**Steam or Smoke**

I knew Eddie when we worked together at Teddington in Middlesex, forty years ago. He was intelligent, practical engineer and we worked closely for about eight months on the design of a big drainage project for a large housing contractor. He was a small man with a great sense of humour, which he would show with a wicked smile and a long dirty laugh.

Like most men, we took our time getting to know one another, but over a beer and steak and kidney pie in the pub opposite I learnt that he was thirty-two years old and married with a little boy. Eddie seemed very happily married, but he did have a lifelong passion, which I discovered was trains. In the nineteen fifties, before the electrification of the British railway network, steam trains were the kings. It was these wonderful engines, which were the workhorses and the racehorses of our railways, that Eddie worshipped.

I learnt about his love for trains in a strange way, because although perhaps not evident to everyone, engineering is basically all about numbers. For example all engineering drawings are numbered, so that they can be traced and recalled when needed. One day we were sorting through a drawing register, checking off what drawings were finished and what were missing – a sort of status check. Suddenly, Eddie said “46992 - Queen of York”, and after that, for almost all of a certain range of numbers, he starting quoting train names. Now, when I was a kid I had spotted trains and collected their numbers, but for me it was just a craze that had not lasted more than my 9th year, so I understood what he meant and found it amusing. Eddie, I realised, was train mad.

When Eddie was a kid he’d spent every available hour train spotting, filling up his Ian Allen Loco Spotters book with witnessed sights of steam trains. He lived at Wembley, where the London Midland Region trains passed through on their way from London up through England and on to the North and Scotland. He spent hours of his young life in the drizzling rain on station platforms, waiting for trains. When he’d seen them, he’d underline their numbers in pencil in his Spotters Book. The Loco Spotters book listed only steam trains that ran on particular sections of the UK railway network and you were required to be honest, only underlining a train number, if you’d actually seen it. The Express trains were the gems, the most valuable “spotting”, as they had not only numbers, but names as well, like “Empress of Gloucester”. He must have spent hours on windy stations waiting to be engulfed in the roar of a train passing, sitting in the dirty white smoke, smelling the train disappearing in a clatter of wheels and carriages. So often, as I knew, the train that passed was one that you already had noted, yet somehow for him, the expectation of seeing a new one was enough to endure rain, cold, and eventually what I found to be enormous boredom!

But for Eddie there was no ennui, he was in his element. He went through his teens travelling around his area collecting train numbers, until by the age of fifteen, he had completed his book and spotted every train that was included in his special edition. He then got into travelling to goods sheds and had mapped out the layout of famous train yards in great detail. I had never found such a complete preoccupation with a hobby, which endured with him as a consummate passion well into his mid-twenties. By this time the uglier diesel trains were supplanting the old steam trains and overhead electrification had begun to bring an end to the steam era, and also to his love.

I thought a lot about his train spotting and we both agreed that he’d been lucky not to have been born much later, then it all would have been too late, the steam trains would have been over before he would have seen it all.

It was this that reminded me of my own youth spent growing up near the same London to Midland’s railway line. My parents had a bungalow at Carpenders Park and our back garden led onto a spinney, which bordered a deep railway embankment that allowed the passage of the London and Midlands line.

Every house had a back fence and installed in ours was a gate, through which my brother and I escaped to play in what became our most important domain. When you’re seven and nine years old, woods take on a different meaning. Trees are there to be conquered and our spinney, which topped the railway embankment, was full of 70 year old oaks, birches, and beech trees and also smaller hazel and elderberry trees. The lower level bracken and bushes made dense foliage for us to play in. We shared this spinney with birds and learnt about their plumage, nests and eggs. I was bought the Observer Book of Birds for my birthday and it became my best companion, only to be equalled by its complement the Observer Book of Birds’ Eggs.

This little wood held different trees, which we favoured and named the Catapult Tree, the Silver Birch, the Big Tree, the Ship Tree, which were all landmarks to us, like mountains or hills were to others. They were to be climbed, conquered and enjoyed in all sorts of weathers. We sat up in them, as the rain splattered on their leaves and on our heads. Our hands and clothes got filthy from the years of smoke that had drifted up from the trains and been deposited on their bark and branches. We swayed in the branches in strong winds, pretending we were pirates in the rigging during a storm, and sat up high in them on glorious summer evenings trying to see further than we had ever walked. The trees lifted our lives from British post war poverty, to a golden future which just beckoned from around the corner.

