

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW WITH TOM RELF BY PERCY REBOUL IN OCTOBER 1980

PR: Tom, let's go right back, when were you born?

TR: On 12 June 1908, in Wood Green.

PR: What did your father do for as living?

TR: He was a professional musician. He was a band boy, and he'd spent the whole of his time in the Navy, and he came out, and he invalided out, so that he wouldn't go into the Marines which were formed in, I should say, 1906. He was a Navy man pure and simple and he belonged to the Navy band, the Admiral's band. The Admiral would pay for the band out of his own pocket.

PR: I think you were saying that he died young, didn't he?

TR: He did. He died at 35 and his father died at 37. In 1908 my mother had just delivered me, and he had lost her husband, my father, and two little girls as well. If that wasn't bad enough, when my sister grew up she died of TB at the age of 23 and she married a cousin of mine, a grand chap, and they had a little girl, my niece, that year and then she died the year after.

PR: So your beginnings were rather tragic. Where were you living at this time?

TR: 214 Lordship Lane, Wood Green. It was a boot shop and my mother employed boot repairers to mend the shoes after her husband died. It was a very successful shop and not only was it a shoe repairers but also a laundry receiving office for the Elmhurst Laundry at Tottenham which is still in existence and she made a good job of that too. The war came along, the First World War, and first one man was taken away and then another man she employed three men at one time, I think. She always spoke of a Mr Grace who was a marvellous shoe repairer and couldn't take enough trouble with the work. In June 1918 her last man was taken away and so she had to shut up the shop, she couldn't keep it going. Her livelihood was taken away and as you know the war ended a few months after and so her business was completely thrown to the wind., and whereas she was able to send my sister to higher education she was one of the first shorthand typists in the country and she was so good, apparently, that if she got fed up with a job at the beginning of the week she could get another one by the end of the week.

PR: Which was rare.

TR: Yes.

PR: So you then moved from Wood Green.

TR: From Wood Green up to Finchley.

PR: Whereabouts in Finchley?

TR: 152 Woodhouse Road, North Finchley, in the council houses where my cousin, Mrs Collier, was living with her 3 children. She offered us accommodation, you see, because my mother was her aunt Min. Her husband had been on the trams, Tom, and he got called up, he was in the guards. So that's the way I was initiated into the Finchley area.

PR: So when you were young, the whole business of trams would have been discussed in the family. You went to a local school, did you?

TR: At wood Green I did

PR: What about Finchley?

TR: I went to Albert Street School, I was there for a time until I passed the scholarship and I went to the newly formed Finchley Central School which was at North Road and the nucleus of Woodhouse School. When Woodhouse School was opened as a Secondary School, we transferred down to there and that was where I spent the remainder of my schooling.

.....Discussion of pupils at Woodhouse School and his educational achievements.....

PR: When did you decide that you would apply for a job as a tram driver and why?

TR: Well, by the time 1930 had come along, by the time of leaving school, which was in 1923, when I left school at a Valuers and Assessors, Foord & Sons, in 39 Victoria Street because I had such good handwriting, out of 50 applicants (one was supposed to be a Westminster School boy) the job paid 15 bob a week, I gave my mother 10 bob a week 4 bob for the tube. By that time I was living at Ealing because my grandmother had died and my mother had gone over to look after her father. I used to travel from Ealing to Victoria with some sandwiches; I had a penny cup of tea in the ABC in Victoria Street and very furtively munched the sandwiches under the counter. I used the tube season to go up to South Kensington museums on Sundays. So from there we went down to Dover. My sister had developed TB and my mother went down there, taking me with him. We stayed there until my sister died of TB leaving her one daughter who now lives at Seal. Our old doctor said: "Ger out Tom, get out of that shop" He could see me pining away and going the way of the others dying of TB. I applied to the trams and got on.

PR: Did you see that advertised?

TR: Oh, Lord no, it was never advertised.

PR: But you had an uncle who was in it

TR: My cousin said: “Why don’t you come on the trams if you want to get in the fresh air?” At the time the regular men’s holidays were from May to September, so the only time that any staff were taken on, were seasonal staff for those holidays. So I applied.

PR: Who did you apply to?

