THE HUNT FOR THE FORGOTTEN STAFF OF CHESTER ROAD RAILWAY STATION

by

Sue Bailey

There is a dearth of information about the lives of the ordinary people who lived and worked in our local area in the Victorian and Edwardian era. British Rail could tell me nothing about the people who worked at Chester Road Railway Station, so I set out to find out for myself.

Chester Road Railway Station was opened on December 1st 1863
(author's copy)

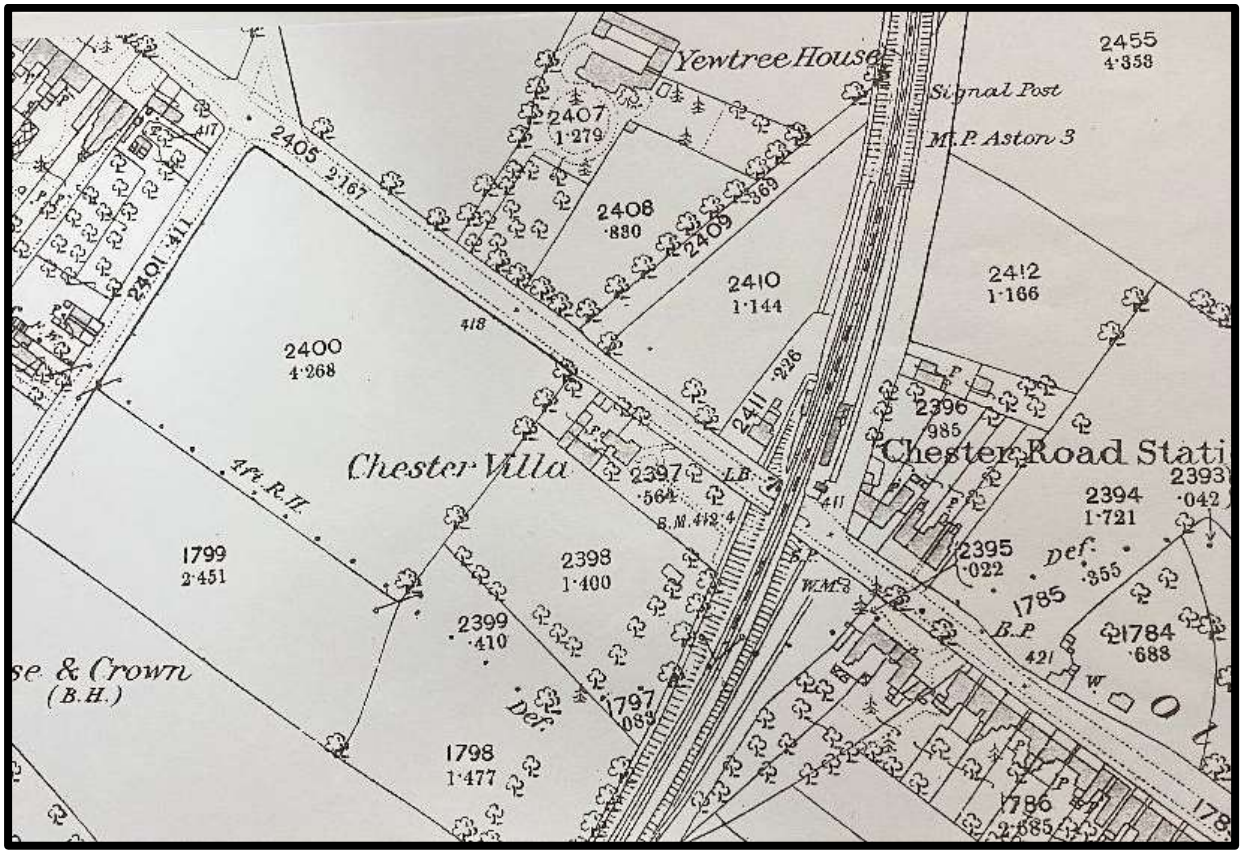
Victorian Station Masters

Within the nineteenth century railway companies there existed two tiers of railway employment. In the top tier there were the clerks (station masters) who were involved with the clerical labour market. It was difficult to enter this market, but, once in, clerks had good promotional prospects, job security, good pay and a monthly salary. In the second tier were the rest of the staff, including signalmen, porters, carriage cleaners and, to some extent, drivers. Paid weekly and with limited advancement opportunities, these employees were highly susceptible to being dismissed at a week's notice.

