

The challenge of working on railways in wartime brought out the best in railway workers and damaged structures were usually repaired immediately. In one case, a 68-lever signalbox destroyed in an air raid was replaced within a day. In the East End of London, a gang of women set to work directly after a bombing incident to repair and rejoin damaged multi-core and telephone cables.

Passengers soon came to expect staff to treat bombings almost as part of their daily routine and would tolerate only minimal disruption to services. Catering assistant Renée Parsons remembered the day she was serving in the refreshment room at Ashford (Kent), SR, when a bomb blew out the back of the building: her customers still demanded tea.

Although it became commonplace for railwaywomen to carry on working under such difficult and dangerous circumstances, there were some acts of particularly outstanding bravery that merit special mention. Miss Haster, a ticket collector at Hull Paragon, remained at her barrier directing passengers to the shelter while bombs were falling on the station. Alice Steckhahn — a 'five foot high girl porter' — single-handedly extinguished a shower of incendiary bombs with sand and water.²⁷ After her station 'somewhere in the North of England' was bombed at 1 a.m., LMS porter Mrs B. Kelly laboured from 3 a.m. until 3 p.m. to clear the debris and reopen the station. She was commended for her 'high sense of duty, gallantry and determination'.²⁸

At Walsden, LMS, a 77-year-old man fell from the platform when a train was due. Porter Nellie Bentley grabbed her lamp and dashed along the line waving a red light at the engine driver. The train stopped just eight yards short of where the man had fallen.²⁹ Porter Violet Wisdom of witnessed an air raid on 16th December 1942. A train from Guildford to Horsham was bombed and machine-gunned near her station at Bramley, SR. Although shocked and frightened, she had the presence of mind to lock the booking office before running along the track toward the train. There she found a horrific scene: the driver and guard had been killed, eight passengers were dead or dying, and the rest were injured. She and the fireman, William Fairey, later received meritorious certificates for the way that they handled the situation. Miss Wisdom was especially commended for her 'great courage and resource directly the bombs had fallen'.³⁰ Although her contribution was well-publicised at the time, when railway historian Bernard Darwin gave an account of this incident in his 1946 book *War on the Line* he stated that Fairey 'single-handedly attended the injured' and 'was unaided in his rescue work,' until six soldiers arrived. Miss Wisdom was not even mentioned.³¹

In addition to the troubles and traumas of working on a bombing target, there were of course the usual railway incidents and accidents, among them several in which railwaywomen risked their lives to save others. At Rushden, LMS, a six-year-old boy fell onto the track and lay, bleeding and unconscious, with his head on a rail. It was too late to stop an approaching train, which was only 200 yards away, so porter Violet Wilson jumped on to the track and 'snatched him from death'.³² Even ticket office clerks sometimes faced danger, and sometimes death. Ida Luff, booking clerk at Carshalton, SR, was on duty when a boy fell onto the electrified line. After telephoning the signalbox, Mrs Luff seized some special rubber insulation gloves, went onto the track, ran 100 yards to where the boy lay on the live rail and dragged him off by the legs. Unfortunately, he was already dead.³³ Mrs Wright, ticket office clerk at Elephant and Castle, SR, bravely fended off armed robbers.³⁴

Accident reports — usually devoid of female names — also bear witness to the presence of railwaywomen. For example, at an enquiry into a collision at Northwood, London Underground, in 1945, in which two trains collided in fog and three passengers died from

smoke inhalation from the resultant fire, among those who gave evidence were Porters Mrs L. M. Sparkes and Miss Vi Ryder and Assistant Train Fitter Miss Atkins, based at Neasden, who was responsible for putting fire extinguishers on trains.³⁵

As if railway workers had not enough to cope with in wartime, to cap it all, from 1940 to 1943 Britain suffered three winters of unusual severity, which highlighted the susceptibility of railways to bad weather. The workforce had to carry on regardless and deal with the aftermath: snow blocks, fallen telegraph poles, and frozen points, rods, brakes, points levers and signal wires. Even axle grease froze in some locations. In the 'big freeze' of January 1942, railwaywomen joined troops to clear snowdrifts and free thousands of pairs of frozen points. The winter of 1946-7 was the coldest ever recorded and was followed by floods. Telegraphist Eileen Bridges remembered Colchester station:

This had one of the longest platforms, the end of which was likened to Siberia. During one very cold winter, could have been 1947, our dear station inspector, a very tall gentleman, was feeling the cold, so a nose-cover was knitted by his 'fans' in the telegraph office. This was held on by elastic, to keep his poor nose from becoming a beacon. It was greeted by much laughter and, dare we say, gratitude. A trivial incident, but one which held us together.³⁶

