

An article in 'Past Times' (Northern Echo?) by Peter Ridley, date unknown

It is December 17, 1897, and George Scarth is born at Castleton on the North York Moors into a world in which the railway is king. For five years now, as a symbol of that supremacy, Stephenson's Locomotion No 1 of 1825 has had a place of honour at Bank Top station, Darlington.

At sixteen, George is to begin his own half-century of railway service. He joins the LNER, the old London and North-Eastern, as a lamp lad porter at Boosebeck. Many years later he is still railway-struck enough to bring home an old framed photograph of the pioneering engine.

Behind the picture, as a backing sheet, is a local newspaper which lists the names of local railwaymen who died in the Great War. He will, no doubt, have intensely personal feelings as she reads it: he is not long demobilised as a corporal machine-gunner with the East Yorkshire Regiment, having survived teenage years fighting in Flanders.

George will be a porter signalman at Danby in the early 1920s and is to spend 1939-45 on the two lines important during that war. He will be stationmaster at Moulton, Richmond, on the branch which carries troops and munitions to Catterick Camp, and later at Dinsdale, near RAF Middleton St George.

But he is to remain at heart a man of the moors and, around 1949, opts to take charge of a lesser station, Kildale, because it is nearer his roots and those of his wife, Margaret Alice (who tells him that the thing she disliked most about an early job at a big Saltburn house was to be seen out in a maid's pinny when sent out to do her employer's shopping).

Later he is to be in charge at Great Ayton and to retire when Dr Beeching axes the station into an unstaffed halt. He will die, aged 74, in 1972. Margaret Alice, born with the century, will live in her own home at Stokesley in 1997.

Their son, Maurice Scarth, will in that year be 75 and also living in Stokesley with his wife Elizabeth in Leven Road. Among souvenirs of his father are the Locomotion photo and the old-timer's stationmaster's cap badge; a top hat is standard issue only at the bigger stations.

Maurice Scarth is also to serve on the railways, but not until after a 1938 start with the Darlington branch of electrical and civil engineers Riley and Neate on a government contract to build 365ft-high structures at Danby Beacon – a basic early warning system, at that stage unable to differentiate between a flock of seagulls and an aircraft, but later to be known as radar.

The year war breaks out will see him in the Orkneys on a similar job as a steel erector and he is to travel the country before leaving the firm in 1951, not long before its take-over by an American company. He becomes a permanent way man based at Battersby Junction, living there with his wife and young family in a railway house and paying 4s 6d (22p) a week; more than forty years later, privately owned homes in the terrace will fetch £60,000-plus.

Battersby Junction will for years face an uncertain future on the oft-threatened line to Whitby, but in his time it will also receive 57 trains a day on a circular route from Middlesbrough (out via Stockton, Picton and Stokesley and back via Great Ayton and Nunthorpe).

In 1960 Maurice will join his father at Great Ayton in the coal business that the LNER traditionally allows stationmasters to run from the sidings, making deliveries by horse and flat cart, and in 1964 he takes it over himself. He retires in 1987 at 65.

Among his Battersby memories will be the demolition of the buffers when a train fails to stop. And a notorious winter in 1963, with snow closing the line for a week and all local roads for six weeks; elder daughter Elaine, a school-bussee, will become bored during the last weeks of the siege and insist on taking the train to Great Ayton and then the bus to school at Stokesley. By 1997 she will be Mrs Brown and live opposite Great Ayton station.