The early Victorian clerks had skills in "literacy, arithmetic up to vulgar fractions and decimal fractions". Clerks "stood above the manual worker" in the years before and after the railway companies were established. For early railway managers, it was therefore logical to appoint clerks as the early station managers. Many railway companies dubbed them with the title "station clerk".

As the railway industry developed, so did the clerical hierarchies. Subsequently the posts of junior (or apprentice) clerk and chief clerk soon evolved, so that companies were able to cope with the increasing business.

Victorian railway clerks were required to have "sharp intelligence", to be respectable and to possess "adequate education". By 1860 prospective probationary clerks were tested in "writing, spelling, copying and common arithmetic.



Chester Road Station in 1886

The Duties of a Victorian Station Master

The station master would arrive in the morning to find a pile of letters waiting for him. Some might be from Head Office, others from his own staff and some from other station masters. The details of the letters were very varied including "special attention to be given to some old person or child travelling by train", the quick transit of goods, as well as complaints from traders. There were also enquiries from headquarters as to suggested time-table changes, derailments, operating irregularities, staff changes or pay rises. All of these had to be read and responded to.

Next, the station master would receive the night inspector's report that detailed any irregularities as to the running of the trains. After that he would read the signalman's report which explained any delays, most of which he could account for to Head Office without further need for investigation. Every delay in the train service had to be reported to headquarters. Station masters were also responsible for the station's accounts and returns. He had had to check and sign the returns. Accounts had to be settled and claims by traders investigated.

Then he had to do his early morning inspection of the station to check that all was in good order. This encompassed every part of the station, from the waiting rooms to the lavatories. Once or twice a week he made surprise visits to the outlying signal boxes to make sure that all was as it should be. The rest of the day would be filled in attending to a range of issues that arose at the station. It was the duty of the station master to ensure safety and, if possible, to make it possible for trains to continue to run. Blockages such as flooding on the line, a derailment or an accident, had to be dealt with. The station master, unlike other grades of employees, was always supposed to be within reasonable call for cases of urgency, day and night, Sundays and weekdays. From the time he assumed responsibility for the station he practically gave himself wholly to the company's business. He was never truly off duty.

Before World War One station masters were a dedicated group of individuals who were under constant pressure to keep the railways of Great Britain moving. Their jobs, while relatively clean and free from risk of physical harm, were far from easy and, on occasions, very arduous.

