

Wakefield Historical Society

“Victorian and Edwardian Railway Uniforms”

Anthony Dawson

Wednesday 08th April 2026 at 7p.m.

“Did they really wear white trousers?” - with this intriguing question, Anthony Dawson began a fascinating and enjoyable talk, leading the audience through a wide-ranging overview of who wore railway uniforms, what they were made of, and how wearing uniforms contributed to defining who a railway worker is.

In addition, Anthony gave members of the audience the opportunity to model some of the authentic and replica garments he had brought along to the evening.

Anthony’s research is built on the study of a wide range of sources from documents of the time, such as official minutes of railway company meetings and traffic committees, commercial prints, letters to the Press, surviving artefacts and modern-day replications.

A feature of Anthony’s talk was the use of really interesting and evocative sketches, pictures and photographs from the time, of the engines, but with wonderful portraits such as that of a porter, a superintendent and a guard, illustrating the wheel caps and the heavy twill cloth jackets, the early forerunner of the workman’s donkey jacket.

Comparing England’s railways to the French, where railway workers wore lovely hats and were provided with summer and winter uniforms, (alongside incidentally winter rations of hot chocolate or hot wine,) and wearing of uniforms was mandated by law. Some French railway workers were armed and female members of staff were also issued with uniforms.

In England, engines at the time had no roof nor cab, and were completely open to the elements. The uniforms were often made of fustian – a very hard-wearing blend of cotton and linen. A cheap fabric, undyed and unbleached, they were also easier to keep clean.

One picture of a Victorian porter showed him wearing the hated bottle green corduroy jacket and cap. Its green dye would run in the rain and over time became very smelly as they were hard to clean. They were also issues as one size fits no-one.

In contrast, the frock coat was very imposing, looked very smart and gave protection against the weather in winter. However, it had its disadvantages as it was so big it got in the way when issuing tickets and was too heavy for summer wear.

One particularly interesting picture was of a railway constable in the 1830s, wearing his white trousers – an early form of a High Viz. Every mile on the railway had a constable. He would have had a truncheon and a pair of handcuffs, as well as a signal flag. Railway constables had the power of arrest.

As regards the railwaymen who wore these uniforms, regulations in force at the time stipulated a minimum height of 5'8" with a minimum 36" chest, interestingly exceeding the requirements of the military at the time.

For boys working on the railway, the equivalent numbers were 5'3" height and 32" chest.

Men were not allowed to wear beards and LNWR had an extraordinary policy of not employing "any person that suffered from any deformity or physical blemish, or evil appearance or with red hair and whiskers."

Uniforms were generally only issued to staff with public facing roles, for instance passenger and goods guards, signalmen, porters and supervisory staff. As mentioned earlier, railway constables and police officers were also uniformed.

In the 1830s, uniforms were issued as part of a man's pay, but from 1838 onwards, railwaymen were deemed to be liveried servants and uniforms were paid for by stoppages from pay (one shilling per week). In the mid-1850s, there were 97,952 people employed on the railways, giving a sense of the size of the industry. Intriguingly, officers uniforms were a matter for private purchase.

A suit of clothes tended to consist of headwear and bodywear, leg wear and footwear, and each garment had a specific wear out period and the railwayman had to pay for any losses or repairs within that period. Typically at the time, these periods ranged from six months for a porter's jacket and boots, through to two years for a guard's great coat.

The garments were made from one of three main fabric types – wool broadcloth, wool serge and fustian. Experimental archaeology provides a modern experience of how the uniforms worked in practice.

So, as Anthony answered his opening question with a resounding Yes – they did wear white trousers. The undyed, unbleached cloth was relatively cheap (mass produced by some half a dozen manufacturers) and easy to wash.

In conclusion and in answer to a wide range of questions from an engaged and enthusiastic audience, uniforms portrayed to the public a disciplined group of men working to a common rule book. Previously only applicable to the military, and unknown to a civilian organization, the uniform created a sense of identity for the men, was good advertising for the railway company and introduced an element of theatricality to the experience of travelling on the railways.

Anthony received a well-deserved round of applause and vote of thanks for his lecture.

Stephen Hargrave

20 April 2026