

# “Walking the Line”

By Joe Mackle

Memoirs of a Railwayman



Joe Mackle.

THREE generations of my family worked on the railway. My grandfather worked at the making of the tracks in the 1840s. He worked in the area between Acton Lough and Poyntzpass. At that time his job was carrying porridge to the workmen — he was only a boy. He eventually got a job on a maintenance gang and later became a ‘ganger.’

I started work on the railway in 1943 and my first job was at the re-painting of the Bann River Bridge at Portadown. There are two or three incidents which stand out in my mind about that job. I remember that after about a fortnight working on the bridge, one day I was painting the outside of it and there was a stiff wind blowing down river. The water was rippling. Now and again, I would look down at the water and I’d get the impression that the bridge was moving. So an older man must have seen me looking down for he came over to me and warned me not to look at the water. He told of an incident that had happened the previous time the bridge had been painted, 15 years earlier. Apparently there was a man on the bridge painting, as I was and he watched the water, lost his balance and fell into the river. He couldn’t swim. Now it’s 40

feet from the bridge to the water and the river is 20 feet deep and 150 feet wide at that point. Another painter jumped in after him got hold of him and managed to pull him to the bank. When he had him out on the bank the fellow who fell still had the paintbrush in his hand!



“He still had the  
paintbrush  
in his hand!”

Another thing I remembered about it was - the Water Board was putting a new water main paralalled with the bridge across the river and they were digging a deep trench about 8-10 feet deep to lay the water main down. I was on the outside of the bridge and this dragnet was working and I heard it struggling and it seemed to be caught. So I looked at it for a minute or two and it pulled and tugged at it and eventually there was something in the shape of the boat came up out of the water. They dragged it in on to the bank and it was the shape of a boat, black - jet black - and very muddy looking, of course. The Engineer realised, or the Water Board realised - that they had got something very unusual so they got in touch with the Museum People and they came and examined it and said that they had

got a very rare find. So they cleaned it up and they took it away. The boat was reckoned to be several thousands years old. It was a dug out like a tree hollowed out at both ends, something like a canoe shape. Then later on as work proceeded on that pipe line. One day I was on the outside of the bridge again and there was a boat with four men in it. Two men were operating two wheels at either side of the box in the middle of this boat. So I couldn't understand really what was going on but shortly after that there turned out to be a diver with a huge round helmet, with glass at the front and two glasses at the side of it - it was the first time I had seen a diver and he was down underneath joining the pipes... Anyway when they pulled him into the boat, the one peculiarity I noticed, he had very, very big feet on him! Then I discovered that his feet were heavily leaded for when his suit was blown up, (two men were pumping air out of this box down into it) he would have floated back to the surface. Well his job was to join the pipes. So that was my first seeing of a diver but he had a very old suit type which is no longer on the go now.

So then work proceeded on there and I went from there to Lawrencetown Bridge and I had the misfortune to fall off that. During the war years, scaffolding was very scarce. It was a lot of make-do and make-and-mend kind of stuff. I was a young fellow and put on the outside. One day a pole broke and in I went and fell 30 feet! The Bann River at that point was quite shallow and narrow - it was about 5 foot deep - I can remember going through the water down on to the ground and standing up with just my head out of the water, I remember that. So that was my experience of Lawrencetown Bridge.

Then I went on from there to Newport, a wee station down outside Lisburn.

There was an airport there, Long Kesh airport. Well, that was exciting but frightening at time, for all the bombers were still going out to Germany and they were being prepared during the day. Engines were test-run and the planes were anchored to the ground and those engines were test-run.

The roar was terrible - we would have to have left the top of the bridge and worked underneath the bridge. Because of the noise we could have been caught by a train. So you worked underneath during that time. Then they would have taken the planes up for test runs and you would have said that they used the bridge that we are at, nearly as target practice! The plane would have gone away up until it was nearly out of sight and then would have come roaring back down towards us and then turn and come up. You could have seen their wings actually bending upwards. The pressure was so great on the plane.

