

BARNSTAPLE TOWN

Some Notes on an 1898 Film

In 1898 an unknown photographer shot some cine-film from the front of a train travelling on the London & South Western Railway's line from Barnstaple Junction to Ilfracombe. Two sections of this film are known to exist, both of which can be viewed on YouTube. One section (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dziGmOLe3KU>) covers the initial part of the journey from Barnstaple Junction to Pottington, a distance of about one mile, while the other section (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyZZiwYTE10>) covers the final part of the journey into Ilfracombe station. **These notes deal with the first section only.** This film clip shows a lot of the signalling installation at Barnstaple Town at that time, but often raises a few questions from viewers, so it is hoped that these notes will provide a useful explanation.

In 1898 the line from Barnstaple Junction was single-track through Barnstaple Town station as far as Pottington signal-box, where the double-track commenced to Ilfracombe. (Further information about Barnstaple Town can be found on **RailWest** at <http://www.railwest.org.uk/>.) The line left Barnstaple Junction station at the west end, passed under the Sticklepath Road and curved around to the right. The film begins just as the train approaches the siding which served the Raleigh Works of Shapland & Petter Ltd. This siding was controlled by a local ground-frame (GF), which was situated on the Down (left-hand) side of the line just before reaching the siding point. Most of the GF is hidden from view in the film by a small wooden hut, which *appears* not to cover the GF itself but probably served to house some associated equipment (eg a communications bell or telephone perhaps). In 1898 the GF was unlocked by an Annett's Key kept at Barnstaple Junction West signal-box, but from 1910 onwards it was unlocked by the Electric Train Tablet for the single-line section between Barnstaple Junction West and Barnstaple Town signal-boxes.

Visible to the left of the track is a Stevens 'drop-flap' ground signal, which was worked by the GF for entry into the siding. Just inside the siding can be seen the rear of a similar ground signal, which controlled the exit from the siding, and then the boundary gate across the siding (which *may* have been bolted by the GF). A short distance beyond the siding point the line begins to curve to the left and there was a vehicle level-crossing from Sticklepath Road into Raleigh Works, where gates across the access can be seen on the left and right.

The train then passes on the right-hand side of the line the Down Distant signal for Barnstaple Town (lever 4), which has been lowered to the 'off' position. At that time the arms of distant signals were still painted red and, although there is a 'V' notch in the end of the arm, there is still a straight white band on the arm rather than a chevron. The train then comes to Westcott's Crossing, a footpath crossing from Sticklepath Road into Raleigh Works. There was a crossing-keeper here, who can be seen holding out a flag for the approaching train. In later years at least there were wicket gates here, locked by a 1-lever GF, but there is no known record of any similar provision for the road crossing gates.

The line then reaches Bridge No 3, a long wrought-iron viaduct which curved sharply to the left across the River Taw to its north bank. Immediately before the bridge on

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the right-hand side can be seen the rear of the Up Distant signal for Barnstaple Junction West. At the far end of the bridge on the right-hand side can be seen the rear of Barnstaple Town's Up Starting signal (lever 12) and then the platform of the former Barnstaple Quay station, which had ceased to be used after the opening of the new Barnstaple Town station on 16th May 1898.

At the far end of the disused platform the train passes on its left a tall signal post and a L&SWR Type 1 signal-box, before passing over Commercial Road level-crossing. The signal-post carried the Down Outer Home signal for Barnstaple Town (lever 5), which is out-of-sight at the top of the post, and a lower subsidiary 'Calling-On' arm (more about that later). The signal-box was formerly Barnstaple Quay box and had controlled the level-crossing and associated signals, until that work was taken over by the new Barnstaple Town signal-box in May 1898. (At some unknown later date the signal-box was demolished and replaced on the same site by a ground-level wooden structure containing a GF for the level-crossing.) As the main running signals are 'off' it is unclear why the man in the old signal-box is waving a flag so vigorously, but there are two suggestions for this:- firstly, it may be to warn of the workmen seen close to the line further ahead, or secondly it may be to confirm that the level-crossing is clear if perhaps the interlocking has been disconnected in preparation for the new GF.

A short distance after passing over the level-crossing, on the outside of the left-hand rail can be seen a long 'safety bar' (sometimes called a 'fouling bar' or 'clearance bar'), which was worked by Barnstaple Town lever 9. In the absence of a mechanical locking table for the 1898 installation it is not possible to determine the precise purpose of this item, but it had been removed by the late 1920s. On the left just before the next level-crossing is a tall signal post with three arms:- the top arm is Barnstaple Town's Down Inner Home (lever 6), below that is the Down Distant for Pottington (lever 19 in that box), and further down the post is a subsidiary 'Calling-On' arm (more about that later). At the foot of the post is a Stevens 'drop-flap' ground signal (lever 8PUSH), which controlled entry into the loop siding at the station ahead.

The train then passes over the next level-crossing and enters the new Barnstaple Town station (opened in May 1898), passing over the facing points (10) which gave access to a loop siding on the down side. Contemporary records state that the facing points were fitted with Black's 'economic' facing point lock (FPL), although it is difficult to confirm this from the film. The proximity of the level-crossing prevented the FPL lock-bar from being installed in rear of the points, so it can be seen on the outside of the right-hand rail adjacent to the switch blades.

