

FROM IT TO NT

by Richard Clowser

The following story is an example of where it's never too late in life to make a career change and in the meantime, fulfil a lifelong ambition too.

BACKGROUND

Having worked for my current employer for 32 years by the end of 2015, the odds of changing my career, with a secure pension and early retirement looming seemed unlikely to say the least. This was despite feeling very stale and somewhat unfulfilled in my role as a Business Analyst in IT.

By late-2015, the much publicised 'Night Tube' should have been up and running and for me, this story would be irrelevant. However, due to a number of factors, as previously published, its introduction was postponed and TfL took the decision to recruit externally for train operators to run the service. This was a break from the current recruitment policy. Even so, I was unaware of the external campaign when a friend and fellow LURS member told me about it on Boxing Day 2015.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

I duly submitted my application form, despite two previous failures when applying for a CSA role. I didn't expect a positive outcome to this application. However, to my surprise I soon heard back and was told that my application had been accepted and that I would shortly be invited to participate in an initial online test. This was a 20-question multiple choice test which I was able to do in the office on a Friday afternoon. The questions were largely scenario 'what if' based and seemed very common sense to me.

Following the initial test in mid-February 2016, I was invited to attend an assessment in mid-March, at a hotel near the British Museum. I arrived on the day with around 50 other people also taking part. These were a series of aptitude tests, requiring high levels of concentration, accuracy and all to be completed in a limited time. The aim was not necessarily to finish the whole test but to complete what I could accurately.

Following this assessment, I went on holiday to the United States and no sooner had I arrived when I received an E-Mail inviting me to a final interview. It seemed I would be thwarted though as the available dates were when I was still on holiday. Luckily though, further dates were added, although it meant I had to go to the interview the day after I returned from holiday. Anyone returning from a trip to the US will know the effect from jet lag due to overnight flying.

The interview, in early-April, was at a hotel near Gloucester Road station and was an industry standard competency interview, followed by a practical test where, after listening to a driver's emergency radio broadcast, the candidates had to record their own message to the line control to a radio, but including the key information.

That was the end of the application process and to my delight on 11 April, TfL Recruitment rang me at lunch to say that I had been successful and offered me the role of a Night Tube Train Operator. I had to keep the news to myself as the job was still subject to references and a strict medical too. Training dates were set times too and it was a while before a start date could be confirmed. Eventually, the date was confirmed as 4 July and following the successful medical I finally handed in my notice.

The last step before starting was uniform fitting and contract signing. This meant a trip out to the uniform store at Acton on EU referendum day to pick up a suitcase of uniform and meet some of my new colleagues.

TRAINING – THE 12 WEEKS

Week 1

On 4 July, like new school children on their first day of school, I arrived at Ashfield House, together with all of the other new starters. The first morning was an introduction to TfL which included a series of presentations and its vital role in keeping London moving.

After this, the new starters were split into their respective groups, new CSAs and new Night Tube operators. There were 13 operators – 12 new and one returning after a long-term break. The first thing we all wanted to know was, where we would be working. The JNP training manager walked round the room asking each of us where we were from and the line we were hoping to work on. With a smile at the end he said that a lot of us would be disappointed, I was! Living in Wanstead I was hoping for the Central Line at Leytonstone. Being told I would be based at Morden on the Northern Line was not what I wanted to hear, and my heart sank! I wasn't the only one disappointed, but accepted that I'd gone too far to back out now. It was also made clear that a step up to full time working was certainly achievable for all of us, but subject to a minimum 18-month tie in to the current role.

We were all handed our training books, all specific to our respective lines. A quick glance showed what had to be done and when over the next 12 weeks. Looming large at the end of it was the road test, but there were many obstacles to overcome in the coming weeks first.

The week was packed with a number of tests and two mandatory multiple-choice exams which were for track safety awareness and fire and safety. The tests finished at Ashfield House with an eyesight and colour test. The remaining tests were at Edgware, which included track walking, ice scraping (on a hot summer's day in July!), SCD (short circuit device) laying and track-to-train access.

We all passed the tests and on Thursday we all went to our respective lines for an initial introduction. All eight Northern Line recruits went to Morden. Then on the Friday, we all had our first cab day. Unfortunately for the four of us based at Morden there weren't enough Instructor Operators (IOs) to go round so we all took it in turns in the cab with the only available IO while the rest of us rode 'on the cushions'.

Weeks 2 & 3

We all returned to Ashfield House at the start of the second week for two weeks of Rules & Regulations training culminating in an exam, which was mandatory to pass. As eight of us were going to the Northern Line, there was a fair proportion of the course that wasn't relevant with respect to signalling. Even so, we did have access to the superb model railway there, complete with signalling. With the majority of lines becoming ATO in the future it's possible that the training material could be changed to reflect that. After a very entertaining course, despite the nerves about the looming exam, we all passed with flying colours. On a sad note, the end of the course meant that the group now split up to go to their respective lines and depots.