At the end of the year I was assigned to a carpenter to get out to do repair work. I was sent out to Brackagh Bog, 2 miles South of Portadown. Come dinner time - at that time we had an hour - a man said 'Young fellow, come with me and I'll show you a bit of history that is soon going to disappear.'

We walked out into Brackagh Bog. He looked around him and there was a big of a hump in the middle all covered over.

Well he went over to this hump and he scraped the moss off it and to me it looked like the corner of a tank, a very heavy tank and there was just about two foot of it above the ground. He said "When I started on the Railway there was about 4½ - 5 foot of that above the ground. That is the tender of the engine belonging to the train that was derailed in Brackagh Bog some time during the 1914-18 war and I think there was 13 people killed in it" "And" he said, "that's all that remained of it."

It was sinking away. Now 15 years ago, I was back down in that area and I went out to the very spot around it but I couldn't find it, it has sunk out of sight. So that was the end of it. I can safely say I saw the last of it!

Then I was in various other places, I was went to Goraghowood quarry, rebuilding the base of the quarry while the quarry was shut down. Towards the end of my time there the quarry had reopened and I had my first experience of the heavy explosions. It frightened the life out of me. Well they used various types of shots. One of them was 'deep bore' and there would have a very heavy thud and the whole place shook. There was what was called 'the Pops'. There were big stones and they had to be broken up. Well when the exploded the noise was terrible, frightening when it was your first experience of it. There was a man there and one day he played a trick on me. He was behind me, and as soon as the explosion went off he threw a stone and hit me in the back. Of course I jumped - and he had a good laugh at me.

I mind when I was on a bridge, as I say I fell off one at Lawrencetown. Well then I went on from there to a bridge called Wellington Cutting and it was an arched bridge, part of the bridge was arched round just to let the train go through it and then the top of the bridge was flat. It was an accommodation road to a farmer. When we put a plank across the underside of the bridge, to work from, we cut off the top of the arch. Because of this we had a look out man on top of the bridge and he would give us a call that whenever he would see the train coming. From his vantage point he could see the trains three miles back. Then he would tell us the train was coming and we would have time to get down by ladder from underneath the bridge from



Members of the Ryan and Mackle families. The writer's grandfather Oliver Mackle (c 1835—1922) is seated on the right.

that plank and stand to the side and take your ladder away and let the train through. The train would pass under the plank, but with a man's weight on it, the plank would sag and perhaps the train might catch it. We were never too happy about trusting this, the rush of air, smoke and steam. If you were on that narrow plank you could have lost your balance. You could have been knocked off by the force of steam or wind. It was war years and the look-out man was a farmer and of course the farmer whose bridge it was, came over the bridge. And the two of them got to talking about farming and forget all about me on the plank. So with me underneath the bridge, I had more of a vantage point than those on the track below. I shouted down to the foreman, "There's a train coming". He then heard it and he said "You'll not get down in time, I think you'll be alright, I think you'll be alright, lie on your mouth and nose on the plank and get your toes up on the plank and tuck your coat in and put your forehead on the plank and grip the two edges of the plank". So I did that but I couldn't help it, but look at that train coming towards me, and I was looking at the top of the engine face to face with the funnel. So

it came racing down towards me and I was just stiff with fright and holding on for grim death. And the funnel missed the bottom of the plank just about 2 inches and the thump of the smoke and the steam coming up out of it nudged the plank and forced the coat open but luckily my coat went up, but then again there was the dome of the boiler, there was the driver's cab, then after that the carriages. It was an express train doing about 70 m.p.h. running down into Goragghwood. I can remember just seeing the driver looking through the window, I don't know whether he was more frightened than me! For he was mesmerised just looking at me, and didn't know whether I was going to clear it or not. But then I can remember the ventilators on top of the carriages, all racing underneath me, I had to stop looking at the carriages because by that time, with them racing underneath me, my head was going light. Anyway I survived it - my face was black. I would say it was maybe half an hour before I could get off that plank so they put the ladder back up again and they got me down and the boss then told me to rest for a while.

