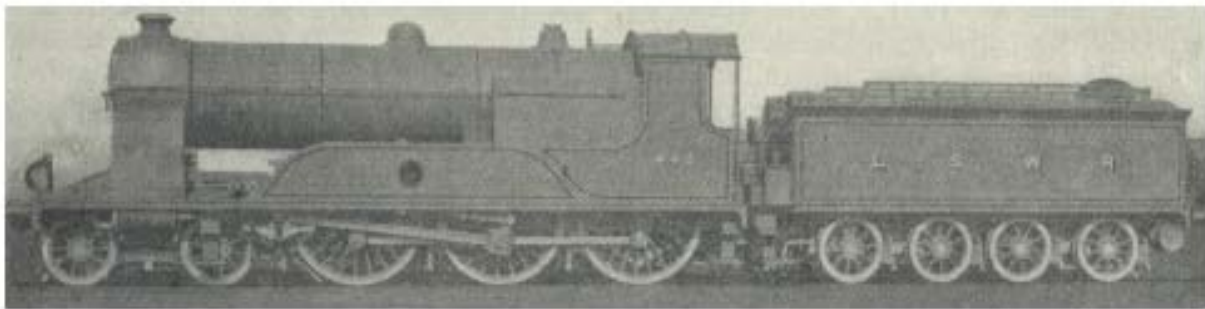


Farewell to the "T14s"

By HENRY MAXWELL



The first "T14" class 4-6-0 locomotive, No. 443, completed at the Eastleigh Works of the London & South Western Railway in March, 1911

THE Class "T14" 4-6-0s were built for the old London & South Western Railway just before the outbreak of the first world war and were condemned not long after the close of the second.* The working life of the engines covered, therefore, a period of nearly 40 years, during which time they suffered a series of structural alterations. Suffered is the word, surely, for rarely can the appearance of locomotives have undergone a more complete and lamentable degeneration than did that of these once lovely creations of Dugald Drummond. Impossible today, almost, to imagine what splendour invested them in the all too brief days of their glory. The very world for which they were designed is no longer imaginable. Rich, stable, be-leisured, and secure, it was shattered by the first world war.

I first remember these great and beautiful machines before the hand of any but their designer had touched them, although Drummond himself was dead and Robert Urie reigned in his stead. They were certainly magnificent, but truth compels me to admit that with their massive flat fronts and their beflanking boxes of firebox cross-tubes they looked just a trifle cumbersome. It is to Robert Urie—author, alas, of so much that was hideous and iconoclastic—that must go the credit for their emancipation. Under his unwontedly sympathetic hand they stepped from majesty into divinity. Exaggerated praise? Not a bit of it!

No one who saw them, as I saw them, when they were hauling the West of England expresses between Salisbury and Exeter just after the first world war, and when they used to come gleaming and towering into the romantic vault of the old Queen Street Station at Exeter, in the miraculous perfection of their apple-green and gold and scarlet, at the head of their fabulous salmon-pink corridor trains of interminable length, would question the authenticity of my metaphor. I was only a schoolboy at the time, it is true, but I am as certain now after 30 years as I was then that all that an express engine is capable of expressing to an understanding eye in the way of power, speed, nobility, and glory, was concentrated in the dream-like symmetries of these machines.

