

GOUDHURST AND KILNDOWN MILLENNIUM BOOK

THE FOLLOWING IS FROM A LETTER SENT TO ME BY HERBERT. C. BASSETT, BASSETTS, ST JOHNS ROAD, NEW ROMNEY:

BORN AND BRED IN nearby Wadhurst, shortly before my sixteenth birthday, I commenced employment, in September 1941 with the then Southern Railway Company at Etchingham as a junior clerk, where training was given in country station work; subsequently working at various other stations in the area.

In April 1943 I was sent to Goudhurst for the fruit and hop season. At that time, Goudhurst Station came under the jurisdiction of the Station Master at Horsmonden – Mr Percy Prescott. The staff at Goudhurst consisted of two signalmen – George Ring, who resided at Smallbridge, his wife being the Level Crossing Keeper there. The other signalman was Pat McLauchlan – an Irishman. Apart from their signalling duties they carried out all aspects of the station work. The other member of the staff was Female Porter – Mrs Maude Giles – who lived in the Station House. After closure, Mrs Giles moved to the village, living at High Ridge off Clayhill.

The official local carrier responsible for the collection and delivery of goods and parcels in the area was Charlie Diprose.

At first all was tranquil, the usual country station scene, some passengers but being common carriers, a considerable variety of goods and parcels. It was necessary to be prepared to deal with a vast range of items, including livestock - anything from day old chicks to a “pig in a crate” and cattle!

The fruit season saw the despatch of plenty of soft fruit. However, towards the end of August things began to change!

The hop-pickers' luggage began to arrive as 'PLA' (Passengers' Luggage in Advance). This consisted of tin trunks, boxes, cases, tea chests etc., etc., in fact everything bar the kitchen sink! As far as practical this was sorted into lots for the various farms but such was the volume that the Goods Shed and parcels vans in the sidings were soon filled, later spilling on to the platforms where it had to be covered with wagon tarpaulins. Every item was recorded with the object of obtaining signatures, as evidence of receipt when the pickers arrived.

Eventually the day came for arrival of the Hoppers Specials bringing families, mostly from East London and parts of Essex. The trains mainly consisted of six very old non-corridor, compartment type, high seating carriages with few, if any, toilets!

Prior to arrival farmers brought transport, mostly in the form of horse drawn farm wagons.

The first train arrived. The hoppers having been cooped up for a long time were anxious to avail themselves of the extremely limited station toilet facilities! Alighting from both sides of the train they swarmed over the tracks many relieving themselves wherever before seeking their "luggage", rummaging through the piles, carrying their "bits and pieces" to the waiting transport.

Abandoning any idea of being able to obtain signatures, I, a bewildered youth, sought sanctuary behind the bars of the Booking Office window. However, an elderly woman came to complain that the leg of her table was broken, wishing to make a claim. Inviting her to fill in a claim form, she did, claiming 30 shillings! Indicating where the table was to be located, I informed her I would examine it later. Meanwhile things had quietened down, most of the hoppers had drifted away but there were a few groups still waiting around for transport. The signalman suggested we go to the cafe opposite which was behind the present hotel for a cup of tea before the arrival of the next train. I explained on the way I needed to examine a broken table on the Down platform. We located it and unbeknown the woman complainant had come behind me. Examining the table it was found to have a large tin trunk tied between the legs, the weight of which had broken one of them. I remarked to the signalman that, in my opinion, "it was worth no more than five bob". Unfortunately the woman overheard my remarks which resulted in my being subjected to the most abusive cockney language – indicating I did not have a proper father! Endeavouring to apologise, hot and red faced I beat a hasty retreat!

On Sundays the line was specially opened, which meant a welcome Sunday duty. This was to enable friends and relations to visit, arriving and returning in the evening by means of what were known as the Hoppers Friends' Specials. They obviously enjoyed themselves in the country, for on their return home there were many drunks – another time to stay behind the bars of the Booking Office window!