

Ascot Races

By Les Hollingsworth

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To the majority the race meeting held at Ascot in the middle of June each year means either horses or ladies fashions. The main interest so far as I am concerned centres on the additional rail traffic created on the Reading-Waterloo line. Over the years the pattern has changed and to a certain extent the volume has decreased but nonetheless it still offers some interest to the observer.

The first recollection I have is just prior to World War II of a train standing in the down platform at Bracknell and the cook in the dining car offering me an orange! I accepted and it was thrown across to where I was standing on the up platform. As far as I can recall the loco was a Schools class 4-4-0.

During the war the race specials did not run and it was not until 1946 or 7 that they started again. For the reader who is not familiar with the track layout at Bracknell prior to the building of the present station a brief description will help. There was a quite extensive goods yard on the up side comprising approximately 9 roads while on the down side there were 2 long sidings with a trailing connection to the main line controlled from a small cabin near the present site of the "two bridges" roundabout on Downshire Way. At the east end of the station there was a trailing crossover, and about 200 yards west of the station another trailing crossover from the down to the up that included a single slip connection to the up goods yard, all controlled from the signal box situated on the end of the up platform. The box normally controlled the sections from Wokingham Junction in the west to Ascot in the east, however up until 1964/5 there were 2 platforms and a signal box at Ascot West which were brought into use during race week thus shortening the section by 0.75 of a mile. Between Bracknell and Wokingham the three level crossings were operated from separate cabins but they were not block sections.

Until 1964 the pattern was as follows:-

The Reading-Waterloo 30 min interval service would be maintained, the trains being increased to 8 cars during the peak times; additional trains would be run from Waterloo to Ascot formed of 4SUB, EPBs or whatever was available. Having unloaded at Ascot they would continue as empty stock to Farnham via Camberley. One 8 car unit would run empty stock to Reading (Southern) as would the Waterloo-Ascot First Class only special formed to 2 x 4COR units complete with antimacassars in all compartments. In some instances the down line between Ascot and Ascot West was used to store units ready for the return rush in the evening.

Special trains from other regions were run on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and originated from such places as Swansea, Wolverhampton, Exeter, Manchester and latterly Alfreton and Mansfield Parkway. On arrival at Reading General the engines would be changed for the final 14 miles to Ascot West. Reading Southern shed provided the motive power which would be either U or N class moguls, Urie S15s or Bulleid Q1s. Having unloaded all the passengers at Ascot West, a waiting turnover engine would bring the empty stock back to Bracknell for berthing. The train loco waited at Ascot West to bring the next train of empty stock back to Bracknell. The usual number of trains was three each day but I do remember on one occasion there being four.

The two down sidings would be used first; the third train on arrival at Bracknell shunted to the up line, the loco ran round, drew the train forward and then reversed into the up goods yard. All

engines would return to Reading for servicing whilst the stock was watered and the restaurant car crews had a break before preparing for the return run.

Just after 5:00pm the engines would return from Reading normally coupled together, one would carry on to Ascot West to work the first train back, and the others would couple up to their respective trains ready to work up to Ascot. Those in the down sidings would be drawn out and if available another engine would couple to the other end to work it forward. If another loco was not available the train loco would have to run round.

Close behind the locos would follow the two rakes of empty electric stock mentioned previously and the First Class only 4CORs, the latter collecting its passengers from the special Racegoers platform between Ascot West and Ascot. Time and paths were invariably lost and most of the specials were late away, the last normally passing through Bracknell between 7:30 and 8:00pm.

Any special approaching from the London direction would call at Ascot and then proceed via Camberley to Farnham or Woking for servicing.

The first major change came in 1964 with the closing of Reading Southern Shed when Western Region engines began to work through to Ascot West thus cutting out the loco change at Reading. On the 17/17 June 1964 the following locos were seen; 6980, 6854, 7808, and Feltham provided standard 4MT 2-6-4 tank, 80143, for shunting stock at Bracknell.

The following year saw two changes; all the specials were worked by diesels, and Ascot West station was closed. The specials from the Western Region then worked to Ascot and carried on as empty stock to Clapham Junction for servicing, The only stock to be berthed at Bracknell was a Midland Region special from Manchester which worked through from Willesden to Ascot then empty stock to Bracknell behind D.374 (now 40174). The loco having run round it remained with the stock in the up yard.

1967 provided a surprise in the shape of 34024 "Tamar Valley" working the Manchester special to the same programme as above. The news of its appearance spread rapidly and I for one was out in the evening to witness what was to be the last Bulleid Pacific to work a train through Bracknell. 1968 was again all diesels, but 1969 provided four different classes as follows:- D1683 (47485), D820 "Grenville", D1001 "Western Pathfinder", and the Manchester arrived behind D67 (45118 "The Royal Artillery"). From 1970 onwards Brush 47s have virtually monopolised the workings, the exception being the Manchester which in 1973 appeared with 7645 (25295) and 7662 (25312) Class 25/3s in charge. Subsequently Southern Region 33s have worked this train from Willesden to Basingstoke and back.

With the closing of Bracknell yard and the removal of the down sidings the present pattern was evolved; all the specials from Reading carry on to Clapham Junction for servicing; those from the London direction either go to Farnham or via Bracknell & Reading to Basingstoke for servicing.

The week rarely passes without an incident: one year a cable fire; another year, 1964 I think, the First Class special managed to remove the third (live) rail between Winnersh and Wokingham, and after considerable delay and chaos arrived at Bracknell with two GWR steam locos on the front! More recently (1976) a return special to Swansea which had been seen in the morning behind a Class 47, appeared late in the evening hauled by a Class 74 Electro-Diesel. I imagine a replacement 47 would have taken over at Reading, or the 74 would have had some difficulty on diesel engine only.

The rolling stock is mainly Mk1s although Mk 2Ds have appeared more in recent years. One of the specials from Wolverhampton is usually formed of open stock plus two full kitchen cars serving full meals throughout the train.

PostscriptAscot 1981

This year the following Special Trains ran in conjunction with the Royal Meeting at Ascot, Brush 47s & Class 33s monopolising the workings.

On Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday:

Manchester to Ascot via Willesden & Clapham Junction; Empty stock to Farnham. Locos: 33027 "Earl Mountbatten", 33010, 33033.

Wolverhampton to Ascot via Reading. Empty stock to Clapham Junction. Locos: 47508 "Great Britain", 47178, 47128.

Wednesday & Thursday only:

Swansea to Ascot via Reading. Empty stock to Clapham Junction. Locos: 47484 "I K Brunal", 47096

Wednesday only:

Liverpool to Ascot via Willesden & Clapham Junction. Empty stock to Basingstoke via Wokingham & Reading. Loco: 33063.

Thursday only:

Nottingham to Ascot via Reading. Empty stock to Clapham Junction. Loco: 47558.

Wolverhampton to Ascot via Reading. Empty stock to Clapham Junction. (Mk 2D air-conditioned stock), Loco: 47223.

In each case the same loco worked the return working, no failures being reported. Timekeeping was within 5 or 10 minutes of booked time except the Wednesday Swansea special which passed Wokingham 19mins late, Reading having held the special on the Spur and let the 12:32 Reading-Waterloo proceed in front.