Mail Rail gallery

Oral History Transcripts

Contents

Climb on Battery Loco: Ray Middlesworth 2
People Panel: John Scott 4
In the Locker: Ray Middlesworth 6
People Panel: Ray Middlesworth 9
People Panel: George Gardiner 11
People Panel: Lester Russell 12

Climb on Battery Loco: Ray Middlesworth

Introduction

Railway engineer Ray Middlesworth describes the characteristics of the different battery locos and the time Mail Rail was featured as a film set in the action comedy ‘Hudson Hawk’, starring Bruce Willis.

Ray Middlesworth

The individual locos had it – their own characteristics. I think that’s through the aging of the batteries and the motors. Some would pull away more sharply. They would lurch when you started them, and their braking would behave differently on different power settings. Some would snatch, energise the braking on say, the fourth settings, and one would glide slowly and the other one would snatch and stop more suddenly. So, you would need to be aware of which loco you were driving: they all had their own little characteristics.

You’re very much in contact with the track because there’s only four very sturdy springs between you and the rails. There’s no comfy suspension: you sit on a

wooden bench. So, you feel every bump and click on the track as you travel along. Half of driving the loco is to know what's up ahead so that you know when to prepare for it, when to slow down, when to speed up and when to be aware of where you might encounter maintenance crews. There were procedures to protect you but you had to know where the blind corners and things were, so you were prepared.

We were a set for a film involving Bruce Willis and Andie MacDowell called 'Hudson Hawk' and the plot line was that Bruce Willis is a cat burglar and he mails himself into the Vatican on their underground railway which was, in fact, us painted to look like the Vatican's underground railway. And, of course, all the trains had to be in the papal colours which were yellow and gold and so the loco was painted yellow, the trains were painted yellow and gold. Us engineers love to give things nicknames: it immediately became christened 'the banana'. We do have our favourites and mine was always the yellow one, the banana, which I quite liked.

People Panel: John Scott

Introduction

John Scott talks about his role as an electrical engineer and the conditions he experienced whilst working in the tunnels.

John Scott

The P-way walk was through the tunnels, just to check for broken rails, loose rails, anything that could cause a problem – a cable hanging down. P-way men often used to come across letters, where a bag had come open and the letters had blown out of the trains and they had to pick up all the letters and bring them into the station.

They had fluorescent lighting down there. It was quite dusty, because of the brake dust, but mostly it was all just segments and they used to hold the dust. And the tunnels themselves were very dusty and dirty – I remember when I first worked down there, I thought "God, you know, so what have I let myself in for?"

If you wanted to work overtime then, it was, you had to go down the tunnel during the weekends. So, they more

or less hoped that you would work overtime and go down the tunnels. And the first time when I went down the tunnel for a weekend's work they used to bring the tea down to the tunnel if you're a long way down the tunnel. They used to make, bring tea, and bring it down to you, on a little trolley. And you was eating sandwiches, your sandwiches were dirty – dusty hands and I thought that I've made – might have made a mistake then but, umm, you get used to it. You get used to anything.

In the Locker: Ray Middlesworth

Introduction

These lockers were abandoned on the last day of operations. Ray Middlesworth describes the atmosphere amongst the staff and the process leading up to the closure of Mail Rail.

Ray Middlesworth

On that Saturday morning it was just a normal Saturday shutdown, they didn't actually make any different arrangements for the trains. Because maybe people didn't know what else to do. We've never done that before. It was a different atmosphere about the railway. It wasn't doom and gloom 'cause a lot of people were, you know, quite looking forward to their retirement. Most people had their futures sort of planned out for them. It was a very few people who were at, what you might call, a loose end.

People were clearing their lockers out. It was a very different atmosphere but we did run through the night and all of us on the railway up and down knew that was the last night and I think there was a feeling, an

atmosphere, that evening because we all knew the trains – that was the last time the trains were running and when we did the morning shutdown on Saturday it would be the last shutdown. I wrote a note in the logbook that ‘end of service’ just to mark the occasion and I think some of the guys on the other stations had a similar feeling.

The railway didn’t officially end until the end of August so there was a period when the staff were still about, everyone was still about but we didn’t actually run the trains anymore. As engineers we still were responsible for the lights, the fans, the lifts as we were then. There was still some work to be done and everyone attended on their shifts, the train maintenance engineers attended on their shifts for the following months to come but there wasn’t actually any railway service running; that was the sort of phoney closure as you might call it because we weren’t actually closed but everyone, you know, we weren’t running but everyone was there.

