

“Arkwright’s of Orton”

This is the third of my occasional series covering the good, bad, amusing and frustrating times working as a volunteer on The Nene Valley Railway.

I am now on my third year on the railway and at the end of my second running Orton Mere Station.

The great British public and for that matter some of the staff on the railway continue to amuse and frustrate me.

Before we go any further perhaps I should explain the title “Arkwright’s of Orton” a few people have laid claim to giving me that title but it was first used by James one of the diesel drivers as he is sure the station is a reincarnation of the shop in “Open all hours”, I seem to have a reputation for removing money from people, both customers and staff alike, hence the title of this article.

As you will have gathered from my two previous articles my favourite job is working on a station, here you meet all sorts of people ranging from the extremely nice to the downright rude, with most people somewhere in the middle. Age or money are no barriers to people being a pain in the rear, in fact experience has shown time and time again that those with money rarely spend much of it and those with just a little tend to spend the lot.

Anyway let us go through some of the amusing and frustrating moments of the year.

The year started fine with some but not all of the regulars returning, and this was mixed with some new characters appearing on the scene. I had kept in touch with the dog walkers and other assorted regulars through November & December when I was pottering about the station.

Having said that it’s been a funny old year with a nice spring and generally a poor summer weather wise.

When we got all settled down early January having had a visitor staying with us over the new year period I noticed a new phenomenon, the bus passenger! Now I know what you’re thinking and that is what the hell have buses got to do with Orton Mere? Well actually a lot as more often than not it’s my method of transport to get to the station. I know that one of the reasons for Orton Mere was

that I could get some exercise walking there and back but the lure of a week's bus pass in my pocket is often very powerful!!

Anyway I noticed what whenever I travel by bus somebody more often than not will prod me and ask me about what train was running and when, funny thing is though that about 75% I don't recognize as ever being at Orton Mere while I have been there. Then it clicked they were like people who do not have a TV licence, they are the railways none paying viewers!! Those who gather at the fence or the foot crossing when there is a faint sniff of a train and then disappear once it's gone just in case they might feel the need to buy something and actually support the railway.

Another group that frustrate me are the timetable collectors, they are regulars who come to the station to watch the trains, they never buy anything and never travel, but each time they visit they always let their children grab a timetable, some of them must have more at home than we have at the station, one woman even jokes about the fact her child has so many each time he grabs one. I do wish I could get away with charging for them (The Arkwright Syndrome kicking in).

So there we were with the new timetable and open for the 2007 season. Thankfully the winter was not as cold as the previous one. Amazingly two fan heaters appeared from Wansford, and as we had no fans to heat the staff used them instead! Their arrival heralded some nice fine mild weather.

As some of you are aware I have a web site coving the pictures my wife and I have taken of the railway, this has prompted a steady stream of emails to the contact address on the site and without exception none of them have been about pictures, instead the senders seemed to be under the impression that I was a walking fountain of knowledge about where to take pictures in Peterborough. Perhaps if I do a site with my Peterborough pictures on then I will get emails about railway photography.

Yet again this year shortage of staff has been a problem, and I have had to sometimes close during the week especially during the summer as there was nobody available to help at the station, I am assuming of course the number of staff going up and down on the train not appearing to do any job in particular were really working quite hard if only making the trains look busy or keeping the seats warm.

As well as the regular crew helping I have had the odd one day stands as well, and after one plaintive call on the NVR Yahoo group one of the directors came and helped me for the day, I think he went away 50% educated and 50% shell shocked. From about lunch time he had this glazed look in his eyes as he coped with the regulars and the first time visitors, the highlight was when three regulars came in and without a word I put their order in front of them, actually that was easy as they always have the same thing each time! He said he enjoyed himself and he learnt a lot about what happens at a station, but he has yet to return for round two!

The biggest highlight of the year was the Royal Visit by Prince Edward, it was amazing how repairs I had been going on about for over a year were suddenly done at the drop of a hat. So I have come to the conclusion that the best way to get anything fixed is to arrange a royal visit!!

On the day of the visit I have never seen so many people who previously were just names. Never mind staffing my station, that day I could have staffed the railway. But if I had put out a request for help then the silence would have been deafening I am sure.

Amazing how so many people could be available for a VIP visitor to the railway but emit not a squeak when staff are needed for mundane things like staffing stations and taking money. Oh no, a royal visit is far more important!!