The look-out man didn't lose his job but he got an awful doing. I remember I had another frightening experience at Barney Leddy's bridge. I was painting from a ladder when the ladder started to slide. Luckily the boss was able to stop it and I got down alright.

Again another bad fright I got was when I worked at Poyntzpass Station and we were sent to do work up about Goragewood or above Goragewood. Now the train was being propelled down. To explain that - the engine was in the rear of the train and pushing the train forward. It was a very, very hot June evening and we set off from Poyntzpass. Well the workmen were all in the Guard's van at the front of the train, the Guards van had verandas front and back, you don't see any of them now, but there were four of us standing in the veranda end. Now, I would have been very familiar with the track and with the sun shining, you hear tell of these things like a mirage in the desert. You think the track is shimmering and you think it was buckled and all like that, you'd think it was like running water nearly, with the heat. But suddenly I discovered that this was no shimmer, this was the track buckled. One part of the track was against the wall and the other part of the track was lying across the up-road. There were

two other fellows and I shouted to them, "The road's buckled!" and I opened the door of the van and shouted, "Get the hand brake on, put the hand brake on, the road's buckled!" So then the boss was there and there was another wee man, he was that badly frightened he just hung on to my arm and he was that badly frightened, the boss says to him, "What's wrong?" "B.B.B.B." that's all they could get out of him. Then the boss got on to the wheel and put the brake on and then went to the back with a red flag to try and draw the driver's attention. It ended with one man left in the veranda, the rest of them? — you see the boss shouted "Everybody get down on the floor and get your feet against something, against the bulk head of the veranda part." But there was a fellow, Jack Tate, used to live in Aughan Park. Well Jack was left alone at the end of the veranda. Now we were coming closer and closer to this buckle and the driver hadn't noticed any red flag or anything but Jack, now the train was going along at a good 20 mph - got to the outside of the van and he jumped out on to the bank. How he stood on his feet, I don't know. But he ran and finally fell with the briars tangling in his legs. But the driver saw him going out of it and he shut down the engine



The writer's father, Oliver Mackle (1882—1962) a platelayer on the G.N.R. (on the left) with Sam Taggart at Scarva Station.

and slammed on the brakes. And it saved us because when we got the first jump of the engine, we ran into the buckle and I could hear the road breaking up beneath us. And we were pitching about. We were just rolling over one another and finally got the train stopped. Well then that put an end to going any further. That was at Magennis' Cutting.

You see the rail expands when it gets hot, many's a time people would ask where does the extra steel come from? Why does it get shorter because it gets colder? Anyway when it expands on a very hot day it can cause the track to buckle. That's what happened that day. We were lucky that day.

But I wasn't always lucky. One day working at Kilnasaggart Bridge we were changing the rails. One of the rails was turned over into a bar. The bar shot up and hit me full in the face and I was laid off work for about 12 months. I had a bad time - I had to go to Dundonald Hospital and get a facial build-up and it affected my hearing for a good bit afterwards, unfortunately, and it didn't do me much good - I can still feel it.

I would say that on average you would get a fright once a month. One cause of this would be trains running the wrong road. Maybe one track would be out of service for some reason.

Well, if you weren't aware of that and you were out on the track you would take it for granted you were walking towards the train. But familiarity breeds contempt, you would hear the train coming, then suddenly you'd realize that the train was not on the other line, it was coming up behind you, which is very, very frightening. I have been caught 3 or 4 times that way, nearly. Say, something had gone wrong at the station - maybe owing to a bomb scare or something, one line was closed (fog was another dangerous thing), or sometimes there would have been parts where farming noises activities going on, maybe 3 or 4 tractors in the one field, a train could get in very, very close to you. One time 3 or 4 of us were working on the track and there was a train coming down. There was some noise on and we didn't hear the train - she came round the corner. The track is 5 foot 3 between the rails and then there's six feet space between the tracks. The train was coming down very, very close, now it was so close that I jumped out of the road to get clear of the train, I was still in the 'six foot' when the train passed me. Four inches clear of the train, my heel was anyway! But I was still between the two tracks whenever the train passed me and she was doing about maybe 60 miles an hour.

