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What's In A Name?: The origins, meanings and significance of Steam Locomotive Names in the British Railways Era Part 1 LNER

David H. Baldwin

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The social, political, military and cultural history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is broadly encapsulated in the names given to British steam locomotives. To understand the origins, significance and meanings of those names is to understand much about the fabric and development of life in Britain during that period: the names fit together like some huge, interlocking jigsaw puzzle and, in one way or another, make reference to virtually everything that was important and of significance to those generations for whom steam traction was a commonly accepted part of life and living.

As a boy, in the fifties, I spent countless hours – as did so many others of my generation – "copping" named locomotives, particularly on the ECML, without ever really knowing, or even wondering, why the likes of Persimmon or Meg Merrilies or Sir Ronald Matthews were so named.

A named locomotive was not merely one of several with shared characteristics but, through its name, acquired a unique identity outwith the class to which it belonged; some even acquired "celebrity" status.

So, for the tens of thousands of schoolboys in the fifties and beyond whose passion was train spotting, "namers" were everything and the subject of much excited and animated conversation following a visit to a faraway railway 'Mecca' such as Doncaster or Tamworth. Yet, whereas virtually all schoolboys would have known where to see Sir Herbert Walker, Sir Keith Park or Sir Daniel Gooch and the classes of locomotive to which they belonged, few would have known much, if anything, about the history, origins or achievements of the name behind the treasured 'cop' carefully underlined in their compendium of British Locomotives.

It may be difficult for subsequent generations to understand the obsessional nature of the train spotting hobby and its continuing fascination for a substantial and significant number of the boys who were "hooked" on it. Perhaps not surprisingly, with the passing of the steam era interest in the nature of this obsession has increased rather than diminished, with a seemingly insatiable demand for photographic essays and other books on the subject. I hope that those who continue to be ensnared by the hobby will, through this book, share my fascination in discovering and exploring the origins and meanings of some of the names which were the focus of their youthful attention and "gave life" and added interest to the pursuit of collecting engine numbers.

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