

Nor does anyone object when the other 50% of the non-aligned public (The Man On Platform Two) harangues Garnett and Patterson about the need (a) to devote more attention to on-train fare collection, (b) "to get out of your ivory signalboxes and talk to the public", and (c) to explain why the cost of car parking at Brough station has gone up from 50p to £1. ("To bring Brough into line with Malton and Scarborough" is the illogical explanation offered).

Other questions come from members of the Committee, and are expertly fielded by the rail chiefs. Rubbish at Newcastle Station? – "I'll sort it out" promises Garnett, scribbling on his memo pad. Chronic unpunctuality of Ulleskelf-York trains? "I'm meeting Mr and Mrs Mason (*the only Ulleskelf commuters, one wonders?*) to discuss it", says the man from Northern Spirit.

Which prompts a mischievous member of the Committee to question why Ulleskelf has such a bizarre train service. "You can go from York to Ulleskelf for an evening out and get back the same day, but you can't do it the other way round" he points out (*it's*

*true: see Table 40*), raising the vision of Ulleskelf becoming a new venue for York residents wishing to add a different dimension to their nightlife.

Now for some more unpunctuality, this time on the Harrogate line, on which the Committee's redoubtable Secretary, Ernie Preston, is a commuter, firing off angry letters to Northern Spirit about its "appalling timekeeping". Maybe, someone suggests, money from the new Rail Passenger Partnership Fund could be used to double-track the single bits of this branch, and also the Penistone Line, another poor performer, to improve timekeeping. But even that might not solve the problem: it has also been a vintage year for that favourite scapegoat *Leaves on the Line*.

Finally, to the long-running saga of Northern Spirit's dirty trains, brought forward from several previous agendas. If the company doesn't clean up its act, and more particularly its trains, warns the Chairman, the Committee might report it to the Regulator. "Not our fault" responds Northern Spirit's MD, "it's the washer at

Neville Hill, for which Maintrain (*National Express Group*) is responsible." If they don't sort things out within 14 days, Northern Spirit will be reporting *them* to the Regulator – and charging them for the cost of hand-washing NS trains.

With all this excitement, the Agenda is now running 34 minutes behind its self-imposed schedule. At 1.15 pm, when the Committee and its guests should be downing their pre-lunch G&Ts, Richard Owens of North Yorkshire County Council, who has been waiting for about three hours to deliver his report, is explaining why most of the Council's transport plans actually have to do with buses rather than trains, although there is talk of a new station at Cross Hills.

At this point I have to leave, missing any titbits that might come up under Any Other Business. The 13.29 train from Leeds to Poppleton is, predictably, grubby, but on time. Maybe I won't write to the RUCC after all; I reckon they've got more important matters to attend to.

## THE BOTTOM LINE ON TOPS

Harry Reed

### Introduction

TOPS (Total Operations Processing Systems) burst like a shooting star on to the British Rail operating scene in the early 1970s; it has now disappeared although its legacy remains. I feel that my notes should not be a history of TOPS, nor indeed a detailed description of the operating procedures (that's jargon for how it works), but rather my own personal recollections. So what I propose is to have a number of sections:

- My first faltering introduction to the system and my underwhelming initial support.
- The thoughts of Ted Strong, Vice President TOPS On-Line Inc, without whose efforts we would never have introduced TOPS. His remit from me was "to do a short article on the problems you faced in getting the system accepted". Those who have met Ted know that there was no problem which he would accept. His determination is the stuff of legends.
- My appointment to the Project Team and how we went about introducing, to a largely unenthusiastic industry, a new system, at a time when the computer was in its infancy ... We were pioneers.
- The anecdotes of Lawrie Hall (aka Albert Coach) a senior member of the Implementation Team who helped to introduce the system.

None of this will give you a much more detailed knowledge of TOPS but I hope you will find it of interest. However let me here give you some background. In the early 1960s IBM saw that the role, indeed the basic concept, of computers was changing as technology developed. They wanted to spearhead a computer application for transport. Southern Pacific Railroad of San Francisco saw major opportunities in a system which would improve utilisation of the wagon fleet and provide better information for short term planning purposes. To this end SP established a new company called TOPS On-Line Inc. In collaboration with a local firm of consultants, Strong Wishart and Associates, SP introduced TOPS throughout their railway and on other railroads in the USA and Canada. BR saw the system in operation and acquired the rights to adopt. BR's need was similar to SP's but in many ways it was further developed for our use. That the system has withered away is no reflection on its value. It was born at the beginning of the computer era; time and technology overtook TOPS but its basic precepts remain valid and essential to profitable freight operation on railways worldwide.

