

*The Thomas the Tank Engine Man*



# **The Thomas the Tank Engine Man**

The Story of the  
Reverend W. Awdry and his  
Really Useful Engines

BRIAN SIBLEY

Foreword by Gyles Brandreth





In Memory of  
The Reverend Wilbert Vere Awdry  
(1911 – 1997)  
‘The Thin Clergyman’  
who introduced the world to  
Edward, Gordon, Henry and all the others  
(especially Thomas the Tank Engine);  
and of two other people  
without whom The Railway Series  
would not have been what it is  
(and might not have existed at all),  
*Margaret Emily Awdry*  
(1912 – 1989)  
and  
*George Edward Vere Awdry*  
(1916 – 1994);  
and of  
one of those for whom  
the stories were originally told,  
*Hilary Awdry Fortnam*  
(1946–2013)

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# Foreword



It's been a long wait, but *The Thomas the Tank Engine Man*, Brian Sibley's biography of the Reverend W. Awdry (last in service in 1995) is back on the rails again in a revised and updated edition, ready to whisk you off for an excursion to meet Thomas, James, Gordon, Edward, and all the other Really Useful Engines on the Island of Sodor and to learn the story behind the books in the famous Railway Series and the modest Church of England clergyman who created them.

Dubbed by his detractors 'The Puff-Puff Parson', Wilbert Awdry seemed destined for a valuable but not especially distinguished career until the day when he needed to tell a bedtime story to his young son and, drawing on a lifetime's love and knowledge of steam locomotion, invented a little tale entitled 'Edward's Day Out'. Eventually published, seventy years ago this year, in *The Three Railway Engines* (Thomas came down the line shortly afterwards) that was the beginning of a worldwide phenomenon.

The age of steam may be long gone but it lives on in the affection of millions of children who love Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends, as you will know if you were ever one those children or if you've been called upon to read – and re-read – the adventures of Thomas and his engine friends, not to mention Bertie the Bus, Harold the Helicopter, and Sir Topham Hatt, the Fat Controller.

In 1984, I was privileged to meet the Reverend Awdry when I was working at the breakfast television station, TV-am, and Thomas's creator came along as a guest with his son, Christopher, and Ringo Starr, who had just become the 'voice' of Thomas the Tank Engine on TV. I was charmed by the unassuming Reverend Awdry, but he did not give much away. I thought then, 'There's a fascinating story here, but I am not going to get it from the great man.' I need not have worried: another great man – Brian Sibley, who understands children's writers better

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than any biographer I know – has dug deep and found out all there is to know. With this book, you are definitely on the right track. So, climb aboard. And –‘Tickets please!’

Gyles Brandreth  
February 2015

## INTRODUCTION

# Point of Departure



It began with a telephone call: ‘Do you know anything about the Thomas the Tank Engine man?’ It was John Forrest, then a radio producer with the BBC’s Religious Broadcasting Department. I had worked with John on several religious programmes, and was known to have an obsessive fascination with children’s books and their writers, having already made radio features about A. A. Milne, Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie.

However, I knew very little about the creator of *Thomas the Tank Engine*, other than the fact that he was the Reverend W. V. Awdry, a Church of England clergyman – hence, I deduced, the interest from Religious Broadcasting. But the question awoke my curiosity, and by the end of our conversation I had agreed to research, write and present a programme about Mr Awdry and his famous little engines.

I must confess to having felt a little apprehensive. For one thing, while I had read *The Three Railway Engines*, *Thomas the Tank Engine* and a few of the other early books, I was certainly not familiar with all the titles in the Railway Series. Also, and this I hesitate to confess, I was in no sense a railway buff. When I was small, it was my father – a lover of everything to do with railways – who played with my clockwork Hornby 00 gauge train set while I, to his great irritation, preferred making up stories about the people who worked in the station and playing with the farm animals that lived alongside the line. When I grew older, my feelings towards engines tended to be governed by where they took you – to the country or, even better, to the seaside.

However, having agreed to interview W. V. Awdry, I read the entire Railway Series and by the time my producer and I set off to meet the author I was not only steeped in the stories, I was bursting with questions. Happily, interviewer and interviewee hit it off on their first meeting and the result was an excellent programme, warmly received by the critics.

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The work done, I found myself wondering whether the research I had started might not have another use – possibly a book about Mr Awdry and his engines. Two years of discussions with various publishers were followed by five years of silence. Then, in 1993, Rosemary Debnam of Reed Children’s Books decided that with the approaching fiftieth anniversary of the Railway Series the time had at last come – which is how I found myself sitting next to Wilbert Awdry at his eighty-second birthday lunch. To my great delight, our conversation virtually picked up where it had left off seven years before.

