

THE BALLAD OF JOHN AXON

Broadcast 2 July 1958, repeated 5 August 1958, 22 May 1960, 11 June 1963

Note that the original broadcast was a 45-minute version.

Singers	Musicians	Named Speakers
Ewan MacColl	Peggy Seeger banjo	Gladys Axon
Bert Lloyd	Bruce Turner clar	Ron Scanlon
Isla Cameron	Brian Daly guit	Jack Pickford
Fitzroy Coleman	Fitzroy Coleman guit	Alec Watts
Stan Kelly-Bootle	Terry Brown trum	Jim Howarth
Dick Loveless	Bobby Mickleburgh trom	Kenneth Pearson
Charles Mayo	Billy Loch drums	Alfred Ball
Colin Dunn	Jim Bray dbass	Joseph Leckie School
Dominic Behan ¹	John Cole harm	Harborne Parish Choir
	Bob Clark fid	
	Alf Edwards ² conc	

¹ not credited

² in the hour-long, not the 45-minute, version

Text

1

**John Axon was a railway man to steam trains born and bred.
He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed.
For forty years he followed and served the iron way.
He lost his life upon the track one February day.**

Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, 10th of July 1957

Sir,

I have the honour to report the result of my inquiry into the collision which occurred on Saturday the 9th of February 1957, when the 11.05 am freight train from Buxton to Arpley got out of control as it was descending a steep incline on the down line and overtook and collided violently with the rear of the 8.45 am freight train from Rowsley to Edgley. I regret to report that driver Axon, and the guard of the Rowsley freight train, were killed.

We present: The Ballad of John Axon, the real life story of a railwayman told by the men who knew him and worked with him, and set into song by Ewan MacColl.

The year was 1957, the morning bright and gay,
On the 9th of February John Axon drove away.
In a class 8 locomotive from Buxton he did go:
On the road to Chapel-en-le Frith his steam brake pipe did blow.

It's a seven-mile drop from Bibbington Top, oh Johnny,
It's 1 in 58 and you've no steam brake, oh Johnny,
She's picking up speed and the power is freed; it's a prayer you'll need,
But you'll never make it, Johnny.

It's hell on a plate, it's a funeral freight, oh Johnny,
It's the end of a dream in steel and steam, oh Johnny,
There's a world in your head and you're due at the shed and there's life ahead
But you'll never see it, Johnny.

CRASH.

2.

It was four a.m. that Saturday John Axon left his bed,
At five he drew his time-card at Edgeley loco shed,
Just after six Ron Scanlon his fireman cried 'Away' -
It was a day no different from any other day.

It was still dark when I got to the shed that Saturday morning. Jack was waiting there - 'Come on, Ron', he said, 'We want to get finished.' Let me see, you're never early at that time of the morning - it's bad enough having to get there at the right time! And as I walked in the driver's lobby there were a lot of choice comments going on around about the weather.

Morning Ronnie, Morning Ernest. Morning. Very rough, yes, 156 please, Johnny, thank you. Too rough. What engine have we got? 8188. All ready? Right.... You what? Said we'd better go.

Come on let's go and get ready. I'm in a reet mood this morning. Eh dear. Never mind, life's comfortable.

3

The iron road is a hard road and the work is never ending,
Working night and day on the iron way -
We're the boys who keep the engines rolling.

Engine driver's got to be in the blood for a start. If it's not in your blood to stand the erratic hours you'll never stand the pace. You see, as a young lad at 15 years of age you're prepared for all this, and the railway life, to my mind, to the proper railwayman, it always comes first. Well, I started when I were, well I was just turned 14 when I started. You just went to your work with your, your chuck under your arm and that was that, you were brought up to it, and that's why today you'll get - the, the,

the proper driver, he thinks nothing of going to London and booking off because railways, it's in his blood.

The old railwayman, it was a tradition, it was part of your life, it went through... railways went through the back of your spine like Blackpool went through rock.