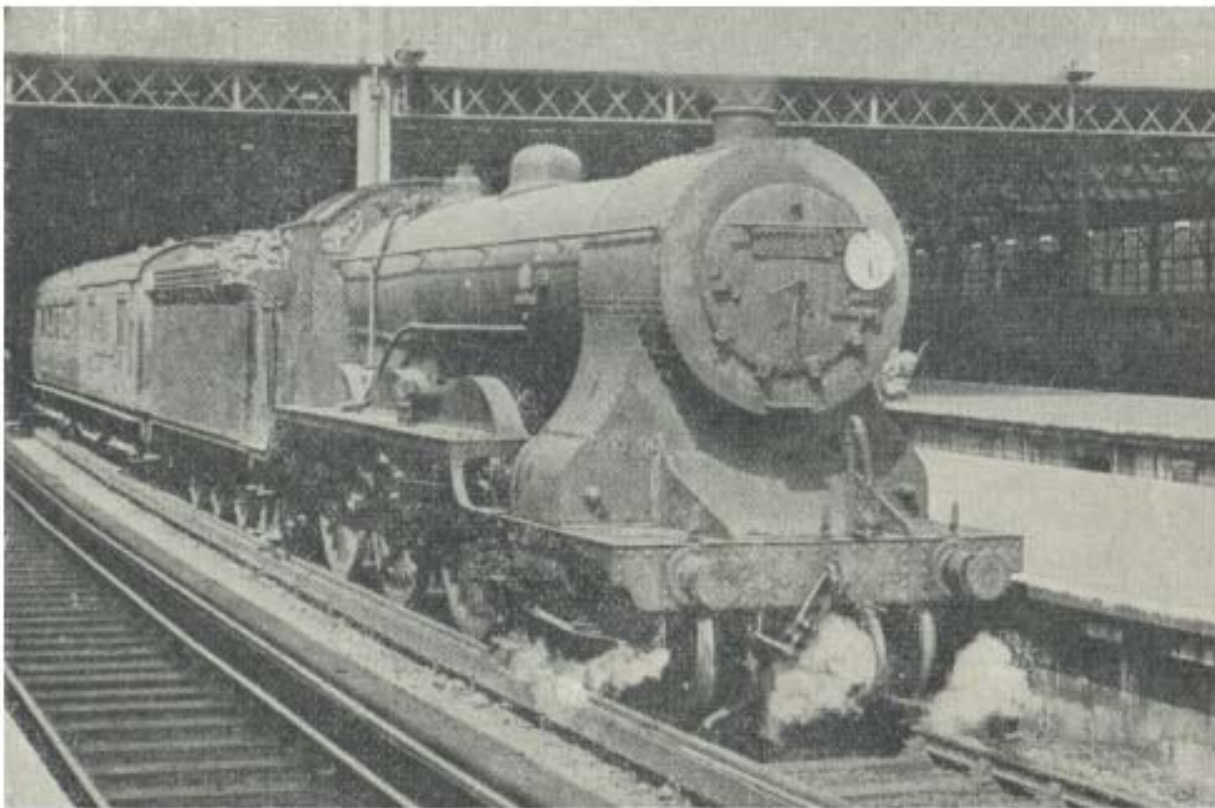
Out of the tunnel, under the two red sandstone bridges they swept, now in sunshine, now in shadow, swift and silent as they approached, growing ever larger, ever more shining, like huge exhibition models, till they came to rest beside one. Winged Victories! The sheer intoxication of their grace is upon me still. They filled my days with wonder and admiration. I walked about in a kind of haze of pulsating glamour. In two successive schools I was nick-named "the 10.50" and was proud to be so.

But no sooner arrived than they uncoupled from their trains and advanced forward below the Queen Street bridge. One saw the outline of the great up-swept saddle of the smokebox, the continuous line of the running board from buffer-beam to buffer-beam, the massive splasher casing from which their latter-

*Ten engines of this class were built in 1911 and 1912, and subsequently underwent extensive alteration. The last one was withdrawn in the summer of 1951.—Ed., R.M.

day soubriquet [the "Paddleboxes"] was derived, the feather-light arch of their cabs and their huge double-bogie tenders, foreshortened and compressed. Beyond the bridge they stopped, poised above the tip of the crater which led down to St. Davids and the West. Then, to the bark of their tremendous exhaust, they backed swiftly into the station again and disappeared behind the train they had just hauled in. Something visionary, something insubstantial seemed to haunt them. One moment they were there, the next gone. Had one really seen such splendour or

an engine-lover would wish to draw a kindly veil. Suffice it to say that the "T14s" appear to have escaped no possible defacement and humiliation that could be heaped on them. To nostalgic eyes they became absolutely and almost mercifully unrecognisable. Nor did they escape a full measure of denigration. Accepted, by those who can surely have never troubled to verify the actualities of their performance, as mechanical failures, spoken of as white-elephants, belittled as they became begrimed, they sustained for years a legend not of glory



Photo]

[R. A. P. Cogger

Rebuilt "T14" No. 30446 at Waterloo in June, 1950, with the 3.54 p.m. train to Basingstoke

had one only dreamed it? Already a "T9" was backing gently down to take the Plymouth portion on its journey. Not a "T9" defaced with a bumptious stove-pipe excrescence for a chimney, but a "T9" all liquid harmony and grace, with never a broken angle nor an unfinished contour about it, shining as only the South Western engines of that hallowed period could shine. And off it would set, sinking out of sight around the curve and down the incline, to that as yet unexplored far West of England which basked below the sunset.

Over the years which have intervened

but of shame. And yet, almost imperceptably, as it would appear, the tide is turning. Here and there voices have been raised in extenuation, almost in defence. The tide will turn completely. So much grace, so much distinction, so much inherent superiority are bound to re-establish themselves in the end. Yes, the tide will surely turn, and meanwhile may one who is proud to call himself a partisan, invite whomever may feel disposed to bid the "T14s" adieux, to pause before giving them valediction and to accord to them the respect that is assuredly their due.