*The Thomas the Tank Engine Man* was eventually published by Heinemann in 1995 and now – after twenty years metaphorically locked up in the shed on a disused siding (during which time its secondhand value has escalated to as much as £150!) – it is being dusted down, fired up and taken for a new run by Lion Hudson to mark the seventieth anniversary of the publication of *The Three Railway Engines*, the little book that was the beginning of Wilbert Awdry’s celebrated Railway Series.

When this biography was originally published two decades ago its subject matter was very much alive: frail and partially bed-ridden, but as sharp of mind as a man half his eighty-two years. As a result, the voice of the Reverend W. Awdry was vibrantly present within its pages.

This presented a possible dilemma in republishing the book eighteen years after Wilbert Awdry’s death: should the numerous present tense quotes now be translated into the past? However, the question occupied my publishers and I for scarcely any time at all. So much of Wilbert’s personality is conveyed through the immediacy of his conversations with his biographer that it seemed absurd to sacrifice that in order to create an impression of critical perspective.

Nevertheless, it was clear that a new epilogue would be required to complete Wilbert’s story and bring the saga of Thomas and his friends up to date, so that is what I have done.

But now I want to take you back to a day sometime in 1994 when I was, as I had been for many months, deep in conversation with Wilbert Awdry, the Thomas the Tank Engine man...

Brian Sibley  
January 2015

## PROLOGUE

# The Station Master's Office



‘Well, now,’ says Wilbert Awdry in response to another of my interminable questions, ‘if you want the answer to that, you’ll have to go into the office and fetch me a folder. It’s a green ring-binder file and you’ll find it under a pile of papers on the third shelf down next to the filing cabinet.’”

So off I go. The sign on the door reads ‘Station Master’, and inside the Station Master’s office an agreeable clutter abounds. There are railway books, journals, magazines, maps and timetables, tottering piles of newspaper cuttings and clippings, and filing cabinets crammed with correspondence, much of it from young readers of the Railway Series.

It was here, in 1986, that I had my first conversations with Wilbert Awdry. I remember him then as a lean, slightly hunched figure with a mane of silver hair and beetling brows that loomed upon his spectacles, behind which twinkled sharp blue-grey eyes. Puffing – engine-like – on a battered pipe, he had theorized about the personality of the steam engine. ‘He’s an extrovert,’ he explained. ‘Unless he is standing in a siding with his fire drawn, he has always got something to say. He likes people to know how he’s getting on. For example, there’s the goods engine who’s always complaining of being badly treated.’

Giving a self-mocking chuckle – lest I should take him *too* seriously – he stoked his pipe with fresh tobacco, got up a new head of steam and was off once more. “Then there’s the express engine, bustling about saying, “Come on! Come on!”, followed by a train of calm, unflappable coaches saying, like dutiful wives, “Yes, dear, of *course!* Yes, dear, of *course!*”, while all along you know they’re thinking about much more important things, like when they’re going to get a new coat of paint!”

Such views have occasionally got Wilbert Awdry into hot water, raising the hackles of those on the look-out for political incorrectness, and have even resulted in his books being banned from certain libraries.

Other critical voices have vehemently condemned the Railway Series for being dull, predictable and repetitious. Admirers of the little books see them as inventive, imaginative and (with one or two exceptions, permissible in such a long series) written with wit, charm and energy.

On whatever side you come down, one thing is certain: nothing is going to change now. Although Wilbert's son, Christopher Awdry, continues to add new books to the series, the 'onlie begetter' of Thomas the Tank Engine and the others hasn't written about his famous engines for many years.

His physical health no longer allows him to be as active as he was. His beloved model railway gathers dust, he seldom gets into the office these days – hence my mission in search of the green folder – and he rarely puffs on one of his old pipes. He still smokes cigarettes, however, particularly when settling down with 'a good book' (by which he means P. G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, Hammond Innes, Georgette Heyer and Ellis Peters, among others) or to talk about those engine characters that played such an important part in his life and which have guaranteed him some kind of immortality.

Despite almost weekly articles in the press speculating on how much he earns from the sale of his books and all the subsidiary paraphernalia, Wilbert has a modest lifestyle. His only luxuries – apart from the cigarettes and fresh supplies of thick historical novels – are a video recorder which he uses to tape any good thrillers and Westerns that may be televised, a chair lift (originally installed for his late wife Margaret), and the services of a live-in carer. His house in Stroud says much about his character: it is one of those sensible, four square, red-brick houses such as a stationmaster might once have lived in – if only the railway line had been nearer.

Wilbert Awdry has spent over half his life being labelled an eccentric. His eccentricity, such as it is, is an abiding affection for the lost age of steam locomotion: an age that he has celebrated – and, in a very real sense, kept alive – by creating the characters in his children's books, which now sell all over the world.