**You sign on at the loco shed, they put you through the cleaning,
In your dungarees, cleaning Super D's, you're a -
Sweeper-upper, brewer-upper, shovel-slinger, spanner-bringer, steam-raiser,
fire-dropper, general-cook and bottle-washer, learning how to keep 'em rolling.
Hey lad will you fetch me a bucket of red oil for a red tail lamp.
Charlie!
Hey Charlie!
On your toes - clean that muck out of number 5,
Look alive there,
Get weaving -
Where've you been for that oil, Arabia?
See the job on number 3 they've got to strip her.
Ginger!
Leave the job you're working on - help the fitter -
Hold the light, pass the wrench, a one-inch spanner up the bench, a one-inch reamer.
Hey cleaner.
Do this, do that, get me this, get me that, rush job on number 8, working late, got a date, I'll never make it.
You'll have to break it.
Just a bloody skivvy, that's me.
Two years, five years, ten years, fifteen years a cleaner!**

Oh, ah, when the work interferes with the girls, well you give up the work you see, aha.

I started on the railway when I was 15, and I was 32 before I was made a registered book fireman.

**When you've done your time at the loco shed and had your share of trouble,
On the open plate you're the driver's mate and you're married to a lousy shovel.**

Come on let's have a little bit of hush in here. Come on! Come on, I have to get up in the morning not same as you, resting all night. 8188. Old tools, don't mind myself, I'm in good condition. Not been resting all night... Bottle of oil. I'll bring the other one when I've used this. That all right? Yes. OK and how do you feel? Slept very well. Very well, you look it and all.

**It's check the water, check the tools and chuck the blooming coal in,
Give the gauge a wipe, check injector pipe,
Now it's swing your shovel at the double, give her rock, watch the clock, steam-raising,
sweat-running, back-aching, bone-shaking - Fireman, fireman, keep her rolling.**

You know, when I first started firing we had what they call now the well tender - you had to shovel the coal right off the level of the footplate, and it were real hard work because you had to raunge down with your back to get hold of your coal to get it into't firebox. But then they brought married man's tender out. Oh and wasn't that a dream - you hadn't got bend as far, you could just shovel t'coal and into't firebox it went... And By Gad all't married men took another lease on life.

You bend your back almost double.
Feed that coal-hungry fire, swing that shovel, that's a fireman's trade.
You've got your long-handled shovel.
Three and a half feet of sweat-polished wood and a narrow steel blade.

Swing your long-handled shovel.
Hear that shovel ring.
Swing your steel-bladed shovel.
Hear the fire sing.
Give us some rock, a round at a time, party your signal along the line....

Put your weight behind your shovel.
From your middle, swing.
Swing your steel-bladed shovel.
From your shoulders, swing.
One at the front, one at the back,
One at each side, and that's the knack.
Sweat on your back, sweat in your eyes,
Feed the fire, the steam'll rise,
Bend and thrust, lift and turn,
There's nine tons of coal to burn
Breathing steam, swallowing coal,
Brace your legs to take the roll.

Now fireman, come on, she's lagging, get some rock on.

You've got your long-handled shovel -
Then make it ring.
Take your steel-bladed shovel -
On the tender ring.
Sweating it out, eight hours a day. Earning your keep, on the iron way.

You know, drivers are not all the same, some can make it hard for a fireman, some can make it easy, but Jack Axon was one of those that made it very easy for a fireman. I mean, he was always ready for a joke and, well he, it made the day seem short, while you were at work. He was a grand chap.

When you've shovelled a million tons of coal,
Some ten or twelve years later,
And your only dream is of raising steam,
Then they hand to you your driver's papers

Hello, what time's your broadsheet please? Give me a 71 card please? 71. ...very much.

I was 21 years on the footplate before I was passed as a driver. I went out for the first time in 1920, and after 21 years I was passed as a driver. And I always remember this - that the old driver that I fired for used to tell me - 'Wait till you get to be a driver, and you'll find out that you go home more tired than you did as a fireman'. And I never used to believe him, but it's true.

**You're on your own, mate,
King of the footplate.
You've got a load, mate, watch the road, mate.
Get her through mate, it's up to you, mate.**

**She's a class eight engine,
She's as tough as they come
Weighs well over 100 tons.
She's a puller, an iron horse.
You've got nine tons of coal,
You've got four thousand gallons of water.
You've got a measure,
Her boiler pressure is
Two hundred and twenty five pounds an inch.
You've got a snorter.**

In the old days, that engine was his life. It was his child. You had some... they had all different ideas - yellow fat for to keep her from running hot and you had some with a thick dick plastering it down the axle boxes. They all had their own little ideas, but he maintained he was keeping that engine on the road by hook or by crook because the, their whole life was round the engine.

