

# Sounds of the Harborough Night

By  
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Both the author's paternal and maternal families lived in Market Harborough, East Farndon, and surrounding villages. Back in Victorian times the nights were surely quieter than they are now, but there were interesting and sometimes frightening noises to be heard and those mentioned below are from my antecedent's recollections and those of my youth living at, initially, 62 Coventry Road, 41 Nithsdale Avenue and from about 1956 at 110 Northampton Road; a house built for my maternal great grandfather in 1897.

A tale of my father's which was indelibly implanted on my mind related to 31<sup>st</sup> January 1916. It was a family custom to take tea with my great grandparents alternatively on Sundays, and my grandmother's family were Buswells and Haddons who lived in Clipston. My father was aged 9, but he and his father were used to walking, so they set out in dank foggy conditions from Harborough to Clipston alone, as my grandmother was expecting the arrival of a baby at any moment. The blizzard of March 1916 was yet to come!

On their return it was then a moonlight night with clouds, and as they reached the "gravel pits" earthworks along the Farndon Road they heard the steam whistle on the Harborough Gasworks sound. That was a signal of a possible air raid and that gas supplies for street lighting would be cut off. As they trudged on a deep droning sound began to impinge on the night's relative silence. Then, caught by a pool of moonlight, they saw two gigantic Zeppelins, the noise being generated by their Maybach engines. My father described the sight and noise – at his age - as being extremely frightening – enemy bombing raids were virtually unknown. They walked on as the airships flew passing over Desborough, Dingley, Medbourne and northwards and the droning receded.

When they reached the top of Farndon hill, Harborough was in virtual darkness but in the northern skies towards Leicester and Loughborough they saw flashes and very faintly heard what they thought were explosions. They carried on to their home on Burnmill Road opposite the school. The next evening, they learnt that the "lights out" air raid warning had not reached Loughborough, Derby, Stanton by Dale, or Burton on Trent, although Liverpool was the intended but missed, teutonic target. Sadly around 70 people were killed and 170 odd injured. The Zeppelins had certainly spread terror, but they had utterly missed their intended targets! There had been an extensive fleet of around 20 airships, but they went astray as far as Scunthorpe, Wolverhampton, and Stanton by Dale. Apparently, one of the returning craft was hit by naval gunfire and ditched in the North Sea, with some wreckage being later recovered off Norway.

Another story of both my father and mother was a much less frightening kind in 1945. They had moved back to Harborough from Glascoed, with my then baby sister (I didn't arrive until 1947) and were staying with my father's parents at 62 Coventry Road, whilst house hunting. As they were settling down at around midnight, they heard the joyous sound of a cacophony of Midland, L&NW and Stanier locomotive whistles from Harborough's locomotive shed.

My mother remembered asking my father – another lifelong railway enthusiast – “what was that all about?” Father – who being a Ministry of Supply explosives expert, had worked closely with the U.S. Munitions operations, replied that he thought it might be down to a Japanese surrender. Shortly afterwards a mail train left Harborough station bound for Rugby and their views were confirmed by a continuous repeated exultant engine whistle scream of “Hip hip hoooooaaay, Hip hip hoooooaaay” all the way from the station until the train disappeared from earshot beyond Lubenham Hill. Nowadays there would be a storm of complaint, but almost everyone in Harborough who heard that celebratory, exultant whistle scream seemed to be delighted, and very quickly knew what it meant!

My childhood memories of the 50's and 60's are much less impactful. However, in the wakeful hours of the night, the lowing of cattle being rested in the station lairages formed a soporific symphony, even from 110 Northampton Road. Intermittently there would be a rattling roar as a retort at the gasworks was emptied and the coke quenched. There would frequently be the resounding applause of wagon buffers and the throaty exhaust of a 4F shunting the busy station sidings, which went on 24/6 in today's parlance.

However, with my age still in single figures, we used to have a succession of evening sound scenarios to enjoy. This would start with an exchange of whistling from the station between train and banking engine. The latter, usually an ex-L&NWR “Super D” would start with its shrill whistle sounding a double crow – it sounded like a giant cockerel on steroids – telling the train engine the banker was ready to start. The train engine – often a Stanier 8F - would reply in stentorian gruff hoot and off they would go. With perhaps 1,400 tons to get up the 250-foot climb to Kelmarsh there was no messing about, and the roar of their exhausts told the tale of the effort being applied. Both engines would get stuck in to getting their huge train rolling at up to 35mph and by the time they were crossing the Auriga Street footpath tunnel the stained-glass insets in my upper bedroom windows would be rattling. The locomotives' forceful and determined efforts would be audible over a large part of Harborough.