TR: The Manor House offices, which are still there. That was the MET area office, more or less Head Office. We were stuck in a room all day long, we were told to get there at 9 o’clock in the morning, and we all went into a room and were kept there without being interviewed at all until about three o’clock in the afternoon. There was only one person, Mr Meux, he said “I’ll let you know”. And he did, I got the job.

Pr: Where did you report to?

TR: It was at Acton Broadway, it was one of the LUT depots.

PR: What’s LUT?

TR: London United Tramways. The LUT, the MET and the SMET were all sister companies all owned by the same shareholders. The only reason I think of any training department was because we went down there as driving, but we did go there as conducting, then we’d be punching tickets all day long., to and fro to each other.

PR: Did you have to start as a conductor?

TR: Yes, you always had to start as a conductor, and as a temporary conductor as well. For the simple reason that you learned the route.

PR: Was there any difference in pay, between a conductor and a driver?

TR: No.

PR: You were called a motorman, weren’t you?

TR: Yes, always a motorman, never a driver. The driver of a tram was always a motorman, never a driver. And his title Big M, Little m Relf, motorman Relf.

PR: Under this training were you given a badge to wear?

TR: Oh no, you sent away to the Public Carriage Office in Lambeth Road which was under police supervision. After some time, you were issued with a badge, which in my case was 20070 and a whacking big licence, about 2 feet by 1 foot, which folded up into a case, which you had to carry at all times

PR: Was this before you qualified or after?

TR: During, I think.

PR: So what were you taught?

TR: Well, in other words how to make out a waybill which was a whacking bit of paper about 3 feet by 2 feet, with all the tickets in Christendom, the starting numbers, all the way down on both sides and when you had your box of tickets, a tin box, containing two, sometimes three, racks and dozens and dozens of different priced tickets, and they all had a starting number. When you went to take the box out and presumably in the training, you had to check up that the starting number was the same as was either on the rack of or the packs of tickets in the box. Also you had to check up that the number of tickets that were listed as being there were actually there as well. And then of course of a night time you put in the finishing numbers then you took the one from the other and the amount and then you had to tot up all the amounts there and on the other side as well when you had paid in.

PR: How long would that operation take?

TR: I think you were allowed a quarter of an hour but so expert was everybody at that time, such good mathematicians, they never had a Ready Reckoner or calculator or anything at all, you reckoned it either in dozens or in hundreds. 100 pence are eight and fourpence and so on, three hundred pence were twenty-five bob. You never see anybody use a calculator of any sort and you always paid in ten minutes.

PR: Do you remember anything else about your training?

TR: As a conductor? No, very little really.

PR: Could you just describe the sort of tramway services we had around this area, in what today is now the Borough of Barnet.

TR: At the time of which I speak there was the 21 North Finchley to Holborn via Wood Green and Finsbury Park, Kings Cross, whatnot. The 45 Finchley to Cricklewood, the 60s North Finchley to Paddington and then on some of our lots, instead of coming back to North Finchley from Paddington we'd put up a 62 and from Paddington to Sudbury via something Park at Harlesden, where there were some points, and so off we went to Sudbury and then we'd come back to Paddington, sometimes we'd then go out to Edgware from Paddington that would be called the 64 route. Then we would come back then eventually go back 60 to North Finchley.

PR: So North Finchley was your depot?

TR: Oh, yes. Myself, as a conductor I went over all the routes because it was to learn the routes but as a driver I was almost entirely on the 21s and the 19s, the 19s went from Barnet to Euston. There used to be a pub there called *The Adam and Eve*, but its not there any longer. So really there were two depots in one really. Say there were 400 men, one 200 never saw the other 2000 because one lot of trams went out in one direction and the other went in the other.

PR: Were there any incidents you remember as a conductor? Did you find it a difficult job?

TR: I didn't find it so. It was an exacting and accurate job.

PR: What sort of hours did you work?

TR: A ninety-six hour fortnight, that's not the same as a forty-eight hour week. One week you'd have a cushy lot, now say on the 21 road, that took an hour each way.

PR: That's an hour from.....

TR: North Finchley to Holborn and back, a journey is there and back. So three 21s would be three hours on the tram. That would be a cushy lot, but the next week you'd make up for it you'd got to make up your 96 hours so therefore instead of working 48 hours the next week, 6 sixes are 36.