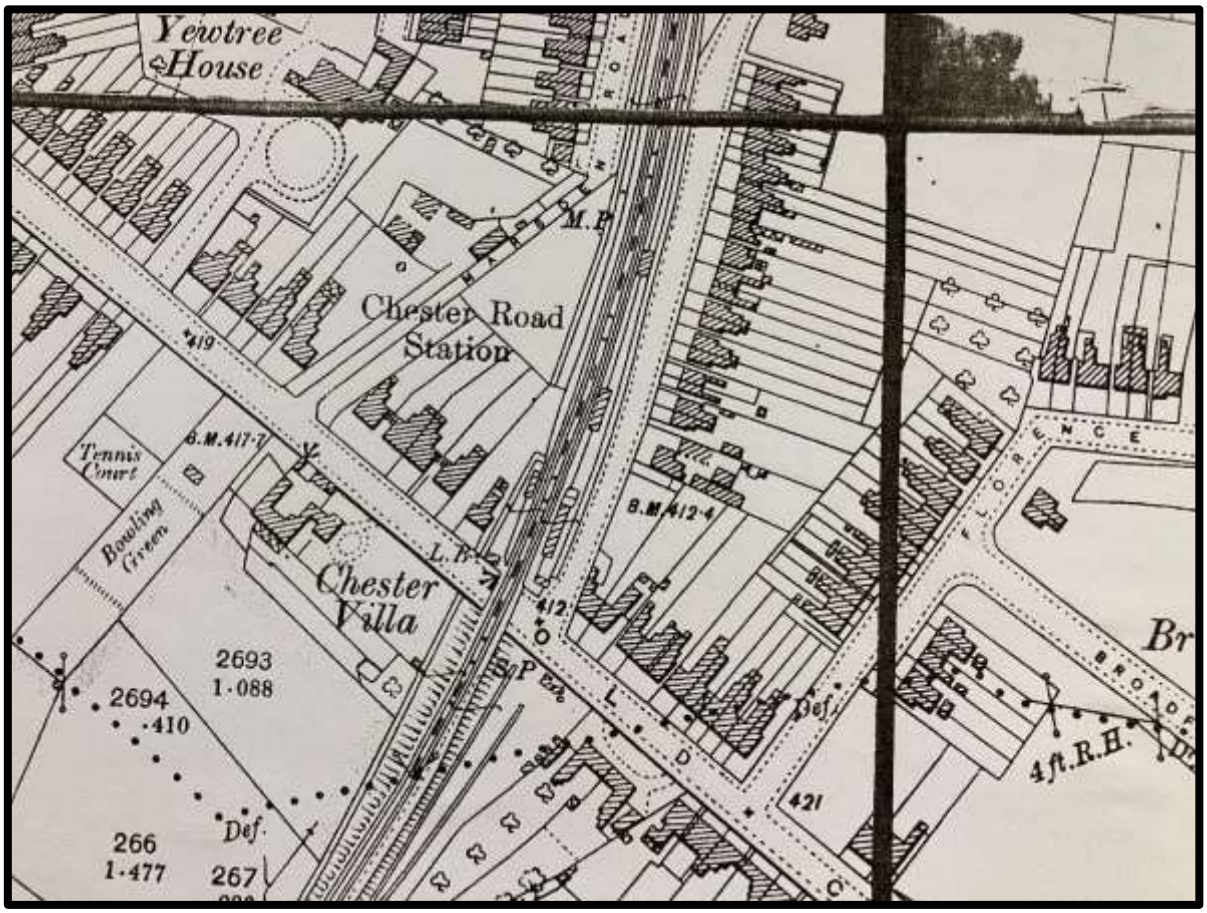
The station master was responsible for the management of other station employees and for the safety and efficient running of the station. At a station the size of Chester Road Railway Station the station master would have had a lot of customer interaction with travelling passengers and would deputise for other members of staff in their absence. The number of employees would vary according to the size of the station. A small station would have a booking clerk (responsible for tickets sales and financial auditing), a porter (responsible for platform safety, luggage transportation and cleaning) and perhaps ancillary staff in catering, left luggage and maintenance roles. A station master might also have day-to-day management of a signalman in the station's signal box.

From the late Victorian era onwards station masters became prominent figures in local communities. They would be provided with a substantial house and, in rural areas particularly, they would have significant social standing

The station master for Chester Road Railway Station lived at Station House on Chester Road, now known as 645, Chester Road. With his uniform, official housing and public prominence, the station master was respected and widely attributed with seniority in the local community. It was common,

especially in rural areas, for the station master to be running a side line or two, to supplement his railway pay packet.

In the Beeching cuts of the 1960s many small stations were closed and the station master's house, along with other railway property, sold off. Number 645, Chester Road (Station House) was in a sad state by 1967 when a local builder bought it and set about rebuilding it completely.



Chester Road Station in 1904

The Station Masters of Chester Road Railway Station

Christopher Thomas Everitt

Christopher Thomas Everitt was born on September 28th 1830 at St. Pancras in Islington.

In 1841 he was living with his father James who was 45, his mother Charlotte who was 40 and his sisters Mary 8, Georgiana 5, and Sophia and Rebecca 2, in Waltham in Essex.

According to the 1851 Census, Christopher was living with the Wright family in Thropston, Northamptonshire where he was working as a grocer's assistant.

In 1852 Christopher married Elizabeth Smith in Grantham, Lincolnshire where she had been born in 1828. Their son William Smith Everitt was born in Grantham in 1853, followed by James Henry in 1854. Their son Robert was born in Worcester in 1857 and Frederick was born in Stechford, Birmingham in 1858.

By 1861 Christopher was the Railway Station Agent at Stechford Railway Station.

According to the 1871 Census, Elizabeth, Robert 14 and Frederick 13, were living in Yardley, Solihull. James 16, was living with the Smith family in Dale End, Birmingham and working as an apprentice. William aged 18 was living with the Blakeway family in Stourbridge and working as an assistant grocer.

By 1881 Christopher was the station master at Chester Road Railway Station. He, Elizabeth and Frederick were living in Station House. Frederick was working as a silversmith. Christopher was still working as the station master in 1991 according to the census. Frederick died in 1897 aged 39.

