Kevin Mountain worked at the Midland Railway Workshops for more than 42 years.

He first visited the Workshops as a seven-year-old with his father, a stoker, and began work there as a junior clerk when he left school at 16.

Kevin worked in various administrative positions at the Workshops, including more than 10 years in the Time Office. When the Workshops closed on March 4, 1994, he had reached the senior position of Timekeeper.

Kevin welcomed the formation of the Midland Redevelopment Authority and its plans to revitalise the site, preserving and adapting its fine heritage buildings.

The MRA invited Kevin to share his reminiscences of the characters and camaraderie of the Midland Railway Workshops. These stories were first published in a monthly column called Kevin Mountain’s Midland Matters that ran in the Echo Newspaper from October 2000 to March 2002.

Kevin’s fund of anecdotes provides a rare insight into life at the Workshops, and the MRA thanks him for his generosity for allowing them to be published.
**Form filling? It’s a snip...**

A first-year apprentice coppersmith had just taken his first sickie and asked his supervisor for help to fill in the necessary Application for Sick Pay form.

When he came to the ‘Reasons for Absence’ section of the form, the apprentice asked what he should write there. Without hesitation the supervisor said ‘vasectomy’ and added that there was a lot of this terrible malady going around at the time.

The apprentice duly wrote ‘vasectomy’ on the form and submitted it. When it reached the foreman, he called the apprentice and asked him about his recent illness. The apprentice explained his supervisor had said there was a lot of it going around.

However, the foreman asked him to fill in a new form and state as reason for his illness the ever-reliable ‘stomach disorder’.

Not long afterwards a special Apprentice Application for Sick Pay form was introduced which had to be signed by a parent or guardian.
**Top drawer dust-up...**

“The personal clerk to the Chief Mechanical Engineer (CME) appeared so distraught one day that I had to ask if everything was OK?

“He told me that he had been speaking to the Working Leading Hand office cleaner (a woman, rate of pay 10 shillings an hour plus 15 shillings a week for her elevated classification, this was in 1964). Her status made her the sole cleaner of the CME’s inner sanctum.

“The cleaner told the personal clerk that the CME would be sailing on the Queen Mary from New York to London on his forthcoming world tour.

“The personal clerk was aghast. This information was classified! (While it was all above board, the usual mode of transport was to fly. The CME had sought and received special permission to go by boat provided he paid the difference in fares. It was kept under wraps because it might have created the wrong impression had it been made public.) So the personal clerk demanded how on earth the cleaner knew.

“She replied with alacrity: ‘I saw the ticket while dusting in his top drawer!’

“While on cleaners, one of the Workshops wags would make a point of asking each November whether the office cleaners were having a sweep this year …”
**DONE LIKE A DINNER**

On Fridays many Workshops employees partook of a liquid lunch at one of the three nearby hotels – the Freemasons, the Helena Vale and the Commercial.

At the Commercial there was a secret code that towards the end of the lunchbreak when Workshops employees ordered ‘fish and chips to go’, the bar attendants would wrap two cans of beer tightly in newspaper. The employees would take the parcels through the Time Office back to their workplace.

Workshops management did not condone this practice, as alcohol and heavy machinery do not mix.

One Friday a new clerk, unaware of the secret code, ordered fish and chips to take back to the office and received the usual parcel. As he was about to open what he was hungrily thinking of as his lunch one of the middle management bosses walked past.

The clerk asked the boss if he wanted a chip, the boss accepted and the clerk finished unwrapping his parcel – only to find two cans of export lager.
SPELL CHEQUE

Alan the Englishman was a labourer employed to clean out sheep wagons before they were repaired.

In the ‘description of work’ area on his payroll timesheets he wrote ‘shovelling sheep shit’.

The Workshops Timekeeper advised him that because the data entry staff was female, it would be more appropriate if Alan wrote ‘shovelling sheep excreta’.

In his broad Cockney accent Alan replied: ‘Listen mate, if I could spell excreta I wouldn’t be shovelling sheep shit for a living!’
**Cockatoo alert!**

On the Helena River flats behind the locomotive running shed adjacent to the Workshops was a two-up ring that operated illegally on Sunday mornings.

The ring (actually a square about 15ft by 15ft, bordered by four disused bits of railway line) was filled with clean river sand, compacted to form a hard base. A disused signal wire cable indicated the minimum height the pennies had to reach.

