

SANDOWN BARROW BOYS and OTHER WAYS of MAKING MONEY in POST WAR DAYS

By Dave Bambrough 2010

“Carry your luggage in the cart Sir” was the term used in most cases when touting for the job of transporting visitor’s suitcases either to or from the Station Yard at Sandown. I have no idea when this Saturday morning earner came to fruition, but it was very popular after the second world war and on in to the 1980’s.

Many of the homemade carts were fashioned from old prams, whereas some were professionally built if dad had carpentry skills.



Not a Sandown scene but typical of the varying types of carts used by the boys, and similarly to Sandown, they too had a Station Coach for transportation to hotels.

One of the favourite corners to wait for the unsuspecting prey was at the junction of Station Avenue and St. John’s Road. Three or four boys would be in position from about 7am onwards hoping for an early customer. At the first sign of anyone with suitcases appearing out of a guesthouse in lower Station Avenue or turning into the Avenue from Albert Road the rush began. The fastest runner soon outpaced his rivals who would quickly sense their lost cause and return to the corner to await the next guesthouse departure to appear.

On approaching the luggage carrying visitors, who were by now probably aware of the impending reason for the chariot race, they would then be requested with “Carry your luggage in the cart Sir”, the boys heart in hand, eagerly hoping for a reply in the affirmative. If it was, this would bring a much relieved smile to the face of the youngster. Paradoxically, a refusal would be suffered with great dismay by the boy, who would then, more than likely reside on the lower corner to save suffering a certain amount of embarrassment with those he had outpaced to no effect. If the reply was positive the visitor would place his luggage on the cart and the longish walk to the Station Yard would begin. Boys knew instinctively from their first day that they were not allowed to charge a stipulated amount for their labour, an unwritten law. The fare relied entirely on the generosity of the hirer, sixpence, (6d=2½p) was looked upon with a certain amount of disdain, whilst one-shilling, (1/- = 5p) was perfectly acceptable and any amount exceeding this sum, such as two shillings, (2/- = 10p) or two and sixpence, (2/6d=12½p) was greeted with a facial expression indicating deep joy.

Nothing it seems runs totally to order in this world and there were pitfalls within the luggage carrying business. Occasionally a cart would break down, with wheels and axles the root cause of most problems. Another concern for the boys existed within the Station Yard. Whilst touting for business from arriving trains, a taxi driver (who had probably had a lean time) would occasionally attempt to vent his morning’s frustration on a Barrow Boy with the toe of his right boot. In most cases the boy was far too nimble for the ageing driver. It was not unknown for taxi drivers to have disputes within their own ranks. Remembering the name of hotels often caused embarrassing consternation for the local boy, as there were many of them in those days. Rain was catastrophic, no money for a trip to the pictures that Saturday night!

The money was made in the mornings, most from returning holidaymakers, so the streets were all but empty of barrows from 1pm onwards. Although using the term “Barrow Boys,” there was not total domination by boys; there was one girl who was good competition for any of her male counterparts, if you are reading this Carol.

When one’s mid teens arrived it was time for the Barrow Boy to move on to more rewarding work, or perhaps, as in my case, to a more rewarding way of delivering visitors and their luggage to the various hotels and boarding houses around the town.

The Station Coach, along with certain taxi drivers, had the right to park in the Station Yard and wait for incoming trains, whilst others were required to park in Nunwell Street until the Station Yard gradually cleared of the more fortunate drivers before entering the yard. The proprietor of the coach hired a driver and a conductor. In my first season in this elevated position my driver was a middle class ageing gentleman who had run into unfortunate times. He was a very methodical person but being the age he was, drove at a very sedate speed and therefore missed many incoming trains causing the loss of valued income to the proprietor. The pay for the day’s work was miserable to say

the least with the owner certainly anticipating a loss through fiddling, hence the poor wages. (Nothing of this nature had happened, yet). On a good day more could be made pushing a barrow but the coach was steady income and not rain affected. The following season my ageing driver was replaced with a younger man. No improvement resulted; this one hardly spoke a word to anyone and like the previous driver made little effort to meet the next train. His employment was terminated after about three weeks, being replaced by a driver named Gordon. Prior to Gordon I had been quite oblivious to the potentiality of the job, they drove, I took the fares, and we were paid at the end of the day. However, with Gordon behind the wheel things soon changed, I think they refer to it as a learning curve these days.

