

RIDING THE SHAKESPEARE EXPRESS

By Sue Taylor

'Here it comes!'

Up went the cry, and a ripple of excitement stirred the waiting crowd. Sure enough, from around the tree-shrouded bend in the track sounded a cheery whistle and an unmistakeable chuffing. The small knots of people merged into an eager audience, necks craned for the first sight of mechanical magic.

The valiant old engine chugged into view, belching smoke as it rounded the bend and approached Stratford's No.3 platform. The gathered enthusiasts cheered, children waved. From his place halfway down the platform, teetering perilously close to the edge, Will Sparkes added his voice to the rest, savouring the moment. His lively grey eyes tracked the stately progress of the engine as it steamed into the station, chunky black bodywork lovingly restored, the driving pistons gleaming with fresh oil.

He stepped back as the moment passed and tugged rather self-consciously at the tweedy, unfamiliar 1940s jacket. It didn't matter that many of his railway society friends were similarly clad, on this most special of days – the 50th anniversary of the first post-War Stratford to Birmingham express, better known as the 'Shakespeare Express'.

The Bard would have liked trains, Will mused, tweaking at his stiff shirt collar. This outfit was too bloody warm for August. He considered taking off the jacket, but ... well, Grandad would never have removed his jacket on so formal an occasion, and on a Sunday to boot. Reminded of that grand old man, Will's joy in the day soured, clouded by recent grief.

The Britannia class loco swept on beyond the station to the junction where it would switch tracks and chug back to link up with its waiting train. Grandad should have been here, today of all days. He'd have been up there on the footplate, reminiscing, angling for a chance to help take her out. And fifty years ago he'd have been driving that engine, proud and tall in his blue BR overalls and peaked cap. Will ambled down the platform, trying to shake off sorrow, as the engine reappeared and tucked itself into place at the head of the three brown-and-cream carriages, each as venerable as the loco. He joined the general exodus to Platform No.1 to board the train, meeting old friends, swapping smalltalk but keeping his distance. He didn't want company, not today. Today was for Grandad. For his memory.

Twenty minutes later Will was edging along the corridor of the middle carriage, seeking an empty compartment. He found one and sank onto the comfortable, faded upholstery. His mind strayed, full of childhood memories of steam trips on Grandad's train, of soot and smoke and the majestic power of steam. The old carriage smelled of ancient cigarettes and dust, of age and coal smoke. The two solitary bulbs in the domed yellow ceiling gave off only a dim glow; the BR logo was peeling and the old-fashioned net luggage rack had long since disintegrated into tatters. Yet to Will, it was comfortable, familiar, reminding him of happier times in his youth, before the dull trivia of adult life claimed him. *No bloody character, these modern trains*; Grandad's strong Yorkshire burr echoed in his mind. Engulfed in bitter-sweet memories, Will took a deep breath and blinked, as a frantic chuffing signalled the engine was preparing for departure.

The special excursion train left Stratford behind and steamed into the green Warwickshire countryside beyond, over-ripe with the lushness of late summer. The train's whistle greeted the approach of the first of several bridges, and people hurried to the trackside to wave, drawn by a sight all too rare. Will gazed unseeing out of the window, his mind full of grandfather Jack Sparkes' last hours, frozen into immobility by a stroke, dying in a hospital bed at the age of 90. Now, his little brick house would be sold and its contents dispersed. Even his beloved model railway layout in the attic would go, dismantled and sold off. Will would have had it like a shot, would have rebuilt it and treasured it. Grandad had left all his railway impedimenta to his only grandson.

'I'm not having that old rubbish cluttering up this house!' Lynn Sparkes' petulant squawk had dashed any hope. 'Sell it. Someone will be stupid enough to buy it. We need the money.' Will had argued, pleaded, but the argument had ended as always, with Lynn in sobbing recrimination, collapsing breathless onto the sofa. Hating himself, hating *her*, Will placated her, giving in, bearing with commendable patience the inevitable bleats of self-pity.

'No wonder I'm not well. You make me ill. You're selfish. You think more of your rotten trains than you do of me.' And he as always apologised, went to make tea, gave in. Again.

Lynn was diabetic, overweight, and her blood pressure could be erratic. Not that her diabetes was of the acute kind that required injections, but she traded on it nonetheless. She resented Will's passion for steam and for Shakespeare, having no such passions herself.

