Tommy and his mate, so to speak.

Some very strange, exceedingly dangerous practices were carried out at this time due to the lack of professional skills in B.R. Management and the eager grabbing of all subsidies and rail assets. It is also recorded elsewhere that other instances of unqualified enginemen driving steam trains did actually happen, and in true British Rail tradition they were all very carefully concealed from public information. As far as Tommy was concerned it was best; and wisest to catch the first bus back to Bacup and say "Nowt," which he did.

The same applied when "Mad Ab;" Driver Harry Taylor jumped off his engine at Heywood, and left a sixteen year old fireman, (myself) in charge of his runaway train of fifty wagons of coal, and a hundred ton plus locomotive; as it roared down the very steep Broadfield Bank completely out of control. That never was officially reported; and neither Harry nor I said a single word about it to anyone. Despite the normal banter and chat at the long table in the mess room at Bacup Shed; that valued topic; just like the attempted bombing of our passenger trains leaving Manchester; was never mentioned, strange eh? But obviously; that is yet another little true story of wartime England.



Note the Crusader's cross, allegedly first drawn in Battle Field blood by King Richard'

