

All the fun of the summer
By Robert Maskill
Orton Mere Station, Nene Valley Railway

Well it's been a funny old year, with generally poor weather and often a drop in customer numbers because of it and of course the economic climate.

However, it's not stopped the weird and the wonderful from paying a visit to Orton Mere.

Our big attraction this year at the station has been Harry's allotment, it has attracted lots of positive comment and also a string of questions.

The favourites being....

Why?

The answer to that is why not!!!!

What will you do with what's grown?

The staff either eat it or give it away to customers who express an interest, stressing the word customer!! Many who asked are not and most likely never have been customers of the station.

Does any get taken?

To the best of our knowledge nothing has been taken, there are many theories behind why, I like to think it's because the majority of people who pass are honest irrespective of their age.

I think it just goes to show that you have to try something to see if it works, there were a lot of doubters on the railway that it would be a success, I can honestly say that Harry and I are delighted that they have been proved wrong!!

In previous articles I have generally concentrated on the humorous side of the station well this year I plan to cover not only the funny bits but also a few of the frustrations as well. Whilst there are a few funny tales from the past year there are also many frustrations.

But let's start with the humour:-

Cyclists.

Cyclists are a regular feature of the station, they don't often travel on the train, but they often stop for refreshments and in the case of regulars a matter, generally they are a happy bunch. Well this one day it was cloudy and looked like it would rain at any minute when a bunch of cyclists descended on the station, I should point out they did not fall out of the sky they came through the gate but descended is a good description!!

They took over 3 bench seats on the platform, bikes everywhere without any consideration for people walking up the platform. Then they got out their food and drink and settled down for lunch!!

In other words the station was a good resting place with seating but they had no intention of spending money.

Now if one thing irritates me more than anything else it's people who use the station facilities and contribute nothing to the costs of running not only the station but also the railway.

I poked my head out of the door and said to the woman nearest "Do you intend to travel". "Oh no!!" she replied in the kind of voice that could take plaque off your teeth.

Doing a quick mental calculation I replied "Right, who is paying the £14 for platform tickets then?"

It was like the parting of the Red sea as they made their way out of the gate again after packing the stuff they had dumped everywhere in record time.

One chap said "Thanks for the hospitality" My reply was "My pleasure"

The crowning glory was as they made their way over the foot crossing it rained hard!!!

The moral of the story is your welcome at the station but not to treat it as a free picnic area!!

They who will not be told and never listen.

Now we have a breed of visitor who for want of a better description could be mistaken for an alligator, all mouth and no ears. They are the ones who ask a question, never listen to the answer then when something happens they don't expect they wonder why!

Take for example one chap who butted in whilst I was talking to another customer and rudely asked, after looking at the board with the times on, if it was steam or diesel running, I replied it was a diesel service and carried on talking to the customer I had been talking to. At this stage I should point out the chalk board with the times on also said in large letters that it was a diesel service. The chap who rudely butted it sat down on a seat with his two grandchildren.

About 15 minutes later the next service from Wansford appeared as was of course Diesel. "Oh" said the chap with his grand children "It's diesel the man said it was steam!!" giving me a black look. "Oh no Granddad" said one of the children with him "The man said it was diesel today, you did not listen to him!!" The look on his face was a classic!!! He stood up muttered something drowned by the sound of the diesel and walked off with grand children in tow.

Early morning stripper!!

Now now don't get too excited, just because we had a stripper pay us a visit!

One weekend morning and adult with learning difficulties came onto the platform and sat on one of the seats, followed by two female carers. I found afterwards she had done a runner from them whilst they were looking at the ducks on one of the lakes.

Now logic would have told most people that once she sat down that they should make sure she did not do another runner...

You guessed right she took off up the platform and off the end, with me and the two care workers in pursuit, as we made our way along the track one of the care workers made a classic comment "This is a bit of a rough path!!" She was informed that actually it was ballast as far from being on a path they were actually trespassing.

Well at Longueville Junction the adult sat on the track and started to take her clothes off, now before you get excited she got no further than her coat, shoes & socks (Sorry to disappoint you all).

One thing that struck me immediately was she did not like the care workers and she was giving them a hard time. Eventually they called for assistance and a male turned up and the adult just went with him no problem at all.

The end result was the first train still ran on time, I got some exercise, I saw how not to be a good care worker and after it all not one of them had the good manners to come and apologise for the incident, not a word. The details of the incident were reported to social services first thing on Monday morning by me. Speaking personally I was on the side of the adult with learning difficulties.

