

It's been almost a year now....

By Robert Maskill Orton Mere Station.

It's now been almost a year since I joined Nene Valley Railway as a working member, so I thought it was time I put my experiences to paper. Perhaps to encourage others to do the same as me. Then again it may well put them off!!!

I am sure people join for many reasons, the most common being that they like railways. Well I had to be different, I don't know the front end of a locomotive from the back, the fact they go both ways does not help!! I am not especially a fan of steam or diesel. However, I enjoy photographing railways and decided that as NVR had provided me with many opportunities to enjoy my photography that I should give something back in return.

Not being wealthy the only thing I could give was my time. So I took the plunge and phoned up for a membership application form. For some strange reason the person who answered the phone gave me the impression they were sitting in an office at a high desk with an oil lamp and wearing a shade.

The form arrived, was duly filled in and returned with my subscription and a list of things I could do, none of them involved getting near anything dirty or so I thought! In the event this was not quite accurate as I found out when clearing out Orton Mere!

Well.... I visited Wansford and on entering the office I saw a chap bent over a computer working away, I was impressed. This was the heart of the railway. Then on closer inspection I saw he was eating lunch!! Never before have I seen somebody use a knife, fork and keyboard at the same time.

After chatting to a few people I decided to work at a station and do turns as a TTI, the station I chose was Ferry Meadows. Now it may just have been my imagination but I swear that a dark cloud obscured the sun and there was a rumble of thunder when I said where I wanted to go.

I caught the train back from Wansford to Ferry Meadows with the staff being warned I was on my way. The wooden cross and clove of garlic I was given before starting the journey to Ferry Meadows was chucked in the nearest bin on the platform. As the train pulled out I saw a figure

recovering them, I had my first lesson, nothing is wasted on NVR except time!!

On arriving I was met by Neville and his son Robert. Here I must say that my decision to work at Ferry Meadows was the right one, I was made most welcome and as it turned out I could not have worked with two nicer people, I enjoyed my time at the station very much, and I will be the first to admit now I am running Orton Mere that I miss both of them, they provided endless hours of entertainment and are a wealth of knowledge.

Come to think of it I have yet to meet anybody on the railway that I don't like which in my experience is unique, everybody has been keen to pass on information and knowledge and for that I am most grateful. But that said some of you do bitch about each other, we are all volunteers and working for the common good keeping the adult train set running!!! I am sure some members sit in a darkened room at night pushing pins into wax models of other members.

I then went mad and purchased a rule book off Hannah, I have read it from cover to cover, even the bits that don't directly concern me in my day to day tasks. However, it does give me a better understanding when I see somebody doing something. I now know why they are doing it.

Now I could write reams about my time at Ferry Meadows, but you would most likely doze off, so here are the highlights.....

Customers and the travelling public have provided the most entertainment, the vast majority have been really nice, and it's a shame that the small number of problems I encountered at the station were all due to locals!

One old lady springs to mind, she appeared on the platform with her husband and asked if we had a toilet available, she was pointed in the right direction and we thought nothing more until just after she left without a word after a slightly longer than normal time in there. Then we detected the smell..... The poor lady had been taken short, we think she may have wanted to buy the station; certainly she left a large deposit!! The smell was so bad that we had to close the station building and the three of us sat outside debating what to do.

Well Neville looked at me and I looked at Neville, after a short debate we sent Robert in to investigate!! We were sadly depleted in stocks off loo

roll and hand towels, and when Robert had worked miracles with the mop we were short of loo cleaner as well!! All in a days work!!

Then there was the woman who asked me if there was another passenger train after the last one!! I never have worked that question out.

There was the chap walking down the track complete with backpack, when questioned as to why he was not using the public paths that run along the side of the track he replied that it was not on his map. My comment was if that was the case when he followed rivers that did not show a path along the bank did he swim all the way!! He was then escorted off the station.

Mention must also be made of the School parties we got during week days, without exception that have been a pleasure to deal with, they have been well mannered and no problem at all. Even the hot summers day when the Polish Tank was 40 minutes late and we had a party of 100+ arrive on the platform to return to Wansford just as it arrived going the other way. Quick decision, we could not have them sitting on the platform for over half an hour with no shade while waiting for it to return. So, much to the shock of the guard we put them all on the train so they would not be in the hot sun.

The result was 100+ happy kids who got a longer ride than they expected together with several confused teachers who were debating who should ring the school and let them know the change of plans. Lots of the kids returned with their parents later during the year and several said thanks for what we did, even a couple of the teachers visited with their own children. The moral of this is “customer service & care of the passengers’ safety” always without exception comes first.

