

A walk on the wild side at Orton Mere Station On the Nene Valley Railway

By Robert Maskill Orton Mere Station.

A lot has happened in the year I have been running Orton Mere station and I thought it only fair that I share some of the highlights with you.

For those of you who read my previous article which covered from when I joined as a working member up to when I took over Orton Mere will know that I concentrated on the humorous and unusual. Well this second instalment is no exception.

One of the first things I discovered was that the great British public was alive and well & ready to both entertain and frustrate.

It all started back in January 2006, I had the keys to Orton Mere and armed with a flak jacket, tin hat and various assistants I jumped in at the deep end and opened for business.

For those reading this who have never visited Orton Mere I will just say that it looks like a brick version of a Monopoly hotel. The fence is half painted and that half needs doing again. The lamp standards down platform one look lovely shame they don't work, this being due to the fact that they have no electric cables running to any of them. It is also cold in winter, several times we opened up to find ice in the bottled water, and that was in the bottles on the side, those in the fridge were warmer. But as they say "It's home!!!" and woe betide anybody who runs the place down.

Now no story of Orton Mere station would be complete without a mention for platform two!! It is the facility from hell, it seems to be a magnet for the local and the Looney. We have had people come asking if they can race model cars on it, skateboard on it, picnic on it, camp on it over night and best of all shout across to the station building to order a drink and expect us to take it across to them! I have asked that it be closed by means of a gate to restrict access for the local loonies. It is no doubt lost on the list of things to be done on the railway, though I would love to be proved wrong.

Our main passing trade comes from the local dog walkers and a few joggers who often lean against the door before coming in, heaving away and looking in worse physical condition than me.

Anyway let's start with the dog walkers, one of the first things we did was put a dog bowl outside the station door for the four legged customers. Early on the first day one woman who, if her dog had looked like her it would have been put down asked if we changed the water after each dog had drunk some. When she discovered that the answer was no she said that she would take her dog elsewhere for a drink, she was last seen with the pooch in question drinking out of the river!!

We also have a regular who comes in with his dog a little way behind, orders a cup of tea and then proceeds to wear down his cell phone battery whilst it gets cold. Well, one weekend we put up a sign saying at all dogs on the station must be on a lead. This chap reads the sign, waits for his dog to catch up then puts it on the lead. He then drops the lead on the floor and walks into the station with the dog following!!! On his first visit he had bought the dog in after it had been in the river it shook the contents of the river up my walls and over my floor, he spent 50p on a tea and we spent a couple of pounds on cleaning materials! He was made aware of my displeasure.

Now to the joggers, they come in all shapes and sizes, it's just a shame that the good looking female ones wearing not a lot rarely if ever stop and come inside. I normally get the over 50's complete with B.O. and bad breath who look as though they are on their last legs. We had one chap midsummer who bought two bottles of water, tipped one over his head and drank the other one, seemed to me an expensive way of staying cool. They rarely spend much and it takes them an age to find the money and then they normally ask for the least number of coins in their change.

One thing the great British public likes seems to be ice cream, and we were asked for it from the start of the year, I discovered that if the sun shone irrespective of the temperature then there was a demand for ice cream, we had snow on the platform but as long as the sun was out we had people asking for ice cream. At first we stocked mini-milks at the price of 30p each, they were to put it mildly a pain in the rear, we had 3 flavours and on average it took a child 5 minutes to decide which flavour they wanted followed by another 5 with the parent telling them that they really wanted another flavour. For 30p it was a pain, so they were dropped from the range offered, the result is that it now takes just 5 minutes and they spend normally around a pound!!! More profit for less effort and suffering. The favourite question of the year was "Are the dark Magnums plain chocolate?"

We get a lot of children at the station, ranging from five year olds who think they are aged twenty to thirty year old adults who act like five year old children. The vast majority of the children are a pleasure to deal with and they are well mannered, often more so than their parents. Due to my stature a few ask if I am the fat controller!!! My answer is “No I am his miserable brother!!”

Mention at this stage must be made of the local toilet facilities. The nearest public toilets are in the car park adjacent to the station and although the car park comes under the Nene Park trust the toilets are owned and maintained by the local council. To say they are a disgrace is an understatement, they are next to a sewage pumping station and when the wind comes from that direction the smell can be terrible. At the start of last year the council often did not bother to open them and we had a steady stream of people at the station looking for a toilet, they were duly informed that the nearest options were either at Ferry Meadows or behind the nearest tree. One woman asked what we used and I said the staff toilet, when she asked why she could not use that I replied because she was not staff! However if she would like to fill in a membership form she could become a working member then the toilet would be available for her use when she was helping at the station, she smiled and said she could not wait that long!!!

