

No Photos, Just Memories

John Wright

As a railway fan generally, I have never personally been 'linked' to any of the railway companies. I was brought up on the London North Eastern Railway and subsequently have lived in the areas of the Southern and the Great Western. They all have their place in my heart and my mind, for life itself is memories and memories are life in my book. However, there are some memories that get more embedded in the mind than others, and for me these are related to one time of my life, a time I would not wish to return to, World War 2.

I was just 10 years old as the war in Europe came to an end in May 1945 and the Japanese were eventually defeated in August that year. It had been a horrendous experience, albeit we did not lose our home, or for that matter, both my parents had not been enlisted to military service. My father had joined the local fire brigade in 1921* and continued that through and beyond the war. However, we did have some close shaves and close encounters with land mines and Doodlebugs (V1s): it was all pretty scary for a young lad. Sawbridgeworth, just in Hertfordshire, and on the border with Essex, was on the 'escape route' when the Luftwaffe had done their dirty deeds on the East End of London and were on their way back to Germany. We used to get their 'chuck-outs', those bombs that, for whatever reason, had not been dropped in the intended target area! Similarly, in 1944, we got the stray Doodlebugs that had faulty gyroscopes and had 'lost their way'. We also got one V2, Hitler's ballistic missile, that thankfully exploded above the town, with the main engine ending up in my pal's back garden! What excitement that was.

What on earth is all this to do with trains then? Well yes, all right then. Of course, there was not very much travel undertaken during the war by 'normal' folk except locally, going to the nearest market town for the odd shopping trip. Bishop's Stortford, just four miles north, was that place and I suppose my mother went by train once a fortnight or so. However, that is not what this is about. Sawbridgeworth was, and still is, on the main line from Liverpool Street to Cambridge and beyond and, although it now seems curious to me, even in the war there were occasional visits to London during so called lull periods. Just to put what I am saying into perspective, where I lived then was about 25 miles from London by road. In those days that seemed a long way and used to take anything up to 1½ hours by train, depending on what had been going on with air raids. The London Blitz was still clear in all our minds because I can verify that from 25 miles away the glow in the sky of September 1940 remains vivid in my memory, even now. The London Docks were even closer, so you can imagine the impression that those huge fires made on a young lad's mind.

I can remember one train journey to London, which I suspect was sometime in 1943. It was the period when things had quietened down a little, possibly around November that year, and during the period of preparation for June 6th (D Day) the following year. Not that we were aware of that of course! On Sawbridgeworth railway station there were no end of American troops, who had obviously just been given some leave and were off to London for a good time. The platform was crowded with them and one or two had left it very late to use the station toilet, having decided it was a must just as the train drew in. They did make it, but very much to the disgust of the station master, when they were clambering into carriages as the train was moving

off, being much encouraged by the cheering of their colleagues hanging out of the other carriage windows. The journey onwards was fascinating really because it seemed that this was their first taste of rail travel, in Britain, other than by troop train possibly. They were totally taken aback by the lack of any facilities on the train, no toilets of course, these were just single compartment carriages. Their method of communication between carriages was out of the windows and at the top of their voices, so it was all very clear as to their thoughts and comments.

We made our way towards Liverpool Street, as far as I can remember without any hold-ups, so I suppose the journey, on this occasion, took around 50 minutes, but of course that line into the terminus meanders through the East End. As we progressed relatively slowly through Ponders End, Tottenham Hale, Stoke Newington, Hackney Downs and Bethnal Green, the mood in the carriage and train had changed to quiet disbelief, I suppose, for the scenes out of the windows on the east side of the line in particular were of devastation. Row after row of terraced houses were black and desolate, black, yes from years of railway grime, but black also from the fires of three years ago. Some areas were just rubble, or great holes where properties had at one time vast cellars. Others just stood with the wallpaper still on the walls and open fireplaces looking out into nothing; parts of industrial buildings with steel girders hanging in space, it seemed. It was an awesome site that I can visualise quite easily today. It was, I think, the first time that I had felt the impact of what had happened there and, I suspect, the first time those Yanks had seen what had gone on before their arrival, but probably not what they had yet to experience in war-torn Europe.

As we pulled into the very blackened Liverpool Street, yes blackened mainly by smoke and smuts, but by the fact that the roof of glass was also well blacked out, the excitement of having reached London once again changed the mood and a mighty, fairly noisy, throng made its way onto the concourse and away. Yes, Liverpool Street did still have a roof as far as I can remember. I cannot imagine why, but perhaps I had concentrated more on the goings-on on the platform that day than looking upwards. I just always remember Liverpool Street as a filthy station until it was electrified in the mid-1950s! It had 13 platforms, all served by just two lines, running through some pretty grotty tunnels on approach and departure.

That day sticks in my mind, but we went again the following year on an uneventful journey to London, on the same route, of course, and nothing had changed, except that the weeds had really taken over. The same night, having returned home, London had its first attack by a flying bomb (V1). Later that year I could watch from my bedroom window at night and see the V1s being directed at London, sometimes, it seemed, coming in strings.

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* [h ttp://www.sawbridgeworthfirebrigade.co.uk](http://www.sawbridgeworthfirebrigade.co.uk)