

VICTORIA RAILWAY STATION LONDON

The memoirs of John Barber

I'm sure I'm not the most qualified to pen a definitive history of the above but I have fond memories of my brief stints there, and if I don't record my experiences who will? I served 3 spells of duty there in the nineteen sixties. With due deference to my colleagues on the Land Boundary, Victoria was a unique Waterguard Station as it dealt with rail passengers from Continental Europe & Cyprus.

ACCOMPANIED REGISTERED BAGGAGE

In those enlightened days, if you were travelling by rail to or from London you could register your heavy baggage to or from numerous venues in Europe - just like air travel. This advantage meant that no matter how many station changes you made on your journey, your baggage arrived at your destination without you having to cart it from train to train. Very rarely did it not arrive on the train you travelled on. Therefore at Victoria, Waterguard Officers would attend arrivals of boat trains from Dover, Folkestone & Newhaven to examine the registered baggage of passengers who had been cleared with their hand baggage at the ports. When Exchange Controls were in force Officers also attended trains to examine and clear outbound registered baggage

UNACCOMPANIED BAGGAGE

Unlike air travel, an additional service offered was that you could send baggage weeks ahead of your own travel, to be collected at your destination. Therefore Waterguard Officers were on duty to clear baggage which had been stored in the underground warehouse awaiting the passengers arrival. Due to the terrorist threat this is not a service that could be offered today.

THE NIGHT FERRY

Oh what luxury! At 0910 each morning the Wagon Lits Boat Train from Brussels and Paris arrived. Passengers were spared the inconvenience of being awakened for Customs clearance at Dover as their train was loaded onto a special ferry at Calais or Dover and Customs clearance was effected at Victoria.

During the sixties air travel had greatly affected the numbers of people travelling this route. In fact during my brief stints it often didn't reach double figures. However the quality of traveller was supreme. Aristocracy, the Diplomatic Service and the odd film star knew how to travel.

Of course the out bound train leaving at 2200 hours also had to be attended for Exchange Control checks.

The Night Ferry service also spawned 'The Dover APO'. I never knew whether this was a voluntary duty or an enforced task. The job was to ensure the 'Hoi Polloi' of passengers customs cleared at Dover and those on a train containing the 'virginal' uncleared passengers

in the Wagon Lits, did not have contact. The advantages of the job was a very good breakfast into Victoria on the inbound train, a day out in London and a good dinner on the outbound service en route to Dover whilst performing a similar task.

WEST INDIES BOAT TRAINS

During the Sixties Victoria also dealt with a number of boat trains bringing Immigrants from the West Indies. These folk boarded ships in the Caribbean which sailed to Marseilles. They then boarded trains for the Channel Ports and arrived at Victoria. They and their hand baggage were cleared at the Ports but 'hold' baggage was placed in goods wagons for clearance at Victoria.

Oh my goodness! Most of these good people had embarked 3 or 4 weeks earlier dressed mainly in light coloured suits or dresses. Their clothes were certainly of a darker hue by the time they arrived at Victoria. Before leaving the Caribbean they had packed their suitcases with local foodstuffs eg. fresh fish, meat, vegetables and fruit. The vast majority of this baggage was condemned by the Port Health Officer.

However the Commissioners insisted it be examined for revenue goods before being destroyed. Therefore the poor souls of a London Port Rummage Crew would be instructed to visit the goods wagons in remote sidings at Victoria to perform this unpleasant task. Many bottles of rum would be recovered. I remember some being concealed in once fresh fish and amazingly others placed in large fruit cakes prior to being baked.

For many weeks after the arrival of a Caribbean boat train the Concourse of the station was home to many passengers who had nowhere to go or whose family or friends had failed to meet them. I also heard stories of West Indian UK residents approaching new arrivals claiming to be taxi drivers. Having paid a large fare they would be driven a few Blocks away and told this was Birmingham or Manchester etc. The driver would then return to Victoria for more.

THE STAFF

Officers stationed at Victoria could be divided into three distinct categories.

1. Those who lived in the proximity of railway stations served by Victoria Station. It was very convenient to alight from your train and be in the Office in two minutes. Others also found it convenient. I could, and did, walk to the Office from my Parental home in Chelsea - A Council property I assure you.
2. Those considered by Senior Management to have a 'drink' problem. The idea was that serving at Victoria would take them away from the evil temptations available on board ship. What a joke! Victoria Station boasted 15 bars, some claiming to dispense the best Guinness in the United Kingdom. If that wasn't enough you could always get a libation from the Steward on the Brighton Belle or Golden Arrow.
3. Unfixed junior Officers sent to assist during the busier Summer season or to kick their heels during the Winter.