4

It doesn't matter where you come from, what colour you are, what religion. Anything, it doesn't make any difference, if you've got that feeling that you want to be a driver, if you've got it in your blood, you'll make a railwayman. You see there's one thing about railway work, especially footplate work - you must have a leaning for that job. I've had a West Indian fireman with me, on long distance trains, and he's been as good a fireman as I've ever had on the job. He definitely has it in his blood, and he comes from Jamaica.

**You give her water, you give her coal,
Hand on the regulator, watch her roll.
Mama, I swear as long as I live, going to serve me steam locomotive.
Dirty tunnels, blinding smoke,
Cover your head, mate, or else you'll choke
Mama me heart and me soul I give, going to serve the steam locomotive.**

**Got me paddle iron, that's a ten foot spoon,
Got me pricker and me dart like a long harpoon,**

**Mama, I tell you positive, going to serve me steam locomotive.
You've got to watch the line
And get her there in time
And keep her rolling,
Keep your hand on the brake
She's a monster, mate, that you're controlling,
You can sing the praises of the aviators,
Rocket pilots and ocean navigators,
Arctic explorers and deep sea divers, but me, I sing of the engine drivers.
Mama, listen to me narrative, going to serve me steam locomotive.**

What a feeling you have when you get off the shed. You've got the engine, you've got the control of it, and what a feeling, I'm cock of the bank. There's nobody can take a rise out of me now, she's mine. Come on, me old beauty - and off we go. The moon's out, and the countryside it's lovely. Look at that hill over there with the moon shining on it and the trees and the valley. It's beautiful. On we go, what a feeling. She answers to every touch. Some more rock on, lad. Yes it's grand. Ooh look, they're lit up in the mill across the way. Somebody else is working on nights besides us. Eee look there - sun's coming over the hills, and what a sight. England at dawn. It's been worth losing a night's sleep for, this has, if only the people of England could see it. England, England - and there's nowhere like it at dawn.

Hello, Bobby, yeah, 8188 Light to Adswood, 6.11 Buxton right, righto mate.

Well, here we go again.

**The iron road is a hard road and the work is never-ending,
Working night and day on the iron way,
With our
Loco drivers, early-risers, lodging-turners, Pile-burners, eleven-quid-a-week-earners -
We're the boys who keep 'em rolling.**

5

**The rain was gently falling when they started down the line,
And on the way to Buxton the sun began to shine,
But the steam brake pipe was leaking and a wisp of steam did rise -
The fireman he reported this when in Buxton they arrived.**

When we left Edgeley it was raining cats and dogs, but on the way up it cleared beautiful, and by the time we got to Buxton it was like a Spring morning. The sun was shining, wasn't a cloud in the sky, and you, you get a keenness up there with it being very high up, and with the sun shining it was... , it made you feel real good. By the time we'd finished our engine duties on the ashpit and that, cleaned the fire and coal and watered it and turned ready for the journey back, we got settled on the shed road and Jack made the repair card out for the brake steam pipe. So I got out this card, took it to the chargehand fitter, and then I went to get the can of tea. When I arrived back the fitter was just sending his mate for an inch and a half spanner to tighten this union nut to the brake disc, and after they'd done the job we started chatting about what we was going to do when we got finished. I was

going to watch Stockport, Stockport County, that was playing at home, and Jack he was going to have another couple of hours in bed. We'd been up since four o'clock that morning, and he was going to a big dinner at the Alma Lodge that evening. Jack kept himself very young with his social life - he liked a lot of dancing and parties, other chaps, like, they have, they like to... football, and play golf, garden, and as we don't get many Saturday afternoons off, when we do get one we really like to enjoy it.

6

Come all you British loco men who travel the Iron Way,
There's a long weekend and money to spend, it's time to draw your pay,
You've done your 80-hour fortnight and now it's time for play,
So off with your dirty dungarees, your time is yours today.