During these fabulous moments the trains would puff through the deep embankment, emitting their steam and smoke. The steam billowed across the tracks and disappeared quickly, especially in summer. The smoke was much stronger and we preferred it, even though if you gulped it down, you ended up coughing your guts up. It smelled like a deep dirty visit to another land of sulphur and dust. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant, but it clung in your hair and clothes. We loved it and enjoyed how everything was different and hidden for a short time in the smoke and steam. Enjoying these moments we were unaware that this is what makes childhood so precious - the innocence of time passing.

With our friends from neighbouring homes, we entered into a different life when we were out in the spinney. Parents, with all their orders and control, were left far behind and forgotten. We built our own homes and called them camps, in specially selected sites in the spinney and on the grass-covered embankment. These spots were chosen with care for their views, beauty of aspect and usually because they were naturally hidden or concealed by us.

In the summer the wild strawberries would appear on the embankment and we would gather them and gorge ourselves, taking just a few for our families. Lying deep in the grass we felt hidden amongst the grass stems. Time passed as we’d watch the trains puff by, lost in trying to identify wild flowers with, what else, but the Observer Book of Wild Flowers. Harebells were my favourite, their fragile blueness seemed to touch my heart and only the sky could compare with their ineffable colour. Later I met a girl, when I was about nineteen, whose eyes were the nearest thing I had seen to the colour of those harebells and if I remember correctly she also made me steam a bit.

Once the summer sun had started to turn the embankment’s long grasses blonde, we would start to make our bivouacs from them, not that we knew that was their name. We just called them camps. They were constructed on the slopes of the embankment, out of vertical sticks that had twines of grass woven in them, like the crude beginnings of huts. They never got more than about 30 inches high, with roofs made for them in the same way, under which we crawled to hide and watch the trains go by.

People used to look out of the train windows, point at us and wave as they passed. Inside the camps it was a different world. The sun came in and made sharp patterns of light and although it was almost impossible to turn around – they were so small – you felt at home because you had made them yourself. You were safe.

Except that sometimes, sparks from the trains would ignite the dry summer grass, causing us to fight fierce battles to stop the fire spreading and destroying our new homes. Sometimes we won, but often we simply weren’t there, but at school, and returning after 4 o’clock we’d find our play area black and devastated. This was a catastrophe, but we knew next year we could do it all again, at least until we grew up.

It’s strange, but all the time we played in this spinney and on the embankment, we were very aware how the trains represented an incredibly strong physical force. We knew they were very dangerous and powerful. Their noise and vibration was, if you went down to the bottom of the embankment, almost unsupportable. We were not stupid – to cross those tracks posed a terrible danger. Five lines of four foot eight and a half inches gauge line were a lot to take into account, not to mention the double tracks of electrified line that the red Bakerloo trains ran on. These Bakerloo line trains were little red worm-like trains serving the far reaches of the London commuter system, and they ran by picking up their electric voltage from a power line between the tracks. I learnt later, how they worked on the Direct Current system pick-up rail, which is very different in its manifestation with a conductor, than the normal alternating current AC system of electricity, which we find in houses and domestic utilisation. If you get a shock from 240 volts AC, by inadvertently touching a live cable, then you are repulsed and, as long as there is nothing to stop you moving back real quickly and recoiling from the shock, you might only suffer a short discomfort and slight “perming” of your hair. But with DC it is different, because it is attractive. If you touch the line then you will have great difficulty removing the part of your body that is in contact. You will be electrified and die from cardiac fibrillation, as your heart tries desperately to beat as fast as the current that is activating it.

All this basic science was far into my future, way back then in the 1950s. As children we definitely considered the railway lines very dangerous. However, we did occasionally dare to go down to touch them and big boys placed pennies on the steam lines to see what would happen to them when the train wheels rolled over them. Some particularly mad kids crossed the tracks to gain “lunatic” status, but all this was very carefully controlled by us look-outs, to be sure that no trains were coming at the moment they made their dash across.

