

"Fred Vokins and The Ironstones Railway"

Fred Vokins was born in 1889 in Didcot, and moved to Banbury at the age of five, when his father's railway job changed.

At Dashwood Road school he met Maud, the love of his life, but at the age of 16 he decided to join the Army instead of joining his dad.

Although he saw action throughout the first world war, he would only talk about his time in the quartermasters stores, and on leaving the army in 1920, he returned to Banbury in search of his sweetheart. In the meantime, Maud had trained as a nurse, and by the time Fred returned, she had become a ward sister. The couple married, and as Fred had secured a job on the Ironstones railway as a trainee steam engine driver, the newly weds moved into one of the three railway cottages owned by the company, location in Paradise St, now known as Bath Road.

The cottages were known as Ss1, Ss2 and Ss3, Ss standing for "Steam shed". Ss1 being where the railway manager lived, Fred and Maud moving into Ss2 and Ss3 was home to the engine driver.

After a few months, the driver retired and Fred and Maud moved into the slightly larger Ss3.

Maud had been told that she couldn't have any children, so the two of them decided to adopt some of the waifs and strays, a result of the war. There was Phil, the twins Ricky and Micky, Maggie, Simon, Welsh Tudor who became something of a folk singer and guitarist, Graham, Jean, Donna and Nick. All living in the two-up two-down. However, Fred was a hard-working, practical man, so he built a shed in the garden, modelled on the French railway couchette, which meant six of the boys could sleep in their own individual beds, something of a luxury at that time.

With so many children to remember, Fred took the easy route and often just referred to them as his "Comrades", and would address with phrases such as "Comrades, come the revolution, we shall be listening to jazz" and "Comrades, cider is the drink of the working man".

But it was just the comrades that Fred and Maud had to think about, as before long they had a child of their own, who Maud insisted on naming Fred. So life was good for Fred and Maud, Fred working driving the steam engine hauling the ironstone, quarried at Wroxton, down to the GWR main line in Banbury. When not driving, he would help out on the upkeep of the line, quite happy to help with shovelling ballast or painting platforms, whatever needed doing. The Ironstones railway had opened in 1917, built using labour from German and Italian prisoners of war, and the stone was freighted up to Corby, where it was crushed, the metal extracted and turned into steel, which became an important part of the war effort in World War Two.

After 25 years of service with a company, it was customary to be given a silver plate, but for Fred in 1945, this was not possible. Instead he was if would like to name the new 0-4-0 locomotive they had just taken delivery of. Fred was pleased as punch, beaming from ear to ear, and of course, named it Maud.

When Fred eventually retired, the company brought together as many of the comrades as they could, rather than have a big do, as they knew that he didn't want a fuss. When asked to name the love of his life, by one of the cheeky comrades, Fred, with one arm leaning against the loco, and the other around his wife's shoulder, simply replied "Maud". And with that he walked off with Maud to their retirement bungalow, overlooking the Ironstones Railway, where he could listen to his jazz, keep an eye on the railway and enjoy his wife's company.

The Ironstones Railway moved over to using diesel engines shortly before it closed in 1967. But you can still walk most of the length of it, recalling Fred Vokins and The Ironstones Railway.