### What is this thing called TOPS

At the beginning of the 1970s change was in the air on British Rail; steam was gone, replaced by a plethora of diesel locomotive types (a

handful of which could attain 100 mph on passenger trains). Signalling was taking a quantum leap from its Victorian past and, in Freight, major changes were evident with the building of new marshalling yards and wagons.

The Freight Commercial side of the business, under increasing pressure from road haulage, was most anxious to improve quality of service. To this end, a system was introduced whereby the make-up of every train was recorded at the source Marshalling Yard and passed forward to the train's destination by Telex. Thus the receiving Yard knew what wagons were en-route on particular services. This was a brave first attempt to produce 'Advance Traffic Information' for short term planning and monitoring purposes. The level of success was marginal for a myriad of reasons but clearly something better was needed. At this time we began to hear rumours of an American system, said to be computer based and 'real-time'. Today, jargon of this kind is readily understood by six-year-old children but, at that time, most people had not even seen a computer and knew nothing of them. In general terms, computers, at that time, were 'batch-processors', eg. give them a list of gas readings and they produced the gas bills but 'real-time' meant the information was up to date as of that minute. This American system was the first 'real time' transport application using computers.

In the Newcastle Division we just let things pass; we were far away from BR headquarters in London and we had our own business to run and important business it was. Coal was king and the operators, with the help of the Traffic Costing Service (I have sung their praises before – see 'The South Bank Iron Ore Saga') were reducing costs and improving wagon supply. The introduction of a specific count of coal wagons throughout the Division each Saturday and the maximisation of the train loads had helped to reduce the Division's fleet of 21-ton hoppers from 24,000 to 12,000. Likewise, our new Tyne Marshalling Yard had, thanks to Consultants Urwick Orr, an analysis system for each train on its arrival on the yard receptions. The Yard Master David McKeever and I were grappling with a complex system (using Standard Deviations from Arithmetic Mean) to forecast in a reliable way what each inbound traffic would appear on each train. We never did get it to work but we were trying. So, by and large, we did not have very much interest in any American system.

Be that as it may, we were small fish in the large BR pool. One fine day every Divisional Operating Superintendent (DOS) in the country was summoned to attend a meeting at 09.30 on Monday morning at Paddington. Of the 50 or so DOSs all but two attended, together with a host of senior BR HQ and Regional HQ Officers and *two Americans*.

One of the DOSs who did not attend was my boss from Newcastle – an overnight sleeper trip leaving on Sunday night was a major factor in that decision which resulted in your author being present. To say the gathering overwhelmed me was an understatement: all this brass was more than a provincial lad could take and these Americans, bold, brash and so self confident were beyond any experience of mine. I sat at the back, as quiet as a mouse, hardly daring to breathe in case some one noticed this junior interloper and I listened. I tried to make sense of what was being said. They talked about something called TOPS which was a 'real time' computer system. TOPS was an acronym for Total Operations Processing System and gave a 'complete car location and status inventory' which I presume meant it told the operator where every wagon was located either in a yard, siding or on a train and indicated if it was loaded or empty. How this magic worked I knew not and, to be honest, it was not something which figured high in my priority list. So I returned to Newcastle and explained (as best I could) to an amazed but unimpressed group of colleagues this vision of Shangri-La which had been revealed.

Imagine my surprise when a couple of days later I was called into the presence of the Divisional Manager, Norman Paton (a man for whom, I had then and to the present day, retain the greatest respect). He said "You've met these Americans" (True – at a distance and across a crowded room) "and they want to introduce TOPS here first. You look after them and give them what they want." In other words – no one more senior was prepared to get involved in something new and risky. In Wellington's army when there was a very risky task, such as storming a breach, the attack was led by a group known as the 'Forlorn Hope', who, if by some chance, survived were promoted. As it happened, this task led to that exact result in my case.

So the great day dawned and I met this small group of Americans and BR HQ officers charged with the task of touring the Division. I had arranged a programme of tours over five days using a two-car diesel unit. Introductions to the Divisional Manager and his officers were cordial but perfunctory, and so, armed with a basket of sandwiches we went about our tasks. We visited exotic places which our Californian visitors could hardly have dreamed about including Consett High and Low Yards, Tyne Dock, Ashington and Bedlington collieries, Morpeth, Horden, Easington, Blackhall and Seaham collieries and South Dock.

