

A Railway Tour through some statistics and emotions

On its formation in 1948 British Railways acquired from its main constituent companies some 22,500 steam locomotives, comprising approximately 390 distinct types. These included many survivors from the nineteenth century, as well as modern designs built by the "Big Four" companies after the 1923 grouping. Numerous older classes owed their longevity to the second world war, and were quickly eliminated as order was restored in the early 1950s.

In 1958, 10 years after nationalization, steam was still the dominant form of traction, diesel and electric power having made little impact upon the everyday railway scene in most areas of the country. By the beginning of that year the number of steam locomotive types had been reduced by nearly 50% to 227 but the total quantity was still around 16,500 reflecting this standardization on modern types; some 1750 of these had been built to 12 new B.R designs or acquired from the War Department. There was still a great deal of variety to be seen, and traffic levels were close to their all time peak, especially on Summer Saturdays. These were the "glorious years" for a schoolboy train spotter; a short while afterwards modernization, branch line closures and loss of freight traffic to road haulage were all to take their toll.

At the end of 1963, only 98 steam locomotive types survived, mainly the more numerous modern classes; most pre-1923 antiquities and rarities had finally disappeared. Dieselization and traffic reduction meant that a few hours spent at the lineside were no longer "the greatest free show on earth" but invariably a tedious monotony, sustained only by the hope that something interesting might turn up.

In the six years from 1958 to 1963 I logged some 2,720 steam locomotives of 140 different classes (some two-thirds of the total types then still running), before "collecting numbers" lost its appeal and was superseded by wider interests. By train spotting standards of the time this was not a great total, but I was never one of the more dedicated members of the breed that indulged in almost weekly coach tours to different parts of the country, attempting to visit as many locomotive sheds as possible in the course of a sleepless weekend. I did participate in a few relatively genteel shed and works visits, but most of what I saw was in the course of everyday travels and the annual fortnight summer holiday.

Why did many schoolboys (and some grown men) collect engine numbers? Such activity was usually looked on as banal and pointless, and I cannot recall any attempt at an objective analysis of the phenomenon at the time, or since. There must have been some good reason for the many thousands of people involved all over the country. Special books listing the numbers were published by Ian Allan Ltd - the "ABCs" - with new editions eagerly awaited at the local "Smiths" every six months. On fine days at weekends the throng of spotters congregated at good vantage points often caused a real safety hazard, and was frowned upon or actively discouraged in some places by the railway authorities. Even on wet or cold days (and nights!) a few hardy types were often to be seen; surely they had better things to do with their time?

Dedicated "shed bashers" would stop at nothing to gain access to depots at any time of day or night, perhaps vandalizing security fencing where the normal mode of entry was not viable, and risking physical violence from angry foremen or even police arrest when discovered. Some even dressed as railwaymen going on duty to avoid detection; they were usually among the more successful! Only some of the sheds and workshops allowed organized group visits, usually on a Sunday when things were not too busy; others, including most of the "desirable" ones were like impenetrable fortresses.

With the wisdom and hindsight of 30 intervening years I would now say that, in my case as a "casual" spotter the collection of numbers was merely a means to an end. Familiarity with the numbers carried, and the way they were organized, quickly led to instant recognition and categorization of those hundred and more different engine types. This in turn led to an appreciation of design, purpose, similarities and differences, geographical distribution and historical origins. Thus within a fairly short time, merely "collecting numbers" outlived its usefulness and was quietly forgotten in pursuance of more general observation, knowledge and reasoning. It acted therefore as a formalizing and organizational aid when starting out in the hobby. Looked at from this

point of view, it can easily be seen why schoolboys would start (maybe at around age 9) by collecting numbers, then ceasing naturally some 4 or 5 years later whilst maintaining their interest. This would also be why some (seemingly far fewer) still do it now with the diesels and electrics, a generation after the demise of the steam locomotive - it serves the same purpose now as it did then! There was evidently a strong “competitive element” in many groups, whereby one would seek to be the first amongst his peers to “cop” all the members of one particular class of engine; this did seem somewhat pointless to me even at the time, I was never competitive for the sake of it!

My old “spotting books”, kept in a box in the loft largely untouched over the years, helped me to recall the things we saw then in some detail, with certain accuracy. After all this time they are an unexpectedly useful aide memoire, stimulating both pleasant memories and reasoned analysis of the then rapidly changing railway scene. The series of articles which followed on is thus a personal contribution to the large amount of contemporary reminiscence being published nowadays.

The following table is an attempt to summarize the origins and decline of the steam locomotives of British Railways over these years, together with the current (early 1990s) preservation situation, which is somewhat more heartening than could have been foreseen:-

Company origin	No. of locos (1948) *	No. of types (1948) *	No. of types (1958) *	Spotting List: Quantity	Spotting List: Types	Preserv-ation: Quant +	Preserv-ation: Types +
GWR	4250	60	34	894	30	134	24
SR	1890	83	49	652	43	83	26
LMSR	9400	86	55	500	27	86	30
LNER	6930	146	77	349	24	38	31
BR&WD	----	----	14	322	13	46	8
Totals	22470	375	227	2717	140	387	119

* approx. figures, excluding odd “one off” examples etc.

+ includes those still in “scrapyard” condition, which are intended for eventual restoration.

My spotting record reflects my main area of activity to the west and south of London, rarely venturing “north of Watford” until a somewhat later period.