PR: So what time would you start then?

TR: I think that the first tram went out at about 4 o'clock in the morning. I do know what time the last tram came in, it was 1 o'clock

PR: That was on the 19s

TR: Yes. As a driver I was on the 19s one time at the terminus at Euston and I was having a cup of tea at a coffee stall, just outside the Tolmer Cinema that was there. A man came up to me and said: "What time does the last tram to Highgate go?" So I said: "Do you know what the time is?" He says: "Well I don't know, I think it's gone half past twelve." "It's twenty to one" I said. And this is the last tram to Highgate and it gets there at 1, at Tally Ho! at twenty past one and I run it in the depot at half past one.

PR: Where were you living then?

TR: I was living at Whetstone.

PR: So you had to walk?

TR: Yes, but I had a rusted old bike that I used to go to and fro on and after a time I got fed up with this bike and so I got a nice second hand one, it wasn't a new one and I left it outside the shop on the kerb one time as I was going to work. I forgot

my sandwiches and went back in to collect them. As I came out again a tram was coming by and it stopped for me and I jumped on and completely forgot about my bike at the kerb. So I did my duty and went round to collect the bike at the bike shed and it wasn't there and I couldn't work out where it had gone to. While I was walking back I realised that I had left it on the kerb and it had been pinched. I went round to the police station and they asked for the frame number. I said "I don't know" and they said it must have been sold up at the Caledonian market long since.

PR: When did you graduate to a driver, if that's the word?

TR: About a couple of years afterwards. They said: "Go over to Acton and learn to be a driver"

PR: What sort of school did they have there?

TR: They had a mock up of a tram, they had a tram under cover, the instructor would show us all the different parts, the trolley, the trolley wheel, the cowcatcher and the dog gate

PR: What's the dog gate?

TR: It's a load of wooden struts in front of the tram and if a dog were to run into it a trap would fall, it would actuate a trap, also of wooden slats and he would get caught up on that. That was called the cowcatcher, though it was a dog catcher really. The thing in front was a dog gate but the thing that picked him up was called a cowcatcher. This instructor would take the controller to pieces and show you all the fingers, the contacts, worked and if it fell off, how to put it on again. I had to repair a controller...

PR: Is the controller the thing that touches the wire?

TR: No the controller is a black that is just behind the dash, the red metal thing in front at each end. There's a black box there comprised of metallic fingers copper and brass contacts, where the electricity runs through the trolley wire, down the pole, through the resistance, which is again a big black box, near the controller and from there it goes to the motors underneath the car. Anyway, we were properly trained, there's no doubt about it, for example they would send us out of the room and make faults so that when we came back we could see....one time he would put a piece of paper between the wheel in the trolley head so that it wouldn't make contact with the wire and so we'd go round searching and then we would realise that the juice wasn't getting to the motor at all. We'd trace it back and there was the piece of paper.

PR: So, in some way you were taught to be your own mechanics?

TR: Very much so.

PR: How long were you on this training?

TR: Oh, no time at all, about a week or a fortnight

PR: What about your first day, when you were the man in charge?

TR: For a time after leaving the school you'd go with another motorman, learning. You'd be at the controls but he'd be the side of you to see that you didn't go flying into anything. Really your training took place when you were learning with another motorman

PR: How long did that go on for?

TR: It went on for about two or three weeks and we went to different parts of the system to learn different routes with the motorman from that depot

PR: So you were learning routes as well?

TR: Evidently. I well remember going down London Road at Winchmore Hill, between Winchmore Hill and Enfield and then old driver said "Although we're going down hill I always think it's best to have the controller on a notch or two of power because somehow or other the wheel seem to have an attraction to the overhead...whether it was true or not I don't know...but also he said: "If you ever have a smash, don't upset yourself, just take a deep breath and hold it for some time, all this is win round the heart"

PR: So he was a philosopher?