Now Grandad's railway memorabilia, the treasured flotsam of an old man's life, languished in two big cardboard removal boxes in Will's garden shed. So far, a month later, Will could not bring himself to open those boxes, grief still too fresh. And he wouldn't open them with Lynn there, spoiling it with her snide remarks. Pity Lynn didn't go out more. As it was, exile to the shed was his sole respite from her whining tongue. Oh, she went shopping, or occasionally met a neighbour for lunch, but her life had narrowed into a routine of housework grudgingly done, gossip delighted in and self-engrossment on a major scale. If Will dared criticise, she played her ace, the diabetes card, making him feel like a cad for giving her a hard time.

She had soundly ridiculed today's outing, of course. How silly, a grown man of nearly 40 dressing up just to ride on a smelly old steam train. For once Will had ignored her, refusing to be baited. Today was too important to him.

As the countryside and its little stations flashed past, Will started to relax. With each mile, Lynn's round, pale, unhappy face faded further into bitter memory, along with the tedium of his daily life. His mood brightened as he listened to the familiar percussion of the engine and watched the grey wisps of smoke drift past the compartment window. A murmur of voices next door indicated he had neighbours, but he was effectively alone with his dreams.

His mind strayed to the second of his passions. Next week booking would open for the new *Hamlet* at the RSC main house. Come autumn, the new season would start and once more he could seek refuge in the brilliant, colourful, tragic, fascinating world of Shakespeare. Lynn hated it of course, deriding it as snobby incomprehensible rubbish. And Alex Burney was playing Gertrude. Magnificent she was, tall, sinuous, all rampant dark red hair and great brown eyes. At

38 she was maturing into a fine classical actress, and she was the object of many a Sparkes fantasy, the antithesis of his dull, tubby wife.

A roar and a whistle startled him out of his reverie. Focussing again, he realised they had swooped into the long tunnel before Tyseley, the old rail depot. Without the glare of the sunlight, the old carriage was all dim yellow light and flickering shadows. A strange feeling crept over Will, a remoteness, as if he had passed into another world. Apart from the sound of the train, all was quiet. All he could see was the old Thirties-built compartment with its fading blue and green seats and its chipped rectangular mirror, the corridor beyond lost in gloom, wisps of smoke past the window. All he could hear was the persistent boom of the engine, the rattling of the wheels along the track. It was an eerie sensation. Will sat quite still, reluctant to break the spell, hardly daring even to breathe.

The train shot out of the other end and back into daylight. Will shook himself, watching as they sped past Tyseley. It seemed they too were well into the spirit of the day, as he glimpsed people in Forties clothes dotting the platform.

He must have dozed. When he awoke again, the train was pulling into Birmingham New Street. To his surprise, even here there was that authentic Forties feel. The platform posters advertised Strand ciggies and the films of the day and looked unexpectedly new. Will grinned, impressed by such attention to detail. Grandad would have been intrigued!

As the train slowed to a halt, Will made his way out of the compartment and into the corridor, pausing to allow a pretty dark girl in a smart pinstripe suit to pass. Her hair, hat and makeup were all in keeping with the Forties theme. Will followed her onto the platform and halted, bemused, amazed, for the transformation was total. Within his startled view there remained not a trace of the 20th century. Everything - seats, railway information signs, people - was authentically Forties. Will wondered how they could have persuaded the Station Manager to do all this. Incredibly, even structural alterations done since 1950 seemed to have been removed.

He glanced along the platform to where the grand old engine rested, still spewing steam. Her driver had descended his footplate and ambled in Will's direction, chatting to his fireman. Will became aware of a misgiving, a prickle up his spine. Something was not right here. This was all too perfect. Too ... *real*. He considered approaching the driver, and waited as the pair came closer.

But as the smoke-begrimed, kindly face of the loco driver came into focus, Will Sparkes' heart lurched. Shock held him immobile, silent, for Will knew him. Much younger, the hair dark brown and wavy, without the silver of age, but the impish blue eyes were the same. Will had seen photos of him looking just as he did now. Alive, young, and unmistakably Grandad Sparkes.

'How do,' he greeted in his Yorkshire burr. 'If you're waiting for the train back, won't be till 3.30.'

