



Combe Rail members' magazine - issue #11 Autumn 2018

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IN THIS ISSUE....

We continue Frank Kidwell 's railway memories with 'The Morteheo Years 1954-60'. We also visit Georgeham Gates, the line's best-preserved crossing box, and speak to the last crossing-keeper, Jean Cooper, who still lives there.

COMBE RAIL NEWS



2018 AGM and Railway Exhibition

This year's AGM and Exhibition took place on Saturday 8th September 2018 in The Landmark Pavilion, Ilfracombe. Visiting groups included The Lynton & Barnstaple Railway, Exmoor Associates, Dartmoor Railway, Tarka Valley Railway, Bideford Railway Heritage Centre, Ilfracombe Museum and West Somerset Railway. We were particularly pleased to welcome Frank Kidwell, Ilfracombe's last signalman (pictured above.) There were some splendid model railway layouts as well, including Peter Hollins' "Parracombe" and David Watts' "Ilfracombe on the Quay" (below, photos by G Best)





TAW LINK NEWS

Following an encouraging meeting in June, North Devon Council have kindly offered to provide local transport and demographic data in support of a pre-feasibility study. We attended the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway's Autumn Gala on September 29 & 30, where our petition to NDC attracted lots of interest and more signatures. Our [online petition](#) currently stands at 1,270.

FRANK KIDWELL'S RAILWAY MEMORIES – PART 2 'The Morteohoe Years 1954-60'



(Morteohoe station, undated. John Alsop collection)

In 1953 I became signaller at Morteohoe. I had an old Enfield 350 Side-valve, and I was travelling between Umberleigh and Morteohoe daily, until a railway cottage became available just beyond the Dogs' Trust on the left hand side, on the nap of the hill. We had the one at the furthest end. It's well sat down over the side of the hill, and there was a bus stop a couple of hundred yards down. There was work going on down there, so the bus stopped outside our place. I was on early turn, and Jean my wife was still in bed, and within a couple of yards of her there was double-decker bus with a bloke looking at her in bed. That cottage had a pump in the garden like the last one, and a lovely lot of land - we used to keep ducks and geese and chickens - and it also had a two-seater lavatory. You could go in there and hold hands. The plank was there with the two buckets underneath. After 12 months there, a cottage became available on Morteohoe station, the middle one of the three, so we moved up there. On the left hand side was the stationmaster's house and the booking office and all the rest. You've got to go on further down the yard, and the three cottages are in on your right hand side. There were slates on the walls, it was pretty exposed there. People used to say "Why the hell do you live there, with the wind cutting?" But it was the healthiest time of the lot. I enjoyed my railway work in any case. Of course we got electricity then! And water! It didn't have a flush toilet though - there was still a bucket. For my wife Jean to come from a city and live in conditions like that, it must have been a hell of a strain on her. But she tolerated it and she got through it, she was a wonder woman. She could make anything - she was dressmaker for Skint's, she worked at the telephone exchange, she became cook for the handicapped school at Pathfields. She could do anything. I think we made a good team, we really did.

Freddie Foulger was stationmaster and Ray Baddick was clerk. Both Jack Burrow, my opposite mate and I, we'd both been Porter/Signalmen and as I say we'd gone through not only the cleaning the urinals, but all of the office procedure from sale of tickets to the monthly accounts. If Ray was stuck on his office work, he'd come up to Jack and me:

"If you're not doing anything this evening could you look at this please?" And we'd complete his work. Frankie Beer [clerk] was a good old boy - I don't know where he lived, but he was a damn good footballer, he was always scoring goals, because at Morteohoe station, the football pitch was across the road. You've got your up platform and waiting shed, and the next field was the Morteohoe and Woolacombe football pitch. Sitting in the signal box you could watch the football match! It was all right.