By 1901 Christopher had retired as the station master and was living with Elizabeth at Fern Villa on Green Lanes, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield.

Christopher died in September 1901. In his Will he left £2,780 17s 10d to his wife Elizabeth and to Joseph Thomas Southern, a boot and shoe dealer who lived in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

Joseph Thomas Birks

Joseph Thomas Birks was born in 1850 in Ladywood, Birmingham.

In 1861 he was living with his father William Mann Birks, a cabinet maker, and his mother Alice on Ladypool Road, Birmingham.

Joseph 21, was living in a boarding house in Dudley, Worcester in 1871. He was working as a railway porter.

In 1873 he became the station master at Upper Church Lane in Dudley. In that year he also married Emily Carter in Dudley.

By 1881 Joseph was the station master at Ocker Hill Road (Allcock Street) in Tipton, Dudley. He and Emily had three children. Eliza was 7, Edgar was 4 and Alice was 3 weeks old.

In the 1891 Census, Joseph is listed as the railway clerk at Oldbury Road Station, Smethwick . He and his family were living at 63, Oldbury Road, Smethwick, Harborne.

By 1896 he was the station master at Chester Road Railway Station.

In 1901 Joseph was the station master living at 148, Chester Road with Emily and their son Thomas aged 24 who was a railway clerk.

In 1911 Joseph moved to “Greenhill” on Marston Road, next to the railway station and became a coal agent.

He was living at 8, Marston Road in 1927. By then Emily had died.

By 1939 Joseph was a widower living with his son Thomas, a butcher, on Longmoor Road, Solihull.

Joseph died in 1945 aged 96.

Chester Road Station (Date unknown)
(Author’s copy)

Thomas Whitehead

Thomas Whitehead was born on August 5th 1878 in Birmingham.

By the time he was 13 he was working as an errand boy and living with his parents, 3 brothers and 3 sisters.

In 1911 he was working as a railway porter.

By 1912 he was employed as the station master at Chester Road Railway Station. He managed the station until 1921.

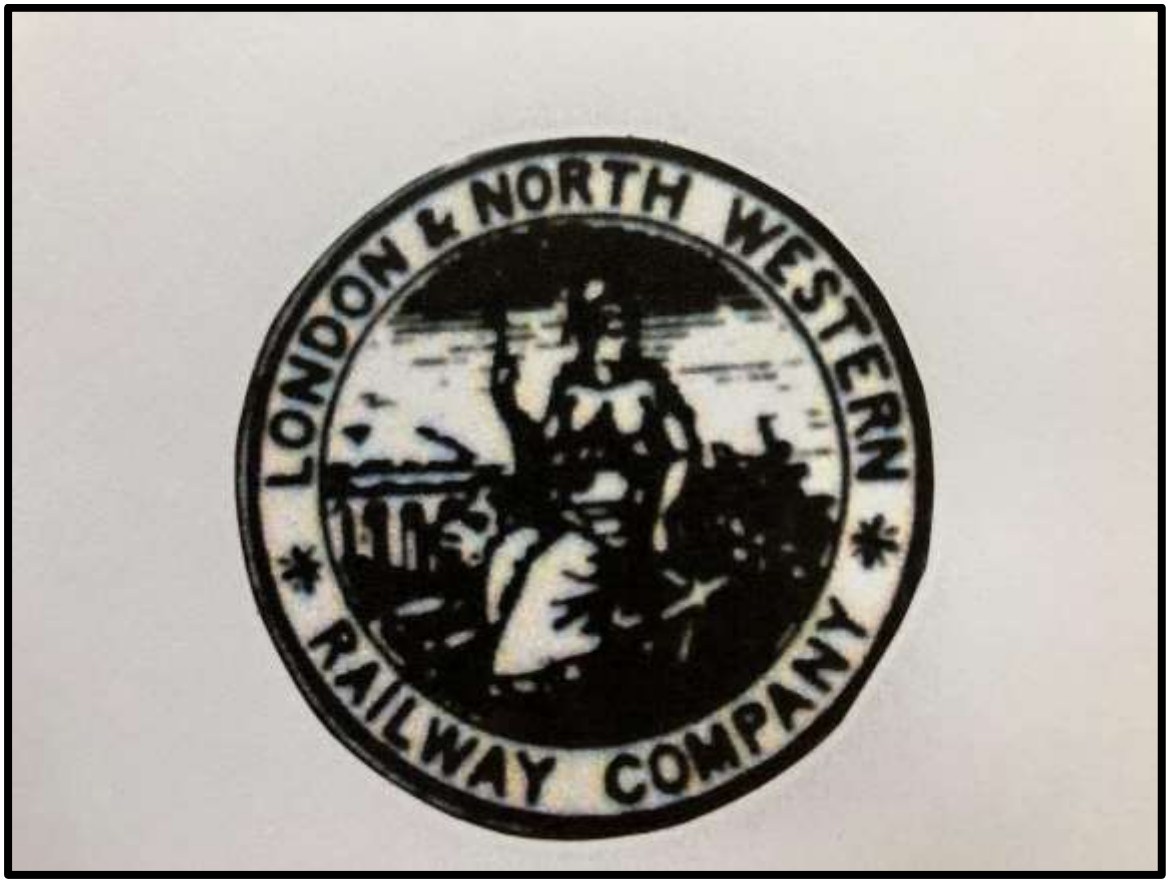
In 1939 he was employed as a railway goods checker at Lawley Street Goods Station.

