

THE SAVING OF L44 (METROPOLITAN RAILWAY LOCOMOTIVE – NO.1)

by Jim Stringer

It was the winter of 1962-63, which, as those able to recall, was a winter which was noted for its heavy and prolonged falls of snow, which started late on Christmas day (1962) and, if I recall, lasted almost through to March.

I was in the third year of my apprenticeship with London Transport (Underground) and having just completed a placement at the Lille Bridge Steam Shed, was now stationed out at Neasden Depot for a period of six months. Working under Tube Trains in that weather was no fun, with the shutters open at either end of the sheds, the wind, and what it brings, blew mercilessly through the pitted roads where my fitter and I were engaged in changing some piece of defective equipment or another on an 'F' or 'T' stock train. The only heating in those days were cast iron coal/wood-burning stoves which stood at either end of the roads – which were only really effective if you stood right on top of them when they were glowing red.

So it was inevitable that to keep warm I should make my way over to the Steam Shed where at least they kept the doors and shutters closed and the heat from the locomotives together with their stoves guaranteed to keep me warm.

At that time London Underground still had a small fleet of steam locomotives amongst which were a couple of 0-6-0 Hunslet Locos which formerly belonged to the District Railway, L30 & L31 – (see *below*). One 0-6-2. 'F' Class Loco (L52) and three 0-4-4 'E' Class locos, L44, L46 and L48. There were also some ex-GWR (BR) 0-6-0 Pannier Tanks which were used for general duties in place of the Hunslets, E & F class locos.



During my time in the steam sheds at Lillie Bridge Depot, I learnt the skills required to strip and repair steam locomotives. Indeed I well remember scraping the main bearings for L30, one of the Hunslet Locomotives (*Left*) under the watchful eye of my fitter, Bill Quickenden and the Depot Manager Harold Amos.

It was whilst I was at Lillie Bridge that I was asked whether I would like to go on a footplate ride over to Croxley Tip which was near Rickmansworth, and where the many tons of rubbish

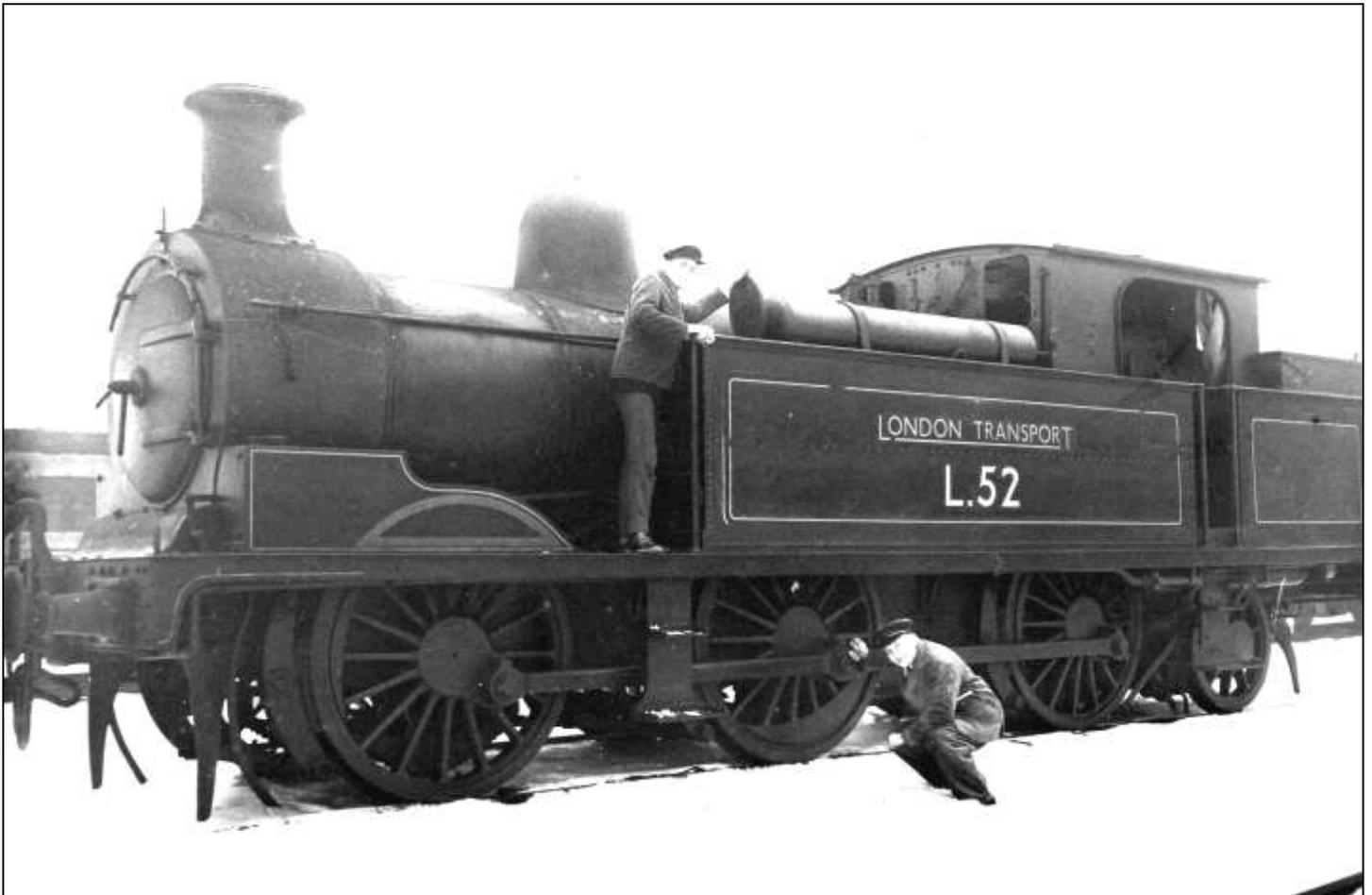
collected from down the tunnels each evening were finally laid to rest. For this I would need to go to Neasden (where I was due to go next anyway), from where the train would depart, and to make myself known to the driver and fireman who were to be found in the steam shed. The Train in question comprised of one of the ex-BR/GWR Pannier Tanks (L97), four 'rubbish' wagons and a brake van. The resulting 'trip' was great, and the driver certainly knew how to impress a mere lad of 19 when it came to breaking all speed limits as we thundered along towards Croxley on the Metropolitan Line. This actually took place during the first week of my placement at Neasden, and there was quite a covering of snow on the ground, which made being on the footplate a very welcome place to be. I had also taken along my brother-in-law's cine camera, and took a couple of reels of film which I still have, and have since had converted onto DVD.