I worked for 3 different companies. The Great Northern Railway went bankrupt around 1964. It was taken over by the UTA for a while and eventually by Nor-

thern Ireland Railways. During the 50s and 60s they closed down a lot of lines, Portadown to Derry. Portadown to Armagh. Scarva to Banbridge. Goraghwood to Warrenpoint. They left it like a tree without branches.

Now when they took up the old rails and sleepers from the 'closed-down lines' they used some of them again in the mainline an they gave a lot of bother.

After my accident at Kilnasaggart, I was given an easier job 'walking' a section of the line.

When I was 'walking' the track, I had to look out for faults — broken rails, broken fish-plates and so on. I had to inspect fences and generally look out for anything which needed repair.

I was track patrol man, I wasn't supposed to do any work, just note all down and reported it into the inspector. Then he sent out a gang for to do these repairs. But at the same time, I knew there was a lot of things I couldn't get the gang for. Maybe they were in Bangor so I would have had to do a lot of wee repairs myself. Even ones now that I got chastised for doing. Well what were you to do? You had to get your priorities right — this was one of the things you had to work out for yourself. Which is the most serious, the risk you were running, repairing the track yourself or waiting on the maintenance gang coming and maybe a train going off the road? So I would have had to do a whole lot of repairs myself in that line. But I mind once, I was down on the Cusher Bridge and I was coming from the North end towards the Cusher Bridge when the 'down' express passed me. Now that was a new General Motors engine, 100 tons weight, a 2,700hp engine capable of up to 120 mph. So when the train passed, I stepped back onto the track and a few yards further on I came on a 6 inch gap in a rail. The plate had broken and the end of the rail had snapped off. The only thing that had prevented an accident, was the high speed of the train - the wheels never actually got down into the gap.

As part of my job, I had to carry with me equipment for use in an emergency — flags, detonators, and other tools, spanners and hammers. So I had to go back towards Tandragee station and put down emergency flags and detonators. Detonators are about the size of a cup, but flat. There is a 'code' for using them, 3 of them tell the driver to stop. When the train runs over them, they explode with an awful bang and cloud of smoke. On another occasion detonators caused me a bit of a problem with the army who were close by. I had a time of it convincing them that it was a caution signal and I wasn't shooting at the train.

I remember another incident on the Lisburn, Antrim line. Two of us were sent to do a job laying new track. A fellow, Tommy Hadden they called him, from Newry was with me and we had these machines and



Miss Margaret Mackle outside her former home, the gate-keeper's house at Acton level-crossing.

we were sent to take the plates off, bore the holes and put on these new plates and bolts. This is quite close to the airport and then there was a lot of surveillance going on with the helicopters and all. Well we were highly engrossed in our work and with the noise of the small engine in this boring gear, (it was strapped on to the rail) we heard nothing — He was on one side of the rail and I was on the other and we were working away at the engine, when I happened to look up over his shoulder and the first thing I saw coming down was an armoured car with a cannon on it. And the cannon was just pointed straight at the two of us! I says to Tommy Hadden, says I, "Tommy, don't make any sudden moves or make any jump for", says I "We have been surrounded by the Army." I remember seeing at a glance, somewhere in the region of 12 rifles pointed at us. Now this gun carrier, came right through the hedge, it didn't wait to come to the gate or nothing, it came tearing down the field to us. So he says to me "What are you going to do?" says I, "We'll have to try and keep calm," He says to me "You do something, you do something!" You see, he had his