Thomas died on October 25th 1940 aged 62.

Harold John Scott

Harold John Scott was born on September 30th 1892 in Mill Green, Staffordshire. His father Charles was a road foreman for Staffordshire County Council.

In 1901 he was living in Mill Green with his parents, brother Allan 10 and sisters Lucy 7 and Mabel 4.



London & North Western Railway Company Logo

Harold began working for the London and North Western Railway Company in 1907 when he was 14.

In 1911 he was the railway clerk at Blake Street Station in Sutton Coldfield.

He married Martha Dainty in 1915 and by 1921 he was employed as a booking clerk alongside 39 other men at Sutton Coldfield Railway Station. The family were living at 43, Lyndon Road, Sutton Coldfield.

In 1924 Harold became the station master at Chester Road Railway Station.

By 1939 Harold, Martha and their 8 children were living at 80, Station Road, Wylde Green.

Harold died on October 20th 1959 aged 67.

William Daniel Jacques

William Daniel Jacques was born on July 1st 1872 in Southwell, Nottinghamshire.

In 1881 he was living at Station House in Fairfield, Derbyshire where his father was the station master. William was one of 13 children. One of his older brothers was employed as a railway goods clerk.
By 1891 William was working as a railway clerk in Bootle, Liverpool. He was living as a boarder in the home of his future father-in-law.

He married Susannah Halewood in West Derby in 1895. They had a daughter born in 1897 and a son born in 1899.

By 1901 William and his family were living in Spondon, Derbyshire where he was working as a railway clerk.

In 1911 William was employed as a railway clerk in Clifton, County Antrim. Widowed William was living with his fourteen year old daughter and twelve year old son. His wife had died early in that year.

By 1929 William was the station master at Chester Road Railway Station.

In 1931 he married Winifred Harriet Evans in Stoke.

By 1939 he had retired and was living with Winifred in Hastings, Sussex.

William died aged 73 on August 22nd 1945 in Stroud, Gloucestershire .

John (Jack) Howard Gilbert

John (Jack) Howard Gilbert was born in 1893.

In 1901 he was living at Station Cottages, Four Oaks in Sutton Coldfield. His father John was working as a platelayer for the London and North Western Railway.

By 1911 Jack was working as a milkman biller, still living with his parents and five brothers and sisters at Station Cottages.

Jack, like his father, became a railway platelayer. By 1915 he had joined the King's Royal Rifle Corps.

In 1918 Jack married Lilian Smith in Aston. Jack and Lilian were living with her parents at 28, Johnson Road, Erdington with their baby daughter in 1921. Jack was working as a civil engineer for the London and North Western Railway Company.

By 1931 the family were living at 645, Chester Road and Jack was employed as the station master until 1934.

By 1939 Jack and Lilian had three children and had moved a few doors along the Chester Road. Jack was once again working as a railway engineer. They were living next door to his father who had retired as a railway platelayer.

Jack died on January 18th 1967 aged 74. He is buried in Sutton Coldfield Cemetery.

Chester Road Railway Station Staff

Francis (Frank) Henshaw Faulkner

Francis (Frank) Henshaw Faulkner was born on September 8th 1877 in West Bromwich, Staffordshire. He was the youngest of five children.

In 1891 he was living with his parents and siblings in Kings Norton, Birmingham. He was working as a baker's assistant.

