

A Boyhood Memory of Steam by Fred Dyer

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It was breaking dawn one morning during summer in the middle twenties, before the days of being banished to Boarding School.

It was usual for me to leave my curtains back as I was wanting to wake early. My age at that time was 10 years old. It was a clear morning, quiet, apart from the waking birds, so I slipped quietly from my bed, dressed and passed down the back stairs and out through the kitchen. I had an objective in view as usual, and I opened our dogs' door for my companion to join me. In the stables Mark was feeding his horses ready for a hard day's work hauling water and coal to my pride and joy, two Fowler AA6 steam ploughing engines, they had arrived the night before to plough or cultivate my father's fields.

This season they were on Wood Field, from which trefoil seed had been cleared, about 25 acres in size. From the house half a mile away I could see wisps of black smoke as steam was being raised. It didn't take me long to reach the field. There gathered round the engine I call 'mine' were Joe, Jack the foreman and the ploughman. Joe's brother Jack was on the far engine, difficult to see in the shade of the distant trees.

There were the usual greetings of morning young un' and a broad smile from Joe as he threw down a piece of waste and called 'come on up here and clean these rods'. I needed no further urging, it was hero worship as far as my feelings were concerned for Joe. From the age of 7 I had been allowed on his engine, only the steering platform at first and then on the driving stand and sometimes allowed to pull the throttle and achieve the 'tick over' that these compounds do so well. But now at the age of 10 I could climb along the foot board and clean parts.

Ten minutes or so passed, there was a gentle clink as the winding drum moved a few inches, Jack was now seated on the cultivator and in the distance a plume of smoke was issuing from the far engine as slowly its flywheel was beginning to move. 'Better come down now and get on the steersman's stand' said Joe. 'Give him a blow Joe' called Jack. A mighty two blasts on the whistle and our drum started to pay out rope. A steady 'click', 'click', at first from the gears which rapidly gained speed as the cultivator headed for the far engine.

By now our safety valve had lifted, Joe closed the damper, opened the steam cocks, and slowly pulled the throttle, it belched steam and water from the cylinder drain taps and then all was ready for our first pull of the day, and Mark was entering the field with his first load of water .

The light had improved quickly and as the last few yards of rope slowly left our drum, NO 5 was ticking over with Joe's hand on the drum clutch. The drum stopped for a few seconds, a clang indicated our clutch had engaged, a quiet 'puff' sounded at the chimney as slowly we started to wind in the rope. We could see the cultivator now as it turned and was let into the work, it was easy to know when Jack pulled the lever and dropped the cultivator times into the soil. As the engine began to take up its full load, she would have stalled but for Joe's experience and feel, he knew the vital moment to open the throttle, the huge double cranks began to turn faster and faster and the bark from the chimney increased as our compound gathered speed, the smoke went straight up on that lovely morning, the speed increased quickly and the whole engine throbbed with power as if alive to every thing and fully knew her job.

Rapidly the cultivator came to us at about 6 mph and then the engine slowed down to pull the shackle

to within 6 inches of the rope guide pulley, judgement to a fine art was needed for this. Joe closed the throttle, threw the reversing lever over and released the clutch. For a second or so the cranks ran in reverse and a 'pant' 'pant' was heard from the cylinder block as though the engine was short of breath. This was always a fascinating sound which I learned later on was the slide valves slapping due to back pressure. Our first pull of the day was over. We engaged gear and moved forward. Meanwhile Mark was filling the far engine with water and would soon come over to us, I would then ride home with him for breakfast.

Returning from breakfast, we could see the wonderful sight of the two Fowlers, their brass chimney tops and polished flywheels glistening in the sun and hear the bark as they broke up the hard earth. Joe drank his tea sent from the van and to my delight asked 'would you like a pull?', meaning pull the cultivator, this was a great moment, I had watched him so often, knew the sounds of the engine and now for the first time was to try my expertise. The drum was slowing down, I had to get the 'tick over' just right and wait, must not have a tug-of-war with the other engine, the drum stopped, Joe nodded his head and the clutch was in, steadily the rope came in, we could see the cultivator turn and even see it drop into the work. I was nicely caught, she stalled, Joe grinned and pointed to the stubby lever on the left of the throttle, 'just touch it lad', I did, and she was away and quickly those mighty cranks began to revolve until they were just a red blur. The cultivator arrived very quickly and just before it reached us Joe took over, 'don't want to knock the drum off yet' he said. 'You did all right for a start', it made my day. In due course I was able to complete the whole operation and leave the drum intact! Finally we reached the day when the art of pulling the six furrow anti balance plough to within 6" of the steam chest was mastered.

Since those days I have driven NO 5 many times. She and her sister were 'laid up' during the depression of the early thirties, but returned to work in the mid thirties. They were taken over by the government during the 1939-1945 War. We have a bond NO 5 and I of many years. At the Suffolk Show her owner invited me to drive at a demonstration at Weting, Norfolk, this I gladly did and again we enjoyed a few hours together.

The story does not end there, as on 13.7.1971, NO 5 was destined to move with her new partner, a BB1 Fowler from the Suffolk Showground, after demonstrating ploughing and cultivating on show days, to the works of Ransomes Sims and Jeffries Ltd., at Nacton. This led to a further invitation to me to drive. Our journey across the showground via Felixstowe Road to the works was pleasant and enjoyable. The occasion was of some interest as it brought the British Rail officials to see us safely over the level crossing into Ransomes works. There were numerous people there who had never seen a ploughing engine before. Never did I think those 47 years ago that NO 5 and I would be driving along Ransomes roadways. Having spent 38 years with the Company made the occasion even more momentous. My one regret being that Joe Shuttlewood, her first driver for so many years was no longer able to be present and drive.

There is one further note of interest. In 1856 Ransomes made and tested for John Fowler a 4 furrow anti-balance plough. The test took place at Nacton, possibly on the site of the present Ransomes works. Is it coincidence that a Fowler should visit this area and works 115 years from the time when Ransomes made engines and ploughs for John Fowler before he had his own works?



NO5 at the 2019 Hands On

Photo John Billard