(Morteohoe staff c.1963 L-R a relief signalman, Clem Chapman (relief stationmaster) Ray Baddick (clerk) Charlie Stevens (porter) photo John Baddick collection)

Jack Burrow [signalman] started at Morteohoe before me. He took over from Eric Kipling, and I took over from Sid Hatchley. Ralph Brittain was a porter and was well liked, he served the job well. Nothing was too much trouble for him. He was a little fusspot, but a *nice* fusspot. If a family was there, he'd be running around like a blue-arsed fly trying to accommodate all their needs. If he stayed on [late], it didn't matter to him. He loved to be useful. Charlie Stevens [porter] used to be a bricklayer or mason, he used to live on the Morteohoe Road, second bungalow on the left. Harry King [ganger] lived in the railway cottages next to us. Harry King and Annie King were like grandparents to our kids. Harry had also been a workmate to my father on the Lynton & Barnstaple. He was ganger from Chelfham on to Bratton. My father was Town station to Chelfham. Harry was Chelfham to Bratton, so going back to work with Harry was like staying in the family. There was the [permanent-way] gang, Jimmy Mitchell, Alan Clarke and Sid Strong, and later, Geoff Selway. Harry was a bull of a man, he was the lead bull, you didn't get in his way, and you didn't tread on his toes. He'd allocate them work, he'd do the patrol, he'd go down to Braunton and come back up - and unfortunately he'd look into Ebberley [Arms pub in Barnstaple - perhaps this was during Harry's L&B days] first and the Foxhunter's second. Then if they hadn't finished the job that he'd allocated them, he'd pick up a sleeper and throw it. And to pick up a sleeper takes some doing, but Harry could do it. But he was a wonderful old chap to me at any rate. The yard users at Morteohoe were Stan Hunt, Frank Facey and Dick Roach.

There used to be money-raising for the orphans [Railway Benevolent Fund] and for every timetable sold a penny would be raised. So particularly when the Brummies came down for their fortnight when they closed the factories, we'd try to sell them timetables. And one ploy that I used was this one:

"Fer Tanners Only"

Yer us be to elp ee out
 We ort us can do to aid
 But don'ee come een we a scowl or shout
 Cause us be yer for our butter and braid

Us is willin to do want iver thee ask
 S'long as tis in reason
 An us'll work double quick and appy too
 Either een or out of the season

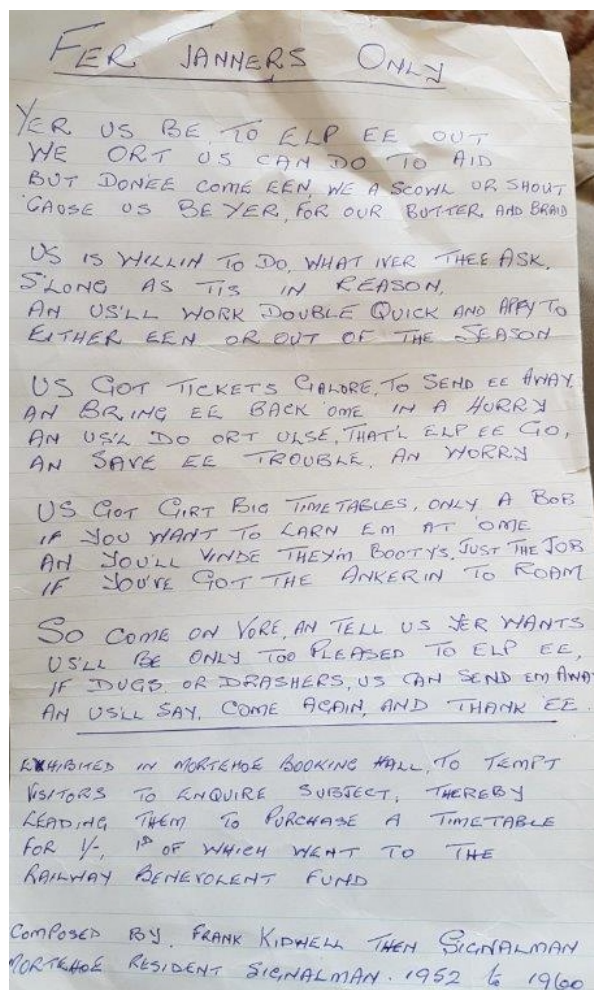
Us got tickets galore to send ee away
 An bring ee back 'ome in a hurry
 An us'l do ort ulse that'll elp ee go
 An save ee trouble an worry

