

Centre for Lifelong Learning

Assessment Cover Sheet for Anonymous Marking

**Module title:** 15/16 RS T3 – British Railway Workers  
**Module code:** CED00009M  
**Module level:** M  
**Tutor:** David Turner

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**Tutor's comments:**

*General Comments*

This is a very good piece of work that describes well the career of Thomas within the context of the available literature. You have shown a good understanding of the literature available and have gone off the reading list, which is to be commended. The work shows a maturity of approach, is well written and is well structured, and has chosen relevant topics for discussion. The referencing format is excellent. In places it would have been nice to have had a little more clarity and on occasion more discussion of the debates in the literature would have been welcome, although the limited word count is appreciated, and a lot has been fitted in.

*Actions to improve*

- If there is a debate in the literature, make sure you discuss it fully.
- On occasion there are points there are elements that could be elaborated on more fully.

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**2<sup>nd</sup> Marker's comments:**

This is a good piece of work that sticks closely to the brief, and is a very good summary of Thomas' career and some of the big issues involved in it. To improve, try to push your arguments a little bit further. Well done!

Signature: D A Turner (1 <sup>st</sup> marker)	Mark/Grade: 68	Date: 27/06/2016
Signature: K D Tennent (2 <sup>nd</sup> marker)	Mark/Grade: 68	Date: 24/07/16

### The career of a British railway worker between 1825 and 1914: William Thomas

The Great Western Railway (GWR) staff register records William Thomas as nearly 15 years of age when he was employed at Swansea High St Goods office as a Messenger in October 1881 at a weekly wage of 10/- (ten shillings), and though he had some promotions his 'career' ended with dismissal at age 47 in January 1914 after some disciplinary episodes. That career seems to offer illustrations of how the railways sometimes recruited, progressed and disciplined their staff in the late nineteenth century.

South Wales was a distinctive 'region' of the UK at the time, with agricultural labour declining more than the UK average between 1850 and 1911, and while most other demands for labour in the region were expanding more slowly, those of mining, metals and rail were growing faster there than the UK average during the same period (mining most spectacularly).<sup>1</sup> Although one might wonder what the youth William had been doing between leaving school and starting at the GWR, in 1881 the railway would have been a good job with prospects. He could have earned more in the future as a coalmining labourer, when older, (2s.10d per day in 1888<sup>2</sup>), but 10s a week would have been an attractive option for a youth of that age capable of working in an office.

This was especially true since clerical work, even when more poorly paid, carried a higher social status than manual work on the railways<sup>3</sup>, as elsewhere at the time. Such work was not easy – as is described in McKenna's anecdotal descriptions<sup>4</sup> – but it was more regular and secure than agricultural labour or most other industries<sup>5</sup>.

Thomas's appointment reflected a version of the policy of the GWR described by Savage<sup>6</sup>, by which youths were appointed as 'lad clerks', received annual wage increases, and then took adult clerical work (if successful in a competitive exam)

<sup>1</sup> EH Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain 1850-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon 1973), 150

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 72

<sup>3</sup> Frank McKenna, *The Railway Workers 1840-1970*, (London: Faber & Faber 1980), 105 & 107

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 102-3

<sup>5</sup> PW Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen* (London: Frank Cass 1970), 168

<sup>6</sup> Mike Savage, "Chapter 5: Discipline, Surveillance and the 'Career' - Employment" from *Foucault, management and organization theory: from panopticon to technologies of self*, (London: Sage 1998), 81. Also Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 60-1

**Commented [DT1]:** Good introduction. Maybe it might have been nice to say where he ended up.

**Commented [KT2]:** Good intro.

**Commented [DT3]:** This could be a bit clearer – declining in size?.

**Commented [DT4]:** It might have been nice to have some figures.

**Commented [DT5]:** Perhaps outline what made him capable.

**Commented [DT6]:** Okay, good consideration. But when you say 'not easy' you have to be more precise.

**Commented [DT7]:** Good!

– his starting wage was comparable with the £20 per annum cited by Savage<sup>7</sup>, and it increased by a weekly 2/- for each of the next four years. Young Mr Thomas may or may not have then taken such an exam, but in any case he progressed not into mainstream clerical work but into the more modest role of ‘office porter’ in 1886 before becoming a ‘policeman’ in 1888 and moving to Westbourne Park, near Paddington.