Week 4

This week was dedicated to 'hiking' on our respective lines. Specifically for the Northern Line, this meant visiting all the depots and sidings – where accessible – and familiarising ourselves with all of the walkways and crossing points. This included High Barnet, Edgware and Highgate sidings, but not Colindale, Archway, Finchley Central or Tooting Broadway, where track access prior to picking up a train is unlikely.

Left: Edgware Depot on 6 August 2017 at 04.13, with two de-icing units closest. The one on the left was derailed at Camden Town on 19 October 2003 and was out of service until 12 March 2007.

At Golders Green and East Finchley there are sidings where trains can be stabled. If an operator needs to pick up their train from one of these sidings a call must be made to the line signaller first. As

the Northern is an automatic line, ATO must be switched off first in order to allow the operator to cross the track safely. The signaller will implement PM (protected manual) working for that section for the duration. As soon as the operator has safely reached his cab, a call is made to the signaller and ATO can be restored.

Week 5

After the week of hiking, we finally started what we were hired for – operating trains. Each week, our respective depot TOSM (train operations service manager) sent a diary planner for the following week. For someone who'd only worked Monday to Friday for 32 years, I now had to work on a Sunday for the first time ever. What came as a shock though was the booking on time which was before 07.00! My first thought was how on earth would I get there at that time from Wanstead? Ironically the 'Night Tube' would be very handy for that. The answer came in the form of the staff taxi service. For those unfamiliar with this, these are dedicated taxis that follow each line, but require 'interchanges' on route. For me on that Sunday morning it meant catching a taxi at Wanstead station at 04.52 to Monument where I changed for a connection to Morden at 06.00, arriving at Morden at 06.35. All staff can use the service and they can be picked up and dropped off at any station.



Once I booked on I budded up with a fellow trainer and we were allocated to an IO. That weekend was special working due to points replacement at Camden Town, so trains from Morden only worked to Moorgate or Charing Cross. Our training books included moves at all reversing points, either theoretical or in practice. So, day one enabled us to complete a couple of rare moves immediately.

Left: Morden Depot just after 03.00 on 8 September 2017. Apart from the de-icing units, there is nothing to distinguish between any of the trains in the 106-train fleet.

The rest of the week was spent with the IO, which included further very early starts. The consolation was that it would be the only week of that. The aim of working with the IO was to prove we could operate a train over the whole line, five times in ATO and five times in PM. There were fewer moves required for the Mill Hill East branch and the depots.

Week 6

This was for me the toughest week of all of the 12 weeks – stock training. For this, all of the Northern Line recruits were reunited at Edgware in one of the training rooms or, on the line using a requisitioned 1995 Tube Stock train at either Highgate or Golders Green. When it came to applying training in practice, the simulators at Edgware were also used. These are numbered in the same sequence as the trains, 51687 and 51688 at Edgware and 51689 at Morden. The end result was an exam, where we had to prove we could fix up to three faults on the train, ranging from an air burst, overrunning compressors and resetting MCBs. It wasn't easy, but again, we all passed.

Weeks 7 & 8

The next two weeks were back out with our IOs, building up our 'road' experience. One highlight was a signal failure at Stockwell at the end of traffic one Tuesday night. This meant I had to put the train into RM mode. When there is a failure, ATO and PM isn't available and trains can only be driven in RM (restricted manual – maximum speed 10mph) through the affected section. To go into RM mode, permission has to be given first by the signaller.

There are no coloured signals now on the Northern Line but there are hold boards which protect points and junctions when in RM mode. These act as signals and passing one without permission is

considered as a SPAD. One of the IOs I was with was quite jealous when I told him afterwards as he hadn't yet driven a train in RM on the running line.

Week 9

After 8 weeks of training, week 9 was a mandatory week of annual leave for everyone.

Week 10

This week was given over to depot moves. Trains are driven in ATO or PM up to the depot transition track, after which RM mode must be selected. Depots are not on the system so all moves in the depot are in RM.

Once again, I buddied up with a colleague as there weren't enough IOs to go round, probably because it was overnight. Monday started off with stabling trains in Golders Green and Edgware at the end of traffic, which included much running around between trains as time was tight. Lurking in the undergrowth at Golders Green was one of the biggest rats I've ever seen, so we didn't hang around!

After spending the night in the luxurious splendour of Edgware station, we brought trains into service from the sidings. Before any train can enter service, the Train Operator must carry out a brake test. Before doing this, the operator must check the cab' defect log book to confirm that the train has been readied for service within the last 24 hours. If not, the train mustn't be taken into service and the train operator must call the depot.

