

The Bishop's Camera

Most parents and grandparents will be familiar with the work of the Rev. W. Awdry, father of Thomas the Tank Engine. But there are many other clergy with an affinity for trains. Among such was the Bishop of Wakefield, Eric Treacy, who remains one of the most famous railway photographers of all time, beginning the hobby in the 1930s when cameras were fickle and complex, and when black and white photography was an art, not merely a science.

Those familiar with Treacy's portfolio often remark that his best shots appear to be taken from spots off-limits to the public, particularly the cabs of speeding express locomotives, or the dirty interiors of engine sheds.

There was a reason for this. Treacy had been Vicar of a working-class parish in Edge Hill in Liverpool, home to many railway workers. Timetables and work rosters meant that Sunday worship didn't suit railway men, so Treacy sought them out in their workplaces, knowing that the men, hard-bitten and thick-skinned as they'd like to appear, still wanted to have their children christened, their daughters given a proper church wedding, and their dead mates given 'a decent Christian burial'. Poverty stalked the streets of Edge Hill in those days, and even an express driver might earn a tenth of what an A380 Captain might get today, for equal responsibility, experience, and skill. So Treacy was known as the railway man's priest, exercising a ministry far beyond the church door.

The men reciprocated. He began to be invited into obscure corners of forgotten stations, and onto engine footplates, having earned recognition for his own discernment of who these men really were, and of their and their families' real needs.

Treacy got a reputation for being late for Synod. That's because he would often divert to a good spot for lineside photography, having previously plotted with the engine crew that they'd produce extra smoke and steam for that extra special shot.

He died with camera in hand and there's a plaque on the platform to prove it.

He also had not one but two locomotives named after him.

Railway people aren't easy to impress. Eric Treacy clearly made the right impression, and his legacy lives on, not only on the page, but also in the collective memory of railway enthusiasts everywhere. And he's proof that true ministry brings rewards.

Richard Swarbrick