We'll give her some rock and we'll beat the clock and send her on her way,
For every train is an express train upon a Saturday.

The missus is standing at the door, your dinner is on the hob,
So bung your driver's ticket in, forget all about the job -
Get dolled up in your Saturday best, the match'll be starting soon,
So hurry up mate and don't be late - it's Saturday afternoon.

We'll give her some rock and we'll beat the clock and send her on her way,
For every train is an express train upon a Saturday.

There's some that's fond of gardening and some that like a gill,
And some of the lads, they play the pools and sometimes make a kill.
Some like a potato pie supper and an extra hour in bed,
But everyone likes the moment when he signs off at the shed.

We'll give her some rock and we'll beat the clock and send her on her way,
For every train is an express train upon a Saturday.

So come all you gallant loco men, steam and diesel too,
You lads that serve the Iron Road, let's drink a glass or two,
And join me in the chorus, all you who like a tune -
The railwayman's friend is the long weekend - and Saturday afternoon.

So long to the driver's lobby, so long the controller's room,
For while we're here we can't be there - on Saturday afternoon.

Open the cab roof I was breakfasting, so forth, and... the fitter-up when he came on the footplate he said what a beautiful morning, i'n't it grand to be alive? Jack said... 'It's not finished yet'

After we'd had us breakfast we came off the shed in good time, so we could get our train ready, and if the Rowsley-Edgeley was late we could take us path in front of him, and get finished an hour earlier,

but this Edgeley man was on time and he's passed us like there, and the guard Fred Creamer and he said we'll kail you again this morning and that was the guard that we hit, you see and we'd had him working up with us all week. Then we had to wait while the Rowsley-Edgeley got to the top of the bank and cleared Bibbington's.

And we received the right-of-way signal and away we went.

7

**The repair was done and the train made up
When they left in Buxton siding,
And the time was just eleven-five,
And the sun it was a-shining**

**Four eight one double eight was her number,
Scanlon was the fireman,
And the guard in the van was Alfred Ball,
And the driver was John Axon.**

**Her wagons numbered thirty-three
And a twenty-ton rear brake van,
She was carrying coke, woodpulp and coal
And fire bricks and pig iron.**

**The down line out of Buxton climbed,
She was pulling nice and steady,
And the bank engine was pushing behind
And the guard's brake stick was ready.**

Normally when we're approaching the top of the bank it would slow down and automatically come to a stop, and the guard comes up and pins so many brakes down on the wagons to assist us going down the incline.

**John Axon looked at the rolling hills
And he found them to his liking,
And he thought of his early courting days,
The days when he went hiking.**

Oh yes, Jack and I were keen on rambling, and that was how we met. I lived at Stretford, Jack lived at Stockport. I used to get the train at Manchester and he used to join it at Stockport. Go to Edale, and hike, sometimes we went moonlight rambles. Well, first ramble that I ever went I went with three friends, and we were going to Castleton. Anyhow we got lost, so we decided that we would go back from Edale. We got to Edale, we found that the last train had gone. So we didn't know what to do, and then we saw two young men coming along and said you've missed the last train haven't you? So, course we said yes. What are you going to do now? So I said we don't know. So, so well you'd better come to the Edale Hotel. So of course we stayed there till we got a car from Sheffield and landed

back in Manchester about four o'clock in the morning. That was the first time that I met Jack that day. Course we arranged to go another ramble with them. And after that we went several rambles with them. That was how it started really.

**I may be a wage slave on Monday,
But I am a free man on Sunday.**

**I've been over Snowdon, I've slept upon Crowdon
I've camped by the Wain Stones as well,
I've sunbathed on Kinder, been burnt to a cinder, and many more things I can tell.
Me rucksack has oft been my pillow,
The heather has oft been my bed,
And sooner than part from the mountains,
I think I would sooner be dead.**

**I'm a Rambler, I'm a Rambler from Manchester way,
I get all me pleasure the hard moorland way -
I may be a wage slave on Monday,
But I am a free man on Sunday.**

**I once loved a maid, a spot welder by trade,
She was fair as the rowan in bloom,
And the blue in her eyes matched the blue moorland skies,
And I wooed her from April till June.
On the day that we should have been married
I went for a ramble instead,
For sooner than part from the mountains,
I think I would rather be dead.**

