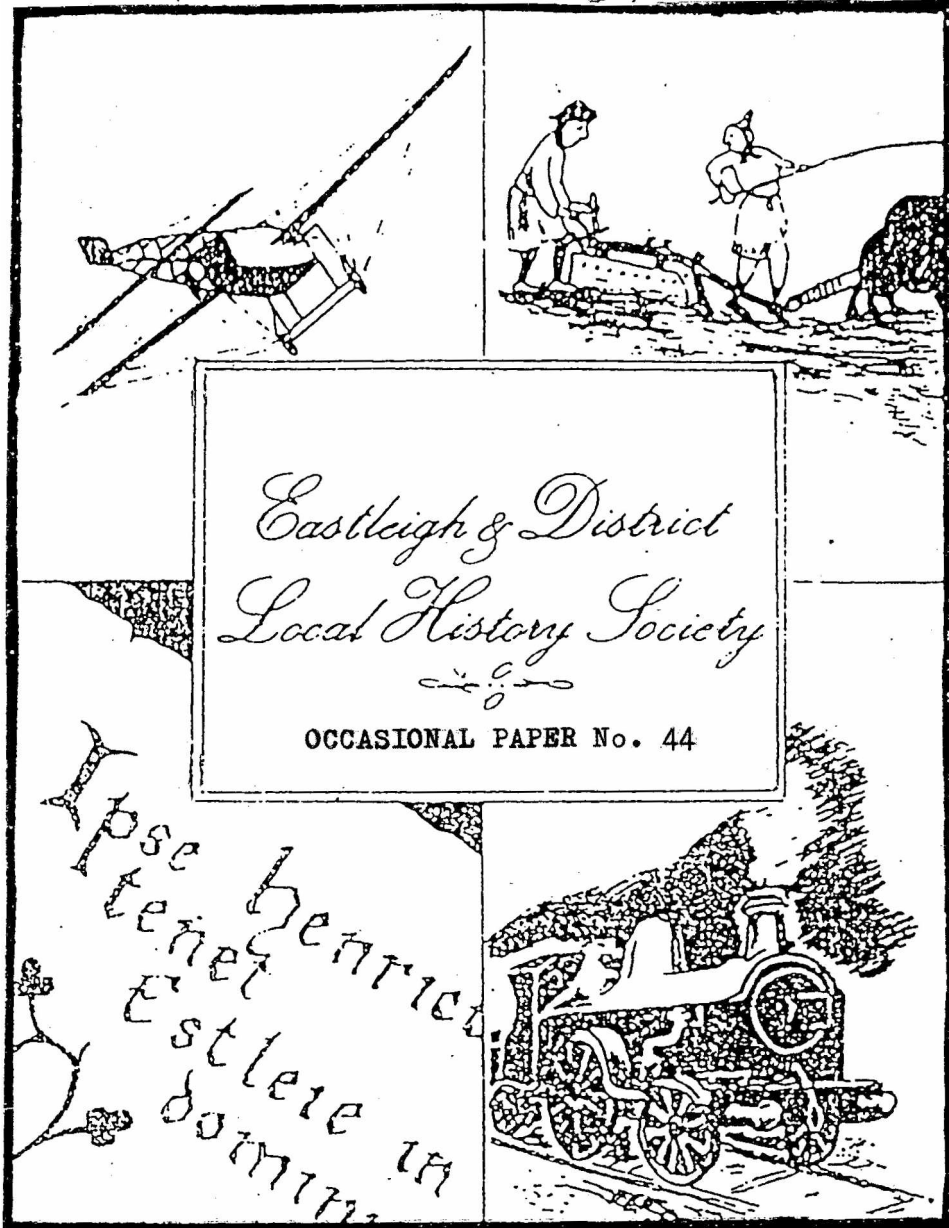