Us got girt big timetables, only a bob
 If you want to larn em at 'ome
 An you'll vind they'm bootys, just the job
 If you've got the ankerin to roam

So come on vore an tell us yer wants
 Us'll be only too pleased to elp ee
 If duggs or drashers, us can send em away
 An us'll say "Come again, and thank ee"

I used to put it on blackboards and put it by the booking office window. 'Course they would read that and think "What the hell is he on about?" And once they started inquiring, it's like putting a gaff into a fish - you've got him, you can sell him a timetable. I used to do marquetry as well. Charlie Stevens [Mortehoe porter] and I were crib fanatics, so the crib board was out every day. He was a mason but he wanted to pack it in, so he came on as porter because he was living just around the corner. He and Edie - Edie worked at The Fortescue Hotel. He was my deputy. Jack Burrow had Ralph Brittain, and I had Charlie Stevens. And that's why I say, really we did run the place. Freddie Foulger was the *nominal* head.

On a summer Saturday, Heddon Mill box would come in to shorten the section. It was a 12-minute section from Braunton to Mortehoe. Heddon Mill would come in to make two 6-minute sections. It didn't cause any insurmountable problems because obviously you only had one train in section at a time. The train would come in with a banker on. As soon as he came into the platform he would disconnect. Then you'd send the banker back to Braunton or back to Ilfracombe over the crossovers. It was all straightforward really. I still run through the bell codes: 3-1 for passengers, 3-2 for goods, 5 for stopping in section, 4-1 for light engine, 5-5 for opening up and 7-5 for closing down. If the density of traffic was so great, [the banker engine would] have to come up and drop back into the goods yard. On one occasion - and luckily it only happened once - he dropped a fusible plug in the boiler, and I just could not get him out of the goods yard. He had gone back up where the railway cottages are, and every opportunity [to get the engine out] was cancelled out by a train on another track.





27th July 1963. Photo Peter Gray)

I think Morteohoe box opened at 6.15. The goods was first down, then the 1.25 Waterloo paper train came down next. Theoretically we worked 365 days a year, minus the 12 days leave. That was from the Monday to the following Saturday week. So the middle Sunday was the only Sunday you had off. So if you and I were opposite mates in the 'box, and your leave started next Monday, I would do late turn on Saturday, cover the two shifts on Sunday, (6346 departs Morteohoe for Ilfracombe on

and be early turn Monday. Which allowed you to do early turn Saturday, and have your suitcase ready, so you and the wife could get on the train Saturday lunchtime and go. That was the only way you could extend your leave. Mind you, it had to be two-way traffic, obviously. We were supposed to have a rest-day every other week. I never had one. I can say that in all honesty, never one rest-day. It was 365 days a year, minus the 12 days leave. Every Sunday, including Christmas Day, Good Friday. I did have a hell of a time one Christmas Day, it must have been 1954. It was a Sunday timetable because it was Christmas Day. The down train had gone in to Ilfracombe, must have been about 12.20, and the next one up was the two o'clock for Waterloo, so I had to be back for that. At least I could dive home and get my Christmas dinner, and back again in time for say, 1.45 at the latest. Going from Morteohoe down through Bradwell Mill, you come out there at the junction with the higher road that goes over to West Down. I came out on the main road, turned right, went down, and I'm coming towards Foxhunters, and a flaming farmer who lives up towards Twitchen [Farm,] he's been in the pub, and his car's facing Braunton, he did a u-turn right in front of me. I went over the top [of him] Of course we didn't have mobile phones then so I couldn't phone my mate Jack [signalman Jack Burrow] and nobody else would know that I was in trouble. The handlebars of my motorbike had gone back, the silencer had snapped in half. I pushed it up the hill. As a matter of fact, Jean had done a tin of peas to go with the Christmas dinner, so I took both ends off the tin, slid the two bits together and got a bit of copper wire and tied it up. I had to forfeit my Christmas dinner. By the time I'd repaired my bike, I had to get back up to Morteohoe. I phoned the police but they wouldn't come out. "Any personal injury? No? Then we're not coming out" Bill Baines was the [Foxhunters] landlord, he was an ex-Canadian Mounted Police Officer. I said I was going to get the police. The farmer started talking and I saw Bill Baines [shake his head] and I thought "I've got two of them on me now, and I'm the one that's in the muck" The farmer did pay for the repairs. I wanted his insurance [details,] but he was loth to get involved with insurance, I doubt very much whether he was insured.