**I'm a Rambler, I'm a Rambler from Manchester way,
I get all my pleasure the hard moorland way -
I may be a wage slave on Monday,
But I am a free man on Sunday.**

We used to have some lovely times, Jack and I, rambling, winter and summer and... didn't matter if it was raining, we used to go every Sunday. Because sometimes, of course, he worked Saturdays, so it was every Sunday we went. We made a lot of friends, with being members of the Manchester federation we met many of their members on our walks, and Jack he liked walking a long way, seeing how far he could go. I would rather not go so far but we used to go some very long rambles. Been over Kinder, he took a party over Kinder. Most of our walks were round Edale and Hope, Castleton, used to go through the Winnerts, and Cavedale, Mam Tor, all those spots. We always finished at Castleton, came back from Hope. Whenever we hiked, we always came back... From Hope.

**John Axon smiled at the thought that
Later he'd be celebrating,
And he smiled when he thought of the Stockport pub**

Where a pint of mild was waiting.

John Axon was a dancing man,
On his pins he was light and nimble,
And often he'd stand on the old footplate,
Whistling an old-time jingle.

To forget himself he had all these social activities, like this dancing and parties, and always had a little bit of a song, like, on the footplate, a very nice chap indeed to work for.

He liked going to parties, and dancing. Oh yes, he loved the music, and he was always whistling the tunes. Wasn't really very interested in dancing at first, but I've always liked dancing, so he thought he'd try, and he really enjoyed it, but of course railwaymen can't go every week, they have to just go when their turns permit them to go. And... he was always talking about trains, and, course my boys used to say why don't you shut the shed door now you've come away, but he really loved trains.

9

Come all you young maidens, take a warning from me -
Shun all engine drivers and their company.
They'll tell you they love you and all kinds of lies,
But the one that he loves is the train that he drives.

I once loved a fireman, he said he loved me.
He took me out walking into the country,
He hugged me and kissed me and gazed in my eyes,
And said, You're as nice as the eight forty-five.

He said 'My dear Molly, Oh won't you be mine,
Just give me the signal and let's clear the line.
My fires are all burning, me steam it is high,
If you don't take the brake off I think I shall die.'

I told him, Young fellow now don't make so free,
For no loco fireman shall ever have me -
He'll hug you and kiss you and when you're in need
He races away at the top of his speed.

A sailor comes home when the voyage is done.
A soldier gets weary of following the drum.
A collier will cleave to his loved one for life.
But the fireman's one love is the engine, his wife.

Jack... A very methodical person. Made little diagrams of all the work that was in the links. And all that sort of thing, everything went in his little book. Everything was recorded that he had, like, that he did.

John Axon kept a little book
And in it there was written
The class, the type and the number of
Every engine he had driven.

44578... Got his number? 7... 44748.

10

Steam train steam train,
What's your number what's your name,
Collecting trains, a fine game,
I've got more than you.

Waiting for the Arpley train,
On the road to Cheadle,
Saw the local passing by,
Pop goes the diesel.

(Trainspotters' voices...)

I've got a Cornish.
I've got a Lancastrian.
I've got the Prince of Wales.
My Dad's a railwayman.

Steam train, steam train,
There goes a Super D,
Write the name and number down
Four oh one ninety-three.

Steam train, steam train, racing down the line,
Thirty wagons full of coal and lime,
Class eight, never late, she'll arrive on time,
Four eight one double eight,
Pulling a lot of freight,
Steam train on the line.

Rattle rattle crash,
Watch the Corny pass,
Like a rocket flash
That's the train for London.

(Trainspotters' voices)

Chuggy chuggy chug,

Like a little bug
Crawling on a rug -
That's the shunting bogey

Class A's an express passenger train,
B's an ordinary passenger train,
C's an express once again,
Just for carrying parcels.
E and F are freights we know,
H is freight that travels slow,
K's a local train that goes
Between the local stations.

(Trainspotters' voices... shrieks as the train passes.)

City of Bristol, it came through last night. Came through last night. I've seen it twice now.

Steam train, steam train,
Carry me away with you,
Steam train, steam train,
Going to be a driver.

Going to be a driver.