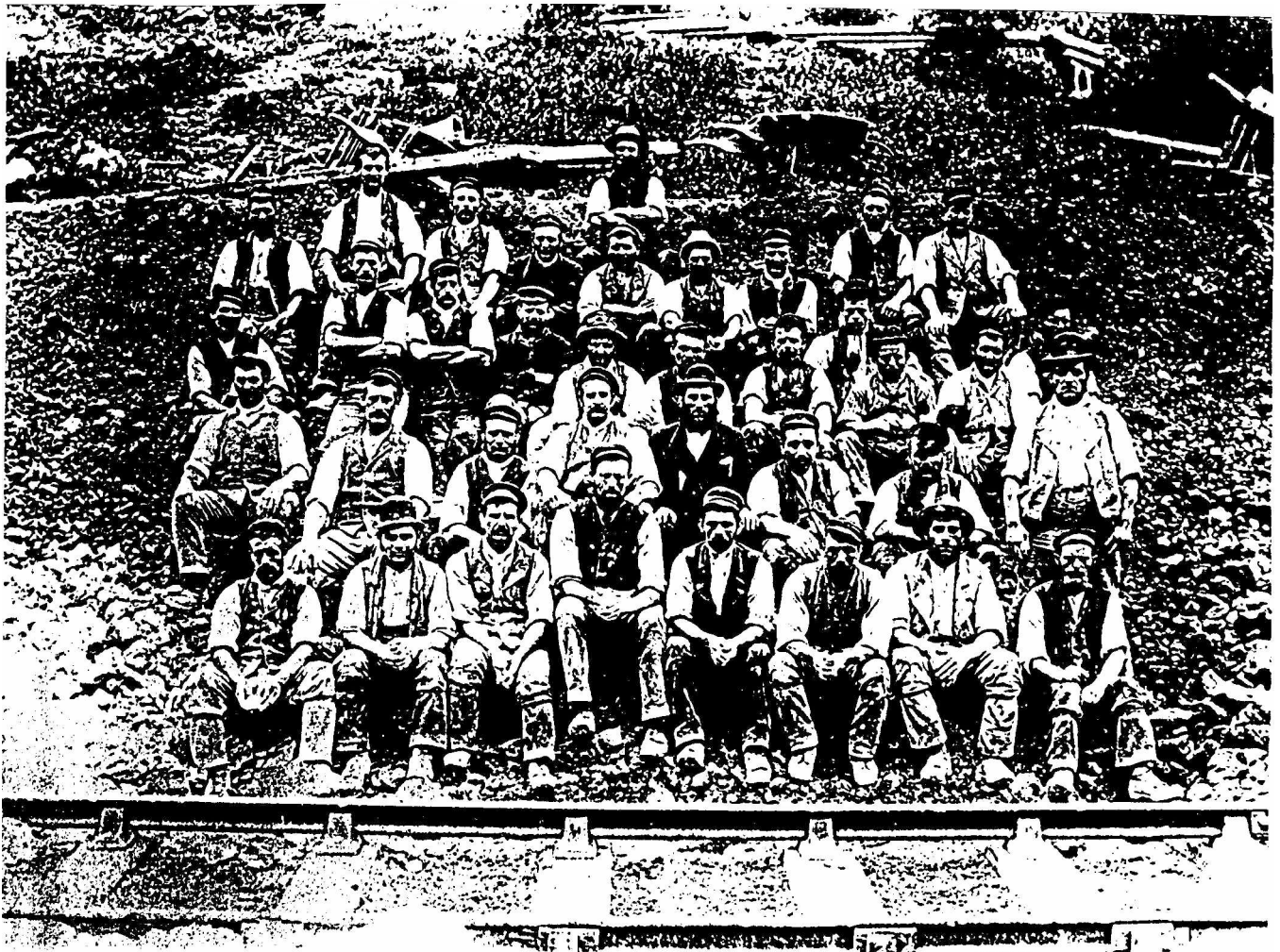