'Um, er, thank you,' croaked Will. Driver Sparkes and his colleague nodded and walked on, doubtless wondering what the heck was up with the smart boggle-eyed stranger. Will sank onto a bench, still in shock. He had just spoken to Grandad. Impossible! Yet it was he, of that Will had no doubt. *Am I dreaming?* He stared around him at the platform with its 1940s trappings. Too real, too ... *new*. Yes, *that was it!*

There could be only one logical explanation. Incredible though it seemed, he was sometime in the late Forties ... 1949? This was no 20th century mockup. He had shot 50 years into Grandad's past. But why? And how? Such things were the stuff of science fiction. *Lynn will wonder where I am*, he thought, inanely. He might never see her again. He'd be free of her moaning and her constant criticism, free to do as he pleased. He realised that idea was less pleasing to him than it should have been. She couldn't help the way she was. He felt sudden regret, that he didn't try harder to understand her. She hadn't been the same since she lost the baby. Should have been more sympathetic. Never really liked children, never wanted ...he shrugged away the unpalatable.

Then panic seized him. Suppose he *couldn't* get back? He would be trapped here, in a time not his own. Here he had nothing. No job, no home, just this suit and a few coppers. Everything he had waited in the 20th century. He didn't belong here. He tried to be rational. How could he get back? However trivial and tedious his life seemed, it *was* his life, his era. Not this one, only 50 years back, but so different.

Of course! If he reversed the journey, travelled back on the train, he might return to his own time the same way he had come, through the tunnel. Well, that's how it happened in those weird sci-fi things. By now, the initial shock was wearing off and curiosity took over. There was a little time to explore before 3.30. Will rose and strolled to the barrier, experiencing a worrying moment as he handed over his ticket. But it had been lovingly reproduced, and passed inspection.

He wandered through the station, fascinated, caught in a dream. He meandered through Grandad's world, one of severe demob suits, rationing and austerity. Old posters still bore the rousing slogans of World War II, and a few soldiers were still in uniformed evidence. Gone were the fast-food bars and the bright neon of the 20th century, and on other platforms he spotted more steam engines, still in their heyday, each one the work of skilled engineers.

Will was reluctant to interact, feeling like a foreign tourist who didn't know the language. He wished he'd read up more about this time. Then an idea dawned. Plucking up courage, he fished out a few suitable coins and purchased a newspaper. Yes! It was late August, 1949. Grandad had always said he had qualified as full driver just after the War. He would boast how he had driven one of the first Stratford Expresses when normal services resumed.

Will loitered near the station café, fascinated, peeking in at its high old-fashioned counter, its gingham-covered tables and dark wooden chairs. From within a smatter of conversation mingled with the cheery sound of big band music. The café had a record player ... or was it called a gramophone then? Will glanced down at Grandad's big old watch and read 3.15. Time to be going.

By 3.30 pm, he flopped back into his seat on the Express, carefully choosing the same compartment. His head spun with images, smells, sounds of another age. He resolved to open Grandad's boxes at last and find out more about the life he had known. And about the mystery, about why Grandad, who loved steam trains, had so suddenly left the job he loved, a year later in 1950.

Will remembered, his mind starting to race. Grandad had stopped driving, in the summer of that year. There had been an accident, someone killed on the line under his train. He had been absolved of any blame, but he could no longer bear to stay in the job. In later years he would never speak of it, not even to his beloved grandson. Will hadn't persisted, struck by the haunted look in Grandad's eyes.

By the time young Will came along, Grandad and a mate of his had set up a model railway business and ran a thriving little shop in Stratford. For Will, it had been a magical world, a veritable treasure-house of railway lore.

There's a reason for everything, Grandad had always said. Was this the reason why Will had been pulled back into the past? Could one old man's spirit do that? Will knew he must try to find out the truth. He vowed to research the old boy's life and set that lively spirit to rest at last.

He held his breath as the train thundered through the tunnel. But when they emerged the other side, he was safely back in the present. Day-trippers gossiped and laughed next door, two jean-clad boys with souvenir brochures passed along the corridor, and he glimpsed modern housing outside. Will relaxed again, his spirit soaring, filled suddenly with new purpose. He knew it would all seem like a dream once he got home, and he was quite sure he wouldn't tell Lynn. But he would try to be nicer to her, to understand. And he would honour Grandad's memory, open those two boxes of mementoes and finally resolve a 50-year-old mystery.

Nothing would ever be quite the same again.

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