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THAT BLASTED WHISTLE - A BRIEF LOOK AT NLR LOCOMOTIVE WHISTLES

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In his book *Locomotives Worth Modelling* the late Francis Hambleton describes the North London Railway example as "One of the smallest of locomotive whistles. A real Italian soprano." Other people, probably contemporary neighbours of the line held vastly different opinions! A Mr. Worthington Smith complained as early as January 1871 about the unnecessary use of engine whistles between Canonbury and Dalston. Watchmen were posted, but found no real evidence of excessive use. In April that year a certain "B" wrote to "The Builder" ⁽¹⁾ as follows:-

The Insufferable Railway Whistle

The damaging and fatal nuisance of the insufferable railway-whistle in the streets of London is by no means "a minor nuisance," but one of the most diabolical sources of mischief, trouble, and death in London.

Certain circumstances compel me to live near the dangerous Dalston Junction on the North London Railway: here, trains are rushing by from Camden, passenger, luggage, and express, on a single pair of rails, at all hours of the night and day; week days and Sundays alike. During the day, trains pass my house every two minutes and a half, each time with the most fiendish shriek it is possible to conceive. Luggage trains, empties, and engines are tearing by and whistling all through the night; and on Sunday, when the passenger trains cease, we are treated to cattle trucks and trains laden with beasts for the Monday's market.

Either because the signalling is defective, or because the drivers are reckless, the whole place, especially during the night, is one fearful tumult. As a rule, the drivers put on the whistle as soon as they leave Canonbury, and never cease until they near the critical junction at Dalston.

The consequence is that the tenants are driven away from the houses; no horse can quietly or safely approach the neighbourhood, and persons are being continually knocked down, and either injured or killed by terrified horses. One of my neighbours had a child run over, and not long since a maddened horse jumped into an area of a neighbouring house.

Travellers by this line must know what this fiendish and incessant whistling means,- viz., either that the driver, when rushing at full speed, is whistling the signals down, or that he is warning the pointsman to set the lines in order for his special train. Once or twice lately, as reported in the public press, trains have run off the line between Camden and Dalston; not long since a pointsman purposely turned a train off its proper rails, to avoid a fearful collision near the dangerous Dalston Junction.

Complaints have been made over and over again to the directors, but without the slightest effect, unless, indeed, it has been to make this terrific and dangerous nuisance worse. Recommendations from the coroner, applications to the Board of Trade, and appeals from the inhabitants regarding this fearful whistling are quite thrown away. Therefore, sir, will you who have done so much to abolish dangerous nuisances in London, try what the Builder can effect for this district?

With the assumption of hypocritical sanctity, passenger-trains are not run during church hours on Sunday mornings; but it is considered no sin by the directors to run cattle-trains during the very same time, and to allow the drivers to raise such an infernal tumult with their shrieking whistles as to cause the service of the church to stop.

Surely some means may be found for compelling railway companies to stop this fatal nuisance in towns, especially during night and

on Sundays; and I can only hope the effectual aid of the Builder may be secured for this most righteous piece of work.

B.

Nothing seems to have been done, and the situation must have got considerably worse when the widening of the main line was completed and the junction to the Great Northern Railway opened. There is no doubt that North London drivers were required to make good use of the whistle, as 465 different codes are listed in the 1916 General Appendix. Some were quite lengthy; four blasts and one “crow” were to be given when ready to leave Maiden Lane sidings, five blasts to enter or leave Dalston carriage sidings, and three, pause, three at Devons Road. One can imagine this being rather annoying!

The whistle complained of was the rather attractive bell-shaped design shown in the 1898 drawing (Fig. 2, page 6), although the design is much earlier, appearing in the photograph of engine No. 24, built by Messrs Robert Stephenson in 1855⁽²⁾. This same photograph also shows the practice of mounting the whistle alongside the safety valves, to save cutting another hole in the boiler. William Adams does not seem to have recognised this advantage, for his designs of 4-4-0 tank engines all had the whistle mounted behind the safety valves and operated by twisting the operating rod. When John Park arrived at Bow, he introduced a modification whereby pressing a short lever in the cab pushed the operating rod and opened a mushroom valve. As steam at boiler pressure was acting on the other side, closure was automatic, and there was little chance of the whistle sticking in the open position. He also reverted to mounting the whistle on the right hand side of the safety valves. This arrangement was used on all subsequent NLR engines. (Which is a nuisance, as on half the available photographs the whistle is hidden!)

The sound of the whistle can only be a matter of conjecture, for there will be few if any people alive now who will have heard it, and probably nobody now can remember it. James Vickery once recalled that in 1880, when his

family moved from Finsbury Park to Stoke Newington, “he could still hear N.L. trains when the wind blew in the right direction.” He wrote that “The North London whistles must have been very far reaching, they were certainly very loud, ear-splitting screeches, so much so that there was general complaint against them, and in 1905 the North London Railway, in deference to public opinion adopted a modified tone of engine whistle, somewhat similar to the sound emitted by L. and S.W.R. engines.”