TR: He certainly was

PR: We can't talk here about how a tram works, although it is absolutely fascinating, but one just remembers the two basic controls

TR: When you apply power you build up, on a tram you built up from left to right, clockwise. If you notice a motorman on a tube train he builds up from right to left, when he moves his controller clockwise it's called "throwing off", not using any more power. It's like being on a bike and pedalling and then freewheeling. In a tram you'd build up, then throw off when you'd got enough speed going and thereby coast and when you wanted to coast you'd put the controller handle round to the left, anticlockwise, and you applied the magnetic brake which was a magnet that stuck onto the running rail, and very effective it was too. The big brass handle was to stop the tram but on points, which were hard steel, and the magnetic brake wouldn't operate so you only had your handbrake. I well remember going across at Cricklewood Broadway and there was a hard crossover there and we went across too quickly and one of our inspectors, his name was Ernie King, came over and he said: "Now don't think I'm trying to pull rank but you came over there too quickly. If a car had cut you up, you've only got your handbrake; you mustn't go over points at more than walking speed.

- PR: So you had the magnetic brake, which you called “the Maggie”, but you also had another brake. How did that operate?
- TR: It pulled a chain which was on a rocker bar and pressed brake blocks onto the wheels. In the Feltham cars they had air brakes and you operated that by a lever. you never used the Maggie on a Feltam car, you only used the air brake, which was a wheel brake.
- PR: Were they nice to drive?
- TR: Very nice.
- PR: What was the art of being a good driver?
- TR: Not to build up too quickly and not to stop with too much force. You built up gradually on the power and not whack on the Maggie too fiercely, let the first and second notch apply, making as slow a stop as possible. The operation for leaving Barnet Church, the motorman put the handbrake on and put a hook over it so that the arm wouldn't fling round, there'd be a dog on the floor and you'd kick that to engage it, put the hook over it, take the reversing key out of the controller and walk through the tram and get ready to go down the hill. And then when you were ready you'd give two rings on the bell to the conductor at the rear end and he would undo the handbrake. You in the meantime would set the controller at one of Maggie, you would have put handle at one degree of magnetic attraction, you'd never put any power on going down the hill, you slid down the hill on that one of Maggie. I remember one old driver I was learning the route with he'd say: “Don't give any power down here, let it slip, because it jerks the people about so much”
- PR: He really cared about the?
- TR: Yes.
- PR: I would have thought there was a lot of friction between conductor and motorman, if he was a poor driver?
- TR: If he was a rough driver and if he ran late and picked him up too many people, of course there'd be friction. But on the other hand there'd be a notice would come up about a hat change. Anybody who wanted to change their driver, that driver would be put into a hat with a conductor whose driver thought he wanted to get rid of him. There'd be a load of old crap in this hat.
- PR: There were all kinds of rules and regulations and discipline was quite harsh. How was the discipline administered?
- TR: A conductor was supposed to clear, get all his passenger's fares in, in a fare stage, which was half a mile, if the driver was a bit late and he was belting along he could get over that half a mile in a minute or less. Now suppose 20 or 30 people

had got on, he'd got to get all those fares in and be on the back again within that minute. And technically if a jumper (ticket inspector) got on and the fares weren't taken at that stage or, worse still, the previous one, then he got booked and there would be a bloke come down from Head Office and tick him off and it would go onto his record and if he had too bad a record, he'd get the sack. Or, if he was a seasonal man and he got honourably discharged in September he wouldn't back again the next May.

PR: What is the significance of this seasonal thing?

TR: The regular staff had their holidays from May to September and that's the only vacancies that occurred in the running of the vehicles. They took on fresh men to take on their places.

PR: So, was there such a thing as a permanent staff?

TR: The permanent staff was if there was any natural wastage in the meantime. The previous year to mine, 1929 school, had been off for a week.

(FIRST SIDE OF TAPE ENDS)

TR: And another thing was overriding: if someone would take a penny fare and try to get a tuppenny ride out of it. And so prevalent was it that to try and get out of that, many a conductor would punch a ticket on a line. The tickets were called "deaf and dumb" tickets they only had numbers instead of names. At that time on the petrol buses they still had stage names. So to get out of this trouble of being booked for overriding, the passenger wouldn't into trouble; the conductor would get into trouble. They'd punch it on the line, between 7 and 8 so the jumper wouldn't know whether he'd got to get off at number 7 or number 8. The rows that went on because the jumper had said the conductor had done it deliberately whereas the conductor would say that the tram had jerked just as he was punching the ticket, were times without number. As a driver, the misdemeanours were almost devoted to running early. Take for example the 19 road, between Barnet and Euston. One dozy Sunday afternoon I took over the tram while it was still on the road at North Finchley and went down to Highgate, which was 20 minutes, and I used to divide it out into 5 minutes (2 fare stages in 5 minutes) it was a fourpenny ride.