It was during my frequent visits to the steam sheds that I met up with Gerald Fitzgerald, a locomotive fitter who, approaching retirement age, was very passionate about his steam locomotives and spoke with some considerable regret that soon the older ones were to be withdrawn from service and scrapped. I too felt that this was a short sighted move by London Transport, and agreed that we should do all within our power to save at least one of them.

On Gerald's advice we opted for L52, built around 1901 by the Yorkshire Engine Co. – this loco would be saved for future generations to enjoy. On my return to Acton I sought an interview with J. Graeme Bruce who, as well as being high up in the ranks of management, was also known to be an enthusiastic historian where London Underground was concerned, and put my suggestion of preservation to him.

J.G. was indeed very sympathetic, and whilst keen to assist in any way possible, advised that my suggestion of having L52 on permanent display at Neasden was never likely to happen, but he did pull some useful strings and obtained a price of £500 for the locomotive – in going order.

So, preservation of one of the old Metropolitan Railway's Steam Locomotives now seemed a distinct possibility, but there still remained – firstly the matter of finding £500, and where to put it when purchased. It was at this point that I contacted the London Railway Preservation Society, and attended a meeting with three of their committee, Noel Draycot, Richard Castle and David Alexander. The meeting, as I recall, was held in the buffet at Liverpool Street station, where a plan was drawn up for the future of L52.



Above: Gerald Fitzgerald (crouching) and me, just 19, featured in an LTE photograph taken at Neasden during the Winter of 1962-63.

To raise the required amount of money we started up '**The Met Tank Appeal Fund**' and had leaflets printed, which outlined our aims and objectives and featured a photograph of the said locomotive. We also publicised the fact that we were seeking funds to save this Loco in periodicals which would most likely be purchased by the Locomotive enthusiast.

The response was phenomenal and soon money was rolling in from literally all corners of the globe. Donations large and small were all recorded in a book – (*which I still have somewhere*), and before long we had achieved our goal, and much more besides – something in the region of just over £1,000 being the final tally.

We were now in a position to go 'officially' to the London Transport Executive and advise them that we had the money with which to purchase L52.

Metropolitan Tank Locomotive Appeal

Engine No. L.52 'F' Class 0-6-2.



An appeal has been launched by a large body of railway enthusiasts to preserve L.52 the last remaining 'F' Class Tank Locomotive belonging to the London Transport Board based at Neasden Depot.

This Engine was first put on line in 1901 for hauling mixed traffic on the Metropolitan Railway, and was last employed in 1961.

The sum of £500 is required to purchase it for preservation for the benefit of our future generation.

We are now appealing to you railway enthusiasts or as a member of the travelling public, to contribute a small donation towards obtaining the necessary funds to conclude the purchase deal with the London Transport Executive.

This appeal is issued in conjunction with the London Railway Preservation Society who have agreed to take custody of the Engine. It will be placed on the Vintage Railway which this Society plan to operate in the countryside convenient to North London.