I don't know whether, if it's in my blood or not because I, I... I remember when I were quite a bit of a kid I used to go on the iron bridge there watching them until... course I were lucky you see in them days they only used to have a couple o' lads at 14 in this yard...

The joint of the driver's steam brake pipe
Began to sweat a little,
By the time they were halfway up the hill
It was coming in a steady trickle.

As we were climbing up the bank, again this faint wisp of steam came from the union nut joint. So we bound it with a couple of rags we got, er, we was going again like for... got about halfway up the bank and then er, it came up in a spiral and we both came across having a look, like...

11

Under the large injector steam valve
There's a length of one and one-eighth piping.
It connects with a driver's brake valve.
The connecting point is a joint of brass.

A one and one-eighth steam pipe,
Fixed in a threaded joint,

Rests on asbestos packing,
And is sealed -
Sealed with brazing metal.

A hundred and twenty-five tons of engine,
Six hundred and fifty tons behind,
And the boiler pressure -
Two twenty-five pounds per square inch.

And the men? Two fragile bodies,
Flesh and blood and brittle bone,
Carbon and water, nerves and dreams,

Power from coal. Power from water.
Power imprisoned in a one and one-eighth pipe.

The restless steam,
Watches the tired metal,
Explores the worn thread,
Watching, watching,
 Every turn of the four-foot wheels,
 Every lunge of the smooth-armed piston,
 Every thrust in the two great cylinders
 Weakens the joint's resistance.
And the brazed flange crumbles.
The pipe is parted -
IT BLOWS!

(Intense gush of steam).

We was too shocked, really, just for a few seconds. And then the realisation came what had happened - that the brake pipe had gone. Conditions on the footplate, oh they was horrible. You only had to put your, your face anywhere near it would peel like an onion.

12

The engine had reached the distant signal
When the broken steam pipe began to scream -
John Axon and his mate couldn't reach the driver's brake
For the cab was full of scalding steam, poor boys,
The cab was full of scalding steam.

John Axon he knew that his regulator
Was still wide open and on full power,
He couldn't turn it off for the way that it was blocked,
And the cab was full of scalding steam, poor boys,

The cab was full of scalding steam.

They hung on the side and they both took turns
At shifting the regulator from afar,
They prodded at the bar with the pricker and the dart
But they couldn't move the iron bar, brave boys,
They couldn't move the iron bar.

Well, I was hanging outside of the cab on the fireman's side. It was only a matter of seconds you could be on the footplate at all, and we put coats over our heads to try and get to the regulator. That was the main thing, to shut that, because we'd steam going on, and we'd no brake ourselves, and we're being pushed by an engine behind. And we were approaching the top then. Well I, I got a fire iron out of the, the alcove at the side there, and tried to knock it down but it was only a short regulator, and it was in second regulator, so it had to come right over and back again to shut. If there'd have been first port we could have knocked it down and it'd have automatically shut. But with it being in second regulator it was no use, no possibility.

John Axon, he got to the fireman's side
And over the scream of the steam did say -
We'll have to get outside if we want to stay alive,
Or this'll be our dying day, poor boys,
Or this'll be our dying day.

The guard, he was waiting to pin down the brakes,
The train it didn't slow down that day -
He stood in the van with the brake stick in his hand
And he knew she was a runaway, poor boy,
He knew she was a runaway.

I'm watching him go over the top, we've left the banker. He's gone over the top, all but what he should do - this man's failing to stop, we're still going, there's something wrong on't engine. On goes the brake.

John Axon, he cried to his fireman: Jump!
It is the only thing you can do,
While I hang on the side and I'll take a little ride,
For I've got to see the journey through, brave boy,
I've got to see the journey through.

Jack realised the position was hopeless, we're still steaming up the bank and gathering speed. He ordered me to jump, to try and get some wagon brakes down, and to draw the guard's attention to put his brake on as hard as he could. I jumped, and I stumbled a bit on the ballast, picked myself up, grabbed the brakes of the wagons as they were passing to drop them, but it was an impossibility to pin them. I had about six or seven down but it was no use, they was only bouncing up, and then of course the train's going away from me and the guard's coming towards me, so I chased back to the guard, shouting to him - 'Alf, put the brake on, we're away!'