Four men were posted as lookouts, each in a tree about 50 yards north, south, east and west of the ring. They were known as ‘cockatoos’ and it was their job to warn the two-up patrons of the approach of any men in blue or the ‘Gestapo’ (Workshops patrol officers).

The ringkeeper paid them a fee to cover the fine on the occasions when law enforcers successfully infiltrated the lookout cordon and the cockatoos had to front the Beak. Of course the ringkeeper was never caught.

*The big blocks where rail carriages were manufactured*
Pound of flesh

The well-respected elderly clerk, known as the Professional Pall Bearer because of the numerous funerals he attended, went one day to the butcher shop (Sylvester and Hunt) and asked for two pieces of steak. The cost was no object, he said rather grandly, as long as the steak was nice and tender.

The butcher wrapped the steak and handed it to the Professional Pall Bearer, saying ‘That will be twelve pounds and ten shillings, please.’

The Professional Pall Bearer then suffered a dizzy spell and had to sit down to aid his recovery. At the time – this was 1965 – steak cost less than a pound per pound.
A Good Friday tradition

Every year on Good Friday there was a social cricket game between the manual workers from the Workshops and the Lumpers’ Union Cricket Club, always played at Fremantle. The annual fixture originated in the late 1880s when the Workshops were located near the wharf on the site now occupied by the Fremantle Railway Station.

Members of both teams were friends and in the main lived in the Fremantle area. The home team provided the lunch, consisting of buckets of prawns washed down with a few ales. The visiting team provided the cricket ball, made of timber by the wood machinists, formed into a sphere on the lathe, bound with string, shellacked and painted.

The Railway Workshops were moved from Fremantle at the suggestion of C.Y. O’Connor. Midland was selected as the new site and employees from Fremantle began to move into Block 1 in 1901. By 1904 all the Fremantle staff had moved into Blocks 2 and 3.

The camaraderie of the annual cricket match continued until the 1960s under the same rules, though the lunches improved with the help of the Wharfies’ Ladies’ Committee. There was no trophy, just the honour and glory of being involved in this memorable social event.
Shady Excuse

“The Assistant Chief Mechanical Engineer was very annoyed one day to find that someone had parked in his designated garage space.

“With a fair bit of difficulty I traced the offending car to Frank the Tarpaulin maker and asked him why on earth he had the audacity to park in a sport reserved for the Workshops’ second-in-charge.

“Frank replied that the car actually belonged to his wife, and she had only lent it to him on the condition that he parked it in the shade.”
No pay, no gain

Thursday 29 September 1983 was a memorable day in the history of the Midland Railway Workshops. It was the day that four armed men with balaclavas over their heads attempted to steal the Workshops payroll from the main office.

Most Workshops employees were paid in cash every fortnight on presentation of a grey metal disc called a pay docket at one of ten specific points, known as ‘windows’, strategically located throughout the site. The disc bore the employee’s particular Workshops time check number. The payroll totalled about $400,000 to $450,000 depending on the amount of overtime worked during the pay period.

The pay staff consisted of ten armed paymasters and ten unarmed pay assistants. The pay make-up area was in a secure room some distance from the main office, guarded by two armed Workshops patrol officers.

The would-be robbers were unlucky. That particular day was the first time there were no payments in cash – for security reasons all wages and salaries were to be paid into the employees’ bank or credit union accounts.

The would-be robbers were reluctant to believe this fact and one pistol-whipped a junior officer before beating a hasty retreat. They ran off down Montreal Road and were never apprehended.
Ol’ Man Robeson Pays a Visit

On Friday 2 December 1960 the great American performer Paul Robeson visited the Workshops to entertain the workers at a recital. However, he was not permitted to enter the site because of the policy of the government of the day, which did not approve of his Communist background.

Paul Robeson was a special man. The son of a slave who escaped to freedom, he was an accomplished singer, actor, activist, athlete, orator, musician and scholar. He was one of America's greatest concert artists and one of its most significant black actors on stage and screen. He spoke more than 20 languages including several African dialects, Chinese, Russian and Arabic.

The Joint Railway Unions Committee arranged Mr Robeson's visit to Midland and the recital was given outside the Workshops on the back of a truck parked next to the bicycle shed in Montreal Road during the lunch hour. He sang unaccompanied and unamplified to an audience of about 2000 people.

Mr Robeson was introduced by Bill Stronach, the chairman of the Joint Railway Unions Committee. The Mayor of Midland Junction, Mr W.S. Doney, was also on the truck, as was the committee’s secretary Colin Hollett.