**Commented [DT8]:** Just mention his wage here to keep the comparison in the readers eye.

This move illustrates that such staff were prepared to make a major geographical move – though of course we don’t know whether the move was instigated by employee or employer on this occasion. Kingsford states that mobility was often a condition of promotion, citing figures from the London, Brighton & South Coast and the Great Northern from the 1850s and 1860s to evidence this<sup>8</sup>, but Thomas’s promotion was a relatively lowly one, and a move from Swansea to London was untypical of the more usual pattern where it was mainly higher status workers such as station masters or clerks who relocated<sup>9</sup> – perhaps there was a personal or family reason.

**Commented [DT9]:** Give a bit more detail.

**Commented [DT10]:** In the LBSCR?

For the GWR, like other railway companies, it was part of their staffing policy that they might appoint a young current employee with proven experience and (at that time) good behaviour to the ‘policeman’ role near Paddington rather than hire a local person of unknown quantity<sup>10</sup>. Some scholars have sought over-elaborate explanations as to why rail companies should have developed this ‘internal labour market’ policy<sup>11</sup> – in time some companies were later to discover the drawback of not having some fresh blood near the top of the organisation – but to my mind the precedent provided by the armed forces made it the more obvious approach to take at that time. Railways operated complex processes (both manual and clerical), and it was attractive to be able to appoint staff who had shown that they understood them and operated them reliably, even though the GWR was forced to employ a large number of supernumeraries as goods porters (for example) in the 1860s and 1870s<sup>12</sup>.

**Commented [KT11]:** What did the policeman role typically involve?

**Commented [DT12]:** Name them in the text.

**Commented [DT13]:** If you reference a debate or argument, discuss them. This shows your knowledge of the literature and the debates at hand. More information on the content of Howlett’s articles would be welcome.

**Commented [DT14]:** Reference here please.

**Commented [DT15]:** Do not say ‘to my mind’. Unless you say otherwise, it is all your opinion.

<sup>7</sup> Savage, “Discipline, Surveillance and the Career”, 81

<sup>8</sup> PW Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen* (London: Frank Cass 1970), 144

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, also 144-5

<sup>10</sup> Savage, “Discipline, Surveillance and the Career”, 81

<sup>11</sup> e.g. Peter Howlett, “The internal labour dynamics of the Great Eastern Railway Company, 1870-1913” (*Economic History Review*, LVII, 2 2004), 397

<sup>12</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 150

As with all such job hierarchies, this can be mutually beneficial for both employer and employee as the worker continues to gain promotions through working effectively and reliably, as Thomas seems to have done at first: He was promoted to Ticket Collector in 1889, and then moved to Slough, also as Ticket Collector in 1890. During this period he continued to gain a shilling a week each year on his wages, suggesting that at least for him the policy of an annual increment was still being operated by the GWR. In 1891 his move was, from my interpretation of the **handwriting in the ledger**, to Landore, a 'Ticket Platform' between Swansea and Neath<sup>13</sup>. But by then staying there for possibly thirteen years, and as Ticket Collector it would seem, and receiving an increment less frequently, his upward progress had frozen - **which is when the mutually beneficial relationship can break down.**<sup>14</sup> **Kingsford reports a similar syndrome, albeit for an earlier period with other companies**<sup>15</sup>. **But he does cite the GWR when offering evidence that 160 out of 286 resignations of porters and police in 1869 stated that they were either "dissatisfied" or moving to a "better place"**<sup>16</sup>. **Although there is no specific evidence that Thomas experienced this 'career frustration' it is notable that until 1903 there was no entry on his disciplinary record, but on 2 October that year a lost a day's pay for absenting himself from duty. On 1 April 1904 he was found to be asleep on duty, and was "suspended" and "removed", to be rapidly followed by 26 April 1904 when he was "reduced" for "Neglect of duty". In practice the ledger shows that he was moved to Llanelli, and then Neath shortly afterwards, although still as Ticket Collector, but with a wage reduced by four shillings from 29/- to 25/-. The ledger records no attempt at an explanation for Mr Thomas's behaviour (or of the adjudicator's thinking), which may have been a complete departure from the past, or it may have been that Thomas had always been on the fringe of misbehaviour, but which had not previously have been recorded.**