The job of a railway plate-layer.



A Gang of Platelayers, 1886.



THE JOB OF A RAILWAY PLATE LAYER

When I was 16, I signed on for five years training as an apprentice at Eastleigh Wagon Works. That ended in 1925 and I had to look for a job. It wasn't easy at that time and after the odd temporary job, I came home and told my Dad that I was fed up. Couldn't he get me a job in his department? He was a ganger on the permanent way and he said he would speak to the Chief Inspector.

It was the time when the railway from Allbrook Signal Box to Shawford had to be widened. If you go under the bridge there, you will see that the old part is different from the new. Work on the bridges had to be done before the track could be widened so it took several years. Most of the material for the widening came from the Otterbourne cutting which is just the other side of the old water works; other material came from all over the Southern Railway. The track had to be extended each side by about twenty feet. That was where I changed from being a wagon builder to working on the permanent way which is in the Civil Engineer's Department.

They wanted a temporary man at Allbrook because the permanent men were being used for look-out duties and hand signalling to secure the safety of the many people working there. I was at Allbrook for two months; then my father told me there was a vacancy in the permanent way re-laying gang. I had to go down and see the Chief Inspector and he said, "You'll start on Monday and you'll go to Branksome to pick up the gang." Work had been going on down there all winter renewing track and making extra sidings at Branksome to berth the carriages. I only had one day there and the next day we came up to Hinton Admiral where we were re-laying for three weeks. If you were working over two miles from Eastleigh, you had to stay in lodgings in order to be at work at the right time in the morning, which was seven o'clock. A man used to go a day before we moved to a new site to arrange lodgings for all the workmen. Over the years, you went to the same place every time and you were always welcome. This was my first time and it was the first time for a chap named George Sparsholt who had come out of the Navy. He and I went to lodge at a station house with Mr and Mrs Stride. We became friends for the rest of our lives and when they died, I went to their funerals at Highcliffe Church.

Now this re-laying was hard work because in those days everything had to be done manually. On arrival at the site, you were issued with a shovel and that thing remained in your possession all the time you were on the permanent way. It had your initials on it. Each gang had 36 young men, a ganger and a sub-ganger, making 38 in all for most of the time. George and I were given a pair of “sleeper-dogs”, so called because they had two handles and as you pulled the handles up, so the points of the tongs gripped into the sleepers. Previously, before you ever got to the site where the re-laying had to be done, the ballast train would unload the new sleepers and rails along the track. Our first job was to lay the new sleepers out end on to the old ones. There were eighteen sleepers to a length of forty-five foot rail which was the standard length in those days. If you had a mile of re-laying to do, that meant one thousand sleepers. There were four men to a length so the thirty-six of us could do nine lengths at a time. Each pair of men would do nine sleepers to a length. It was a bit complicated because the sleepers were all jumbled up along the pathway of the railway and they all had to be turned end on, sometimes on the level, sometimes up a bit of a cutting or sometimes down a slope, but they all had to be sleeper to sleeper. When you and all the others had finished your nine, you went and started the next nine and so on until you had finished the length of re-laying that had to be done.

Then you would march back to the start and be issued with “rail-dogs”, the tongs of which fitted over the bull-head of the rail and gripped it as you lifted it. Twenty-four men were needed to lay out the rails in the six foot between the two roads exactly where they were to go in. Then one was laid down flat and the other was stood on its edge. You went on doing this for a quarter of a mile, made up of nine lengths of forty-five foot rail. Then you had a five minute rest. You went on like this, a quarter of a mile at a time until all the new rails were laid out ready to take the place of the old ones. The reason that one rail was stood on its edge was so that a man could mark where the sleepers had to come. There were eighteen sleepers in a length and the nearer the joint the closer the sleepers were, because the joints were the weakest points on all the permanent way. So there was a broad chalk mark across the head of the rail, fifteen inches in at both ends, the next space was two feet, then two feet six inch spacings right through to the other end. When you had taken the old rail out and put the new rail in, you had to pull in the new sleepers to those chalk marks and they all had to be in the correct position along the forty five feet. When all the rails had been laid out, you walked back and about thirty men took their shovels and they had to clean out all the ballast from one end to the other of the sleeper. Each man had to do six beds and the ballast was thrown into the recess between the sleepers you had laid out. It was hard work and sometimes you needed a pick-axe. It took exactly one hour. Then you had to go on to the next stint until the whole re-laying was done and all the ballast cleared out.