Mr Robeson rendered some of his all-time favourites – Ol’ Man River and Swing Low, Sweet Chariot come to mind – and even sang a song in Chinese. He closed the recital with a community number that received fantastic support.

After the recital he was given a Mayoral reception in the Council chambers attended by local dignitaries and union officials.

Paul Robeson at the Workshops, December 1960
The 3000-strong audience at the centenary concert the MRA held in November 2004 to commemorate Paul Robeson’s visit to the Workshops.

One of Australia’s finest male singers, Andrew Foote, gave a passionate rendition of Ol’ Man River at the start of the centenary concert.
WAY TO PAY

A messenger nicknamed the Blue Terror was asked to pay a bill at Millers Timber and Trading, an establishment opposite the Workshops at the eastern end of Railway Parade.

The bill had arrived in the usual window envelope and the bill payer had placed the money inside the envelope with the bill. Unfortunately the bill payer’s name and address showed through the window of the envelope.

So the Blue Terror, instead of going across the road to Millers, road his bicycle all the way to Swan View and paid the money to the astonished bill payer’s wife.
A senior foreman was conducting the Commissioner of Railways on a tour of the Foundry and proudly pointed out a brand-new addition to the building’s plant and machinery.

It was an annealing furnace, which basically treated the various components such as manganese points and crossings by heating them to specific temperatures and then allowing them to cool gradually.

The Commissioner, nicknamed Mr Grace (after the shop proprietor in the television show Are You Being Served?) was quite miffed. He explained to the touring party that the new addition couldn’t possible be an annealing furnace because he was yet to approve the finance for its construction.
NEVER MIND THE LENGTH

On 10 October 1974 the Workshops’ flagpole, a focal point of the site abutted to the wall of the Wagon Shop in Block 1, was dismantled for maintenance and painting.

The area in front of the flagpole was the meeting point for departmental, political, union and social gatherings.

While the Plant Engineer and some foremen were inspecting the reclining flagpole, someone suggested it would be a good idea to measure it.

Stunned silence greeted the Plant Engineer’s reply: ‘No, I want to know how high it is, not how long it is!’
**HOT STUFF**

White sawdust was never burnt in the Workshops’ incinerator due to the high demand for it at dance venues. It was mixed with candle wax and sprinkled on dance floors to provide added glide for excellent ballroom dancing.

The Police Department used the incinerator periodically to burn confiscated rifle butts. It was also trialled for the burning of pornographic material, under heavy guard.

The trial failed miserably, due to 3200 Workshops employees volunteering to vet the material before it was destroyed and most of the burnt paper emitted from the incinerator flue spreading over the Workshops site and surrounding areas.

*With Planning and Infrastructure Minister Alannah MacTiernan (left) and Midland MLA Michelle Roberts at the Interpretive Centre opening*
Well I’ll be blowed...

The Senior Clerk Design was displeased when he found the cause of the photocopy machine jam to be a piece of crumpled A4 sheet music for The Flight of the Bumblebee. He called a staff meeting and explained that illegal copying had to cease and the 15 cents per copy for all non-departmental copies had to be paid.

The Senior Clerk also said that he knew the identity of the culprit. Because the offending A4 sheet resembled a piano accordion bellows, it had to be a piano accordionist. (He knew all the time that the real offender was Neil the sparky, an accomplished cornet player.)

Neil – not understanding the senior clerk’s sense of humour – was convinced that luck was on his side and that someone else would get the blame.

Transportable house

Ron, a turner, made an application on the prescribed form to borrow a two-wheeled hand trolley. The reason for the request was ‘Moving house on weekend.’

The application was not approved, with the reason given as ‘A two-wheeled trolley would not be large enough for such a task.’
Model fundraising

The main fundraising event for the War Memorial, the statue of Peace, at the Workshops was the raffle of a 12-hour wristwatch. The raffle consisted of selling 43,200 tickets at one penny each, that being the number of seconds in 12 hours.

The watch was wound and placed in a sealed box and when all the tickets were sold the box was opened. If the watch had stopped after three hours, three minutes and three seconds, ticket number 10,983 would be the winner (there being that many seconds in three hours, three minutes and three seconds).

The raffle raised the magnificent sum of £110.10.10 towards the £950 cost of the statue.

Other fundraising events were sweeps on the Melbourne and Kalgoorlie Cups (for which the approval of the Premier was necessary) and weekend wildflower and picnic train trips.