I remember the relief signalmen - Frank McDonough, George Luggar. If there was genuine sickness, then you had to have relief signalmen. There was another one used to come down from King's Nympton, he had a lovely twin motorcycle. I was always envious because mine was a 350 Enfield - chug, chug, chug - side-valve, it would go anywhere, and keep going. I used to repair [push] bikes in the goods shed. I found one lying in the hedge up on the Morteohoe road, there were even worms growing in the dynamo. I took it down the goods shed, stripped it down - so I'm working in the goods shed, and listening out for bells in the 'box! Well, we ran the station ourselves, so who cared?

Some of these drivers were mad. George Capell and Ernie Pike didn't like to work a lot at the engine shed, so coming up the bank [to Morteohoe from Braunton] they'd open up the regulator and you'd see a firework display. On one occasion the wind was coming from West Down across, and the sparks went into the roof of the railway cottages and set fire to them. They would blow all the clinker out on the way up so they didn't have to clean it out at Ilfracombe.



(34028 *Eddystone* departs Morteohoe for Ilfracombe in 1959)

They'd have enough head of steam to run down to Ilfracombe, come in with a 3-set, run around, have it ready for the morning up local - and then homeward!

The other hard winter was over at Morteohoe in I think '57. When you come from Mullacott going towards Morteohoe, you go over the bridge and turn left to get to the Fortescue - just in over on the right on the Ilfracombe side of the bridge there was an engine and a coach, and the snow had drifted, and you could walk across from one side over the top of the train over to the other field. It was just solid snow. The driver and the fireman were in the signalbox for two days.

GEORGEHAM'S LAST CROSSING-KEEPER



On 24th September 1970, with closure of the Ilfracombe line just two weeks away, The North Devon Journal photographed and interviewed Jean Cooper, the last crossing-keeper at Georgeham Gates, just north of Braunton station. Last month, we caught up with Jean, who still lives in the crossing-keeper's cottage. With helpful prompts from her son Alan, Jean recalls her crossing-keeping days, and explains how she acquired a most unusual garden shed...

Jean's husband Ken Cooper had started on the railway at Okehampton.

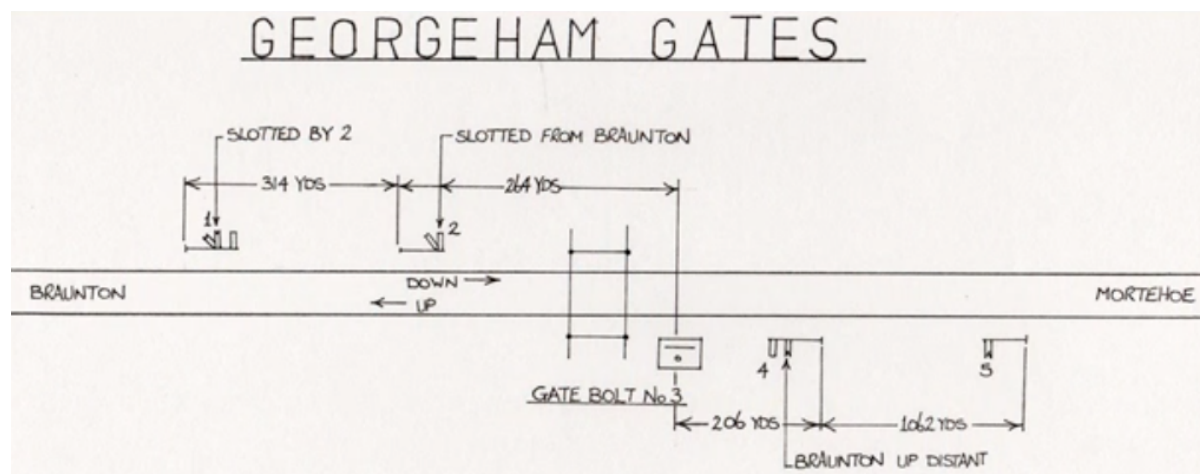
Jean Cooper: Ken was Relief from Salisbury all the way down to Bodmin. He did shunting at Crediton, and lorry driving, and he did ticket collecting at Okehampton and Bow.