I got to like these Americans but I was far from convinced that their system, based as it was on long haul freight movements (TOPS parent railway Southern Pacific average length of haul was 1400 miles) could relate to our coal hauls of about 20 miles. Now, however, I was not the junior at the back of the room, so I said so. I explained my systems and compared it simplicity with their cumbersome system and for a week we argued because by then I realised that although they were, in the Geordie vernacular, 'canny blokes' they were neither supermen nor indeed were they railwaymen. Let me explain:

the boss was Ted Strong (now a firm friend and we still argue). Ted was the boss of a San Francisco consultancy firm and had been a driving force behind the development of TOPS for Southern Pacific. Ted played the 'bad cop' to his business partner Jack Pfeiffer's 'nice cop' to perfection; at this time I did not appreciate this. (In truth even years later some BR Officers did not understand the strategy.) The point of this being no matter who they were, my knowledge and experience level on my home ground was greater than theirs so I was not over-awed. That fact cemented our relationship. Ted once asked me to define a consultant. "Someone who expresses other peoples' ideas in his own words", I replied. "Pretty fair answer", said Ted.

During this week of exploration we journeyed to South Dock; Jack was trying to convince me of the benefit TOPS gave, in communication, to operators with printed train lists for supervisors, guards and drivers. I argued our communication systems were, in the main, verbal but effective. I took my two visitors to the Yard Inspector's cabin to await the arrival of a loaded train of shipment coal. Mineral control had advised the Inspector by phone of the next leg of the working so this was to be communicated to driver and guard. There we were, a small group waiting to see how this would be achieved. As the J27 engine drew past, the driver leaned out and the Inspector shouted up:

"GAN DOON SIVIN LOUSE OFF, CATCH FIVE FER RYHOPE"

"There you are," I said, "succinct, pertinent and to the point".

Ted and Jack were aghast. "What did he say, I didn't understand a word". I explained "Well, he told the driver he would like him to take his load of 30 wagons of coal on to reception siding number seven and, after securing the train, he was to detach his engine and proceed to the departure end of siding number five. He was then to attach all the empty wagons on that siding, to draw forward and reverse onto reception number seven and attach the guard's van which had been on his inward load. Once this had been done he was to proceed to Ryhope Colliery and deliver the empty coal wagons."

"You guys sure talk funny" was the response. Nevertheless the lesson had been driven home.

Our visitors returned to London, no doubt completely bemused leaving me thinking "that's the last I will hear of that" and wondering how I would be able to explain 1,000 miles of operating departmental mileage on a Diesel Multiple Unit.

As fate would have it, it was not the last I heard of it. Only a few days later I was summoned (yes again) to Mr Paton's office where he indicated the TOPS Project Manager (Bob Arnott, another exiled operator) wanted me to join the project as (of all things) Education and Training Officer. Whilst I was ambitious and this was a promotion, I think I would have turned the offer down had it not been for George Flynn, the Divisional Training Officer, who persuaded me to accept the challenge.

## A FERRY GOOD STORY

Walter Rothschild

Chaeron the Ferryman was getting frustrated with his lot. Day after day he took the souls of the Departed over the River Styx – a river not noted for the charms of its scenery, or even its good fishing. Once upon a time almost all the Dead had arrived with, at least, the necessary fare of two Obols in their hands or over their eyes or in the pockets of their shrouds – well, maybe not even almost all, but at least those from good backgrounds – and some had even had another coin or two as a tip for him. The Poor – well, the Poor are always with us, is what the Bible says, but in Chaeron's case they were only with him until they got to the other side and disembarked, and then he could forget them and their mean stinginess even in death. And if, while disembarking, the boat suddenly for no apparent reason shifted a bit or swung, and they fell overboard or got their feet wet

in the black, sluggish ooze of the Styx – well, that was some slight consolation for the aggrieved Ferryman, and was no more than these passengers deserved. He had his own ironic ideas about the mud in the Styx and the Sticks-in-the Mud. And some of those peasants who had, all their lives, "lived in the sticks" – well, they may as well bathe in it, too.

And as for the occasional Israelite who turned up, having strayed off the path to Sheol, and who usually demanded the right to free transport because *their* religion forbade people to be buried with money – well, that was sheer chutzpah.

But even that had been in the old days, when people still Believed and when there were still enough Obols to go around. The coin has been out of circulation for aeons now, largely because so many had been

buried with corpses, and corpses, as is well known, rarely give any change. Drachmae were for while, (a process also known as Inflation), a reasonable substitute of sorts, but then the world seemed to expand, the number of potential passengers ringing the bell on the Earth side of the river grew exponentially, many had strange currencies that didn't suit his currents, many had no liquid credit assets at all (in the old days even a bandit, when robbing and then despatching an unfortunate business traveller, would leave him two Obols for the final Fare), and – well, where does one start to describe the changes? The Underworld was suddenly populated with Underworld Figures for whom the area held no fears at all, and who indeed preferred to hold their fare money in the waters rather than hand it to the Ferryman ('money-laundering', they called this