PR: So, starting at Barnet for example, what would be the first one?

TR: The running time between and Barnet and Finchley was 15 minutes but that's only 2 and a half miles. The first fare stage was Station Road, number 27, which is only half a mile. So, evidently you were allowed that 5 minutes to get down that half mile. So you were expected to go down slowly on the magnetic brake.

PR: So the difficulty of the road was taken into account.

TR: Evidently, in that case. Now from 27 to 25, which was Whetstone, which was another mile you'd allow another five minutes, from 25 Whetstone to North

Finchley which was 23 (*The Swan & Pyramids* being 24) was another mile so you'd allow another five minutes. And so the driver would space himself out. Now going back to Highgate on that Sunday afternoon I wasn't paying attention to the timing, nobody about, nobody getting on or off, it was a very sleepy afternoon and got to *The Woodman* when I should have been at *The Wellington*, so I was running about 3 minutes. A jumper came up (he was known as Razor Sharp) he was a very meticulous man, a martinet. He says: "Whatever are you doing Relf? I don't what you're about. You should barely be at The Wellington now" And he was as genuinely upset as if I'd pinched his gold watch. So I said: "What can I say? It's a dozy afternoon I musty have taken my mind off the running time. There's been nobody about" He was still standing there "This is really too bad" he said. He was truly upset

PR: Let's talk a little about the working conditions.

TR: I tell you what I didn't say. I said the first tram went out at about 4 o'clock in the morning. I was very keen to get my sleep in so I changed every duty that started at six o'clock. I was quite popular and the duties were noticeably easier before 6 o'clock than after. And so I was able to swop with other drivers. If I had to get up at six I would never go to bed later than 10 o'clock. I would try and get eight hours in because I wanted to get myself in proper condition. I've known people not do that and run into brick walls and all sorts of things. One girl that's still on the buses, she was on the 26s, she is very white haired and slim and I had her on her first day, the reason being that my own conductor was on holiday. I turned up at six o'clock and there was this girl waiting for me and my lot was one she could conduct. I tried to be sociable so I said: "Are you with me today?" and she said: "Yes it's my first day" I said: "What time did you get up this morning?" and she said "Four o'clock." "Do you live close?" She said: "No, I walked down from Barnet."

PR: Can we get back to the working conditions? I read somewhere that you didn't even get a break?

TR: Sometimes that's what's called a through lot, but there weren't many. You might have a four journey lot with only half an hour off, in which case you had to chase round to the canteen and try and get tea and toast or something and then do another four-hour stint. Very few straight through lots though. They were long lots, of course, and cold and wet. I was on the Felthams with the vestibule, nevertheless I've been on those open cars and I've had thick woollen underclothes on, we were very well clothed in those days, better even than the policemen. Thick Melton trousers, a three-quarter length pea jacket an overcoat and an oilskin as well and I've stood on the front of those open trams and it's just as if I was wearing nothing at all. I had gauntlets, as a matter of fact, they weren't issued, and all the time I was working inside, or outside, I always wore gloves. And although hats were dished out, most unshapely things some of them, always bought a hat that had a grummet in (that's the steel wire inside) and in summer we had white dustcoats and white tops to our hats.

PR: Were you given that uniform?

TR: We were issued with them; I don't know if we were given them or whether they were taken from our pay or what. Until the Second World War came along they were ours but after that we had to hand them back when a new lot were issued, I don't know if they sold them second hand. We didn't like the idea; it was a perk that was being taken away, because some of the men had allotments and they liked to use them there and some were too bloody poor to have a suit and they used to be walking about in their tram uniforms most of the time.

PR: You talk about being poor. When you started in 1930 what were the wages?