Alan Cooper: As a young lad at Crediton station, I can remember Dad lifting me up into the cab of a steam engine.

AC: And both men from the cab they were in the drivers' relief hut on the platform, they had their own building that they could go in and have a quick brew. I remember dad talking to them, and they agreed that I could be lifted up into the cab.

JC: I grew up at Filleigh on the old Great Western line, and you never heard of crossings there. Ken's family weren't railway people, he was the first line. My family in Bristol were railway people. I had two uncles that would drive the lorries. Temple Meads. I had three there - Uncle Joe, Uncle Bill and Uncle Ben.

Ken became crossing keeper at Georgeham in 1963.



AC: There were five levers in Georgeham box. The middle one was to lock the gate. The other two on the right would be for the home and distant signal. Down home would have to be pulled first then down distant, but you couldn't pull these until the middle locking lever for the gated was pulled.

JC: The up distant was nearly at the bridge [road overbridge #13]

AC: Every week, we'd have to fill the can with paraffin and go for a walk up to the signal, me and dad. Yes I was lamp boy, climbed the ladder put the paraffin in and trimmed the wick.

In 1967, the station staff at Mortehoe was reduced to a single foreman. Ken Cooper was offered the post, which he accepted. Having deputised for her husband on many occasions, Jean was the obvious candidate to replace him as crossing keeper at Georgeham.

AC: Dad had a car by then to drive up to Mortehoe. Are you going to mention about the wage conflict, when you took over from dad?

JC: Oh yes well I still kept the mens' wages. Mrs Harris [crossing keeper at Heddon Mill] heard about it and I had to have the same as her husband! I did have a uniform, they gave me a uniform, but I never wore it. Oooh it was rough. Alan who was our relief? One was from 'Combe and one was from Barton Lane

AC: The relief crossing keepers used to cycle here of course, early mornings. We used to open the gates for the first train, and then the relief crossing-keeper would arrive by 7am.

Devon Belle: What time did the working day start?

JC: Five I think. Alan, did the train stay at Ilfracome, or did he go up at five? Cos I know that I used to sleep over, and he used to be up there at the signal, shouting for me to pull the levers to open the gates so he could come through!

AC: As far as I remember the first train was from Exeter, cos they brought the papers in, so he'd be going down.

JC: The last train was 8.30pm. It'll never come back. The trains would go past here double-headed, a proper train, you know, with the coal, and it'd be packed. People going to Woolacombe, coming back from 'Combe, standing in the corridors.

DB: I read that Georgeham Gates and Braunton Gates were all interlocked?

JC: Oh no, mine was separate. I suspect the one the other side of the station - Braunton Gates - might've been locked, to go to Vellator. I forget now what the bell codes were.