My best friend at this time was a boy called Martin, who lived about 50 houses up the road. His parents were school teachers and Martin always seemed to be brighter than everyone else. He could read before he went to school, was very quick at learning the multiplication tables etc. However, I could climb trees higher than him, knew more about birds and their eggs and had much more freedom than he did. His parents didn’t even allow him to go to Cubs.

One of our neighbours had a wonderful black and white dog, called Belinda – a ridiculous name – so we called her by her breed, which was Collie. She, Collie Dog, went everywhere with Martin and me. Well, especially when we were playing out on the embankment. This dog was just looking for a bit of company most of the time and wanted to be with us. Her coat was a beautiful patchwork of long fur. She was very obedient and intelligent. I thought of her as a close friend.

Next door-but-one was an old lady who kept chickens. One public holiday we were told that a fox had managed to enter her hen coop and had attacked and killed all her chickens. So on this wet afternoon after school, we set off with Collie Dog, excited as hell, wandering the paths of the spinney until we discovered the fox’s footprints in the soft mud and had to run like mad to keep up with Collie, who now had got the fox’s scent. How big would the fox be, could Collie Dog kill it, and avenge the death of the chickens? We ran through brambles and elderberry copses, following Collie’s mad rush right down to the train station, where the spinney ended in allotment gardens. Here we lost the tracks and had to return home with only our desperate frustration at not succeeding.

On the other side of the railway tracks a different world existed. A new, London County Council estate had been built and families from the East End of London, who had been bombed out during the Second World War, were relocated here in the early fifties, giving them a completely new environment. The estate was vast and had several schools, shopping precincts, libraries, pubs and seemed a very foreign land to our young eyes. Sometimes large gangs of kids would appear on the other bank, which was not high like our embankment, and throw stones and shout taunts at us as we train spotted on the other side. Some climbed the fence on their side and started to attempt to cross the lines. However, usually a nearby house was informed of this, and a parent would emerge to bring order and stop them trying to cross the electrified Tube tracks.

One day Martin and I were sitting on some old ant hills on the bank waiting to catch site of the “Royal Scot” which was supposed to come through at 11.34am, when we noticed a crowd of at least 20 LCC kids massing on their side of the line. They started their usual game of name calling and taunting. We just ignored them, but Collie Dog didn’t and ran down to the track’s edge and started to bark at them. A stone suddenly whizzed into the bank next to us and we saw what this new danger was. Catapults! We were being targeted and the stones started to rain down on us and we became well aware that the grassy slopes offered no protection. We retired swiftly to a ditch that ran along the top of the embankment and peeped out. We were safely out of range, but train-spotting was over for the day.

Every autumn we would gather hazel nuts and one day, under a nut tree, quite close to our back fence, I noticed a strange metallic fin sticking out of the ground. My brother Steve said not to touch it – it might be a bomb, so we went back down our garden and reported it to our Mum. She came and to have a look and was horrified. Steve was right – it was unexploded ordinance. She telephoned the police and later that afternoon we were visited by two gentlemen who told us and our neighbours to stay inside and went to examine it. Fortunately it was not dangerous and they defused it and brought it down to their car. One of the men explained that in the War, sometimes the Germans tried to bomb the railway and missed. He asked us to be very careful and to immediately report any other similar objects that we found.

Our parents decided that for safety’s sake we should not play anymore in the embankment spinney, so the gate in the back fence was padlocked shut and the spinney and embankment put out of bounds to us.

And was this the end of an era? Well, yes, for a bit I suppose, because after the summer holidays I went to a new school in the town 4 miles away and had less time for the lure of the embankment’s old magic. But my younger brother, who was six years my junior, was just too keen and later pressed and pressed for permission to go into the spinney and finally the gate was opened up again. By this time I was sixteen years old and able to point out to my girlfriend the impossibly high tree houses that we had built all those years ago. They were still evident in the winter times through the lacework of the branches in the spinney behind the houses. Adolescence loomed and confusion rained in hailstones and the spinney took a final back-step from my life.

Now, fifty years later, the spinney and embankment are covered thickly with trees right down to the edge of the train tracks and that whole era of childhood now lies beneath them, and also deep within my heart.

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