Tuesday night into Wednesday was spent stabling trains in Highgate and High Barnet and bringing them into service in the morning. High Barnet differs from the depots and other stabling points in that it's in the ATO system as there is no shunter there. Permission must be given by the signaller first to switch to RM mode to carry out the brake test. Highgate doesn't have a shunter either, but when the train is within three minutes of its service entry time, the operator presses a button on a pole adjacent to the cab which will set the route and give authority to proceed.

The depot moves were then completed by bringing trains into service at Golders Green followed by moves in and out of Kennington siding. Trains normally reverse at Kennington via the loop, but for the trainees to complete their required moves, the signaller gave permission to reverse via the siding after relieving the current operator for a few minutes.

Weeks 11 & 12

Following the depot moves week we returned to our depot and continued our route learning with the IOs. We also had our last classroom based training which was line knowledge. This covered all of the moves that can be made on the line. Some of these are quite complex, Golders Green being a good example.

Below: Part of Golders Green Depot open sidings at 04.55 on 3 June 2017, with all but two roads occupied. Both Morden and Golders Green depots now have power-operated points instead of hand-worked.



For all of us though, one day had loomed large on the horizon since the start of training and that was the road test – much like a driving test and equally nerve-racking too! Mine was set for Friday 23 September preceded by much revision with the IO. An unscheduled 35-minute reversal in Archway siding was very usefully spent revising fault fixing.

The road test with the examiner included preparing a train and bringing it into service, then operating it in service in both PM and ATO for a specified time. The rest of the test was classroom based which covered stock and defect fixing and line route knowledge proving. Being told I had passed was a huge relief at the end of an intensive but very enjoyable training period.

Before I left Morden for the rest of the day I handed my training book over to the TOSM and was then given my train key, radio and lamp. I was ready to start work!

SWEAT DAY

The following day I had my 'sweat day'. Similar to driving a car on your own for the first time, this was my first time out solo in the cab. By late-September, the launch date for the Northern Line Night Tube still hadn't been confirmed, but the newly passed recruits weren't going to sit idle. In the interim period, we all had to book on at Morden at 20.30 on Friday and Saturday nights. The DTSM would then allocate each of us a part duty to complete, which was a 'rounder', i.e. Morden to High Barnet or Edgware and back. My first part duty started at Kennington at 22.53. It felt surprisingly comfortable first time out on my own and the duty ended quietly by stabling in Morden depot.

Over the next few weeks, the part duty routine continued. To get home at the end of my duty I took a staff taxi to Monument where I could connect with the Central Line night service.

NORTHERN LINE 'NIGHT TUBE' LAUNCH

With a live start date of 18 November confirmed, there was an official launch ceremony at 55 Broadway on 4 November. All of the new Northern Line night tube operators were invited to this. There were a number of presentations, including one by the Northern Line general manager. During the evening we also heard from a Central Line operator who shared with us his early experiences of the night service which had been running since 18 August.

TRIAL WEEKEND

Prior to the live launch of the night service, each line had a trial weekend the week before to see how the service performed, but without passengers. The service ran as booked up to normal end of traffic hours, after which the trains ran, but empty until the start of traffic.

If anyone thought that running up and down the line empty was all there was to it, they were sadly mistaken! This was a trial for the CSAs, Train Operators, Line Controllers and Signallers amongst others and plenty of tests were planned too.

On the first night, Friday 11 November I was lucky and apart from a late pick up at High Barnet, it went incident free.

The following night I wasn't so lucky. At Clapham Common southbound a code amber was given by the line controller. Code red means stop immediately, but amber meant not to move once stopped. Luckily, I remembered my Ashfield House training and stayed put until given the all clear. With just an Edgware rounder to do I left Morden at 04.22, conscious that the trial exercise was due to finish by 06.00 before the day service started. As I arrived at Balham there were a number of people on the platform in orange hi vis jackets. They all boarded my train and I feared the worst!

Sure enough, halfway to Clapham South a PEA (passenger emergency alarm) is activated. Between stations the train continues but the operator must respond to the alarm and call the line controller. Responding to the alarm I was told that a customer was having a fit. Once at Clapham South I went back to investigate and rather too convincingly, one of the test team was having a fit. The CSA came down to assist and I called for an ambulance to be sent, although I had to confirm that one wouldn't actually be sent! The 'patient' made a sudden miraculous recovery, so with the PEAs reset and a PA made to thank my 'customers' for their patience and understanding, I could continue.

Not content with getting me once, I immediately had another PEA activated. This time it was for an 'unattended bag' left on the train. So at Clapham Common I went through much the same process until the bag was suddenly claimed. I was then able to continue unmolested, but I was given some very positive feedback by the training team before they left me in peace at Kennington. The adrenaline rush certainly helped keep me going until my duty ended. As a result of the various 'incidents' I was running late and I had to reverse at Colindale, a move I never managed to do in training.

