

WHO CALLED THE CALL-BOY?



150 YEARS OF IRISH RAILWAY

One hundred and fifty years ago, in December 1834, the first Irish railway line, from Dublin to Kingstown, was opened for traffic. Less than fourteen years later, on 9th May 1848, the railway reached Limerick when the Waterford and Limerick Railway opened its first 25 miles between the city and Tipperary. By 1850 a total of 700 miles of railway was open or under construction.

The coming of the railway was to change the face of Ireland. It is difficult to comprehend today the gigantic scale of this venture: it was the greatest feat of engineering ever carried out in this country. The railway revolutionised travel by speeding up the mobility of people and the transportation of materials.

The task began with the forgotten men who built the railways - the lowly-paid labourers who dug, tunnelled and blasted their rugged way across the countryside. The engine drivers, firemen, guards, stationmasters, porters and checkers all followed in their hard-driven tracks.

But perhaps the most fascinating job of all was that of call-boy. Because of the nature of their employment, railwaymen worked irregular shifts, starting at all hours of the day and night. Above all, they had to get to work on time. And here the call-boy came into the picture.

At the Limerick Loco six call-boys were employed, two on each of the three shifts (midnight to 8 a.m., 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 4 p.m. to midnight). When they were not on their calling rounds the call-boys served as cleaners of the locomotives. The shifts were rotated among the six boys, the one between midnight and 8 a.m. being by far the busiest for the "knocker-ups". The boys travelled throughout the city and called the sleeping drivers and firemen an hour before "booming-on" time. Many of the houses being small, one-storey dwellings, the boys often knocked on the bedroom windows to wake the sleeping men.

In time the call-boys went on to become firemen, and, eventually, drivers. A rigid hierarchy of seniority operated among the drivers, starting with the passenger train drivers, followed by the "special" or excursion men and goods train drivers. The last two grades were the pilot men who did the shunting work and the shed-turners who worked in the loco yard and station.

The coming of the diesel and electric trains brought the steam age and these demarcations to an end. But who can ever forget the sight of a steam engine racing majestically along, belching out clouds of steam and smoke, slowing as it relentlessly climbed a hill, and then, with the driver giving a short burst on the whistle valve, thundering away into the distance? And, of course, we still have the more tangible legacy of impressive Victorian terminal buildings, bridges, viaducts, tunnels, hotels and cottages.

The call-boy no longer does his nocturnal round, and the passing of the steam age has brought many other changes. But Limerick has continued to maintain its place as an important railway terminus.

Earlier this year the Limerick Museum hosted a delightful exhibition of railway memorabilia. Its publication *Reflections on Munster Railways* was a worthy tribute to this historic year.