By 1899 he had married his wife Eleanor and they had a baby son. In 1901 they were living in Selly Oak where Frank was working as a domestic groom.

In 1903 Frank began working for the London and North Western Railway Company as a parcel porter at New Street Station.

During World War One Frank was a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps.

In 1921 he was living at 64, Lottie Road in Selly Oak and working as a porter at New Street Station.

By 1935 Frank and Eleanor were living at Station House 645, Chester Road where Frank was the Railway Guard until 1951.

Frank died aged 74 on February 14th 1951.

Frank Charles Brown

Frank Charles Brown was born at 3, Coton Lane, Erdington in 1893. He was baptised at Saint Barnabas Church in Erdington on March 5th 1893. His mother Mary Jane Brown died in 1901 when Frank was eight. She is buried in Saint Barnabas churchyard.

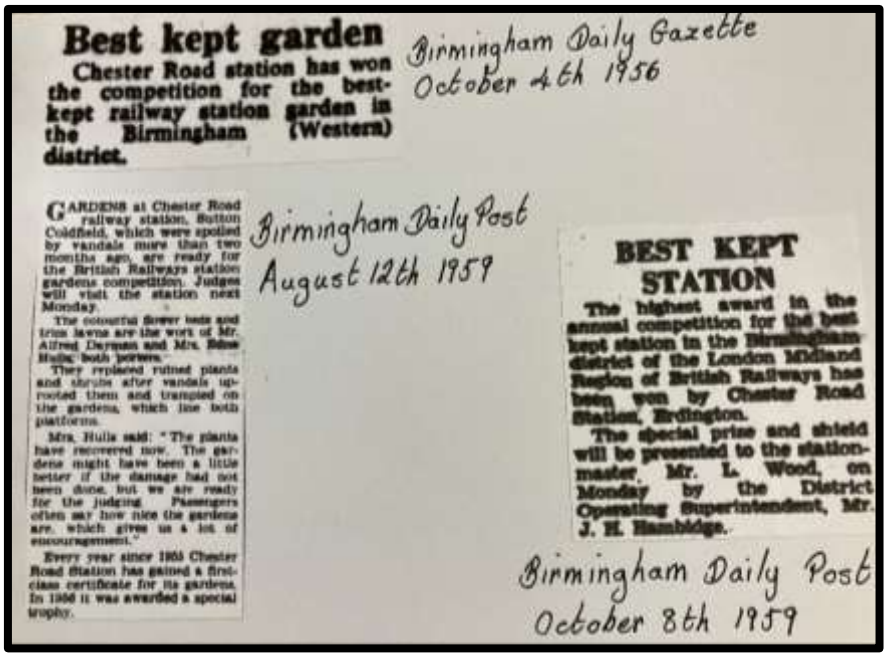
Frank had a twin sister and a step-brother who was born in 1905 after his father remarried.

While Frank was working at Chester Road Station he enlisted in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in 1916.

Frank was killed in action on August 8th 1916 at the Somme in France. He was twenty-three years old.

Best kept Railway Station Garden in Birmingham

Every year since 1955 Chester Road Station gained a first-class certificate for its gardens. In 1956, 1961 and 1962 it was awarded the Best-kept Railway Station Garden in Birmingham. In 1959 it was awarded a special prize and shield for the Best-kept Station. This was presented to the station master Mr. L Wood. Porters Mrs. Edna Hulls and Mr Alfred Dayman were the members of staff who planted and maintained the gardens.



Best kept garden

Chester Road station has won the competition for the best-kept railway station garden in the Birmingham (Western) district.

Birmingham Daily Gazette
October 4th 1956

GARDENS at Chester Road railway station, Sutton Coldfield, which were spoiled by vandals more than two months ago, are ready for the British Railways station gardens competition. Judges will visit the station next Monday.

The colourful flower beds and grass lawns are the work of Mr. Alfred Dayman and Mrs. Edna Hulls, both porters.

They replaced ruined plants and shrubs after vandals uprooted them and trampled on the gardens, which line both platforms.

Mrs. Hulls said: "The plants have recovered now. The gardens might have been a little better if the damage had not been done, but we are ready for the judging. Passengers often say how nice the gardens are, which gives us a lot of encouragement."

Every year since 1955 Chester Road Station has gained a first-class certificate for its gardens. In 1956 it was awarded a special trophy.