The effects of standardization are clearly seen for the GWR types, which has resulted in a fairly comprehensive preservation coverage. It is often said that the GWR is over represented in preservation, at the expense particularly of the LNER. While this is certainly true in terms of quantities of locos (they happened to survive in the right place at the right time), the opposite trend altogether is seen in terms of the number of discrete types or designs, which is surely the figure of greater historical significance? Representatives of well known classes are of course sadly absent from all the groups in preservation.

The most common locomotive types in 1948 were the 0-6-0 tender (48 different classes) and the 4-4-0 tender (also 48). By 1958 the former was still the most prevalent at 32 types, but the 4-4-0s had diminished rapidly to only 18. 0-6-0 tanks and 4-6-0s (23 and 22 respectively) were the 2nd and 3rd commonest arrangements in 1958. I managed to log examples of 20 of the 4-6-0 classes but only 14 of the 0-6-0s and about the same number of 0-6-0 tank types, this including all the distinct varieties of WR panniers. The most common types in preservation are 4-6-0 (16) and 0-6-0 (15 classes).

The types I saw most of again reflect the strong GW and SR influence on my childhood: 165 "Halls", 161 of the 57xx pannier tanks, 120 "Castles" and 101 of the total 110 Southern West Country/Battle of Britain pacifics (though in reality the latter comprised two very different machines, in their original and rebuilt versions).

These four types account for a fifth of all those engines I ever saw! The highest number of any LMS type seen was 84, of the ubiquitous Stanier class 5 4-6-0s. Many examples of all the above have survived in preservation, and may happily still be seen at work today. Other types with which I was familiar fared less well; there are no indiginous BR survivors of the "Austerity" or WD 2-8-0s, the LNER L1 tanks (neither of which types can be said to be greatly missed), or the LNE A1 pacifics, the GW "Granges" and Southern 700 0-6-0s (all of which are).

My personal favourites? This is difficult, as I suppose various types might be admired for elegance of design, familiarity (or perhaps rarity) or antiquity. Impressions might also be biased according to the varying standards of cleanliness and mechanical maintenance encountered. If I had to pick just one type as an overall favourite I would choose the unrebuilt version of the Southern "West Country" pacific, for its sheer air smoothed elegance and versatility (they were used on all kinds of duties, from Kent to Cornwall). I was never that strongly impressed by the "premier" locomotive types of each group (the "King", "Merchant Navy", "Duchess" and A4 classes), regarding them as just a little bit too large for elegance, perhaps even tending to ungainliness when seen close to, and somewhat over-rated by other enthusiasts considering their relatively small numbers. I have no doubt they did great work, and they certainly looked more impressive at speed out on the main line, but this was surely only to be expected. I rated the more numerous (and therefore patently much more useful) "second tier" types more highly; the Castles, West Countries, A3s and Jubilees were all elegant designs and impressive day in day out performers on all manner of duties.

Among other particular favourites were the W.R Moguls - quite rare in the London area - a very compact yet powerful machine, anonymous unlike their larger brethren, and one of the oldest GW designs then still running, originating in 1907. The 14xx 0-4-2 tanks were also well liked, archtypal country branch line motive power; though dating only from 1932, they looked positively quaint. On the Southern the T9 4-4-0s were invariably beautifully kept (in the London area at least), enhancing their elderly but most elegant lines; the BR lined out black livery really suited them. M7 0-4-4 tanks and 700 class "Black Motor" 0-6-0s were familiar antiquities on home territory; they had been around for many, many years and were missed when suddenly replaced by modern motive power. The same can be said for the LNER suburban tank classes N2 and N7; they were hardly elegant and were usually indescribably filthy, but were admired for their sheer brute strength and brisk operation.

The Southern "King Arthur" and LNE "Sandringham/Footballer" 4-6-0s were firm favourites, standing out from their mundane (and thoroughly boring) S15 and B1 counterparts by being painted green instead of black (grey?), usually far better kept, and carrying names. I was never particularly struck on any of the former LMS types except the "Jubilee" 4-6-0, which stood out similarly from the ranks of "Black Fives". Likewise, all the BR standard classes were regarded as routine and uninteresting, and I still find relative difficulty in raising any great enthusiasm about these in preservation circles nowadays.

I have often noted over the years that personal preference for one or other of the "big four" railway companies (as might be expressed in modelling, collecting or research interests) seems to be influenced most strongly by the area of the country in which one's formative years were spent. Luckily living in the London area we could observe and compare objectively the engines, characteristics and operations of all four BR constituents, alongside the very different activities of London Transport. I did just this, and cannot recall any particular feelings of personal bias in these early years, nor indeed could see any good reason why anyone should have such opinions! A personal preference for the former Great Western system emerged in around 1963, based upon a growing appreciation of the sheer style of the total operation out of Paddington, not just upon locomotive types or carriage stock etc. This should not have been possible some fifteen years after unification of the old companies; that it did, and so strongly, is a testimony to the indelible stamp each of these organizations left upon its activities. Indeed, it still lingers in a few places even now, after over forty years,

though obviously much diluted during the years of modernization. The Southern and LNER operations also of course showed style in many aspects, but it did not somehow seem to be quite as all pervasive or coherent. I have to say that the former LMS, as viewed narrowly from the London end, seemed to exhibit very little to my way of thinking.

I have hardly mentioned the diesel and electric forms of traction that we saw in those years. To my regret I spent rather too much time then looking at and photographing the new era, at the expense of the rapidly vanishing old one. The former has now also largely vanished so is becoming of some interest in its own right!

However, aside from the creeping new standardization, in the fifties and early sixties both London Transport and all four main railway groups had some interesting or even ancient types of non steam motive power, as recalled in the appropriate places in our other detailed articles.

K.A. Jagers 1993