TR: It was about £3 a week. I remember at one time it was 12 bob a day; now 6 12s are 72, that's £3.12. On a Sunday you were supposed to get a quarter of an hour's overtime money, but you were driving four 21s instead of 3 21s so you got 16 bob but you were still driving it at flat rate, four 21s at 16bob instead of three 21s for 12 bob. That went on for years. I remember my wife saying: "Did you have a good week this week?" and I said: "Yes £4". Many a time my wife would walk out with sixpence in her pocket and many's the time I would walk out with sixpence in my pocket. A cup of tea at the canteen was a penny a cup and so my big spending was a cup of tea every day. I was back to the time when I was at school – a penny cup of tea at the ABC!

PR: But £3 wasn't bad....

TR: It wasn't good either. About the same amount as the police. My wife was a good manager and we had two little boys, the elder one went to Finchley Catholic Grammar School, which was a good school at the time, a load of old nerks now. The younger boy went to Comrie House, a private school, and when he went there he went to Finchley County. So it was about enough to send the boys to grammar school.

PR: What about holidays?

TR: Holidays were very strange. We used to get 10 days paid holiday. I think that you had to have been on for three years before you got a holiday. The holidays seemed as if they were drawn out of the hat and the people that did the drawing out of the hat seemed to be the Union officials. And the Union Officials seemed almost invariably to get June and July, well for several years I got Septembers and Octobers but, fortunately, Septembers were very nice in those days. After I was out from May to September in 1930, 31 and 32, in 1933 a scheme was introduced that had holidays right round the year, and so fresh men were taken on, and kept on, that would never have gone through the mill like we did before. So whereas my service should have got me a summer holiday I was finding myself with a January or December holiday.

PR: So you weren't skiing in Switzerland?

- TR: No, not even skating on the local pond!
- PR: So the conditions generally were not very generous. It was some time before the Trade Unions were able to get anything organised on the trams wasn't it?
- TR: They were pretty well organised when I started. The TGWU, they used to embrace everyone from rat catchers to coffin makers, everyone was in the TGWU.
- PR: Were they effective as a Trade Union?
- TR: No, they didn't want to offend the governors and with the men they tried to make out they were doing goodness knows what. I found they were ineffective. For some reason best known to himself, the Union Secretary didn't fancy me at all, I don't know why, I didn't particularly like him or dislike him, he was on a different road to me. My record was immaculate and on one part of my career, I left the transport and went down to Deal, and the younger son was in a minor public school down there and when he left school he found there was no work for him so we came back again. Now with such a record and with buses being off the road for the want of drivers I naturally thought that I would be taken back. I went to the local official in the depot and explained that I'd had to come back and I'd like to start again. He said: "I'll let you now because I'd got a bit of decorating to do". So this went on for a week or two, and I went back and he said the same thing. I had a friend who was a surgeon at the Manor House Hospital and he knew Lord Ashfield and I went round and said about this. He said "Do you want to get back then?" I said "I might as well" He said: "Don't you worry, but I'm going on a holiday, it's the first one I've had for years, will it do when I come back?" I said: "Yes it'll be alright". In the meantime, I went round the depot to have a piddle and there was this Union Secretary there and he said: "Oh, you haven't got back then?" So I said: "No, but it's only a question of time." "Oh," he said "of course, if you will go around doing things the wrong way, that's up to you" So I said: "What is the right way?" He said: "You should have approached the Union". So I said: "Alright, I'm approaching them now." They held a meeting and evidently he got them to say they didn't want me, so I saw them again and he said they had decided not to recommend me coming back. "Don't you worry about that, I shall be back" I said. So he said: "I don't know how" and I said: "I don't suppose you do. You wait and see" Whether he told somebody and they but the squeak in but he came into my house and said: "I've never known anyone to get back that the Union hasn't fetched back." I said: "Don't you trouble yourself, it'll be all right". Later he said: "We've had another Union meeting and we've decided to recommend that you come back, but I want you to keep it free of any publicity." Anyway, I got back before this chap came back from his holiday
- PR: So your experiences weren't too happy?
- TR: I'd never done anything against them; I'd paid my Union dues.
- PR: You said that you'd had a couple of driving incidents