back to them and I was looking at them. So all I could do then was just stand up and put my two hands away out, and I shouted, to the officer, who had come right in and he was just on the other side of the fence looking at me through the fence, I said "We're railway men! We're railway men! That machine if you look at it, we're fixing the rail". So then he signalled that at the other soldiers, and there was about 30 at this time, and they collected in on us. So I said "There's a gate up there, you can come over that an look at it" So he said "Could you explain that to me?" I said "It's a boring machine and we're boring holes in the rails to fix new plates." Then he did get through the hedge and came over and looked at it. "Oh," he says "I'm very sorry but we had heard about two men being highly engrossed on the track." So he says "We'll not bother you any more - we have you photographed and all - and if we see you anywhere else on the track, we'll know not to disturb you."

Another time were were sent out to Aldergrove and there's a civil airport and a military airport there as well. Now they wanted an emergency road out of the

airport, across the railway and we put in a 40 foot wide pass in planks, timber, across so that you could bring in fire brigades, ambulances and the like of that across in an emergency. Because it was railway work then they assigned us to do the work. I was sent out and there was about 5 or 6 of us and my job was to use the chain saw and cut the planks and then they were nailed down in, in between the rails, to leave a level top. But at that point in time, you see, there was very very little traffic on that line, that was the Antrim line from Lisburn and there were only goods trains travelling through it at about 10 - 15 mph. Now some airport men were sent in to help us, with some of the work. One day I was using the chain saw when the first thing I heard was an awful roar, just over my head. My instinct was that it was a train and I jumped back, right out on to the bank "What on earth was that?" I turned round and it was a plane and it was a jet and she was only about 100 feet above my head. They had a great laugh at me, jumping so fast out of the road!! Well the instinct was that it was a train. Well I got my own back on them shortly after that. Three days afterwards we had the crossing finished and the whole top of the crossing was covered in saw dust, and chips of wood and all that sort of thing and the boss said "Right boys, all clear the track, get back, there's a high speed trial run to come any time" So we all stood back. Now the airport men, they had been used to very slow trains running down through there but we had moved back out of the road and he shouted over to them, "Now

boys you are too close to it - stand further back" Well they did, they moved back a bit but not too far, like they were wondering what was all the fuss about. They didn't appreciate the noise and power of a high speed train.

Well the train came through anyway and she was doing about 80 mph., she left a lovely clean crossing, all the wood chips, and sawdust and all was away. The airport were covered with sawdust. They had sawdust in their mouths and eyes and two of them had lost their caps. Our boss says "Well I warned you!" Well one of them was saying to me afterwards, "I'd rather be in there than all that - how do you lot live with that?" But I thought, "How do you lot live with planes?"

I said at the beginning that three generations of my family worked on the railway. My grandfather, was involved in the actual building of the railway.

According to a story handed down in my family, the building of this section of the railway commenced with a short piece of track near the shore of Acton Lake. At that point the canal and railway are on a level with one another and are only 20 yards apart. The first engine used on this part of the track, was brought to Acton on the Canal - in pieces, and assembled there.

South of Acton much of the track had to be cut through higher ground, while North of Acton the track runs along embankments for most of the way to Portadown. Some of these embankments are 50 feet high and about 200 feet wide at the base. It takes an awful volume of earth to make an embankment 7 miles long,



Joe Mackle at Canal Bridge—south of Poyntzpass.



Poyntzpass Station.

especially if you were using horses and carts. So that's why the engine was brought in. It carried the material dug out of the cuttings to the South of Acton to be dumped to form embankments North of Acton and as it worked, the line extended to the North and South.

Canavan's bog, North of Poyntzpass apparently gave a lot of trouble, because they couldn't get a foundation. Eventually, they had to get imported from England osiers, that's a kind of a sally bush. I remember remarking to an older railway man — "That's a peculiar-looking bush" He says "That's supposed to be from the time this railway was made. The only thing they could get at that time was to form a foundation and they laid carpets of these osiers as they were brought across from England and of course, by canal. The canal made a fortune that time from the railway even though it eventually closed them down. But massive loads of these rods were brought in and that was laid down and then earth filling on top. And that was the only way they could get that Bog to stabilize, was using those osiers." It was the only type of bush that I saw that could grow 6-7 feet in 1 year and was very thin so you could quite easily make big mats of them.

