

Master, Wardens, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I understand Master, that you were elected Master of the Arbitrators last November. Well I am happy to say we at Magdalene don't go in for any of that fancy democracy stuff. We appoint our Masters, and I am the one who does it. The first time I had to act was fifteen or so years ago when my father was in his nineties, he asked me to find the Master, and then he (my father) would appoint him. This did not suit the Dons and they all signed a letter to my father during Sunday Eve Chapel saying that I had no business to be carrying out these duties. My father in reply wrote them a letter in Latin which soon shut them up.

In 2002 the choice of Duncan Robinson as Master pleased all the Dons. This was unusual as during the selection process over the years there has often been some temporary dissention but peace always prevailed when the Master was in post. As a matter of interest, Duncan Robinson is Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. I rather wonder, Master, whether keeping the peace among 30 unruly Dons would not qualify me for a new career in Arbitration.

Stress is part of daily living. We all suffer it. We all handle it differently. Some take to the bottle. Others swap partners. But I'm a passionate railwayman so I drive engines.

It all started when I was evacuated to Llandovery in August 1939 and lived with a retired guard on the Great Western Railway. I started driving Pannier Tank locomotives to Llanelli almost on a daily basis aged 7.

We moved to Saffron Walden in 1944 and I continued driving engines between Audley End and Bartlow. Our cook at Mutlow Hall was the lover of my favourite driver Alf who had driven locomotives in France for the whole of the 1st World War. I got to know Alf better as he was always in our kitchen chatting up our cook. I used to drive two or three times a week in the holidays. Alf and his fireman were often to be seen in the Railway Alms in Saffron Walden, and on one occasion they told me that they had two hours to spare which they proposed to spend drinking. I was told to do some shunting for them in the yard. I proudly told my Father that evening what I had been up to and he made me promise that I was never again to drive engines on my own without the driver or fireman.

In the shooting season 2 cwt sacks of coal were stacked in the cab and I was told to slow to a crawl just north of Ashdon station. Out of the bushes would appear a poacher with 2 brace of pheasants, one for the driver and one for the fireman. They were our pheasants! The two sacks of coal were then dropped down for the poacher without stopping the train.

In 1952, 90% of us had done our National Service which was mighty good for us. Cambridge followed and those who had seen action in Korea or Malaya regarded the University as utter bliss. We described it as 'as good as the Army but without the responsibility!' After a year or more fighting in the jungle with the 3rd Battalion The King's African Rifles, three fellow Second Lieutenants and myself duly paraded at our Battalion Headquarters at Temerloh Railway Station in Pahang to be dined out before sailing home.

At about 2.00 in the morning someone said "Robin, you are the only chap who knows how to drive steam engines, why don't we get the armoured train out and potter up and down the main line and make a bit of noise in the jungle".

But there were two problems. One was to keep our Colonel asleep who fortunately had dysentery so the Medical Officer gave him a little injection. The second problem was that the Station Master kept the key to the points. Our Medical Officer found the Station Master sound asleep and carefully gave him a small injection to make sure that he too had a good rest. I soon had about ten fully inebriated fellow Officers on the footplate and we potted up and down the East Coast main line which was single track, loosing off every form of bombardment into the jungle, grenades to Bren guns, mortars, the lot. I suppose I must have known the timings of other trains on the line that night because we never ran into anything.

The Army curtailed my driving for a while but in 1956 I wrote to the Locomotive Superintendent at Liverpool Street to see whether I could have a ride on the Sandringham Class Locomotive No.2806 "Audley End" named after our Family home. Unfortunately the engine had already been scrapped but I was generously given an all day trip round East Anglia on various locomotives ending at about 11 p.m. back to Audley End Station.

My halcyon days were in the 1950's and 60's when I often drove the Norfolkman Liverpool Street to Norwich, where I gave the driver, fireman and Inspector a good lunch in the Station Hotel at Norwich, and then I often used to fire the engine back to Liverpool Street. On one occasion the Inspector told me to ease up going through Diss at 102 mph driving the Britannia "Oliver Cromwell" No.70013 now preserved. In those happy days we used to say that driving a steam locomotive at high speed was better than flying an aeroplane and nearly as good as sex. On this occasion we did the 47 miles between Ipswich and Norwich start to stop in 41 minutes.

On the 16th May, 1964 (a Sunday), Stirling Moss opened our Railway at Audley End. Last year we carried 42,800 passengers and we have a lot of fun. We have a disabled carriage cum restaurant car which can serve four people, and I am toying with the idea of a sleeping car for two! The engine driver however, might not appreciate driving a loving couple round all night even in the summer.

Finally, I am thinking of going into the funeral business by railway. There would be an extra charge for steam haulage, but we are thinking of building a branch line to a suitable location in our woods where the customers would be buried under their own tree which of course they provide. It is an excellent way of getting one's wood planted. We would have to have a posh station with a restaurant and/or drinking facilities. Our local Canon in Saffron Walden says the station on the branch line from Audley End should be called Dead End. So when the stress finally gets to me, its down the Branch Line for my last journey.

Your guests have dined well, Master. We have enjoyed every minute of this superb evening. So let us all, your fortunate guests, our hosts and indeed every one here, stand and drink to the health of the Worshipful Company of Arbitrators. May it flourish forever more.

