

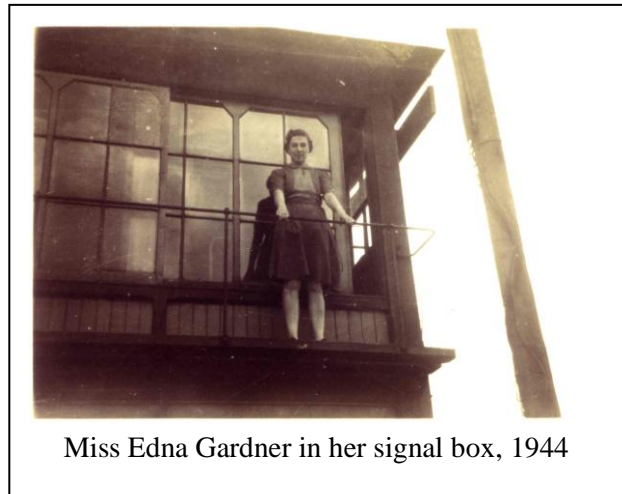
4th May, 1944.

My first day as a trainee signalwoman I met my tutor who had known me when I was a small girl so I felt quite at ease. Then came ten weeks of learning rules and regulations of the workings of all railway staff. Most of that was knowing what to do in cases of emergency. Then I had the bell signals and indicators to learn. We had to know them even if they didn't all apply to my signal box. My box was intermediate, days only, 9 am to 5 pm, 6 days a week. The head of signalling came and "passed me for the box" (that's knowing I'm capable of doing the job safely re that particular box).

Next, I had to go to the area head office to be examined on rules and regulations. I passed with flying colours. The head controller then took me to lunch in the canteen. We were on a table at the front, which was for "the hard hat men" (bosses). Being the only female there I was getting quite a lot of attention. It was really wonderful to feel I was one of them. A young girl of 21, very shy, but so thrilling to be in a man's world doing my 'bit' to help win the war. Previously to this I'd been in the NAAFI from July 1940. I was happy in my work but it didn't need skill like I was now looking forward to.

And so to my first day on my own, no tutor, it was all down to me. Up the steps, unlock the door, step inside, butterflies of excitement and down to business. First job, ring Woodend I'm ready to open box. Passenger train in section on up line. Turn a key in box to put me through to Whitwell on up line and Woodend the down. Give 5-5-5 rings to both boxes and I'm open.

We had indicators on a shelf above the levers and the box to "turn me on". The bells were either end of the indicators.



Miss Edna Gardner in her signal box, 1944

My first emergency was engine failure in section. I had a class 8 heavyweight close by. Actually, he was ready to follow the failure one. A brief discussion between drivers of both engines and me, and get the heavyweight hitched to the front of the failure and off they go to Whitwell where the signalman had agreed to take him in. Back comes heavyweight to get his load and they are soon on their way. All dealt with and no trouble.

The Foreman Shunter at Worksop was very much against women doing a man's job so he did his utmost to make difficulties for me. He decided one afternoon to send a train of empty wagons for the colliery just as it was time for me to close. We'd already had our quota for the day and this was extra which there was no room for. I let him know the situation here and refused to take it. He rang our Head Controller complaining about me refusing the train. The Head Controller rang me. When I explained the situation to him, "Close and go home Miss Gardner. I'll sort him out," said the Head Controller.

The next day I heard from the train crew. Shunter had a good dressing down from my boss and it made him livid, so he was going to murder me. However, it pleased the men who worked under him. They said he needed taking down a peg or two, and I'd done that.

Between 1.30 and 2.30 it was usually very quiet. I used to sing when I thought no one was around. I was singing "Where 'ere you walk" one such day. Then the Number Taker appeared. He'd been listening to me, which eventually led to us singing together and Taffy, a Porter Signalman, also joined us. Taffy had to call for that hour to do any outside jobs I needed doing – getting the signal lamps

down to be cleaned and put back; bringing me coal and water from the colliery, etc. Bill, the Number Taker, had been a vocalist in Welbeck Colliery Band for many years. Taffy, well a Welshman can always sing, and me a young girl in a Sunday school choir. The perfect trio. News of us got around all along our line. Our phones connected us in our boxes (no outside lines). Our numbers were in Morse code which we knew (I was three short signals) and we could all listen in.