Turning up for work the next Saturday morning I was introduced to my third driver by the proprietor. My new acquaintance then confronted me with a new set of rules that he said "would be in my best interests to adhere to".

My induction from Gordon went as follows; "All fares from standing passengers and any fares picked up on the return journey to the Station Yard to go in our pocket, the rest to the owner. What had I been missing? (At busy times we were allowed eight standing passengers).

Gordon drove within the law but his general attitude to any aspect of the job was to do it as fast as possible, which suited me as I also worked this way, having often been frustrated with the attitude of the previous drivers. He knew exactly the time of the next incoming train and always did his best to meet it. This of course was now critical for both the proprietor's pocket and ours.

Refreshment had always been purchased from Frosty's in the days of pushing the barrow (a small general shop just outside the Station Yard) but now I was mobile I soon found out that refreshments would only be taken when there was time to spare. For instance, leaving a caravan site at the bottom of Avenue Road one morning with the coach now empty I informed Gordon that when we reached the Station Yard I would need to relieve myself and partake of refreshment. This brought immediate displeasure to Gordon's face and he straightway handed me a large key with the following instructions; "use this key to remove a short floorboard at the back of the coach and complete the necessary relieving as we travel". So, as Gordon motored along the Broadway with his usual haste I completed nature's call on to the tarmac road and we arrived just in time to meet the next train. The most surprising outcome of this was that after a couple of weeks the owner doubled our wages, this totally down to Gordon's management of the situation. The job was now a very rewarding one and I completed two seasons with him before the day job necessitated working weekends.

The only moment of regret throughout the three summers was on arriving at one of the large hotels on the Esplanade a person's case was missing, the gentleman concerned was understandably most distraught. Try as we did it could not be found. Eventually it turned up in the lost luggage department at the Station toward the end of his holiday.

Spending money for youngsters post war was always very hard to come by. Those with affluent parents may well have been fortunate enough not to experience the "hard up feeling", of, where was the next bob or two coming from. Working class boys, that is the ambitious ones, had to supplement themselves with money by any means available to them, without breaking the law of course.

Ways of doing this in these times varied, some honestly, and other ways that may be viewed as bordering on the dishonestly. Times were hard, many, such as the aforementioned luggage carrying were seasonal, only possible in the summer. Paper rounds were a favourite, daily rounds (Monday – Saturday inclusive) and a Sunday round, paid separately to the daily one. Some did both, others, one or the other. The boys packed their own rounds, which helped increase the earnings on the Sunday round in the summer months. By putting a few spare papers in the bag there was usually an opportunity to sell them en route in the summer months, another seasonal only opportunity. One had to be very careful when placing the extras in the bag, as should the owner have detected these goings-on extra seasonal earnings would have ceased forthwith.

Joining the local Choir brought in approximately four shillings every quarter (4/- =20p), with half a crown (2/6d=12½p) for a wedding and occasionally two bob (2/- =10p) if the Choir was required for a funeral. Working on the beach or in café's during school summer holidays was favourite for many, Aunts and Uncles were always nice to see if they were of a generous nature and there was for some, the weekly pocket money from ones parents. Carol singing at Christmas was always reasonably lucrative.

Some of the more spontaneous ways of generating money came by pressing button "B" in telephone boxes. Had the previous caller inserted his money and failed to be connected, just occasionally they would forget to press the button "B" for the return of their money. Running errands for the next-door neighbour netted an occasional threepence (3d=1¼p), returning empty lemonade bottles to café's also brought in 3d. Sometimes the bottle may have been found in the yard at the back of the premises already having been paid on for the return. I seem to recall that the proprietors of such establishments then started marking the bottles to counteract this fraudulent behaviour.

"Fiddling" machines in the four amusement arcades was a fairly reliable earner (seasonal again) that is until you felt the rather large hand of one of the employees on ones shoulder. Finally, it usually paid to arise early for school the day after the Carnival and traverse the route it had taken, as there was always an odd penny or halfpenny, which had missed a float. (Happy days) Concluded.