

A PLOUGHMANS DAY

By Harry Maxey

The alarm clock went off, bringing almost instant re-action from the men asleep in the living van of Brown's cultivator set, with the exception of Bert the cook, who was still unconscious. The time was 4a.m. the morning was misty and cool, the sun could be seen as a pale, straw coloured plate in the sky. George and I got out of bed and commenced to dress, Bert was still away in Dixieland, but he was soon pleased to get out and get dressed, to avoid the attentions of George, who was dropping large blobs of water onto his ears and neck. Bert got quite niggly with George, but he knew better than to argue with him and was soon on his way to the engines. His first job of the day as cook was to take off the damper lid on the first engine and stir up the fire, then lift the ash-pan lid. Then go across the field and do likewise to the other engine. The engines would have around 50 to 60 lbs of steam and it wouldn't be long before they had a full head of steam, 180 to 200 lbs per sq inch and raring to go.

Meanwhile, back at the van, George had laid and lit the fire and put the kettle on. First one and then another would go outside for a breath of fresh air, and at that time of morning the air is really fresh. After a quick wash, George, Charlie and I would have our mugs of tea, perhaps a biscuit or two and then off to the engines. Before leaving the van, George would rouse Bob the foreman, who was still in his bunk. Meanwhile Bert had returned and it was his job to get breakfast ready, stack away the beds and prepare for the coming day's chores.

The day before had been hectic, and we had travelled about 10 miles from our last job. The day had been hot and we were afraid that we would be picking tar up off the road as the hot sun was softening it, but we managed to avoid any trouble that way, but trouble we got, in the way of the high pressure injector on Georges engine. For some unknown reason it refused to function when needed. We had two lengthy stops to effect repairs but to no avail, so when we arrived at our destination, we allowed things to cool down whilst we had our meal and the necessary repair was made and work resumed.

We moved into a 15 acre fallow field which looked as if it might be good going, second time over, and this proved to be so later on. As we were going to the engines, we looked into the next field, which was also 15 acres. A good crop of clover had been harvested off it and there were about 5 to 7 inches of second growth, so we decided to 'sweep' the field when we moved in.

This morning, on arrival at the tackle, the drivers got on with their chores, whilst I oiled the drag and checked that the rope ends and coupling shackles were satisfactory. When ready to commence work, George would give two short blasts on his whistle and Charlie would start the first pull. Around 5.30 am Charlie sent word to George that he was running out of water and could only make another 4 or 5 pulls, and would therefore signal to that effect. On Charlies next pull he blew several long blasts on his whistle. This would be heard by the man with the water-cart and inform him that the engines were short of water. On Georges next pull, he would also whistle for water, and invariably the man with the coal-cart would also think we wanted coal as well. The farmer provided the coal, plus the men and horses to deliver it. The coal would be stacked about 2 ft high above the bunker top and would last the day under reasonable conditions.

Bob the foreman, and Bertie the cook arrived to relieve George and I for breakfast. Afterwards, George and I resumed our jobs, Bob relieved Charlie, who went back to the van with Bert. Breakfast usually consisted of two or more rashers of bacon, one or two eggs, off the farm of course, any left-over potatoes would be fried and shared, the whole lot washed down with mugs of tea. Bert would fill any oil cans which would be brought to the van by the drivers, from a large tank under the van floor. Bert would go to the village shops for tobacco, cigarettes, or any items required by members of the crew.

Bob the foreman went off on his bike, to see the next farm we were to visit, but we knew differently, he would be found in the nearest pub, "doing his acreage" there. The crew by now had dragged the field once over and had changed round and were making good progress, so when the headland had been "half-breeded" it was decided to fit the wing- tines. These were soon fitted and it wasn't long before the time

came when the wing-tines were removed and normal dragging was the order and soon the field was completed.

The outfit was moved into the next field and here George decided it was opportune to 'sweep* the field, a process which will be described in a future article. After the "sweep" the work resumed and soon the engines were 'telling the world" the work was much harder. By now it was a moonlit night and work carried on until about 10pm, so it was the end of a good days work, and the crew were ready for a last mug of hot drink before queuing up to get a wash and then turning in for the night. So ends another day in the life of a Lincolnshire steam ploughman.

Charles Henry Maxey was born in March 1911 and died aged 80 in February 1992. In 1939 he was joiner and a telephonist in the Auxiliary Fire Service. We would be interested to know more of him. He contributed a number of articles to the Steam Plough Times. Such well written pieces showing real life are gold dust these days.

According to issue 85 of March 1989 his father John joined Ward and Dale as a strapping lad at age 14 as a cook boy and before long became a driver. He left Ward and Dale when he was 20 and joined Fowlers. He was then sent to Germany, going to Magdeburg to train local drivers and to assist in erecting new tackle from England.

After this he joined the Lincolnshire Constabulary. However after making his mark there he left the police in June 1918 and re-joined Ward's taking charge of a set of singles. Sadly, he was taken by the flu epidemic in December 1918.

*John Billard
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