You will have guessed from this that staffing at stations can be something of a problem. I do get the impression that many members turn their nose up at working on a station, perhaps not thinking it important, well I accept that it may not be every ones cup of tea (Excuse the pun) but the railway survives on its income from various things, the most important being paying passengers. The first contact those passengers have with the railway when they visit is one of the five stations, and the impression they form there dictates how they enjoy the experience as a whole.

An open station will always make the railway more money than a closed one!!

The other enjoyable event was the naming of two TPO coaches on platform 2 during the TPO weekend. The look on Brian Whites face when he realised one was named after him was a joy to see. Brian is one of those people on the railway whose keenness and commitment is catching. It is always a pleasure to

have a natter to him and the naming of the TPO coach in his honour was well deserved.

Anyway back to the excitement of Orton Mere Station.

The observant of you will have noticed that the station once again has a garden, this is due solely to the work of one person, and that person is Harry Baldwin. When not tending the flower beds at the station Harry can often be found working as an engine cleaner in the Wansford sheds, now there are two diverse activities for a volunteer to do, clean locomotives and look after a station garden.

Anyway the past year has seen Harry transform what was a patch of weeds into something that has been commented on by quite a few visitors. Especially the NVR letters in white stones. In the process he has waged a never ending war against the local Rabbit and Muntjac deer population who have done their best to eat the plants as soon as Harry has planted them.

But Harry is not one to give up and we have had some especially nice displays this year with even more planned in 2008. Watch this space as they say.

Now some customers have provided little gems of amusement, here are the best....

An old couple came to the station on their 60th wedding anniversary, they wanted to travel to Yarwell and have a walk round as it was in that area they had done all their courting up towards Nassington & Yarwell. They went off on the train and when they got back I asked how they had got on. "Lovely" said the woman "We recognised lots of places and thought back to our courting days as walked up towards the villages "Did you go all the way?" I asked meaning walking to the villages, "Oh no" she replied you did not go all the way in those days!!!" She went a bright shade of red when she realised what I meant!!

An American couple and their son arrived wanting to travel on a British steam railway whilst in the UK on holiday, their faces were a picture when the visiting American locomotive arrived at the station!

Then we had the following short Gems!!

"How much is your £10.50 Rover ticket?"

When a woman was told where our station was in the city centre she said “If I speak to the driver do you think he could take me a bit closer to the centre?”

Are the train times in the timetable leaflet?

Do you sell toilet rolls?

Do you sell Tampax? (This was a chap asking by the way)

Have you got a January sale on tickets?

How many times can I use a return ticket

Do you sell dog food?

Do you have proper trains or are they toys?

Why is the station not open when your closed!!!!

On a DMU day “Can I sit with my back to the engine?”

I am on holiday in Norfolk next week can I buy tickets for the North Norfolk Railway from you?

Civils train arrived on platform one I was asked by a customer waiting for the train to Peterborough “Where do we sit?”

One Wednesday a customer asked me if it would be sunny on the following Saturday. I was unable to tell him as I had left my crystal ball at home.

On the day of the Spring Diesel gala I was moaned at because there were no steam trains running, this was from a person who had printed out the details of the diesel gala off the web site and travelled over 100 miles wanting to go behind a steam train.

During the Santa’s I opened a few of the Saturdays and it amazed me how many people could find Orton Mere station but lacked the ability to find Wansford, and they were all pointed in the right direction.

So there we have it the third instalment, if you have any comments please drop me an email or even pop into the station on a running day. Mind you bring some money with you!!!

In ending this look at the year I must thank those regular helpers at the station, without whose help it would not have been possible, they are Sue my ever

suffering wife, Roger Vigar who enables me to open many weekdays where otherwise I would be closed and also Peter Clayton who's commitment and enthusiasm has kept me going many weekends. I know that at short notice he has often juggled round his weekend so we could open despite what he admits to and I am very grateful, if the railway had a few more Peters volunteering then life would be much easier. Thanks also to those in the Office and café at Wansford, your help and assistance has been much appreciated. Last but not least of course Harry Baldwin and his excellent work tending the garden.

If your reading this, are a member of the railway and fancy having a go at the station please contact me, new blood is always welcome. If you're not a member but would like to volunteer then grab a timetable and fill in the membership application form you will be made most welcome. Speaking personally joining the railway is the best thing I have done for many years.

Robert Maskill
Orton Mere Station
Nene Valley Railway