



Patricia Bennett, Tracks Sponsor's choice award

Our family never had a garden with lawns and flowers or a veg plot - but we always had a railway track (and once an orchard so no need to 'scrump' apples)! We moved around the North, the Midlands and Wales following father's work as a pharmacist, but his first love was engineering. It became his hobby and although he was in a reserved occupation his engineering skills were such that he was deployed during the war as an engineer at an aeroplane factory repairing damaged war planes.

As soon as we arrived at our new home(s) the tracks were assembled by my father and three brothers. Imagine large railway sleepers with railway tracks attached meandering across the garden, supported by more sleepers to lift the railway line to the required height and with buffers at each end of course.

Gardening was not a priority for my father as we moved so much. However, the gardens with long grass and wild hedges were great for boisterous children to play around in and a haven for wildflowers, birds and insects. The fifties were not known for being environmentally conscious, so I suppose without realising it we were doing our bit. Our mother would have loved green lawns and colourful flower beds (we both enjoyed looking around gardens) but it was not to be. So each garden provided a home for the railway track. I don't know it's gauge but its size was signified by a number of 000's.

He made two locomotives, an LNER in classic green livery but my favourite was the chunky 'Doodlebug' in black and gold. He also needed space for his lathe, his workbench and the engineering tools which he used to build his working replicas of steam railway engines. It could be in a shed or outhouse or even a cellar. The engines (locomotives) were beautiful, perfect in every detail and scale to a full-sized engine. The tender held the tiny pieces of coal which were shovelled into the small firebox as we prepared to build up steam. He never used 'slack'! (Some of you may remember 'slack' the powdery coal that was cheaper than chunks of coal and was useful for damping down our coal fires.)

We had open air 'carriages' made from flat wooden planks on wheels. Four metal 'legs' at each corner supported two wooden ramps for our feet so we could sit comfortably. My first memory is of me sitting behind my father, peeping round to watch as he opened the door of the firebox and shoveled the coal into the glowing embers with a handmade shovel and got up steam. We moved off, the engine chuffing and whistle blowing. Although we were perfectly safe I would put my arms round his waist as we moved gathering speed across the garden. It was great fun, the smell of smoke, that special sound of the engine rattling across the rails. To this day I will always love seeing or riding on steam trains!

Over sixty years later I was sitting in The National Railway Museum looking at slides my father had taken in the 1930's, 40's and 50's. I had recently found out that they were there in a collection of 2000 slides that could not be validated as there was no name with them. When I rang up and asked if I could view them and explained that I was his daughter they were very helpful. On our arrival they produced one of the boxes containing 400 slides for me to look at. Every slide was in a small waxed envelope and I had to wear plastic gloves when I touched them. My husband sat with me in a room at a table which was under lit so we could examine the slides easily.

On each envelope I looked at the writing and there he was. The beautifully clear details of each slide written with a fountain pen (how many people use them these days?) written in his hand and I knew straight away they were his. How did I know? In my memories box I have birthday card which I received when I was about nine years old. Inside the message was written in my father's elegant style. I looked at the envelopes and the writing matched. It was a very special moment that brought so many memories back to me.