My phone would ring and a voice would ask, "Is Bill and Taffy there?" which quite often they were. "Give us a song, Duck", and so the trio stood round a phone singing to all the boxes along a 13 mile line the good old tune 'Guide me O thou Great Jehovah'

Another incident, the colliery had borrowed a small engine ("Jocko") from us (LMS) and when it was due to be returned a driver and fireman were sent to collect it. It was almost my closing time but the line was clear so I got the road for it and all should be straightforward, but not for our two men. They didn't want to go straight back as they'd get another job to do. After much arguing I closed leaving them main line with a clear run and using language not good for my tender ears.

Another incident with awkward Shunter. He rings boss again complaining I won't take a train of empties. It was a holiday weekend so everyone wanted to get home. Boss rings me; once again I explain the situation. I had a train at each of my home signals, also a train at each starter – enough, one might say, but no – I had an engine and brake in the dead end and another engine and brake in the only space there was in the pit yard. I'd several train staff all in the box with me all eager to get home and they said I was doing a good job and boss agreed. After all, I should not have had engines in the pit yard or dead end, but in doing so, many men were able to get home instead of being held up longer.

Another incident in my signalwoman's day: All trains had done their work and I was ready to go home. The last to leave was going my way, so I was given a lift in the brake van. I let Dickie (the signalman) know I was on and asked him not to give the driver clearance too soon, so that I could get off safely. He forgot, and I had to jump off or face the "awkward shunter" when we reached the sidings. The guard put his brake on and we were on an incline, so I decided jump was the better option. No problem, so I may have another talent that I didn't know about!

I've certainly got a guardian angel. I used to walk along the track (nearly 2 miles) to my box (it was out in the sticks) and on frosty days the signals used to stick. So, I had a thick piece of wood close by each signal, and I'd use it to give the lever at the bottom of the signal a whack. That made it movable and I could work the signals.

Being an intermediate box, my signals had to be left 'off', giving clearance to trains, which would have been dangerous to traffic once my box was open. There was always a passenger train in section on the up line when I opened, but the down line was usually clear. We had no trains on Sundays, so any major work needing to be done had to be done then. It was an easy day for me and I could do my tapestry work, which I enjoyed doing. I would make the men a cup of tea now and then, and it's nicer to have fresh instead of out of a flask. My Mum always managed to have plenty of tea, even though it was rationed. A very good manager was my Mum!



Mrs Edna Molesworth (nee Gardner) 60 years later in Toddington signal box.

My box served three trades: we had the colliery; a brick company; and a steel and basic works. Our trains brought empty wagons and collected full ones, so a good deal of shunting was done in the pit yard. The last train was ready to leave when one of the wheels looked very much like coming off. After several minutes, the worst happened and the engine came really off. I rings the boxes either side of me to let the platelayers know we needed their help. Send for the breakdown van. All within minutes of our finishing time. Mum sends my young brother to see why Dad wasn't home. Next thing, Brian arrives with a bag of sandwiches and cake. Mum knew it would be a few hours to get the engine back on track. It was 4 ½ hours later before the train was mobile again. The 'poers that be' said a relief signalman would be sent to relieve me when I'd worked for 12 hours - that being because for safety reasons I wasn't allowed to work for more than 12 hours. I managed to persuade them that it would be back to normal by then. To bring another man out would have taken 2 hours pto reach me. I didn't think it was necessary. The men were doing the work, not me. My Dad was ganger, so he and I walked home together. Being summer (double summer time) it was just getting dusk, fine and still warm. It was safe for people to be out those days. Very different to what it is today.

Dickie wasn't a conscientious worker and one day could have caused a serious accident. I had a train ready to go to Mansfield once the passenger train from Worksop had gone through. The driver, guard and number taker were all in the box with me, quietly waiting for the passenger train to be offered. All of a sudden, Bill says, "Aye up, it's here!" "Can't be!" says I, "It's not been offered". "Look, there's smoke round the bend". By then it was almost to my home signal. I quickly got clearance from Whitwell, pulled the signals off, and on-line straight away. I gave 6 bells (danger signal) to Dickie. He rings the phone, "What's wrong?". "You only let the passenger through without permission!" "I didn't!" "You did. Look at your indicator." "What are you going to do?" asks Dickie. So I told him, if it was noticed when the register was checked, I would tell them the truth. I wasn't going to lie to get him off the hook when the outcome could have been disastrous.

We have to book the exact time when a train is offered; when it passes my box; and when the train is cleared of my section. I called in Dickie's box on my way home and gave him a good dressing down. I think I just about frightened him to death. I hated doing it, but safety comes first, and we have to be relied on when we are working as a team.