On 29 September 1903, Henry Pryce, the locomotive engineer received the following anonymous threatening but succinct letter:-

Sir,

If you will instruct your drivers to blow their blasted whistles every 20 yards instead of every 50 there will be a fine chance of reducing your wages sheet - for I know a number of passengers who have been driven insane by that devilish screech and only wait an opportunity to shoot either the driver or the engine.

Perhaps there was further correspondence which has not survived, perhaps Pryce did not want it to appear that he was taking notice, but in April 1906, it was proposed “at a cost of £60 to fit the Company’s engine with a new whistle of a deeper tone than at present in use.” The Locomotive Committee approved the proposal subject to the consent of other companies over whose lines the engines are worked⁽³⁾. The introduction of the new whistle is the subject of NLR General Order No. 402, which reads as follows:-

Engine Whistle

Commencing Tuesday next, 1st May, a new whistle - much less shrill and deeper in tone than the present one - will be brought into use as rapidly as the engines can be fitted by the Locomotive Department

*Broad Street Station
April 27 1906*

*Fred. J. Dunn
Gen. Manager.*

This date is fairly conclusive, but the draw-

ing of the new whistle is dated December 1907 (Fig. 3, page 7), and Vickery (see above) quotes 1905 for the change. As he was renowned for keeping copious dated and detailed notes, maybe some earlier trials were conducted.

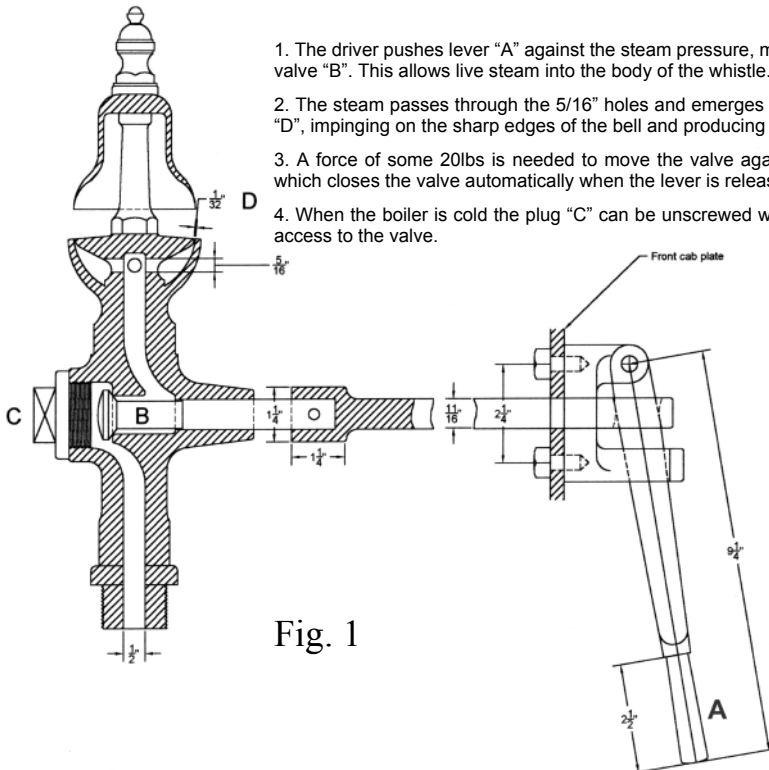
Drawings of both types of whistle are shown. The details have been taken from the original Bow tracings, by kind permission of the National Railway Museum at York, in whose care they now are.

In theory the preserved 0-6-0 tank should have the later style of whistle, but careful examination of photographs show that the one fitted is operated by twisting the handle, so it is quite likely that a second Midland Railway pattern whistle was fitted during one of its repairs at Derby. If any member pays it a visit perhaps they could have a closer look. It would be nice, if not strictly authentic, if it could be fitted with

a new whistle to the original drawing, when restored to steam!

References:

- (1) The Builder, April 15 1871 page 291. Although originally aimed at builders and developers, this magazine soon began to champion public health issues, applying pressure to improve drainage and ventilation, public lighting etc., and later any other issue which would increase circulation. Its pages often give a good insight into life in the Victorian age.
- (2) North London Railway - A Pictorial Record HMSO 1979 ISBN 0-11-290273-1 Plate 20
- (3) PRO RAIL 529/63 Locomotive, Traffic and Stores Committee minute No. 12923 5 April 1906



1. The driver pushes lever "A" against the steam pressure, moving the mushroom valve "B". This allows live steam into the body of the whistle.
2. The steam passes through the 5/16" holes and emerges from the annular gap "D", impinging on the sharp edges of the bell and producing the whistle sound.
3. A force of some 20lbs is needed to move the valve against steam pressure, which closes the valve automatically when the lever is released.
4. When the boiler is cold the plug "C" can be unscrewed with a spanner to gain access to the valve.