A WA Government Railways stenographer was the model for the right arm of the statue, raised skywards. A clause inserted in the sculptor’s contract stated that ‘The Chief Mechanical Engineer or his deputy must have access at all times to the rooms while the figure is being modelled.’

The Governor-General, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir William Campion KCMG DSO, unveiled the statue on 20 December 1925 at a ceremony attended by many religious and civil dignitaries, senior railways officials, representatives of the armed forces and Workshops employees and their families.
Christmas Past

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s about a third of the Workshops’ workforce and their families would spend their Christmas holidays at the Busselton camping ground. The WA Government Railways (WAGR) would provide extra dog-boxes – passenger coaches – on the ‘midnight horror’ on the break-up night to accommodate the holidaymakers from Midland.

Arrangements began on the Friday the week before. WAGR provided covered vans, marshalled them near the bike shed outside the Workshops for the holidaying employees to load with tents, camping gear, food, fishing tackle, bicycles, crabbing nets and scoops.

When loading was completed, the vans were coupled to a fast-goods service and despatched to Busselton early on the Saturday morning.

The men then travelled on a ‘destination pass’ on the Friday ‘midnight horror’, met the fast-goods train late on Saturday morning, unloaded and prepared the camping ground for habitation. They returned on Sunday night’s train ready for work on Monday morning, making the trip down again with their families a few days later on break-up night.
**Dead Loss**

One of the office messengers in the early 1960s was nicknamed Mort the Mortician because he smiled only rarely and had no sense of humour. However, he was a very obliging person.

One of the clerks who enjoyed a punt on the horses asked Mort to place a bet for him while he was up the street picking up lunch orders. Mort agreed, and when he returned presented the clerk with the betting ticket.

But when the clerk checked the ticket he discovered it was not for the horse he had selected. He queried Mort, who told him his selection had been scratched from the race so Mort had picked another horse for him.

The bet was five pounds each way. Unfortunately Mort’s choice did not run a place and the clerk was ten pounds out of pocket.

**Slow Progress**

A well-respected elderly clerk had been standing near a water-chiller for about 45 minutes.

He was then heard to remark: “I have been looking out of this window for a long time observing those three wages employees near the flagpole, and in all this time they have not done a scrap of work!”
**The Crayfish and the Vagabond**

A junior assistant in the Time Office in the 1950s was nicknamed Crayfish (for the usual reasons) by the apprentice car and wagon builders in Block 1. He was the object of considerable taunting by these lads as he waked past Block 1 from the main Time Office to open the Number 2 Time Office for the Workshops lunch hour. When he turned to see where the cries ‘Crayfish, Crayfish’ came from, there would be nobody in sight. However, the junior assistant had a fair idea who the name-callers were.

At this time there was a glut of car and wagon builders and most of the fifth-year apprentices were paid off when their apprenticeships expired. One day at about 10.40am the junior assistant was standing in the observation window at the Number 2 Time Office when he saw one of the name-callers drive past on Montreal Road in his Vauxhall Vagabond with its hood down. The junior assistant immediately rang the main Time Office and inquired if docket No. 3445 (the Vauxhall Vagabond driver’s official Workshops number) had a pass-out for this day. When the answer was ‘No’, the junior assistant left the building, jumped in his green Austin A40 and gave chase to the Vagabond, seeking some revenge for all the taunting to which he had been subjected.

He caught up with the Vagabond at the Freemasons Hotel, on the corner of Helena Street and Great Eastern Highway, and asked the startled driver why he was out of the Workshops without the necessary pass-out.

The Vagabond driver replied that he had been paid off the Friday before on the expiry of his apprenticeship and he now worked at the Midland Abattoirs.

“See you later, Crayfish,” he said as he sped off, leaving the stunned junior assistant scratching his head in disbelief.
**NEIGH, NOT ME**

The Chief Clerk, Mr Edgar (Eddy) J.S. Thompson, was nicknamed Mr Ed after a popular television comedy show at the time featuring a talking horse.

On the first of August one year, one of the Workshops wags mentioned at morning tea that today was Mr Ed’s birthday. A few chuckles ensued but a fellow clerk, unaware of the joke and the fact that August 1 is all horses’ birthday, made a beeline for Mr Thompson’s office and wished him all the best for his birthday.

He belatedly realised the joke and was very embarrassed when the surprised Chief Clerk told him that his birthday was much later in the year.
Kevin Mountford
TALL TALES & TRUE
STORIES
of the
MIDLAND RAILWAY
WORKSHOPS