

NEWS

# Great Train Robbery loco in auction spotlight 56 years after raid drama

EXCLUSIVE

By Geoff Courtney

A WORKSPATE from a Class 40 diesel that was at the centre of one of the most audacious and internationally publicised robberies in the history of Britain's railways is to go under the hammer. It is from D326, which in the early hours of August 8, 1963, was involved in what has become known as the Great Train Robbery.

A gang of 16 men, led by 31-year-old Bruce Reynolds, had sabotaged the signals on the West Coast Main Line at Sears Crossing between Leighton Buzzard and Cheddington in Buckinghamshire, bringing the Glasgow Central to Euston overnight Travelling Post Office mail train to a halt just after 3am.

David Whitby, secondman to driver Jack Mills, left the cab to telephone the signalbox, returning shortly after to tell his 57-year-old driver that the wires had been cut. With the 72 Post Office staff on board the 12-coach train unaware of what was happening, Mills and Whitby were attacked with an iron bar, and Mills sustained severe head injuries.

The gang uncoupled the diesel and the two leading carriages, one of which contained a stash of cash, with the intention of driving forward to a prearranged meeting place half a mile ahead at Bridego (now Mentmore) Bridge. However, the gang member who was hired to drive the train was a retired former Southern Region driver used to operating only shunters. On discovering he couldn't work the Class 40, the robbers forced the injured Mills to drive it for them.



**Robbery worksplate:** The English Electric worksplate from D326 that is going under the hammer on March 7. The Class 40 diesel was at the centre of an international media blitz when it was involved in the notorious Great Train Robbery in August 1963. GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAYANA

Once at the meeting point, the gang transferred 120 mailbags containing the cash to a waiting vehicle and drove to their hideout at Leatherslade Farm near Brill, 27 miles from the crime scene, arriving at 4.30am, about 10 minutes after the alarm had been raised by one of the Post Office workers stranded on the train. Their haul was a staggering £2,595,997 – equivalent to about £50 million today – and this was divided among the gang into shares of about £150,000 each, the bulk of which was never recovered.

The robbery grabbed the world's attention, and debate continues about it to this day. High-profile members of the gang who served time after a major police operation included Reynolds, Ronald 'Buster' Edwards, and Ronnie Biggs, while only one gang member is known to be still alive, Bob Welch, who served 13 years.

#### Driver never fully recovered

Both members of the diesel crew had died within a decade of the robbery, with

driver Mills being particularly affected by his head injuries, from which he never fully recovered. He returned to work nine months after the raid, and worked for 18 months on light duties, followed by just over a year on sick leave. He returned at the end of 1966 but retired after a year, having spent 2½ months off sick during 1967.

Mills received just £250 compensation, but an appeal on his behalf by a national newspaper raised £34,000 that enabled him to move into a more comfortable house in Crewe. Shortly after moving, however, he died in February 1970 at the age of 64.

His secondman at the time of the robbery, David Whitby, who was based at Crewe with Mills and was also injured in the raid, died of a heart attack in January 1972 at the age of just 34, and his sister Nancy said her brother never recovered from the trauma of the attack. In December 2014 she unveiled a plaque at Crewe station in memory of the pair in a ceremony that filled her with emotion.

The worksplate is being sold next March by Great Central Railwayana, whose auctioneer Mike Soden said: "The Great Train Robbery was one of the most talked-about crimes of the century, and at its heart was the diesel crewed by driver Jack Mills and his secondman David Whitby.

"Class 40 worksplates have a following in their own right due to an increasing interest in heritage modern traction, but one of those from this particular diesel, which was involved in a notorious episode in railway history, makes it attractive to not only enthusiasts, but also the general public." Mike said he was confident it would sell well for into four figures.

D326 was built by English Electric at its Vulcan Foundry in Newton-le-Willows, Lancashire (works No. 3072/D622) in 1960, entering service in December that year. At the time of the robbery it was allocated to the former LMS shed of Camden in north-west London (1B), which coincidentally was to close to steam a month after the robbery. It was withdrawn as No. 40126 in February 1984.

It is said that after the robbery, some railwaymen were reluctant to drive the 1Co-Co1 diesel as it was regarded as a jinxed locomotive, a fear doubtless enhanced by a secondman being electrocuted while washing its windows a year to the month after the raid, and it is also claimed that it was cut up unusually speedily at Doncaster works after withdrawal because of the public's and enthusiasts' continuing fascination with the engine.

The plate is being sold by Great Central Railwayana at Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, on March 7.

**Railway attraction:** Class 40 D326 heads an Up express past Mallerstang signalbox on the Settle-Carlisle line between Kirkby Stephen and Garsdale, probably in the early-mid 1960s. The 1Co-Co1 diesel became the centre of worldwide attention on August 8, 1963, when it was halted at sabotaged signals near Leighton Buzzard in a raid that gained notoriety as the Great Train Robbery. In March the locomotive will once again become the centre of attention when one of its worksplates goes under the hammer in a Great Central Railwayana auction. NORRIS FORREST/THE TRANSPORT TREASURY