And the true closure came at the end of August when everyone left. They cleared their lockers for the last time and everyone went off to do other jobs. And there was four of us that remained, and we actually took over the maintenance of the whole line then, whereas before all

the other engineers were in place. So, there was three months when it was sort of haunted by us all.

People Panel: Ray Middlesworth

Introduction

Ray Middlesworth describes an infamous accident involving multiple trains at Mount Pleasant.

Ray Middlesworth

The worst ever incident on the railway didn't happen to me but happened some time before I actually started working on the railway, but it was, famous or infamous: where a track - there's - we got a section in a large incline section called EA10 and that's the section of track approaching the Mount Pleasant and it comes down a hill. Physically, it's underneath Theobald's Road. And what would happen is that trains would accelerate down this hill as they approached Mount Pleasant and then there's a sharp bend at the bottom and they would turn this bend and then slow down as they came into Mount Pleasant. But as they were going down this sharp bend at the bottom, obviously centrifugal force would throw them out slightly, and on one incident a train for some reason, centre of gravity might have been wrong, or it was loaded wrong, it came off but it leant against the wall. And what that meant is that electrically the

actual train wasn’t shorting the track out, it was just leaning against the wall.

So, it was electrically invisible. They’d lost the fact that this train hadn’t appeared and phoned the engineer up. Unfortunately, he couldn’t see – there was no electrical indication that there was a train still there and he made the mistake to think, well maybe they had some sort of error, and the train had been sent on and someone hadn’t written it down. So, he gave a clearance to the circuits to send the next train along. And of course, the next train came along and found the other train and ploughed into the back of it. Then there was train debris all over the tracks and it did register with the track circuitry that there was a fault there, that there was a train there, and they knew they had a problem. But in the meantime, ‘cause our two tracks run parallel, another train going on the other road was leaving the station and it collided with the debris from the other two trains going the other way. So, now we had three trains all piled up in a sort of like a spaghetti in the bottom of this hill. And that was the worst ever accident we had on the railway regarding the trains; three trains all piled up.

People Panel: George Gardiner

Introduction

George Gardiner was train controller at Mount Pleasant Station. Here he explains the process of moving the trains through the stations.

George Gardiner

KEB [King Edward Building, a station on the route] rings up … “Gardiner at the Mount?”, “yeah”, “Err , set 14 … I want you to put it round your loop.” Right… put the phone down. Face the train in, shunt it up to the cabin. Then I find a lever, 6 and 9 to the loop. All the other trains won’t come in because I’ve put all the levers in. Now that train goes round my loop. When the next train comes in from the westbound, I shut that current off - the first - the first one of the levers to receive the trains in. Then as that train comes in, you push that lever back. Then the next train, lever up is to shunt the train. Then put that lever back, then I’ll pull the other one next to it to send it right up. Then I’ll pull another one at the end to send it away and out of the station. That’s the eastbound, but when this train gets into the station to the point where the cherry is, it stops, because the current’s not on.

People Panel: Lester Russell

Introduction

Platform worker Lester Russell describes the hard work that went into moving the mail through the railway.

Lester Russell

The chute would be full of mail; from 70ft down at some stations from top to bottom. And they'd be coming on the conveyor. And you'd be at the inlet conveyor, and you used to get, like, tickets, different stations. So, ticket 10 was for instance 'Pad' [Paddington station] and 2 would be Liverpool Street. And you'd have different barrows, great big aluminium barrows and you throw in them as it come off the conveyor into that. And then you'd get the trains coming and in and as that pulls up, you could have, well they used to call it a straight 8, so you could have, say, 8 containers on that train, so you'd have to run along, drop all the ramps which used to join the train with the platform. Pull those containers off.

All the work that you'd been unloading from the conveyor, you slide it along - throw it and whack that on the train, put the ramps back up on the train. Press the cherry [button] which makes the train go. Those trains

had to run to a timetable and if they wasn't running on time you had the switchman coming out and saying "Come on, get those trains, what's going on?" or, and then you'd have to get your mate off a break to help you out, and that's the last thing you wanted to do.