TR: In 1935 I had been loaned on to the open trams on a couple of occasions. On the first occasion was on the 62s (from Paddington to Sudbury). This incident took place at Wembley Church which is in the middle of an S bend and each end going up to Wembley is an uphill gradient. I was coming down from Wembley town and coming in the opposite direction, on the other side of the road, across on to my side of the road was a huge steam traction engine with wheels about 10 feet in diameter. The only way to steer these things is a little wheel in front of the driver, about the size of a tea plate, with a handle. You twist like mad on it and it pulls a chain which pulls a bar which pulls the big wheels one way or another. But, to go the other way, you have to take the slack off to get it to pull the other way. It turned out that the man in charge had only been in charge of this for a fortnight. The engine had been at Sudbury Fair, it was the time of Sudbury Carnival, and he was coming down the hill lickety-split (well, lickety-split for him) and he certainly couldn't stop it and he obviously thought he was going to cut the S bend and lose speed by going up the other hill. We met on my side of the road with a most almighty crash you ever heard in your life; the boiler burst, the steam came, his axle broke and here was I standing on an open tram, operating my Maggie which wasn't gripping on the hard steel of the points and I twisted my handbrake. A massive big piece of glass came down from the upper saloon window, just like a guillotine blade, and sliced through my glove at my right wrist, it cut through my glove and not my wrist. And that traction engine was pulled into a side road and it was there until it was red rust; I suppose they couldn't get the spare parts for it.

PR: Did you have any passengers on board?

TR: Yes, but none of them were hurt. It was quite a peaceful afternoon and most of the people had got off at Wembley.

PR: But had you had a full load, it would have been a lot worse.

TR: Oh, yes but it got into the London papers even so.

PR: What was the other one?

TR: I was quite expecting to have to take the tram back to Finchley, even though I had such a whack, it was back in service in a fortnight. You can imagine how well the old trams were built. Nothing was ever said to me about it; I just made a report about it there was no inquest at all. The second one was at Willesden Bus Garage, also on an S bend with a pub called *The Course is Altered*. I was driving one of these trams to Finchley and for some reason best known to himself a big lorry came round from Willesden Green to Harlesden and went smack into the front of the dash of the tram. Although I had applied the controller to stop it on the Maggie, I realised that the way he was charging forward it would knock the big brass handle into my stomach so I stood back a step. The handbrake was knocked at quite an angle, even with the dash there. I'd been sweating on the Feltham trams for the summer and some of the old boys thought "I don't know why he

should be in the warm and cosy while we're stuck out in the open we'll put it to the Union meeting to get him put on to the open trams". So I'd been put onto the open trams, and I thought I didn't like being on the open trams in any case, being that I'd been sweating in the closed in the summer, so I put in to go into the back. Well, I got my conductor's badge so I was just as good a conductor as the rest. I went to see the CDI (the Charge Depot Inspector), the only sort of boss we ever had and he said "You're not losing your nerve are you?" I said the right thing, because if I had said: "Yes I am", he would have known it was a load of lies, because I wanted to get on the closed in cars in the warm, whether it was on the front or the back. So I said: "Oh, no, I haven't lost my nerve". I got put on the back and was in the warm all through that winter up until May 1936. We had a fob pocket which we put our sixpences and threepenny bits in, and I had an Edward VIII threepenny bit dished out to me and I just paid it in. That's worth £3000 now! When the summer came round again I was put on the closed in cars – there was never any thought of me going on the open cars again.

PR: Can you tell me about some of the characters you have met?

TR: Bill Cole enlisted in the First World War at 16; he was in the trenches, Razor Sharp, that's the one that stopped me at *The Woodman*. Mad Abbott, on one occasion he set his controller on 1 of power going up Barnet Hill, jumped off, ran round the back, ran alongside the tram and said: "How do you do?" to his conductor at the back.

PR: Were they mostly ex-military men?

TR: Yes.

TAPE CONTINUES WITH REMINISCENCES OF PERSONALITIES

PR: People talk of the service in those days. How frequently did the trams run?

TR: Eight minutes and 6 minutes. You had Regulators like Razor Sharp that was horrified that you were half a mile away and only about two and a half minutes wrong.

PR: Did you really care about the passengers?

TR: We took a pride in giving a good ride.

Transcribed by David Berguer
Friern Barnet & District Local History Society
October 2007