Looking across Northampton Road from 110 there was a gap to the railway; a fountain of sparks would become visible above the cottages opposite, but compared to the 8F's modest efforts, the Super “D” resembled the last days of

Pompeii; flames at the chimney, showers of small sparks and flaming lumps of coal thrown high in the sky. As they passed Little Bowden Crossing the exhausts became even more vociferous as their speed was dragged down by the gradient. They could be heard slogging away ever more slowly along the long curving embankment by the down distant signal, and up to Waterloo Farm Bridge. Due to the lack of traffic noise the exhaust blasts rebounding from the passage under both overbridges before the tunnel could be clearly heard.

By the time the tunnel was reached they might be down to a slogging or jogging speed, as first the 8F's bark disappeared, followed by the "Super D". On emerging the banker would give an exultant scream on its whistle for two reasons – firstly they had made it through the inferno of that narrow tunnel, secondly, in the evening, they would be peeling off and running back from Oxendon Station all by gravity! The 8F would get a move on over the Ise bridge to overcome the short sharp ascent to Kelmarsh Tunnel, then for them it was then downhill all the way to Northampton.

The closing spectacular at about 10.30pm each weekday, would be the passage of the train of 40 ton "Tin Trunk" wagons which carried power station slack from collieries in the Shipley, Moor Green, Mapperley, Coppice and Woodside areas to Stonebridge Park Power Station, near Willesden. These bogie wagons were large vacuum braked hoppers. By 10.00pm the banking engines had been put to bed "on shed" and the crews signed off, so the train engine had to go it alone, come snow, rain, hail, or frost.

Usually hauled by an 8F or a W.D. Austerity 2-8-0 from Toton, the train of heavy hopper wagons would slide into Harborough's L&NWR "up" platform and take a deep drink from the water column, whilst crews were changed, and the fire cleaned. Then, after probably 30 minutes, preceded by roaring safety valves, the challenge was on and a furious assault on the climb southwards would commence. Even in darkness or thick fog the rhythm of the "Tin Trunk's" bogie wheels was unmistakable, their Da-Dump, Da-Dump was unlike anything else. The battle up 220 feet to Oxendon always seems to have been won; then you could settle into sleep. Harborough was left shaken if not stirred!

The mornings were different, people were up and going to work, some down town to Symington's corsets or soups or Dainite Rubber. Others went in the opposite direction to Tungstone, Vislok or Looms, and some to "The Aircraft" up Logan Street. There were packed trains to Rugby for BTH, English Electric and British Railways themselves. If I remember aright the first was a 6.22, then 7.17 and lastly 8.18. This latter seemed to have a role of collecting every surplus item of passenger or parcels rolling stock and dragging a vast caravan of vehicles back to Rugby. Its passage over the A508 bridge was distinctly noisy!

Over all this, the unmistakable sound of Symington's steam whistle would resonate over the town to hasten any laggards on their way to their work.

Additional sounds would come from the hooves of horses; Co-op milk was still being delivered by horse dray, and the co-operation between milkman and horse was amazing. The horse seemed to know exactly where to stop to allow "empties" and "fulls" to be exchanged and where to draw forward to. Similar but heavier and more continuous sounds of horses' hooves came from those hauling coal delivery drays in the winter. The coal, coke, slack or large lump product would be bagged, and the horse would often be rewarded by its nosebag and a drink, when a delivery was being handled.

Tuesdays, being market day, introduced a new set of sounds. Cattle being driven to the market yard off Springfield Street, urged on by the farmer's dogs with only a very occasional bark. Sheep were more vocal, especially if lambs were present. Traffic was held up for a while and the trail left behind by the animals was collected and prized by gardeners!

Another quite regular passage of horse drawn vardo vans and trailers, usually with the addition of some foals and ponies, was caused by the movement of gypsy families. At the time much of this movement was travelling between one agricultural worksite and another or going to a gypsy of horse fair. One family had a senior member who was blind, and he walked along behind one of the wagons, holding on to the backboard! Overall, they presented a colourful picture of a totally different way of life from that of house dwellers, and was something that virtually disappeared in the later 1950's.

The sounds of Harborough had begun to change! Whilst the war had introduced piston engined aircraft as a common noise, with airfields nearby at Foxton, Bosworth, Harrington and Pipewell. The ground level sounds of the infernal combustion engine in cars, vans, lorries, and buses increasingly displaced the evocative sounds of horses, cattle, and steam, as I began my "senior school" education. Real and iron horses increasingly disappeared, and our environment got ever noisier and more polluted and climate threatening, as road usage grew.

The trek to Burnmill Road and school then took up my time and listening from now on, except perhaps in the 1956 - 1959 period. Then, every weekday morning, two 8 wheel 2-stroke diesel Foden tipper lorries operated by "Hoveringham Gravels", with a Mammoth's silhouette on each cabside door, would pass along the A508 southwards to the M1 construction sites laden with aggregate. They were one of the very few non steam vehicles that were worth hearing and their passage marked the end of the listening day - school called!

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