

## Train Footplate

By Susan Bennett



As the morning mist poured over the floor it brought back memories of the steam and smoke swirling around the men as they stoked the boiler, adjusted the gauges and pulled the levers. The singing of the wheels on the metalled track as we sped through the countryside, the warmth of the fire in the boiler as the smoke and steam trailed in the blue summer sky. But that was so long ago. My last journey, as it turned out, was onto the sidings to join broken engines and rundown coaches. I no longer heard the joyful voices eager to ride behind me or felt the engineer run an oily cloth over the connecting rods to ensure they ran smoothly. Silence had been my companion for many years. Nature had started to reclaim the space. A robin built its nest in my smokestack whilst a family of mice made a home for themselves in the boiler.

Time passed, I had no way of knowing how much time, but then one day I once again heard voices of men. They tried to move frozen instruments, rub dirt from the paintwork, disturbed a mouse who ran out of the boiler tube, over their feet and made its escape into the wood. Voices moved around inside and out and then it was silent again. Night came and I heard my friend the owl hooting in the nearby tree. A few more days and nights passed then suddenly I heard many more voices. The men clambered all over me, they used hammers to knock off the rust that was eating at my structure, touched up the worse spots, and with their rags polished up dull metalwork, dials and handles until I looked more like myself again. It was only cosmetic but it made me feel young again. Then they towed me into a big shed using – I found it hard to consider – a diesel engine. Lots of men were

there and once again they prodded and poked, twiddled the knobs and pretended to sound the whistle. The general hubbub settled down and one man stood up high and started pointing and shouting until he hit his desk with a hammer. And then it was all over. Later I discovered that I had been bought by a volunteer railway group who planned to restore me to my former glory.

And here I am today with steam instead of mist swirling across my footplate and the joyous sound of children's voices ready for a new experience. The engineer released the brake and we slowly chuffed out of the station, then I gathered speed and my wheels made the familiar clickly clack over the rails – and then my glorious whistle announced I was once more in the world

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