The press, politicians and railway managers applauded railway workers for their hard work in difficult circumstances. Many received honours for their wartime railway service, including a number of female staff who maintained communications instead of taking shelter during air raids. Other honours were awarded for dealing with secret documents. A complete list of railwaywomen who won awards is not available, but the following came to light during this research:

Some who were awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM):

Miss C. Davenport, Clerk-in-Charge, Telephone Enquiry Bureau. (GWR)
Miss M.C. Steward, Paddington Telephone Exchange Supervisor. (GWR)
Miss E. E. Barratt, York Telephone Exchange Supervisor. (LNER)
Miss G.E. Cooper, Southampton Telephone Exchange Supervisor. (SR)
Miss G. Kallender, Telephone Exchange Supervisor. (SR)

Some who were made Members of the Order of the British Empire (OBE):

Miss D. Thompson, Personal Clerk to the Chairman of the REC.
Miss Helen Catto, Chief Welfare Superintendent. (LMS)
Miss E. E. Smith, Lord Stamp's Private Secretary. (LMS)
Miss Pearl Wadham, Personal Clerk to the Divisional General Manager. (SR)

Railway telephone operators contributed to the war effort by relaying warnings to other staff. One of them, Joan Evans, worked at Hastings, a heavily-bombed town:

I worked in shifts, one week early, one week late and as I used to live a distance from the station I used to cycle. It was not safe to walk when it was dark, too many drunken soldiers about. My office was just off the main station entrance and was supposed to be bomb-proof. We were very busy as besides our public train time service we had all the military calls for soldiers going on leave,

working out routes for them. A lot of Canadians were billeted in the countryside and on my early shift I used to find them sleeping on benches in the ladies'. They had missed their trains the night before and would be woken up and given a cup of tea so they would be able to catch the 6.30 a.m. milk train.

One morning every month we had to work the switchboard with our gas masks on. This was very difficult and very unpleasant, but it was a drill that had to be done. Our main job was sending air raid warnings, we had a special phone which used to ring to tell us of an impending raid. First, yellow to be alert, then the red alert, which meant the enemy were close, then it was all systems go. When we received the yellow, we had to notify all signal boxes and small stations to Ashford, Eastbourne and Tunbridge. The last three had their own operators to pass the warning on. The red usually followed, and we had to do it all again: 'warning, red'. The codes for all the signal boxes all had to be remembered, you couldn't afford to make a mistake, as the signal boxes somehow managed to warn a moving train which would reduce speed to a crawl.

During raids I had to stay at the board and, if it was a bad one, I would get very frightened. We all left a key open and sang songs; our favourite was *Apple Blossom Time*. When the 'all clear' came through we had to ring everyone again and we heaved a sigh of relief. We all became very friendly over the years.³⁷

Another switchboard operator, Molly Eagle, witnessed the London Blitz from Oxford:

One night I was on the switchboard talking to the telephone operator at Paddington Station and she said to me, 'Can you hear the noise?' As I listened I could hear the noise of bombs banging and whining as they fell and exploded. She told me that there was a terrific air raid going on at that very moment over London. I think she was very brave and frightened as she stuck to her post.³⁸

On 6th July 1945 a convoy of US army lorries carrying 'cluster' bombs in wooden cases was using Drake's Lane Crossing at Earsham, Suffolk, when some cases fell on the track. When the driver of the following lorry braked sharply to avoid them, cases of bombs fell from his lorry, too, into the path of an approaching train. The American servicemen begged her to run to safety, but Crossing Keeper V. M. Hewitt risked her life rather than let a train collide with the bombs. She darted to her cottage, seized her emergency equipment, ran along the track towards the train (pausing only to lay three detonators on the rail in accordance with the regulations) and waved her red flag to the engine driver. The train came to a halt just 175 yards short of the obstruction. Mrs Hewitt was awarded the LNER Medal for outstanding courage and resource – the first woman to receive it.³⁹

On Friday 13th June 1941, the Great Western steamer *St Patrick* was dive-bombed en route to Rosslare, killing the captain, 18 crew members and 11 passengers. It sank in just six minutes. The steerage stewardess, Elizabeth May Owen, repeatedly swam into submerged cabins and saved the lives of several passengers. She was awarded the George Medal and the Lloyd's Medal for bravery – the only woman railway employee ever to be awarded such accolades.* It is most odd that Stewardess Owen was not even mentioned in the report of the loss of the *St Patrick* published in the *Great Western Magazine*.

* During the war, the following were awarded to railway staff: George Cross – 3; George Medal – 28; MBE – 9; BEM – 76; Commendation – 127.