All Contributions should be by means of crossed postal order or cheque and made out to "THE MET TANK APPEAL".

ALL MONEY OR CORRESPONDENCE
SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO

J. C. STRINGER, ESQ.
2 GIBBON ROAD,
ACTON, LONDON, W.3.

But it was at this point that disappointment was to raise its ugly head when we were told that whilst getting L52 prepared for steaming during the forthcoming Metropolitan Railway Centenary celebrations, it was found to have a cracked mainframe, and was therefore not a viable proposition for preservation, as in that condition it could not even be steamed for the Centenary celebrations. However, we could have L44 instead, formerly Metropolitan Locomotive No.1, which was also being prepared for the Centenary celebrations and would only cost us £450 – but, we would have to wait until after the celebrations were over before we could have it.

There then followed a long and frustrating period when we found that our proposal to steam L44 up to its new home in Bishops Stortford was not looked kindly upon by the Eastern Region of British Railways, over whose rails it would have to pass – something to do with the smoke/steam corroding the overhead lines would you believe?

All this was dutifully recorded in the local paper – *The Acton Gazette* which, of course, made much from this mini drama.

When you look back and actually read the rubbish which was written then – the style makes you cringe, but somehow it may have done the trick, as some time later, following a change of venue for its storage from Bishops Stortford to Luton, which was reached by going over London Midland Region metals, British Railways relented and gave the necessary permission to move the locomotive under its own steam to its new home – a Government cold storage depot at Luton.

The year was now 1964 – almost three years since the appeal was launched.

During the time taken to secure a path over British Railways' tracks, we made several visits to Neasden to clean and polish our new purchase. The first thing to change was the removal of numerous coats of 'Bullock Maroon' paint which was hiding the brass safety valve dome – oh how we toiled to get that brass shining again!

When the day came to move L44 to Luton, it was my intention to travel for part of the way on the footplate, and for which local permission had been granted, but with so many others occupying that limited space, with far more right to be there than me, I was ordered off at Wembley Park, but at least I did get to travel on her for a short distance.

When all the bills had been paid, the £1,000 was all spent up, as on top of the £450 cost of for the locomotive, we also had to pay for the services of extra crews, coal, a pilot and of course the use of LMR 'track' – £550 in all, which effectively cleaned us out. However, we did acquire a great quantity of useful spare parts which were gathered (*as scrap*) from Neasden shortly before her departure.

Apprentice with a 54 ton problem

THE boy with the biggest problem in London looked lovingly at beautiful 044, sighed a long, tender sigh and said: "She means everything to me. But I just don't know what to do."

His problem: a 54 ton, 33 foot long railway engine. The cause: a stupid stop signal by British Railways.

And the young lover's name: Jim Stringer, of Gibbon-road, East Acton.

The whistle and snort of a 66-year-old locomotive is the language of love for 21-year-old London Transport apprentice Jim.

When he heard old 044 sounding off a year ago, he decided to buy her. It cost him £450 to save her gold and maroon, brass-plated body from the breaker's yard.

But now Jim's come to the end of the line — and bang against the buffers of Dr. Beeching!

Private track

Jim wants to move 044 from her Neasden engine shed to Bishops Cleeve, where the London Railway Preservation Society has a couple of old carriages on a private track.

But British Railways won't let him drive her along their lines.

"They say the steam from her funnel would corrode the overhead electricity wires," said Jim. "But I think that's a lot of rubbish."

The Eastern Region have turned his plan down.

But the engine can't stay at Neasden very much longer.

"It's very worrying," said Jim. "To preserve the engine, my helpers and I have had to borrow money."

And unless British Railways change their signal to "Green for Go," 044 may have to be broken up.

"We are so near and yet so far from our object," said Jim. "If we cannot move her to a last resting place, we shall have lost all the money and a year's hard work."

"And Britain will have lost a fine old engine."

So how about it British Railways? A little relaxation of the rules would be just what the Doctor should order!

JIM CAN NOW PUFF, WHISTLE AND SNORT

FULL points to Jim Stringer! He's beaten Dr. Beeching. And the points are changed — to let him move his 66-year-old railway engine. British Railways gave him the green signal this week.

Puff, whistle and snort! Tomorrow Jim's 54 ton engine takes on two tons of coal and gets up steam for a 30 mile trip to Luton.

Twenty-one-year-old Jim has won a three-year battle with British Railways — one week after the Gazette gave the war cry.

Driver needed

He has bought a £450 tank locomotive from the London Transport.

He applied in 1961 to drive it along B.R. lines to a last resting place to preserve it. At last they are letting him take old L44 from Neasden to a siding in Luton.

"The London Railway Preservation Society have helped me to get the British Railways to change their minds," said Jim, of Gibbon-road, Acton.

Jim, a London Transport apprentice, hopes to ride on the footplate when his engine steams off to Luton.