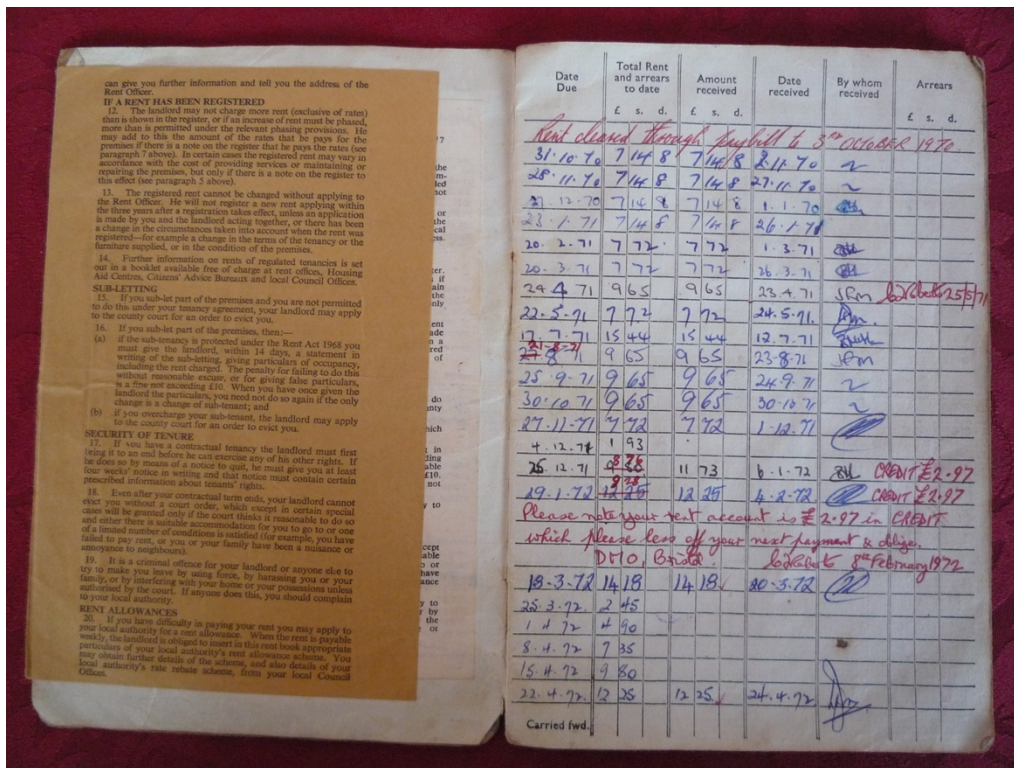
AC: Yes we had a bell in the house, and in the signal box.

JC: They'd be whistling with their horns to let me know I hadn't done the gates quickly enough! There used to be kissing gates as we used to call them. Old Cherry May used to cross with the train coming, and Ken used to tell her off.

AC: The side-gates obviously weren't locked, so pedestrians could take a chance if they wanted.

JC: Mrs May used to come through the side gates, my husband would be out there or I would, and tell her to go back, the train's coming! But she wouldn't listen. All you had to do was get your heel caught in the line...

AC: Colonel Webber - he was the Squire - used to press his horn, coming down the hill: "I'm on my way!" He used to give dad five pounds for Christmas for obliging, for holding up British Rail just for him!



The British Rail rent book for Georgeham crossing cottage. The first entry reads: "Rent cleared through paybill to 3rd October 1970" – the day the line closed.



AC: When the line closed, they sold the metal so we had contractors in, they would just take everything for reclamation, the signs, the bells, everything would just go. So it was all lost. So father bought the crossing box from the railway. Then they came and wanted him to remove it, because...

JC: Instow wanted it

AC ... oh Instow wanted it, did they? It was on railway land still. We'd bought the box, but not the land. So they wanted it removed, but father held out until he
(The signal pulleys are still in situ beneath the

floor) managed to buy the house.

AC: We bought the land soon after they took the track up [1975.] The crossing gates that were on our crossing, dad took them up, and my wife's father had them for his farm, so they were used as cattle gates on the farm, just outside of Georgeham. It looks like we bought the cottage in 1978 because that's when the rent stopped. I can remember the lorries going up and down, taking the ballast away. They had a lot of fun charging up and down here creating a lot of dust. There'd be a JCB at one end loading the lorry and they'd drive along the railway line. I don't know where they exited onto the road, whether it was in Braunton or at Wrafton. Can't have done their tyres much good.