Anyway, I got fed up of people moaning whenever they were shut so one weekend I ran off some slips of paper with the council number on and gave them to everyone who wanted to use a toilet, suggesting they phoned and complained on Monday morning. From the following Tuesday they have been open almost every day, rain or shine.

Track trespass continues to be a problem and is not just limited to children, we had one chap wondering down the line from the yacht club crossing with his grandson in tow, when challenged he said he was after golf balls! He was suitably educated and sent on his way. Then we had a woman come trotting down the line from Longueville junction, she claimed she was a free spirit and could go anywhere!! Likewise she was informed of the error of her ways and sent on her way. The gem of the year was one chap who when challenged on the track said I was talking to him as though he was an idiot. My response was that was perhaps because only an idiot would trespass on a railway line! He had the good grace to admit I could be right, he has since travelled on the train with his family and become a regular customer at the station when he is out and about walking. However the highlight was a photographer and model that went from the foot crossing to the front of the signal box early one Wednesday

morning, they were intercepted just as she was about to go topless for a couple of shots, again they were spoken to and sent on their way. Before anybody asks I will say that she most likely had to do topless modelling because if her face had been her fortune then she would have been on income support!!

We also discovered a rare breed that are occasionally seen locally and that's the Signalman. Early on I discovered they came in two varieties, the talkative and the silent. The former will pop into the station spend some money have a natter, buy some cake or chocolate, use the loo and then tootle off to their box, making contact to let me know of late running services.

The silent type scuttle into the box clutching a flask and a bag and we hear nothing from them and get a brief glimpse as they go to the public loos in the car park. Gentlemen if you're one of the silent variety & reading this please note we don't bite, nor do we mug you for money and you can use the station loo which means you don't have to go for a paddle every time to find the need to visit the toilet!!

The various special events through the year produced some entertaining incidents and visitors, the diesel gala certainly bought out some of the Looney tunes, their standard money holder seemed to be a plastic cash bag with every coin examined in minute detail before they handed it over, their purchased hot drink examined before they took a sip only to declare "It's hot!!!" they then put it on the counter to cool and whilst it did so they wondered off, 50% of them never returned. I even saw one chap take his batteries out of his camera twice and polish them with a cloth, he told his mate with him that the batteries liked the personal attention!!!

The kettle cuddlers on steam days would wax lyrical about some locomotive I had never heard of and expect me to know what they were on about. As I said in my first article trains are a black art to me! Still they were a friendly bunch and without exception were a pleasure to deal with.

Gem visitor comments from the last year include....

Is it steam today? As City of Peterborough waited to depart for Wansford.

Do you give a discount if we buy two tickets?

Do you do free trial rides?

Can I buy a fishing licence here?

Have you a left luggage department?

Do you accept Stagecoach bus Megarider tickets?

Do you do late night opening on Thursdays like the shops in the city centre?

Do you have Earl Grey Tea? My answer was “no we use tea that reflects the staff, we use PG Tips as advertised by monkeys!!”

There are two of us but we only want to go into town would it be cheaper to buy just one return between us but only use it one way? After all that would be the same as two trips by one of us.

Do you have any sleeping compartments?

Could you ask all the people on the platform to leave for a few minutes as we want to take a picture of the station with no people on it!

Do you have rover tickets in a colour other than red, it's a terrible shade and we collect them.

Could we exchange this mint Cornetto for a strawberry one, my child had two licks and did not like the flavour.

Why are your Thomas badges the same price at every station? (No I can't fathom that question out either).

Do you do bicycle hire?

Why do you have old trains, can't the railway get some modern ones, after all there might be a grant from the Government available!

In closing I would like to thank all the people who have helped me at the station on running days, without your help and commitment we could not have opened, you are too numerous to mention and I look forward to working with you all in 2007.

Very special thanks also to Sue my ever suffering wife, she put in many hours at the station despite working full time also. During the year Sue was my right arm and always had a smile for the customers, train crews and even the occasional idiot that came through the door. The shop turnover for the year would have been much less if it had not been for her hard work.

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