But there's one difficulty: "A driver," said Jim. "I am looking for someone who can drive such an old engine."

When he does it will be first stop — Preservation.



Above: L44 at Neasden Depot after members of the LRPS had worked on the cleaning up of its brass safety valve dome. In the background is the long-since demolished Neasden Power Station.

Photo: Jim Stringer

Left: Two extracts from the Acton Gazette, both of which are written with a bit of writer's license!

Below: Jim Stringer's arrival at Moorgate, 13 January 2013, 50 years after raising the £450 required by London Transport to purchase this locomotive for preservation.



Above: (Right) The E Class was a versatile locomotive in that it sometimes worked away from the Metropolitan Line, on other routes which could accommodate surface stock. Here passing Park Royal, L44 operating bunker first is probably on an Acton Works to Neasden depot transfer working. To the right of the locomotive and behind the 'tombstone' station name bullseye is the station garden with a roundel picked out in bricks.

Photo: Fred Ivey

The sheet below is a transcript of the London Transport stock movement notice No.84/64 which gave the times when L44 was due at various locations en-route to Luton.

It is headed – TRANSFER OF LIGHT ENGINE. NEASDEN DEPOT TO COLD STORE SIDING, SKIMPOT LANE, LUTON (L.M.R.) BEDFORDSHIRE 20 MARCH. On Friday 20 March on behalf of “The London Railway Preservation Society” Steam Locomotive No. L44 will be transferred from Neaden (L.T.) to the London Midland Region and stable at private sidings at Luton, Bedfordshire.

Timings are as follows:

Ex-Metropolitan Steam Locomotive No.44						
Neasden depot (LT)	dep	AM 10.12	Willesden No.7	(arr (dep	AM 11.52 11.54	
Wembley Park	pass	10 20	Sudbury Jn	(arr (dep	PM 12.10 12.30	
Harrow	pass	10 29	Watford Jn	(arr (dep	1.05 3.16	Water Coal (If req)
Harrow Yard	(arr (dep	10.31 10.42	Leighton Buzzard	(arr (dep	4.35 4.45	Water
Harrow	pass	10 44	Dunstable	(arr (dep	5.16 7.16	
Neasden Sth Jn	(arr	To LMR 10.58	Luton (private siding)	arr	7.34	
	dep	Water 11.36				
Acton Canal Wharf	(arr (dep	11.46 11.48				

Divisional Superintendent ‘A’ will arrange crews, and relief at Leighton Buzzard.

London Midland Region will provide the necessary conductor crews.

Speed of the light engine will not exceed 25 m.p.h throughout the journey.

The Movement Notice shows the Locomotive as passing Wembley Park, but in fact it had to stop there to let me off!

In 1969, the newly formed Quanton Railway Society (*now the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre*) offered a more permanent and secure home for L44 at their recently acquired museum at Quanton, and so it was that L44 was transferred from Luton to its new home in Buckinghamshire.

So there we have it, the story of how a young apprentice and an elderly locomotive fitter took it upon themselves to save, for future generations, what is now the last surviving ‘E’ Class steam locomotive built for the Metropolitan Railway at Neasden in 1898.

I am, of course, delighted that L44, or to be more precise, Metropolitan Loco No.1 is now in such a fine condition after almost 50 years in preservation, which can only be attributed to the dedication and skill of those hard working volunteers at Quanton – who carried on when our initial task had been achieved.

I am of course immensely proud to have been the instigator of this locomotive’s survival and to have played such a significant role in its preservation.

To be advised that Met. No.1 was to play a significant part in the London Underground’s 150th Celebrations in 2013 was, for me, the icing on the cake, and to be invited by the London Transport Museum’s CEO (*Sam Mullins*) to travel on the train pulled by this locomotive had to be one of the many highlights of my life.

Long may she survive and continue to provide pleasure and enjoyment to those who come into contact with her – after all, that’s why I wanted her to be saved.

L52? Well, sadly she was broken up at Neasden in July 1964, but I was back in Acton Works by then, completing my apprenticeship.



No.1 in Metropolitan days is seen shunting in the goods yard at Chesham.



No.1 after takeover by London Transport but before it acquired the number L44.

L44 is seen (*Below*) on the Stanmore branch on 1 October 1961 with the Southern Counties Touring Society trip which ran from Wembley Park to Stanmore, then New Cross and return to Baker Street.

Photo: Brian Pask



Left: What might have been, but wasn't. Jim Stringer's plans to save L52 was thwarted when it was found that the locomotive had a cracked mainframe and its preservation was no longer viable. Instead L44 was chosen and the rest, as they say, is history. L52 is seen in happier days on the Watford South Curve on a Watford Tip working, with two flat wagons and a brake van behind. L52 was scrapped at Neasden on 30 July 1964 by Lacmotts, a scrap dealer in Sheerness, Kent.