March 1905 found Thomas absent from duty and in a pub - "removed and suspended for 7 days" - and in October 1905 he became a "Timekeeper" at New

<sup>13</sup> An early GWR timetable showing this 'platform' can be found at [http://library-2.lse.ac.uk/collections/pamphlets/document\\_service/HE1\\_42/00000481/doc.pdf](http://library-2.lse.ac.uk/collections/pamphlets/document_service/HE1_42/00000481/doc.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Savage, "Discipline, Surveillance and the Career", 85, makes a similar argument

<sup>15</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 141-2

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 146

**Commented [DT16]:** Yes, it was a bit unclear, wasn't it.

**Commented [DT17]:** Good!

**Commented [KT18]:** Interesting - is it possible that Thomas' performance in his more glamorous role had not been entirely satisfactory?

**Commented [DT19]:** You might just have wanted to cite the research on promotion rates - i.e. the slow down - in Savage's work.

**Commented [DT20]:** Good!

**Commented [DT21]:** Good consideration.

Milford (which later became Neyland, Milford Haven), with a wage now reduced to 23/-. Although he was moved again, as a policeman, to Fishguard Harbour, in 1906, his wage did not again reach his former 1904 peak of 29/-until September 1911.

This record of Thomas's misdemeanours is in keeping with Savage's finding that the GWR had largely ceased fining staff as a punishment by 1900, but was by then relying increasingly on cautioning, suspensions and reductions in pay<sup>17</sup>. To the modern eye it might seem remarkable that he was not dismissed in 1905 for a repeated offence of absence, though Kingsford reports that by the 1860s, although the GWR did continue to dismiss for absence, the need to do so was declining<sup>18</sup>. But if any credibility is to be attached to Simmons's colourful memoirs, then such absenting behaviour was not that unusual in the nineteenth century GWR<sup>19</sup>, and is consistent with the 'local customary' behaviour described by Edwards and Whitston<sup>20</sup>, who additionally confirm that the GWR ceased to fine offenders after 1900<sup>21</sup>.

The ledger finally records without explanation that Mr Thomas was "Dismissed" in January 1914- when aged 47. It is unlikely that the union would have been allowed formally to defend him, if there had been a new offence, since a union (limited) role in disciplinary proceedings was not established until 1916/17<sup>22</sup>. For a man who had only ever worked on the railway, re-employment prospects would have been, at best, uncertain<sup>23</sup>.

1293, plus 26 in footnotes

<sup>17</sup> Savage, "Discipline, Surveillance and the Career", 79. Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 23-5, also attests the frequent GWR practice of fining offenders before 1900.

<sup>18</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 21-2

<sup>19</sup> Ernest J. Simmons, *Memoirs of a station master*, (London: Adams & Dart 1879)

<sup>20</sup> Paul K Edwards & Colin Whitston, "Disciplinary Practice: A Study of Railways in Britain, 1860-1988", *Work, Employment & Society*, (Vol 8, No.3, September 1994), 322

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 328

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 324

<sup>23</sup> Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 151

Commented [DT22]: Good paragraph.

Commented [KT23]: But why did they become more lenient?

Commented [DT24]: Which union. You also assuming that he was a member. Perhaps you could have talked about the likelihood of him being a member.

Exam No: Y3835665

**Biography:**

Bibliography and References

Edwards, Paul K, & Whitston, Colin, "Disciplinary Practice: A Study of Railways in Britain, 1860-1988", *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol 8, No.3, September 1994, 317-337

Howlett, Peter, "The internal labour dynamics of the Great Eastern Railway Company, 1870-1913" *Economic History Review*, LVII, 2 2004, 396 422

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Simmons, Ernest J., *Memoirs of a station master 1879*, London: Adams & Dart 1974