I must make it clear I did NOT qualify for the second category. I would now though.

CHARACTERS

I do not claim that Victoria had more or less notable individuals than any other Waterguard station. However its geographical location allowed Frank Wolf to indulge his unusual interest. Frank was Austrian by birth and it was never explained to me how he came to join the Waterguard. He spoke impeccable English with a hint of accent as heard in WWII films of the time - e.g. 'For you zee vor iss over'. His interest was Military music. Not unusual for an Austrian I hear you say.

Victoria is situated midway between Chelsea Barracks and Buckingham Palace, and Frank could regularly be seen marching alongside the Guards on their way to or from the Palace. He would then return to the office and telephone a fellow aficionado. They would discuss the pieces played and the performance of the Guards Band. 'Are you hearing zee counterpoint between zee trumpet unt clarinet'.

Dear Frank was also king of 'shift swops' at Victoria. He also spent time at Surrey Docks where he could often be seen in the undergrowth bird watching. I believe he finished his service in East Anglia. A worthy Waterguard Character.

UNUSUAL PRACTICES

The basic shifts at Victoria were 0730-1600 and 1530-2400 with the occasional call outs and shift extensions to deal with arrivals/departures outside these hours.

There were what can only be described as 'Spanish Practices' in operation. For example, Officers on the early shift were designated as the 'A', 'B' and 'C' man etc. After clearance of passengers on the Night ferry, which arrived at 0910, the 'A' man would 'disappear'. I seem to remember the 'B' man couldn't go until after the 1030 outward bound Ostend and so on.

The underground baggage warehouse was a vast area which extended from Platform 8 to the Office near Platform 3. It was a playground for young APOs. The French, mainly Parisians, had a penchant for sending their mopeds ahead prior to their own arrival. Oh joy. In those days no key was required for the ignition and racing in the isles around the racks was only limited by the amount of fuel in the machine or asphyxiation due to the exhaust fumes.

The locker room was situated in a building next to the Office and access was intended to be made by separate stairs. This was too much effort for the fixed Officers who could be seen stepping onto the window ledge in the kitchen & stretching to the ledge of the locker room next door. All above a terrifying drop and often after many visits to aforementioned bars.

I was the victim of a prank which must have been played on many unsuspecting junior APOs I had recently finished my Waterguard Training course at the Custom House and one evening I was one of a number of Officers attending the arrival of the Golden Arrow on Platform 8. When the train arrived, pulled by a magnificent gleaming steam engine, I was instructed by a very Senior PO to ask the driver how much coal he had in his tender for 'light dues' purposes. 'Brest to the Elbe' flashed through my mind, not to mention the liability of railway engines. However I wasn't about to question a senior PO so I craned my neck up to the cab to ask the question of the driver. He leaned out and uttered those immortal words 'F—k off sonny'. I turned to find my colleagues consumed with mirth.

My other embarrassing moment was self inflicted. Again it was soon after I had finished my WTC course. I was conducting Exchange Control checks on the evening Night Ferry when into the Baggage Hall swept a smartly suited man carrying an overnight bag followed by a Porter with a large sack on a trolley. I questioned the man as to how much Sterling he was carrying and then asked him what was in the sack. He slowly turned a shade of puce before spluttering 'I haven't the faintest idea' and stormed off. I was informed by his grinning Porter that his client was the Queens Messenger and the sack was the Diplomatic bag being sent by the Foreign Office to our Embassy in Paris.

A regular job for a junior APO was to arrange destruction of seized uncooked meats. These would be loaded onto a baggage trolley and the APO would set off to find a steam engine with a sympathetic Fireman who would shovel the offending items into his firebox. Very pleasant aromas would drift over the Station.

I wouldn't wish to give the impression that the Officers at Victoria station were all 'ne'er-do-wells' - far from it. There were regular seizures of Revenue goods and expensive jewellery and cameras etc. I can also remember significant seizures of cannabis, mainly if I recall from passengers from Cyprus.

I served at many places during my Waterguard career, all had their idiosyncrasies but there was nothing quite like Victoria Station.