

# STEAM PLOUGH TIMES

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## Up the Bank by Albert Crittall

Looking back, it is now over 50 years ago that we ploughed a very steep bank in Fawkham Kent and it still stands out in my memory. One day I must revisit the site to see if my memory is as good as I think it is!

At the time I was working for Thomas Wood & Soan of Crockenhill, and the foreman, Fred Gillham, 'Snatchum' when he couldn't hear you, told us that the job was ploughing a steep bank. We didn't think it would be much of a job, for we had ploughed steep banks before and always managed all right, but when we arrived and saw this one, even Bill Clark and George Jarrett had some serious doubts. Anyway, after a bit of a "confab", it was decided that we would plough down and "ride light" back up. The gang at that time was Bill Clark, R/H engine and head man, Dick Clark, L/H engine and George Jarrett Head ploughman and me, under ploughman, with an occasional "third man" usually a chap called 'Sailor'. I never knew his other name as he wasn't very forthcoming.

There was quite a long stretch of level ground before the bank started and at the bottom of the bank there was a very short level headland ending in a hedge and a small ditch. When we started, Dick went backwards down the bank, taking Bill's rope with him. At the bottom, George and I took the rope off the lynch pin and waited until Dick got "set in" alongside the hedge, then we shackled both ropes together and signalled Bill to take the ropes back.

On the first went we found that we had three problems. One was that the engines were out of sight of one another, although if the drivers stood on the rear wheels, they could see enough of each other so that hand signals could be given. The second problem we found was that the rope was cutting too deeply into the ground at the top of the bank. We got over that by putting a baulk of timber just before the crest of the bank for the rope to run over.

The third problem wasn't quite so easy to get over, as owing to the angle of the rope coming down the bank, we found it extremely difficult to get the rope to coil on the drum properly. We had to use same baulks of timber to cant Dick's engine over to quite a dangerous angle to try and get the-drum more in line with the angle of the bank before the rope would coil half well, even then a close watch had to be kept on the rope for if there was a loud bang as one coil jumped over another one, it meant stopping, putting out of gear, getting down and using a coil bar to get the coil back in the proper place, for 'Snatchum' Gillham didn't take too kindly to crippled ropes.

On the return went, the rope was lifted off the hook on the tailman's seat, which was then tipped over, but the rope was left on the loose rope carrier on the tail of the plough. George and I climbed up on to the upended half of the plough, and a signal was given for Bill to start pulling. As the plough came into balance, the combined weight of George and I on the rear of the plough was sufficient to keep the front skifes clear of the ground and so we "rode light" up the bank. At the top of the bank, just before the baulk of timber, we signalled Bill to stop and out of gear-both arms up-, pulled the baulk from under the rope, signalled Bill to move forward-one arm horizontal-, waited till the tail of the plough cleared the bank then signalled Bill to stop -one arm up-, then pull the baulk back under the rope for the return went, another signal-one arm horizontal- for Bill to carry on.

On the return went, ploughing this time, when we reached the baulk of timber at the top of the bank, we signalled Dick to stop and out of gear - both arms up-, to take the strain off the rope so that we could shift the baulk out of the way, another signal to Dick-one arm horizontal- to move on, as the tail of the plough cleared the baulk ,another signal to stop-one arm up-, pull the baulk back under the

railing rope for the return went, another signal-one arm horizontal- and we were on our way down the bank, this time Bill puts the drum brake on hard, to keep his rope taut and to stop the tail of the plough running down the bank, because if that happens and it sometimes does, then things begin to get a bit hairy!

Even these days I think that the-top engine on bank work should always be fitted with a drum brake, i.e. the one that works on the vertical shaft, not the one round the drum. At the end of the went we gave Dick a hand to cant the engine over ready for the next pull, then back on to the plough and gave Bill the signal to start pulling and so we started the procedure all over again.

By the time we reached the end of the bank we were completely fed-up with the job. Such are the memories that one holds even after so many years. It is good to realise that Thomas Wood & Sons are still in business, members of the Steam Plough Club, but I still wonder if that bank is still there.