The children who read them still write to tell the author which of these little engine characters is their favourite – boastful Gordon, grumpy Henry, hard-working Edward, cheerful Percy or, most famous of all, mischievous Thomas the Tank Engine. They sometimes write to tell the author that they have spotted inconsistencies in the illustrations but, most of all, they write to ask questions. Thirty years ago, such questions tended to be along the lines of 'Can you tell where Toby keeps his coal?'

Today, they're more likely to be: 'Does Thomas have a girlfriend?', 'Has Thomas ever become sick?', 'How old is Thomas?' or 'Does Thomas have summer holidays?'

Thomas and his friends are very much in evidence in the Station Master's office and indeed in the rest of his house. Their smiling smoke-box faces are to be found on wastepaper bins, lampshades, clocks, trays, cushion covers, cups and saucers as well as on embroidered pictures worked by Margaret Awdry.

The things which Mr Awdry has around him are but a tiny fraction of a phenomenal merchandising enterprise of the kind usually associated with such characters as Mickey Mouse or Snoopy. He is only marginally of products being marketed on the strength of the worldwide fame of his characters, from Thomas lunch-boxes (as famously carried by Prince William on his first day at school) to notebooks and stationery, bedside lights, duvet covers, money-boxes, toothbrushes, nursery cutlery, mug and egg cup sets and a Thomas plate on which to serve a meal of Thomas spaghetti shapes (signals, tracks, guards, Fat Controllers and Thomases) in tomato sauce.

There are also various three-dimensional steam train models. Some, improbably, are 'cuddly engines' made of soft fabrics. More authentically, there are engines to push along, pull along or wind up, and others ironically powered by electricity. The demand for Thomas merchandise is seemingly limitless and the earning power of such products substantial. Ertl, manufacturers of die-cast metal toys based on the Railway Series, put three million character engines into the market during 1994 alone. This vast industry is largely a spin-off from the highly successful film series produced by the company Britt Allcroft (Thomas) Ltd, first shown on television and subsequently available on video with worldwide sales running into millions. Yet, for all the ingenuity with which these films are produced (and the skill with which they have been marketed) their success is founded on twenty-six little books whose author is described on their title-pages as 'The Rev W. Awdry'.

So what is the reason for the success of these books? Is it their text: sharp and tightly written with sly little jokes and rhythmic sounds but, nevertheless, always true to railway lore? Or is it the illustrations: capturing the hustle and bustle of station and shed and those trackside scenes – embankments of spring flowers, rolling meadows of summer lushness, whirling autumn leaves, brooding clouds of winter rain and frosted Christmas-card landscapes – depicted in vivid, iridescent colours?

Perhaps the reason children first come to love the books is rather more prosaic. For Brian Doyle, writer on children's literature, it is all a matter of size – or rather the lack of it: 'They can be slipped into small pockets without any trouble at all, to be taken out at convenient (or, indeed, inconvenient) moments during the day to be read or looked at or chuckled over.' Adults may refer to them as 'little books', but to a child the Railway Series – like the books of Beatrix Potter – are essentially child-sized.

In 1994, sales of Wilbert Awdry's books, in their familiar oblong format with brightly-coloured illustrations, totalled some twenty-five million copies. In addition, the stories now appear in many other versions including board books, bath books, sticker books, lift-the-flap books, pop-up books, peep-through books, press-out model books and easy-to-read books. Wilbert Awdry's characters – appearing in all this diversity of shapes and sizes – have now reached total worldwide sales of fifty million copies, making him the most successful children's writer of the century.

The original stories were written to be read aloud and a few years after they were published, a record was produced of the author doing just that. Since then, the stories have been recorded on disc by Johnny Morris and William Rushton, on radio by Sir John Gielgud, and on the soundtrack of the television series by former Beatle, Ringo Starr. Most of all, of course, they have been read aloud by many millions of parents.

In reading these stories to their children, parents have come to know the characters and their various exploits every bit as well as their offspring. Some years ago, Mrs Pat Powell (a mother of three) wrote a charming letter of mock complaint to the author:

Have you ever tried to explain to elderly neighbours that when your children are yelling 'Rubbish' or 'Dirty Objects' at each other, they are not being rude, but merely indulging in literary quotations? Have you ever had to undergo the funny looks of passers-by as you choo-choo-choo your way up a hill with a twin push-chair with son No. 3 standing on the back letting go with violently piercing whistles? Have you ever had a child refuse to do as he is bade, replying 'It's bad for my swerves'? Well, I have and it's all your fault.

