

THE STATION

From Gordon Ward, 29, St Peter's Road, Margate: 2001

[Written to me as a result of seeing my notice in the Gazette, April 2001, asking for any information about Birchington Station during the Second World War.]

I joined the staff at Birchington Station in October 1944 and left in November 1946, to do my National Service. At that time there was a staff of 9. The Station Master, 2 Signalmen, 2 Booking Clerks and 4 Porters. There was a goods' shed and 5 sidings, all of which were in constant use. The Coal Merchant employed a man permanently in the goods' yard, unloading coal from the wagons and bagging it up for the driver of the coal lorry to collect.

At this time there was Wartime Petrol Rationing, which meant that everything that came into or went out of Birchington came and went by rail. Everything for the shops was delivered by a driver from Walker's Garage, the site of which was opposite the station. All the local farm produce intended for London was brought to the station to be transported. The broccoli season was especially hectic.

Obviously, Birchington Station could not have printed tickets for every station in the country, so blanks were used. The Booking Clerk had to write in the name of the appropriate station. Owing to the War, there were many Airmen from Manston using the station, going on and coming off leave. I remember an incident regarding them. The Booking Clerk was getting an excessive number of requests for tickets to Mottingham (a district of London). An investigation was started and it was found that the 'M' was being turned into an 'N' (making it read 'Nottingham').

We also had problems with Airmen coming back off leave. Going on leave, they would cycle from Manston on RAF cycles and would leave them at the station until they returned. The fee was four old pence (approx. 2p) for the first day and was paid when purchasing the travel ticket. For every other day, the fee was two old pence per day and was paid at the time of returning and collecting the cycle. But after 10 days leave, a number of Airmen returned 'broke'. The cycles were kept locked in the waiting room on the 'down' line platform and it was the job of the porter on duty who saw the last train from London in, to collect the outstanding fees. Some of those who had no money turned aggressive when I refused to let them have their cycles; some had to borrow from other Airmen. I did not like that task at all, as I was on my own at 10.30 p.m.

On my early shift, I cycled from Margate to unlock the station and issue tickets for the 5 a.m. train to London. The train fare to Chatham was 3s 6d (approx. 17p) and to London (Victoria) 7s 6d (approx. 37p). The reason for the cheap fare was because the train was scheduled to arrive at Victoria before 8 a.m. and was therefore classed as a workmen's train. I was surprised at the number of women that used the workmen's train for a day's shopping in London.

The station had gas lighting and the signal lamps were lit by paraffin, which lasted 8 days. Every Monday the lamps were changed. They were very heavy to carry. During the summer, it was quite a pleasant job, but in the winter it was no joke struggling out to the furthest signal on the Birchington marshes in a blizzard and then, having climbed to the top of the signal post, to find the flame in the lamp had gone out. Can you imagine trying to light a match on the marshes in a blizzard?

Birchington Station was built in 1863. It was soundly built, as was the goods' shed, which had doors large enough for a locomotive to go through. From Monday to Saturday at 8 p.m. a goods' train would arrive to collect all the wagons that had been loaded during the day. At 6 p.m. I would lock the goods' shed, as it would only be a short train and would not come near the shed. On Saturday, the goods' train was longer, with a larger locomotive and it was my job to see that the doors were open, when the train reversed into the yard to connect our wagons to the train. Then it would go back onto the main line.

Every Saturday, I would leave the shed doors open until the train had gone. One particular Saturday, I forgot it was Saturday, so at 6 p.m. I shut and locked the shed doors. At 8.30 p.m. the train arrived, I waved it back into the yard with my lamp, (it was a November day and it had been dark for two hours), when suddenly there was an enormous bang, followed by the sound of splintering wood. I looked over my shoulder and saw the wagons disappearing into the shed, taking the doors with them. I immediately changed my signal light to red, but either the driver couldn't see the light, or he was not looking, as the next second, there was another bang, as the wagons burst through the doors at the other end of the shed. The only thing that stopped them ending up in the Booking Office was a set of buffers.

It is such a long time ago that I cannot remember why I did not lose my job! On the following Monday, carpenters arrived from Ashford and fitted new doors.