On the right immediately beyond the level-crossing can be seen the rear of Barnstaple Town's Up Home (lever 13) and next to this is the 14-lever L&SWR Type 4 Barnstaple Town signal-box (which opened with the new station). This was a block-post, which worked Electric Train Tablet up the line to Barnstaple Junction West and down the line to Pottington. As the train passed the signal-box the driver *should* give up the Barnstaple Junction West – Barnstaple Town tablet and then receive the Barnstaple Town – Pottington tablet from the signalman, but this exchange is out of sight in the film. It is unclear whether any of the people stood on the platform was actually the signalman about to carry out the exchange.

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As the train proceeds past the platform, on the left can be seen the trap-points protecting the exit from the loop siding and the rear of another 'drop-flap' ground signal (lever 8PULL) which controlled movements out of the siding. At the far end of the platform can be seen Barnstaple Town's Down Starting signal (lever 7), which was 'slotted' by lever 18 at Pottington as the Down Home for that box. To the right can be seen another signal, which was the Down Starting for the separate bay platform used by the independent narrow-gauge Lynton & Barnstaple Railway (L&BR). The L&BR had their own signal-box, a gable-roofed timber structure which can be seen on the extreme right. As the train continues past the platform the L&BR signal can be seen to return to 'on', so one may assume that the L&BR signalman was replacing it behind a departing L&BR train.

Just beyond the Down Starting signal was another facing point, which led to a siding on the Up side used for transfer traffic with an adjacent narrow-gauge L&BR siding. Access to this siding was controlled by a flap-signal seen on the right-hand side just beyond the Down Starting signal, with the rear of the corresponding exit signal seen a little further on between the main line and the siding. Over to the left can be seen the drop-flap ground-signal for the western exit from the loop siding, with the siding trap-point just beyond it. The loop siding joins the main line by a point facing to Up trains, either side of which can be seen the rear of a drop-flap ground-signal:- the one on the left reading into the loop siding, while the one on the right reads ahead into the platform road.

All the point-work and ground-signals at the west end of Barnstaple Town station were controlled by Pottington GF 'B' (also sometimes called Barnstaple Town GF 'B'), which was released electrically by Pottington signal-box. This GF had a 7-lever frame housed in a typical ground-level L&SWR pent-roof wooden hut, which can be seen on the right of the line immediately before the swing-bridge over the River Yeo. The GF also worked a bolt on the east end of the swing-bridge, while there was another bolt at the west end worked by lever 13 in Pottington signal-box. Once the train has passed over the swing-bridge it passes on the left the Down Starting signal for Pottington (lever 17 in that box) and then reaches the signal-box itself, which was a L&SWR Type 3B box (opened in 1890) containing a 19-lever frame. The signalman can be seen standing at the foot of the steps ready to receive the Barnstaple Town – Pottington tablet; is his gesticulation perhaps a warning to the cameraman to get out of the way?

As the train continues on its way, on the right-hand side of the line can be seen the rear of the Up Starting signal (lever 5) with a lower arm which was the Up Distant for Barnstaple Town (lever 14 in that box). The train now approaches the facing points (lever 11) at the start of the double-track to Ilfracombe, which are set for the Down line. On the right can be seen the boundary gate across the siding leading to Rolle Quay (on the west bank of the River Yeo). This siding crossed the Up line by a diamond crossing to a trailing point (lever 9) in the Down line a short distance beyond the facing point. On the right also can be seen the rear of the Up Inner Home (lever 3).

In the last few frames of the film there are some further items visible in the background. On the extreme left adjacent to the Down line can be seen part of the hipped-roof hut which housed Pottington GF 'A'; this GF was released by Pottington

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signal-box lever 6 and worked a nearby crossover between the Up and Down lines. (At the time of the film the GF also worked an adjacent level-crossing, and that function was released by lever 7 in Pottington signal-box, but in later years the crossing gates were disconnected from the GF and simply padlocked shut.) Also visible are two more signals:- the left-hand one facing the train with its arm lowered is the Down Advanced Starting (lever 16), whilst the right-hand one is the rear of the Up Outer Home (lever 2).

The film ends just as the train is about to pass over the trailing points for Rolle Quay siding. In the final frame or two it is just possible to see the rear of two drop-flap ground-signals, side-by-side on the Down side of the line adjacent to the siding point. The signal nearer to the track was Pottington No 8, which controlled movements into Rolle Quay siding, while the other signal was Pottington No 4 which controlled movements back towards the single-line over the swing-bridge.

Mention was made earlier of the subsidiary 'Calling On' arms located below the Down Outer Home and Down Inner Home signals at Barnstaple Town. These signals did not form part of the original installation for the new signal-box, but were requested by Colonel Yorke from the Board of Trade when he inspected the station on 5th May 1898 and according to the relevant L&SWR Instruction they were in place for the opening on 16th May. It is clear therefore that the film was taken some time after the new Barnstaple Town signal-box had been inspected, but as it is not known when the former Barnstaple Quay signal-box was demolished it is not possible to be more precise about the exact date of the film.

The purpose of the 'Calling On' arms was to allow a Down train to be signalled into the platform at Barnstaple Town station as far as the Down Starting (7) whenever the swing-bridge at Pottington was **not** locked in place for the railway. In each case the main and subsidiary arms on the same post were worked by the same lever, from which a single signal wire was connected to an electro-mechanical selector mounted on the signal-post, with separate wires onwards from that to each arm. The selectors were controlled electrically by the bridge bolt lever at Pottington and determined which arm actually came 'off' when the signalman at Barnstaple Town pulled his levers.



*A Barnstaple Town totem sign
photographed from a window of the last train
on the Ilfracombe line on 3rd October 1970*