What is, perhaps, surprising about the continued success of the Railway Series – and it certainly surprises its creator – is that few of today's



youngsters who know the books by heart have ever seen a steam train, let alone travelled in one. In fact, neither have most of the parents who buy the books for their children. To children, the Island of Sodor (home of the Fat Controller's railway) is a Never-Never Land. Like other such places – Wonderland, Narnia, Oz and Middle-earth – it is both fantastic and at the same time absolutely real. To adults, the stories have about them an atmosphere of yearning romance, a wistful glimpse back in time to a less complicated age.

'In common with other skilled story-spinners,' writes Mary Cadogan, authority on children's literature, 'Awdry has created a microcosmic world in which his engaging cast of headstrong or shy, boastful or understanding engine "characters" have flourished and become archetypal. We continue to enjoy their cosy but exhilarating exploits which transport us, through the excitements of steam-train journeys, into a nostalgically serene era that Awdry has contrived to keep alive in the here and now.'

They may also hint at a desire to know that we are on the right track, travelling along the straight and narrow-gauge, which may be why so many clergymen seem to have a passion for steam railways. 'Some deep sense of affinity,' wrote George Hill, 'seems to draw parsons to firebox and footplate. It must be something to do with a correspondence between steam as a driving force and the spirit which bloweth where it listeth, or with the symbolism of rails guiding the soul to its predestined terminus.'

As for stations, Jeffrey Richards and John M. MacKenzie, writing in their book *The Railway Station: A Social History*, describe these buildings, whether large or small, as being essentially ecclesiastical:

If the station is seen as a cathedral or chapel, it can also be seen to possess in its heyday a Bible every bit as imposing and sometimes even as impenetrable as the Authorized Version (Bradshaw), incense (steam), and liturgical chanting ('The train now standing at platform 3 is...', 'Close the doors and stand clear', 'All change').

'Railways and the Church,' Wilbert Awdry once remarked, 'both had their heyday in the mid-nineteenth century; both own a great deal of Gothic-style architecture which is expensive to maintain; both are regularly assailed by critics; and both are firmly convinced that they are the best means of getting man to his ultimate destination!'

Perhaps part of this almost religious mystique about railways comes from the observation of ritual, a sense of regularity and order which is both satisfying and reassuring. The fact that timetables must be followed, lines kept to and signals obeyed has its own appeal for young readers who, as Jeffrey Richards observes, 'love ritual and repetition – especially repeated readings of the same stories'.

If true, then the analogy might reasonably be extended to suggest that engines are like human beings. The late Reverend Teddy Boston, a long-time friend of Wilbert Awdry (who appears in the Railway Series as the Fat Clergyman), once said: 'The steam engine is the nearest thing to a living being made by man'. Certainly Thomas and friends succeed and survive because of their strongly drawn human personalities. Readers – young and old – identify with the engines, sharing in their happiness and their sadness, seeing in the struggles, triumphs and failures of the railway engines a reflection of their own hopes, fears, ambitions and frustrations.

The stories of those engines are now famous throughout the world, and this book – the result of many visits to the Station Master's office – tells how they came to be written and of the man who wrote them.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ‘Eyes full of twinkles’



‘He is not a pretty baby.’ A somewhat uncomplimentary remark, particularly since it was written by the baby’s mother, but there were apparently compensations: he was ‘healthy looking’ and had ‘a quantity of soft brown hair’. Most significantly, he was described as having ‘bright blue-grey eyes that are full of twinkles’.

These notes appear in a stocky manuscript-book, on the inside page of which is inscribed (in strong block capitals) the words: ‘WILBERT VERE AWDRY. RECORD BOOK.’ In over one hundred and sixty pages Wilbert’s mother, Lucy Awdry, lovingly noted just about everything that happened to ‘Baby’ during the first two years of his life, together with press cuttings and dozens of photographs, often framed with decorations delicately painted in watercolours.

One of the first of these, within a border of stylized flowers and foliage, shows Wilbert with a half smile and a bright, focused look that suggests a mix of curiosity and concentration; qualities which, like the twinkling eyes, Wilbert Awdry still possesses.

He arrived at 5.22 on the afternoon of 15 June 1911, at Ampfield Vicarage in Romsey, Hampshire. Lucy Awdry described her newborn son as a short (‘but very perfectly formed’) baby who had ‘long fingers and toes’, a ‘mouse-face’ (with ‘the Awdry chin and ears’) and ‘a loud and persistent voice’. Loud enough to inspire his father, the Reverend Vere Awdry, to pen a little verse in Wilbert’s *Record Book*:

*Who’s dat squalling on Daddy’s bed?  
Little fat baby with face very red.  
Fill his little mouth with a little boiled water,  
Dat’s de bes’ cure for a little cross snorter.*