As well as working at Ferry Meadows I had decided to do some days as a TTI, now I must admit that I prefer station work to TTI work, for a start it gives me more time to chat to the customers. Also from 17 years in retail and customer service I never ever give anybody the benefit of the doubt when doing a TTI turn, they are guilty until shown to be innocent!!

Highlight of the year was without doubt was the compartment on the Mk1’s with the blinds drawn. On opening it I was greeted with the sight of a young lady on her knees in front of her boyfriend. She was topless. I said “Tickets please” she did not flinch, he almost went through the roof in shock, I clipped their tickets and left with the comment that I would

not charge for the two bald headed children and shut the compartment door behind me.

The diesel gala bought a crop of people who had either strangely lost their ticket or did not want it clipped as they collected them. In the case of the former they bought another ticket and in the case of the latter I smiled nicely as I took a chunk out of their ticket. It did not help their cause that I had heard them earlier say that if we did not clip them they could use them the next day as well!!

It also bought a number of people who thought that putting on a high viz jacket gave them the right to wander up and down the track at will. What surprised me was the fact that most when challenged used the fact they were professional railway workers as their excuse. Personally speaking as a new chap I would have thought they would know better, but it appears this is not the case. I put it down to the breathing of the diesel fumes.

Well after some months at Ferry Meadows I decided that I wanted to run a station, the question was which one would I like to run if I was given the opportunity? Well given the choice of any then first option would be Ferry Meadows, but that was not available, Neville and Robert do an excellent job there and have a band of regulars who visit them.

That left a choice of Peterborough NVR or Orton Mere, the former has a band of staff there already who are part of the fixtures and fittings (I call the station "The Titfield Thunderbolt") and I wanted something from scratch, a challenge if you like. So the obvious choice was Orton Mere. However, that had Steve Dando running it as a franchise selling hot food and lots of other things except tickets!! I had during the year gone there a few times and sold tickets off the platform during event weekends, Steve had made me most welcome and was a nice chap to chat too. I enjoyed going there as I had got to know him before becoming a member.

So I wrote a letter saying that I would like to run Orton Mere if and when it became available at some stage in the future.

I took over at Orton Mere the first week in January. Less than a year after first joining the railway. This raised a few eyebrows I think because some people think that only an insane person would run the station which has a reputation for problems, in the past few years it's been set on fire and had a mechanical digger driven into the back of it for example. It came with Graffiti on three walls and the main doors, one of which was red and the other brown, and almost a dozen large containers of used cooking oil!!

First task was to clear the place out, a lot of rubbish was accumulated there and I decided to adopt the policy of "If in doubt chuck it out" I must thank Matt Dicks for his help clearing it of the accumulated junk he is a dab hand at cleaning toilets!! Also Derrick Mulvana for transporting the bags of rubbish to Wansford for disposal. We have still to clear the ticket office and put it back into use. That will be done in the very near future I hope, time permitting. Also we plan to sand, paint and varnish the benches outside the station building.

Mention must also be made of the wild animals we found at the station, and I don't mean the locals!! Especially the spider which I had to deal with before Matt would venture back into the loo after he spotted it. The poor lad went redder than when Trudy and Sharon pursue him down the platform!!!

Then there was the mouse that appeared, it resulted in Derrick chasing it round the station with a mop muttering about getting the little devil!! I bet not many have seen a director move so fast, not in daylight anyway.

Both incidents provided some light relief to the day.

Mention must also be made of the ticket cupboard. It had a big lock on it but no sign of the key! Nobody knew where it was and there did not appear to be a spare at Wansford. As a last resort Derrick Mulvana bought down some bolt croppers and in the process discovered the key on top of the cupboard above eye level! I got some light hearted stick off him for that. The key had a label on it bearing the words "Orton Mere Ticket Cupboard, leave on top of Cupboard"!!! So much for security!!! Rather like locking the front door and having the key on a bit of string behind the letter box.

All we need now is heating in the station, if we want to keep warm at the moment we open the fridges!! It needs sorting and I think I will have to make myself a pain in the rear until it is.

Well that brings me up to date, I am at Orton Mere and we open the station every day there is a service. Most of the custom is made up of dog walkers with smelly wet dogs and joggers keeping fit, who look in worse condition than I am!!

If you're passing Orton Mere and we are open please feel free to pop in for a tea or coffee you will be most welcome, but be warned we are an

expert at extracting money out of people. If you want to come and sit and bitch about the railway then don't bother you will not get a sympathetic ear. Do that amongst yourselves, as most likely you're the only people listening anyway.

For anybody reading this who is thinking of becoming a working member I would say "Go for it!!" Best thing I have done and should have joined 20 years ago when I first moved to the area.

Should you feel like having a go working at a station and fancy a day walking on the wild side please contact me as I am keen to increase the number of staff I have available to cover days when we are open.

©Robert Maskill
Orton Mere Station