GO LIVE WEEKEND

Finally, after almost 11 months, came the moment I and all of my new colleagues had been waiting for. On 18 November the Northern Line Night Tube service finally went live. It was hardly an anti-climax, but the first weekend went by quietly without incident.

THE NIGHT SERVICE

The core service is every 7/8 minutes Morden to Camden Town via Charing Cross, with trains alternating to High Barnet and Edgware every 15 minutes. There is no night service via Bank although many of the Morden duties start or end with a trip up the City branch. There is also one Saturday duty that serves Mill Hill East at the end of normal traffic hours.

During the night hours there are a number of trains that finish and start at Morden, Golders Green, Edgware and High Barnet. Therefore, the night operators often end up doing a lot more depot work than their day counterparts, who generally only start or stable at their home depot. I've overheard colleagues who said that they haven't stabled a train in Edgware for years, whereas it's common practice for us.

No duty is the same and with a twelve-week roster plus spare duties and annual leave cover it takes about 16 weeks for a duty to come round again. As with any job, there are 'good' and 'bad' duties that operators dread or look forward to.

SERVICE EXPERIENCE TO DATE

There was much speculation before the night service went live as to what to expect during a typical duty. How would London's night life be reflected on the trains into the early hours? After nearly a year of the service it seems to be settling into a pattern.

Patronage is heaviest, unsurprisingly, from Camden Town to Stockwell. Camden Town is the busiest station for picking up although this does tail off after 03.00. Surprisingly though, Tottenham Court Road and Leicester Square are by no means excessively busy at any time during the night. Euston, Waterloo and Stockwell are quite busy interchanges all through the night. Generally though, the easiest period of the night is after about 04.00 when it gets very quiet, but after 05.00, especially on a Saturday morning, it starts to pick up again with the early morning commute.

The more frequent service to Morden over the northern branches seems justified too, with all stations south of Clapham Common seeing a healthy number of passengers.

SLEEPERS

By far the biggest challenge faced is waking up people at the terminal stations. If the train is continuing in service, a cursory tap with a J door key on an adjacent pole may be used to try and wake them, but otherwise they're left in peace. More than once I've noticed a sleeper at Edgware who is still asleep at Morden and is still dead to the world back at Edgware!

Where it poses a problem is where trains are stabled mid duty, then the task of waking the sleepers can be a real challenge. There is a strict 'hands off' policy, so if shouting and much banging of the J door key won't work a call is made to the line controller for assistance to 'encourage' the person to leave the train.

Unfortunately, night life comes with its 'by-products' too and if it doesn't end up on the platform, it often ends up on the train and sometimes the seats too. Vomit on a train seat should mean an immediate withdrawal from service, if known about of course. However, since that could lead to a big gap in the service, as long as the cleaners can deal with it, the train can stay in service with a plastic cover and notice over the offending seat.

Probably the worst experience was when someone had been sick behind the J door and it's flowed into the cab! Despite the cleaner applying the mop, quite what the passengers thought of seeing me with a tissue wedged up both nostrils would have been interesting to know!

INCIDENTS

Thankfully the majority of duties pass incident free week on week, but regrettably, in the early hours of 12 August, there was a 'one under' at Waterloo on the southbound. The service was inevitably suspended for the duration, but the line flexibility meant that trains could run empty south via the Bank branch after de-training at Camden Town and re-entering service at Kennington. Unfortunately, 'one unders' are a factor of the job and no one can ever know how an operator will be affected by the incident.

The Northern Line seems to be a far more reliable service these days as an ATO line and apart from unforeseen incidents, this is reflected in the night service too. The only infrastructure problem I've experienced so far is points failing at Morden tunnel mouth on two separate occasions and once at Camden Town, but this was sorted fairly quickly.

COPING WITH NIGHT WORKING

Being only two nights a week it's not proved too difficult to adjust to night working then to get back to a normal sleep pattern for the rest of the week. It will probably never feel normal but it's something that all night operators have to deal with. For some it's easier, having worked nights in a previous role. For

most though, it's always seems to be the last leg of a rounder where fatigue starts to kick in, so it helps to stand up, move around the cab, operate the doors from the bulkhead and do anything to maintain concentration and alertness.

... AND BEYOND

The 'Night Tube' has now been operating for over a year now on five lines. How successful it is from a revenue perspective I don't know, but it will be extended to other lines in the future including parts of the Overground.



The majority of the initial group of night operators will move on to the day job and other roles in the future, if they so choose, and another batch of night operators will join the ranks.

Whatever happens, it's been quite an experience over the last year and a very enjoyable one too.

Left: Interior of DM 51646 in Morden depot prior to entering service. Only the leading car is on current rails, which means that the auxiliary converters that convert 630v DC to 415v AC are not being powered. Therefore, to save draining the batteries that power the main saloon lighting, the lighting becomes chequered. Full lighting is restored once the train is fully back on current.

All photos in this article: Richard Clowser