Each day had its job. You never started a new site until the Wednesday of each week and by Friday you had finished your opening up. By then, you could say you'd had three days hard work. Mostly, you finished on a Friday afternoon because when you were lodging away you had to go home and get fresh food. You had to be back in lodgings on Saturday night so as to be able to start work at five o'clock on Sunday morning. That's when all the traffic was stopped on one road and speed had to be reduced on the other because as you took out the materials you were inclined to wander onto the other track. You had to work in all weathers, sun, rain or snow, and when you had done fifteen years as I had, you were supposed to be pretty tough.

The re-layers had to take out the old rails and lay them in the six foot space where the new ones were from one end to the other. Then another section would take out the old sleepers which was the hardest work because they had to be dragged right across to the pathway of the recess. Then another gang had to clean and level everything loose where the new sleepers had to be put in. Then the rails had to be put in. Finally, another gang of plate layers would key them up and put fish plates on them. We were working from start to finish with hardly a break. We used to have a half-hour break for a meal and an occasional break for a mug of tea. The difficulty of making tea was the water supply. It wasn't like today when you can get water almost anywhere. In between villages, you might have to walk half a mile with six or seven gallons of water and you were only allowed a certain time. Two chaps were in charge - different ones each year. I remember when I was doing it, we had a big iron hook which we hung from four chairs. The five gallon dixie was put on the hook over a fire of old sleepers. You put a quarter pound of tea in the dixie and added a tin of condensed milk. When it was time for a meal break, the men used to come and get a mug of tea and sit on the ground to eat their sandwiches. The two chaps who made the tea also did the washing up. All the mugs were put in the dixie and stored away in a hut somewhere. At first there was no shelter whatsoever but later on portable shelters were provided.

The money was poor - £2. 4s. 8d per week plus 15/- for your lodgings. There was double pay on Sundays. You got your money on Thursdays and that's when you might go out for a drink. We all went to one pub and the villagers liked our visit because we made it a bit lively. Our signature tune was "Flannigan's Band" and it would always be sung at ten to ten, ready for closing time. The landlord or lady would take everything movable out of the room, because otherwise it would get broken with us banging on the old oak table which was a feature of most old-fashioned pubs in those days. I remember the village copper used to come up on his bicycle with the little oil lamp and wait outside the pub about ten o'clock but he never had any trouble from us. I really enjoyed myself among those wonderful country people. We were always welcome to go to the Wednesday evening Whist Drives they used to have in the village hall.

I can say that during my fifteen years in the re-laying gang, I walked from Eastleigh to Gillingham tunnel in Dorset, from Dorchester to Basingstoke, from Basingstoke to Salisbury, from Eastleigh to Alton and from Eastleigh to Cosham. It was all country in those days and I thought the most picturesque line was from Romsey to Andover Junction, going through Mottisfont, Stockbridge, Fullerton, Clatford and Andover Town stations. It was a sad day when Lord Beaching cut out the branch lines through the countryside. During the first part of the war, we re-layed the Meon Valley lines from end to end, some twenty miles, but it's all gone now.

Much has changed over the years. As engines got heavier and faster, the forty-five foot rails were replaced by sixty foot lengths. A sixty foot rail weighed just under a ton and extra men were needed to move them. There were six pairs of men at each end with their rail-dogs and five pairs in between. You needed twenty-four sleepers in the length. During the war, new materials had to be used because it was difficult to get timber across from British Columbia, but nothing was satisfactory. They tried Jarram wood sleepers which was supposed to come from Australia. It was heavy and it took four men to lift one, but they didn't stand up to our weather. They tried a French poplar but that was useless; it couldn't take a creosote and it rotted away in the wet. Now concrete sleepers are used. They are strong and heavy and last for forty years. They are reinforced with twenty-four wires. Otherwise, they would crack and cause the gauge - 4ft 8½in. - to widen. Between the tracks, you have a standard distance of six feet.

My plate-laying days came to end in 1942 when I contracted pleurisy, followed by complications while working at Nursling. I was off work for a year and was declared unfit to resume plate-laying. So it was back to the Loco Works and I spent my last fifteen years as a stock keeper and time keeper, getting to know all the new materials for post war railways.



JOHN COMPTON

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