

THE GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

People of Wigston - 002

Edna Annis

Extracted from Wikipedia & Eric Jarvis

5/29/2010

The Society provides the framework for individuals to write about their ancestors who lived in the Greater Wigston area. All documents are held in the GWHS library in electronic format and are fully searchable. It is the Societies hope that all documents will eventually be available on line to all researchers.

ERIC JARVIS'S REMINISCENCES OF WARTIME RAILWAYWOMEN

Edna Annis of Wigston, Leicestershire, came of a railway family, her grandfather was a ganger on the Eastern Railway, her father a signalman at Wigston South Junction, and her brother, Bill, a signalman at Kilby Bridge, Wigston: he worked on the railway for 51 years.

I have known the Annis family for over 5 years having worked with the father and Bill from various boxes, I finished as a Spc. Class relief signalman in 1964 after 28 years service, and was well acquainted with Edna when she became a porter guard at Leicester.

Her first appointment in the early part of the war was as a porter at Leicester L.M.S. station and after a time when the station master had to appoint someone as porter guard he asked Edna if she would train for such a post, and her reply was that she didn't want to do any men's work of a job. The station master replied that if she didn't take it on someone else would, so she accepted the post and took her training seriously. You know there are many people who think that all a passenger guard has to do is blow a whistle and wave a green flag, but of course there is much more to it than that. This fact is shown in a hard backed book still in my possession that belonged to Edna. In it there are all the particulars of the routes she had to cover from Leicester, i.e. Nuneaton-Birmingham, Coalville-Burton, Loughborough-Trent, Derby-Nottingham, Market Harborough-Kettering, Melton-Peterborough, Wigston-Rugby. To be more precise she had marked all signals where Rule 55 applied and the position of all catch points, the identification of all passenger stock such as saloons 1st class S F 3rd Class S.T. Corridor stock composite C.K., a list of 47. There is a list of what the steam pressure should be on various trains, information on what to do if a passenger fell out of the train. Other remarks about various rules and regulations were also recorded, and most importantly for a passenger guard, where to put out letters and parcels for other destinations e.g. at Coalville station, letters and parcels for Whitwick, Thringstone, Ibstock, Hugglescote, and so it went on for every station she had to cover on all the routes mentioned.

Now to some people all this information to be carried about everywhere this lady went, would not mean much, but to a seasoned railway man it was a sure sign of a person dedicated to the job he or she was appointed to do, and that was the backbone of Edna's railway career, she was dedicated to the job. She not only did it well but with a smile, always willing to help passengers and station staff whenever she could. I went to see an old railwayman this weekend, he is 81 years of age, I said "You can remember Edna Annis the passenger guard." "Not half" he said "when I started my first shift as a porter at Coalville station during the war, the first train was the 5 a.m. parcels and newspapers from Leicester, and Edna was the guard. "You're fresh aren't you" "Yes" I said. "Well now this lot goes to so and so, this fish goes to so and

so." She really put me right and that helped a lot as my first contact with other railway staff." That to me was Edna Annis all through her railway career, which lasted for 13 years. She later became a warden at an old people's establishment and didn't the old uns love her. I never knew of anyone male or female have anything to say against Edna. She, like another lady I will speak of later, had a man's wage and did a man's job efficiently and with a smile.

I was also privileged to know a few ladies who worked the signal boxes on the Leicester-Burton line. You mentioned a station mistress working at Merry Lees in 1832-41, well the box at Merry Lees was worked by two ladies, Jackie Priest (her brother was a signalman) and Evelyn Beveridge who incidentally lived at Merry Lees. Although the box at Merry Lees, it was called the Desford Colliery Box as it served the Desford Colliery some half a mile away.

The next box at Bagworth was worked by Ruby Caldwell (she married a Coalville driver, Jim Robinson) who started 1 June 1944 and was trained by Frank Johnson and Tom Rodgers who I had previously trained. She was a well made lass and had no problem in pulling lever 13 which worked points down by the bridge (always the hardest lever to manipulate in all the boxes on that line). She took to it like a duck to water, but early on she used to have Ernie Mellors' little dog with her on the night shift, she was a platelayer that lived in the railway cottages. That arrangement didn't last long as each small noise outside set the dog barking which caused Ruby more fright than ever. Anyway she decided after a few months to stick it out on her own. She says there were no hard feelings towards the ladies on the branch so far as she was aware but there was one driver on the branch (who shall be nameless, he was known as a "know-all") who took her to task one day saying she had two trains in a section, which wasn't true, Reg. 5 was authorised on the down lines for freight trains. She stayed on at Bagworth a few years, then, when she married Jim, went to Coalville Junction where there was no night work, a piece of cake she said after working Bagworth.

Her partner was Gladys Bancroft who married a signalman named Ron Pendleton from Wigston.

The next box at Ellistown was manned by a lady by the name of Joan Yates but unfortunately some man, drunk or otherwise, tried to get into the box one night and this really frightened her, so she packed the job in, it was rather a lonely box.

Then came Cliffe Hill Sidings where Adie Shepperd was her signal lady. Quite a good girl, I trained her, but any difficulty she had was always sorted out by the outside foreman of Cliffe Hill Granite Co., who had worked so many years in that post that he knew the railway side of affairs as well.

Moving down the line beyond Coalville we came to Swannington (the third railway to be built was the Leicester-Swannington railway 1832).

One of the best known families in the village was the Brewins and one Jim Brewin had a daughter named Beatrice who worked at a high class fashion

shop in Leicester. Having a mother with arthritis she could not go away to do national work of importance but when a vacancy came at Swannington Station for a Grade 1 porter she took it. This work involved doing what was called the month end - quite a complicated mass of figures.

But when a vacancy at the Swannington box came she took it after finding out that she had the physical strength to operate the gates. They were of the split gate type which were easier to work than the signal gate type. She left to be married to Harry Shields, a driver from Burton on Trent. She was trained by Alan Lovell, a real gentleman, and Albert Dawkes. When she started she was told you will be paid a man's wages so you do a man's job.

No doubt there were others who worked in boxes along that line, I have only written about those I worked to and with.

There were of course porters, Frances and Nora at Bagworth, and a lady I knew very well at Barrow on Soar, namely Frances Bowness (later Sunderland); she came on the railway in 1954 but again of a railway stock, her Dad was signalman at Barrow for over 30 years later becoming a relief signalman, I trained him in many of the boxes then he retired. The porter's job at Barrow was a tough one (I ought to know I started there as a porter in 1937) covering goods work as well as passenger work and doing the issuing of tickets early morning and late night. Frances says she helped to load many a truck cattle and sheep then crow-barred the truck out of the dock and the dirt so and so's weeing all down her neck. Anyway she enjoyed her job and when asked "How did you get on with the men?" she said "Oh, it was lovely, I got a lot of wolf whistles from the young firemen as the train passed, giving me a toot on the whistle."

The other section that employed ladies was the platelayers section, there were quite a few along the Burton line although I didn't know them very well, apart from the oiling of the points I would think that particular work was the hardest from a manual or physical point of view, but here again I never heard of any animosity against them.

You ask for my particular feelings about ladies working on the railways, and I must point out that my dealings with them were on the Leicester-Burton line and that is an important point. You see it was predominantly a coal mining area where men called a spade a spade and were a different breed of men to the city dwellers. If something went wrong you would be sworn at up hill and down dale and that was it, whereas very often in the more populated areas they would be more likely to report a lady or gentleman to his or her superiors. To me the railway ladies did a good job, they made their mistakes, of course they did, but so did the men. I don't care who does a job, you should always speak of them as you find them.

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