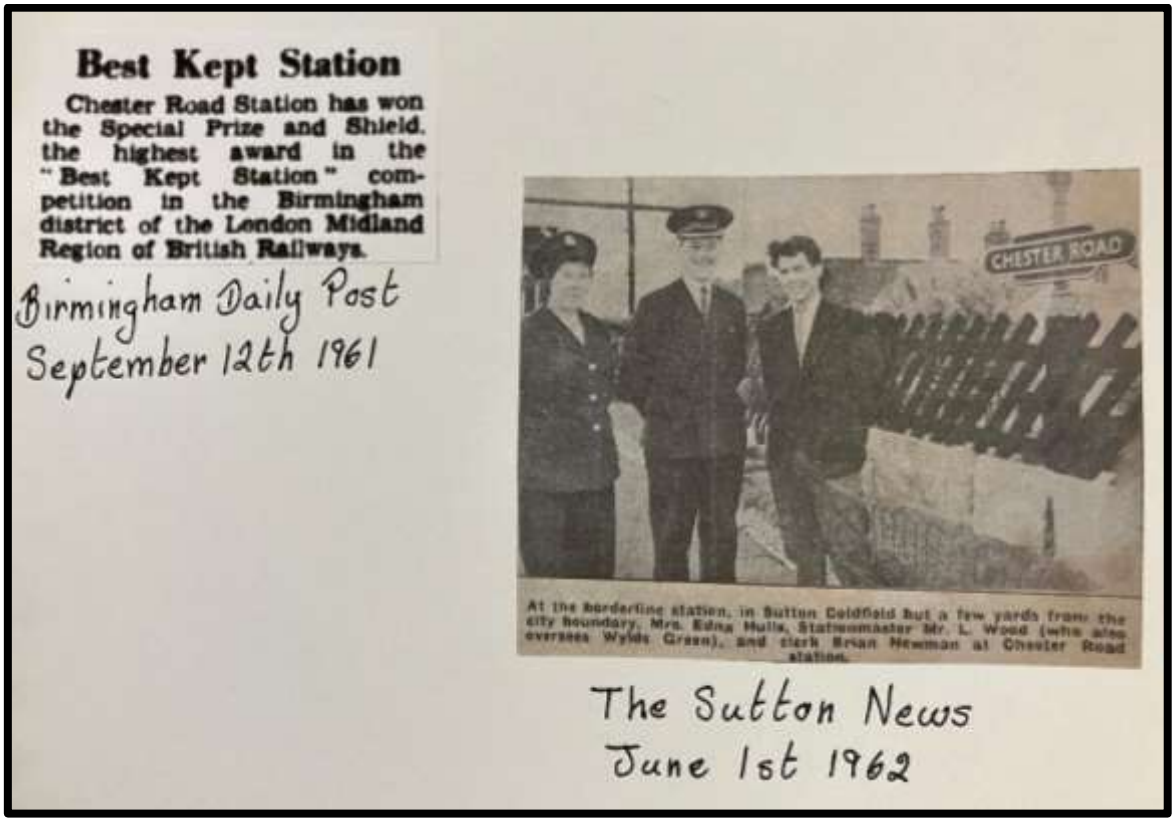
Birmingham Daily Post
August 12th 1959

BEST KEPT STATION

The highest award in the annual competition for the best kept station in the Birmingham district of the London Midland Region of British Railways has been won by Chester Road Station, Erdington.

The special prize and shield will be presented to the station-master, Mr. L. Wood, on Monday by the District Operating Superintendent, Mr. J. H. Hambidge.

Birmingham Daily Post
October 8th 1959



Best Kept Station

Chester Road Station has won the Special Prize and Shield, the highest award in the "Best Kept Station" competition in the Birmingham district of the London Midland Region of British Railways.

Birmingham Daily Post
September 12th 1961

At the borderline station, in Sutton Coldfield but a few yards from the city boundary, Mrs. Edna Hulls, Stationmaster Mr. L. Wood (who also oversees Wylde Green), and clerk Brian Newman at Chester Road station.

The Sutton News
June 1st 1962

SOURCES

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With special thanks to Richard Bullock, Michael Brittain, David Clark, groover 5177 and Marianne Marzipan, who kindly allowed the life stories of their relatives to be included in this publication. Grateful thanks also to Janet Jordan for her technical help.

Sue Bailey
March 2023