Early morning customers, well they expect to be customers.

Those of you who know me will know that I often get to the station on running days early, 7.30am is not unusual sometimes. Now I can see some of you thinking, what's the silly sod doing there that early? Well the answer is simple, Sue my wife often leaves for work early and I leave at the same time, because if I am not careful I will start working on the computer and when I look at the clock it's 10am. So I leave early so I don't end up in panic mode. Anyway it gives me the chance to clean the floor and tables etc, then I can sit out on the platform and relax for an hour or so with a good book, it set's me up for the day!!

Well I have found that I am not the only crack pot around at that early hour, we have a selection of runners, cyclists, dog walkers and the local nutters to keep me company. One gem was at 7.30 one morning when I was walking past the signal box some barmy chap on a bike stopped and asked me if I was open for hot drinks, now I was not yet at the station, I had my backpack and fleece on and it was raining, heaven knows why he thought I might be open for hot drinks!!! I informed him he was about 3 hours too early, he said he would be back, I have yet to see him again.

Another classic was one foggy morning when a jogger passing me said "Morning, lovely day!" you could not see 100 yards, even the ducks had lights!!

Then another gem was a chap who asked for directions to Spalding, he was walking with his dog and from the state of him I would think he would be hard pressed to make it to the city centre.

But first prize goes to a woman who I would guess would be in her mid to late 40's about 8.30 one morning I had washed the floor and was about to chuck the water over the side of the platform. She asked me why I was bothering? I asked for clarification, she said why was I bothering to clean a closed station on a disused railway? I informed her it was not disused and gave her a copy of the timetable leaflet. She looked at it and said it was made up to confuse tourists,

and I was part of a big master plan to get people to use buses!! I know we often don't run on time but surely the timetable is not made up, is it? I was lost for words.

Only a few weeks ago I arrived early to see two of the local homeless kipping on two of the benches. I opened the back door quietly then nearly frightened the life out of them when I opened the gate and then unlocked the front door. Now I know what you expect here, you expect me to say I gave them a telling off and kicked them off the station. Well you would be wrong, I gave them a coffee each had a chat with them and they went on their way. No I did not charge them for the coffee either, it's easy to forget the homeless when we are snug and warm at home, they were doing no harm and they were grateful for the coffee and I hope the kindness I showed them, it's not that hard to become homeless, and can happen to anybody just remember that. Now should you think you have a chance of a coffee if you kip on the platform just remember Arkwright Rules!! But I do have a soft side as well.

So there are some of the humorous bits from the past year, now to find humour out of some of them you would need to have been there to have witnessed them, but take my word for it there was humour there somewhere.

Now having got this far your all waiting with baited breath for my frustrations, thinking, this will be good he will be having a moan about the railway... Well wrong, my frustrations come from the general public!!

Number one frustration are the permanent lookers, these are the people who come on the railway sit in the sun take a few pictures and then leave, they are regulars but never ever buy anything or contribute one penny piece to the railway, well if you fall into that category, be warned I am after you..... I now chase platform tickets at every opportunity.

Second prize goes to the people who stand outside look at the time board and come in and ask if they are the times of the trains!! For heaven's sake they are not there for show!!!

Joint second prize goes to the people who stand next to somebody ordering tea or coffee and then when it's their turn ask if we sell hot drinks!! Or stand in front of the chocolate and crisps and ask if we sell chocolate or crisps.

A close third are the toilet people, the ones who come onto the platform look at the sign that says toilets across the car park, then ask if we have toilets? One

woman springs to mind who strode into the station and said in a loud voice “You have no paper in your toilet” I opened the door to the staff toilet looked inside and closing it again, turned to her and replied “Sorry your mistaken we have plenty!!” She went on to say she meant the one in the car park, and was most objectionable when I said they were nothing to do with the railway, she said that we should still feel obliged to put paper in them. My answer was to ask her if she would do the same if one of her neighbours had run out in their outside loo. She then had the cheek to ask if we could let her have some anyway, I replied no we did not sell it but there was a supermarket 10 minutes walk away and she could buy some there. She left muttering away to herself as the customers dissolved into laughter.

To finish this fourth article I would like to thank all those who have helped me through the year at Orton Mere, some have helped by being there and some of you have helped by staying away!! I am sure you know which camp you are in.

Thanks as always to my ever suffering wife Sue, I am writing this last bit on the evening of our 22nd wedding anniversary and I still don't know how she puts up with me!!

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