Fig. 1

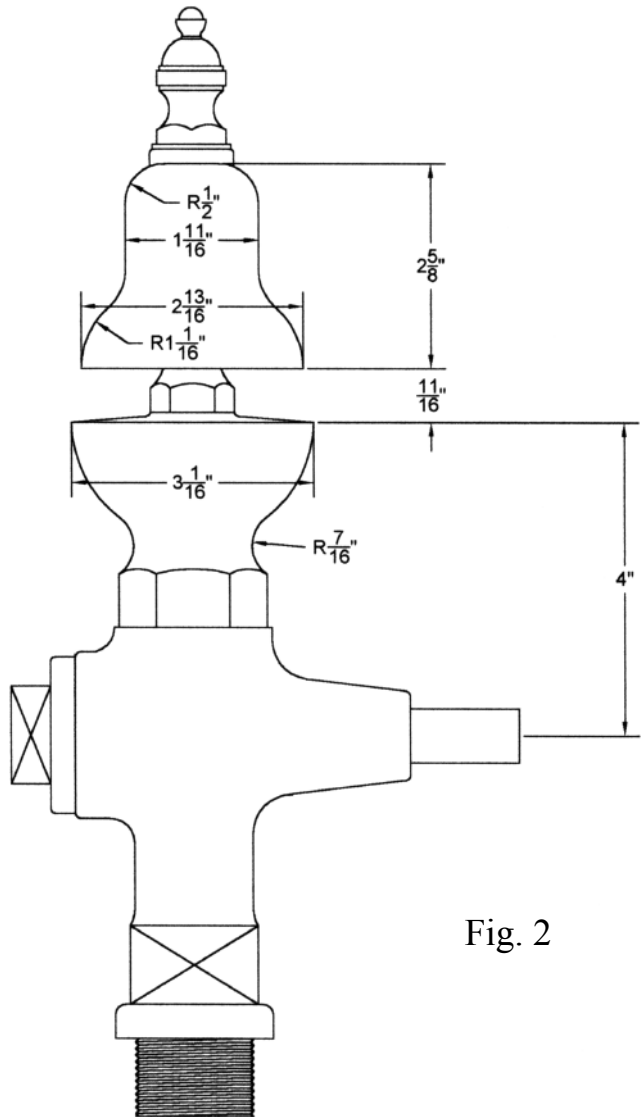


Fig. 2

Details taken from N.L.R. drawing
No. L55 dated September 29th 1898

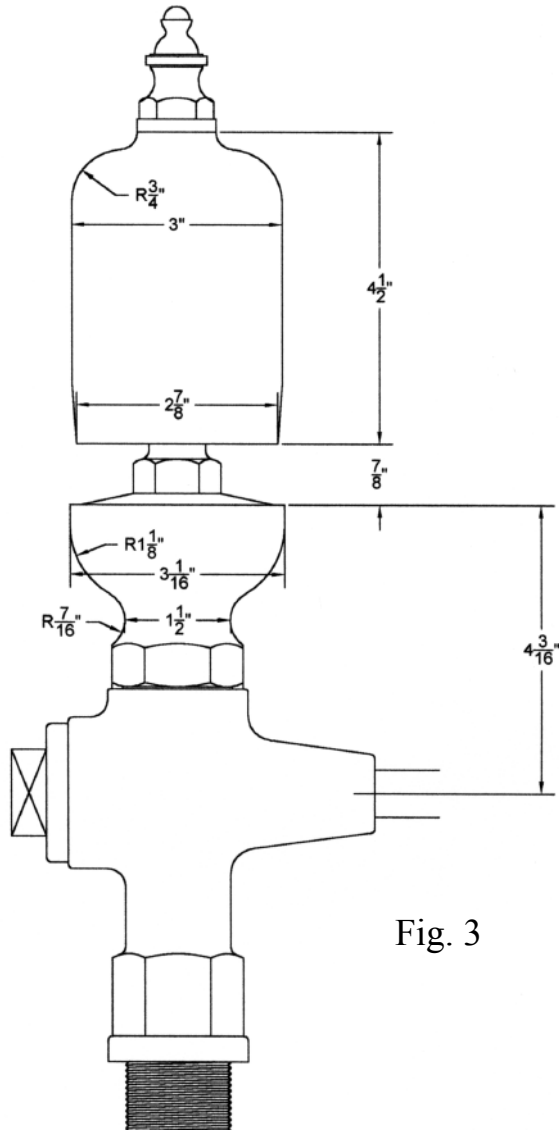


Fig. 3

Details taken from N.L.R. drawing
No. L55 dated December 1907