

“Gatekeeping Isn't As Easy As It Looks!”

Gatekeeper P. O'Brien has been opening the gates at the Park Street level crossing, Moonee Ponds, for the past 18 years, and remembers the days when motor cars were far from common. He anticipates one of the busiest Christmases on record this year, and in this special interview discusses some of the little-known aspects of his responsible job.



PARK STREET level crossing, about half a mile out from Moonee Ponds station, is one of the busiest crossings in the State, and boasts the only automatic signalling frame in use in any gatekeeper's cabin in Victoria.

Mr. Patrick O'Brien smilingly admits that he has controlled affairs at the crossing for 18 years. His strong physique and jaunty bearing give good promise for another 18.

"When I first came here," he declares, "motor cars were nearly as scarce as our leisure moments are at present. I say nearly as scarce, for now and again we used to see a motor.

"Things have changed, though. It's absolutely impossible now, even if it were permissible, to leave the gates unattended for one minute.

"You see, we have to keep the gates continually open for trains, but must run out and open them when a car or vehicle draws up to get through, provided, of course, that the automatic signalling frame indicates that there is no train approaching."

This automatic signalling frame is the ordinary type in use in signal boxes, and was installed at Park-street early in 1918.

Safety First is Not All Slogans

It shows two lengths of track, which are illuminated by an electric glow, but which darkens immediately a train approaches.

From the time the glow disappears, the gates must remain closed to road traffic, even if all the King's horses and all the King's men were kept waiting.

Besides keeping the road gates closed, the gatekeeper operates levers which automatically lock the wicket-gates and prevent pedestrians also from crossing the rails.

Finally, when the train has passed, and the gatekeeper is free to open the gates for waiting vehicles, he must first switch over an ingenious device in his cabin, which controls signals on each side of the crossing, and gives warning to approaching trains that the gates are open for road traffic.

The Department, it will be seen, doesn't restrict its "Safety First" activities to slogans and appeals to the public.

"Yes, we're kept busy," continues Mr. O'Brien. "Our aim is to keep the train wheels moving, and at the same time prevent delays to the public. I think we can safely claim to have done this successfully.

"It's no easy matter to let motors across

without delay. Even at the slack periods of the day, we have a 15-minute service, while between 5 and 6 p.m., we handle—let me see," Mr. O'Brien consults a large time-table hanging on the wall, "yes, 24 electric trains, as well as a couple of expresses.

"And on Saturdays, when there's race meetings at Mooney Valley or football matches at Essendon, well——!"

Words fail the gatekeeper, and he shrugs his broad shoulders expressively.

Mr. O'Brien is of opinion that this year's Christmas traffic will be extremely heavy.

Everybody's Buying Cars

"Everybody's buying cars nowadays," he remarks, "and if the weather is any way warm, well, we'll be warm too before we're finished."

Night work constitutes the most trying portion of a gatekeeper's life. After the last train has passed, the gates are locked against road traffic, but the gatekeeper must be prepared at any moment to jump out of bed and rush out to let a car through.

"It's amazing how people will persist in selecting the darkest and wettest nights to go home late by car," says the gatekeeper musingly. "Springing out of a warm bed in the early hours of a winter morning, tossing on a few clothes, and stumbling out into the cold to open the gates for a carload of drunks isn't much of a joke, you know.

"Still, the job has its occasional compensations, too. One day I saw a rather wild-looking customer walk through the gates, turn round, walk back again, stop and stare round him for a bit, and then walk across the line again.

The Postmaster-General!

"He kept this up for quite a while, and at length I went out and asked him what was the game. He replied very calmly that he was the Postmaster-General, and started walking across the line again.

"We rang up the police, and found out that he was a mental case who had escaped from Carlton."

Mr. O'Brien is pardonably proud of the fact that during his 18 years' experience at Moonee Ponds he has never been in any way concerned in a railway mishap or accident of any kind.

If carefulness counts for anything, he never will be.