

## CLERKS-IN-CHARGE/STATION MISTRESSES

Among the first women employed on Britain's railways were those universally known as 'station mistresses' but who were, in fact, the female equivalent of a clerk-in-charge (or porter-in-charge), a railwayman who sold tickets and performed administrative work at a small station or halt. As the sole member of staff, the clerk-in-charge also performed the duty of crossing keeper (where applicable) and of porter (weighing and handling parcels, attending to trains and passengers, lighting signal and station lamps, etc). If the station had a siding, there might have been a ground frame of points levers to operate. Very few women filled these posts; they were usually daughters, wives and widows of railwaymen and were engaged only at quiet, rural stations, purely at the whim of local management. Their titles were various and included station agent, lady station master, halt attendant and station mistress, the term most railwaymen, passengers, journalists and other observers used to describe them and which, therefore, will be used henceforth.

The first female railway employee whose name is recorded was described as a station mistress. Mary Argyle, a working wife, had charge of Merry Lees, Leicester & Swannington Railway (which was later absorbed into the MR) for nearly 39 years, from its opening on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1832 till its closure on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1871.<sup>46</sup> She performed all the duties of porter, booking clerk and crossing keeper and assisted when wagons were shunted into the siding. Her weekly pay was 2s 6d, raised to 3s 6d in 1847. Stretton, historian of the MR, wrote that he had often watched her climb 'up the ladder of the home-signal and light the lamps as well as any man'.<sup>47</sup> Her employer built a station house in 1839, which she occupied with her husband, a platelayer.<sup>48</sup>

There were isolated instances of station mistresses all over Victorian Britain. In 1849 they were recorded at Thornley and at Hesleden, on the Hartlepool Railway and Docks; at Elrington, NER;<sup>49</sup> Rosemount, Caledonian Railway and Braceborough Spa Halt, GNR.<sup>50</sup> St Harmon's Halt, Cambrian Railway, boasted at least two. In his diary for Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1876, Kilvert described Station Mistress Sarah Jones as 'A handsome, pleasant-faced woman, very stout, who lives in a cottage on the line.' At the turn of the century Mrs E. J. Bebb was described as St Harmon's 'Station mistress Gatekeeper' at a wage of 10s a week. Miss Anne Jenkins was listed as the 'agent' at Dolwen.<sup>51</sup> The incumbent at Langford, GER, was featured on a postcard in 1910 bearing the claim that she was the only station mistress in Britain.<sup>52</sup> From the 1890s till 1926 Harriet James ran two stations on the Ffestiniog to Bala line with her husband Robert, formerly the station master at Bala. They occupied the station house at Trawsfynedd and Mrs James regularly cycled nearly five miles uphill to operate Trawsfynedd crossing gates and, from 1902, a halt at Cwm Prysor, a lonely and mountainous spot by Tryweryn Lake, 1,200 feet above sea level. It was said that the latter task 'required considerable pluck and determination'. While pursuing her railway career Mrs James raised three daughters. On her retirement at age 65 the managers presented her with an armchair.<sup>53</sup>