
Distant memories of Hellifield Shed

Hellifield Shed (Motive Power Depot Shed Code 24H) was closed on the 17th June 1963. It had been built by the Midland Railway Company as part of Hellifield's transition into a major railway centre when the 'new' station was constructed and opened in 1879. Hellifield Shed served the Midland, the L.M.S. and British Railways. It ended its days housing preserved engines and rolling stock before finally being dismantled in 1972/73.

I have plenty of memories of the early 1970's when as lads we would sneak into the building and play on the static sleeping giants and old carriages that stood awaiting an uncertain future. Outside, the disused railway turntable was an ideal place for catching frogs, and I distinctly remember our group of urchins being lined up on the platform and given a lecture on trespassing by P.C. Mobbs the Village Bobby.

I do however have an even earlier memory of being taken into the Shed by my Dad. The year must have been about 1962, not long before closure. Snapshots of a brief recollection bring the smells and sounds of the building to life. I vaguely remember some office staff, locomen and loco's, and being reprimanded for wandering off in what was still a working – and dangerous – place of employment. These little

images which stick in my mind represent glimpses into a time long ago, when Hellifield Station drifted slowly into the swansong period of its life. When steam locomotives were to become an endangered species, and Dr Beeching's savage Railway Modernisation Plan was to sound the death knell of many Railway Stations and sleepy Branch Lines.

Perhaps the visit that day went something like this: I'd accompanied my Dad to Hellifield Shed, for some reason to do with his work as a Signalman.

As we'd walked through its dark interior I had been struck by the heavy odour of steam and coal. Oily and sooty walls rose up on both sides, and starlings and sparrows chirped and chattered within the grimy rooftop interior. There



*Hellifield Shed, circa 1963, around the time of my visit
Photo Robert Leak collection*

were dark offices and stores alongside the right hand wall. My dad had disappeared into one of them, instructing me to stay where I was and not to move.

An engine stood silently on one of the four 'roads' that led into the shed, and a group of men were working beneath it, in one of the pits that lay beneath all the tracks within the shed. As I watched the men tinkering about underneath the loco, I was suddenly startled by the sound of a light engine entering the shed. It announced its presence with a brief toot on its whistle as it cruised its way slowly along the far track. It came to a halt at the end of the shed. Steam escaped from its valves and workings, and the black giant stood majestically whilst its crew climbed down from the footplate. From within the locomotive came the many sounds of a huge coal-fired engine coming to rest. A simmering steamy clicking, and an occasional hiss. Almost clockwork-like, these sounds gave the impression of an engine settling down to sleep. A slumbering giant. The driver and fireman walked past me and nodded. They were both clad in dark oily denims, and one of them wore a beret. The other had a black and rather tattered peaked regulation cap on his head. Both carried white enamel tea urns.

'Anyway – the match was rubbish. Burnley should have nailed it'. The one in the beret spoke to his mate, while an unlit Woodbine dangled from his lips.

'Yeah.. Well..Leeds didn't do any better. Clubbing it on Saturday then?' responded the other.

'Nah.. Late turn. On at 10.'

A grunt in response and both walked out of the gloom and into the morning air.

I wandered up to the end of the Engine Shed. There were some more offices on my right, and I could hear voices from within. Someone was hammering on a typewriter.

I peeked through an open door and a man in a collar and tie noticed me hovering at the entrance to the office. A girl looked up from the typewriter and smiled at me.

'Hello curly top'. The girl shuffled some papers as she spoke to me and the man came out of the office to where I was standing.

'What you doing here, lad?' The man spoke quietly, and put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

'You're not on your own are you?'

He looked friendly and had a waistcoat over his shirt. I couldn't help notice his sleeves and cuffs were dirty, and he had a large black moustache.

'I'm with my Dad. He's down there talking to someone'.

The moustache wobbled and the man put his hand on my shoulder and moved me away from the edge of the railway track and the pit below.

'I think it'd be best if you went back to your Dad. Dangerous place this you know'

At that moment my Dad had appeared behind me, and the two of them had a brief discussion. This had included a reprimand for me, along the lines of 'Stop where I tell you to stop in the future'.

At the end of the Shed, there was a large, well lit extension to the building, with what looked like a big hole in the floor. My dad told me this was the wheeldrop area where the undercarriage and wheels were fixed. There seemed to be various items of



Another photo from around 1963. Loco and Snowplough stand outside the Shed. The Sandhouse and Chimney are in the rear of the photo.

Photo Robert Leak collection

machinery in there, plus sundry items of equipment. Pieces of metal, steel, and loose rails etc seemed strewn about the place. On the outside of the engine shed was a large chimney next to what he said was the Sandhouse – the sand being used on engines, to allow their wheels to gain a grip on oily and greasy rails.

That was then. That was where my memory stops. The sights and sounds are like snapshots in time. It's always the smells and odours of certain things that stick in the mind. Whenever I smell burning oil and coal and visit redundant or perhaps restored railway centres where puffing and hissing loco's trundle and shunt, it always reminds me of



Following closure, the Shed stands empty in the early 1970's. It remained a building full of smoky smells and mysterious, dark, and empty rooms. Always a rather ghostly place to wander. Its very walls seemed to reek of history.

Photo K Leak

Hellifield Shed and that brief visit 60 years ago.

Fact file:

Hellifield also had another Engine Shed. The L & Y Railway Company built its own 3 road Shed on land now occupied by 'new' housing above L & Y Terrace. It was closed in 1927.

During the final years of its life Hellifield Shed housed preserved locomotives from the Midland Railway, Great Eastern Railway, and the London and North Eastern Railway to name but a few. One of the Shed's notable occupants, silently awaiting a new home was L.N.E.R No 4471 Green Arrow.

Prior to a decision on the closure of the Shed, it was mooted that that building would be maintained and continue life as a Diesel Maintenance Depot. This was not to happen. Other 'Sheds' still continuing active life at the time of closure were Skipton, Leeds Holbeck and Carlisle. Many of the staff at Hellifield and likewise the loco's from Hellifield Shed, moved or were transferred to these and other active depots

Ken Leak