John Axon, he was all alone, there on the engine side,
The train it reached the hilltop and began the downhill ride,
The sun it was still shining, the sky was still as blue.
He gambled with his life that day, and this John Axon knew.

After the guard's van passed me, I looked round again and saw it disappearing over the hill.

Oooh...
You're on your own, mate,
Oooh...
King of the footplate,
Ooh Johnny, ooh Johnny,
What makes you do the things you do, Johnny?
Oh why do you have to see it through, Johnny?
Ooh, ooh, ooh, Johnny.

It's a seven-mile drop from Bibbington Top, oh Johnny,
It's one in fifty-eight and you've no steam brake, oh Johnny,
She's picking up speed and the power is freed; it's a prayer you'll need,
But you'll never make it, Johnny.

Every yard of the track says you won't come back, Oh Johnny,
She's a fist of steel, every turn of the wheels cry Johnny,
There isn't a chance
You'll get to your dance,
You can see at a glance
That you'll never make it Johnny.

There's a tunnel ahead, you can't cover your head, oh Johnny,
Doing sixty an hour and she's gaining power, oh Johnny,
Watch out for the wall -
Bunch yourself up small
In the smoky pall
Or you'll never make it, Johnny.

It's hell on a plate, it's a funeral freight, oh Johnny,
It's the end of a dream in steel and steam, oh Johnny,
There's a world in your head
And you're due at the shed
And there's life ahead
But you'll never see it, Johnny.

All alone now. Ron's gone. On my own now, all the way, all the way.
Never make it. How far's all the way? There's a gradient all the way into Whaley.
Seven-mile gradient. One in seventy. One in sixty. One in fifty-eight.

Wait!

Dove Hole's passed.
Going too fast to see if they saw me hanging outside the cab.
Down the curving line, through the hill of limestone, Eaves tunnel.

Every turn of the four foot wheels,
Every lunge of the smooth-armed piston,
Every thrust of the two great cylinders
Sings of a man's destruction.

Was I born for this?
To hang like a fly on an iron ball.
Helpless, on a moving wall.
To die, to end,
In a welter of blood and oil.
Twisted metal, splintered bone.

What was it that Jim said, one day in the shed,
Jim said, or was it in the pub,
What was it that Jim said about steam, about power -

With a steam locomotive, you create the power, you maintain the power, and you control the power.

Curse the power.
Curse the boiler pressure. The burning coal that made it. the fire and the air which fed it.
Curse the water which boiled and turned to steam.
Curse the steam brake and the nut which connects with the steam brake pipe.
Curse the brass of the steam brake valve.
Curse the nut of the steam brake valve.
Curse the steam.

The run it is finished, the shift's nearly ended.
So long, mates, so long, remember -
A man is a man, he must do what he can
For his brothers.

By his deeds you shall know him.
 By the work of his hand.
By the friends who will mourn him.
 By the love that he bore.
By the gift of his courage.
 And the life that he gave.

(Crash.)

On the 3rd of May 1957 Mrs Gladys Axon received the following letter.

10 Downing Street
Whitehall
2nd May 1957

Madam

I have the honour to inform you that the Queen has been graciously pleased to approve the Prime Minister's recommendation that the *George Cross* be awarded posthumously to your husband, John Axon.

**John Axon was a railway man to steam trains born and bred,
He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed,
He was a man of courage and served the iron way -
He gave his life upon the track one February day.**

The Ballad of John Axon was the work of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker.

The lyrics were written by Ewan MacColl, who also, with the exception of two songs set to traditional airs, composed the music and himself sang the part of narrator.

The instrumental arranging and musical direction was by Peggy Seeger, who also played the banjo.

The vocalists were AL Lloyd, Isla Cameron, Stan Kelly, Dick Loveless, Charles Mayo and Colin Dunn.

And the instrumentalists were Jim Bray, bass; Terry Brown, trumpet; Bob Clark, fiddle; John Cole, harmonica; Fitzroy Coleman, guitar, who also sang the West Indian fireman calypso; Bryan Daly, guitar; Alf Edwards, English concertina; Billy Loch, drums; Bobby Mickleburgh, trombone; and Bruce Turner, clarinet.