Now a story was handed down in my family about this first engine and the day it first started up. Before I tell you the story, I would need to explain something about the engine itself.

The engine consists of a fire box involving, as most of you know, a boiler - fire tubes running through the

boiler to the front of the engine which is the smoke box. Leading out of the boiler and down to the cylinders for the driving cylinders, there would have been 2 steel pipes to feed the steam down into those cylinders. The exhaust from those cylinders then would turn back into the fire box and go into a special pipe called the 'blast pipe.' It had to be a precise fitting. So whenever the steam was exhausted up through that, it created a bracket in the fire box and that was for the fire to come through the tubes and generate the steam. Now when the engine was standing idle and not moving, the cylinders are now cold, no heat would have got down to them, but some steam would leak out of the throttle valve down those tubes and into the cylinders and the steam would condense back to water. For the water then would create terrible trouble if it got back into the brass pipe because if it did get back in and was thrown up into the smoke box, it would go back onto the face of the boiler, into the tubes, cool the boiler and possibly roast the drivers and fireman! So there would be a flashback through the boiler into the firebox. There was a provision made on those cylinders, they're known as snifting valves and when the engine is idle the valves are left open. Now for the first 10 or 15 feet, when the engine moves forward, those valves are left open and then they're closed - that's to blow the cylinders well clean of water or oil or anything of that line. So there would be nothing to get back to the blast pipe.



Now rather than have those snifting valves blowing down onto the ground — for they would throw muck up into the working parts such as the connecting rods and crankshafts — there were pipes laid from these valves away out to the front of the engine so that the steam and water blew out and clear.

Now in this area, while I suppose they had heard of steam engines in other places, this was the very first chance for most people to see one so naturally enough, a very large crowd gathered when word got round that the day had arrived when the engine was going to be started up. It was something like a space launch today.

Anyone, the engine was fired up and as steam pressure gathered so did the tension in the crowd. As the time approached to start, the engine would have been smelling very hot with steam and coal and I suppose paint and that, too, helped to increase the tension. So there must have been quite a crowd — I think it would have been in the hundreds - had gathered to see this spectacle.

Now there were a lot of horses about but that didn't help the crowd anyway, as the horses were taken well back out of the road, for they would go mad once the engine would start, but that didn't do much for the crowd either. Finally the driver got up on to the engine, opened the throttle and the first thing happens is this big jet of steam blows away out in front of the engine.

The engine started to move and there's a belch of smoke and steam. All the people around ran like mad away from it. They knocked other down and those that got knocked down got tramped on. They got up and fights broke out, in their hurry to get away from this engine! This awful thing! So it finished up there was nothing only the engine men left, the rest were scattered all roads and directions. Even railway men who hadn't seen their first engine either, so away they went. There was one horse, and this horse seemed to ignore it and wasn't too fussed about the engine and they wondered why. It turned out that it was an English man that had come over from England and he brought his horse had got well used to engine and it didn't bother him at all. So apparently then the work then proceeded on in towards Portadown and that was how they got the 6 or 7 miles of embankments built up, it was by using that engine. So that was the story concerning it. It would have been worthwhile seeing that, I would love to have been there myself.

“Actually I'm the last of my line on the railway. I lived for about 50 years in a railway gate house at Acton Lough, but I moved to Poyntzpass village a few years ago.

There are many more tales I could tell you, maybe another time but I finished on the railway in 1989 after 46 years, 'Walking the Line'. ”



1,000 Year's Service—Retirement Luncheon, 24th November, 1989.  
Joe Mackle is fourth from left, centre row.