THE AMBERLEY GHOST STORY BY TED COOK

Mr. James Crabtree lived in a cottage in Pulborough, West Sussex. He was in his late sixties. He had never married and been retired for the last four years. His still had a full head of hair which had turned white over the last few years. He also sported a large white beard which made him look a formidable looking character and well known around the village.

Mrs. Crabtree the ninety year old mother of James Crabtree still lived in the family home in the village of Amberley a few miles to the south of her son’s home. She lived on her own and although frail she managed well for her great age. Mrs Crabtree had a lot of friends in the village that kept an eye on her and did various errands for her, except on Fridays. That was the day her son came to visit, and he took care of his Mother’s needs for that day each week.

As usual this Friday James Crabtree made his way from his home in Pulborough to his Mum’s cottage in Amberley. He always travelled by the same train each Friday.

This Friday was no exception. It was Friday 13th February 1959 and it was a cold winter’s day. The dark clouds looked like there could be snow on the way and the biting wind made anyone outside wrap their coat around themselves to try to keep the little warmth of their bodies inside.

The train which James Crabtree caught each Friday morning left Pulborough station at nine minutes past eight. With the cold weather that morning the train was slightly behind time. James waited on the open platform stamping his feet to try to keep the circulation going round his body. The wind was whistling under the station canopy making anyone standing on the platform wonder why they had even got out of bed that morning!

Some ten minutes after it was due to arrive there appeared out of the gloom a green coloured object approaching at speed. The few intending passengers moved forward towards the edge of the platform. The four car electric train screeched to a halt at the side of them. One door swung open and a couple of men in working clothes got out onto the platform, pulling their coats up around their necks as they left the warmth of the railway carriage and met the full force of the cold winter’s air in their faces. The last one of the two to get out slammed the carriage door shut.

James Crabtree along with the other passengers who had been awaiting the overdue train boarded further down the carriage. James closed the door behind them with a satisfying bang, pleased to be out of the cold and on his way at last. The Station Porter who had only appeared out of the staff room as the train had entered the station put his arm up in the air and blew on his whistle to give the “right away” signal to the Guard at the rear of the train. The Guard waved his green flag towards the Driver looking out of his cab at the front. The Driver gave a toot on the train whistle and quickly disappeared back inside his cab.

The Guard hopped into the brake van closing the door behind him and as the train pulled out of the station the Guard nodded to the Porter as he passed. The Porter nodded back and turned quickly to go back into the warmth of the staff room. In the carriage James Crabtree sat by the window looking out at the gloomy morning. “There will be snow before I get home tonight” he thought. Then thinking if it did get too heavy he supposed he could always bed down at his Mother’s cottage for the night. He would not be missed at his home living there all alone as he did.

It was times like this when he hoped that there would have been someone there waiting for him. To make his tea and warm his slippers by the fire but he had never married or even got near to it. Most of his life he had been with his Mother and then when eventually he had managed to buy a place of his own, he was past the time of finding himself a bride. So he had settled for the bachelor life and that was how it had been for these last few years. Now he had retired he spent his time walking on the Downs or fishing in the local river. Except on Fridays, like today the one day in the week when he would visit his Mother.

There were other days in the year Easter, Christmas when he would stay overnight and on her birthday but his Mother had always been independent and only accepted the minimum of help.

James was drawn back to reality as the train noise suddenly changed, as the electric service rattled over Timberley Viaduct. “Viaduct” indeed thought James it is only a small bridge over the River Arun. The line crosses the river many times on its journey south. The only difference with Timberley was it was a steel girder bridge, but with only one span and it did make a different sound when trains passed over it to all the other bridges on the line, but to call it a viaduct was to give it a statue not suited to its size.

Before he knew it the train was slowing for Amberley station and his destination. James eased himself off the seat and stood up by the carriage door. The train drew to a halt in the platform of Amberley station. James opened the door and the cold air hit him in the face. He shivered and pulled his coat up around his chin. Climbing out onto the platform he felt sorry to have to leave the warmth of the train carriage. Slowly he made his way to the exit. Walking through the booking hall he handed his ticket to the man at the counter without saying a word.

Out in the station yard he felt even colder as the wind blew up from the roadway below. As with every other Friday he made his way towards the village and his Mother’s house.

The walk took him down the station yard to the road and turning right out of the gate up the hill to the village of Amberley. There being a distinct lack of a pavement meant a walk on the right hand side of the road facing oncoming traffic. This could cause James to become frightened if any came at speed towards him.

Eventually he made it to the village, a distance of about a thousand metres but always seemed longer. James always wondered why the station was named after a village it was not that close to, and why it was not called Houghton Bridge as that was actually where the station was located! Then he thought there must be more places just like Amberley Station. James was still pondering this idea as he reached the village shop.

Each week James would get some groceries for his Mother and himself. As he was used to cooking for himself, James always cooked for his Mum on his weekly visit. He also took with him a couple of cream cakes as an after lunch treat. So armed with his groceries and cakes he set off for the last few yards to his Mother’s house.

When James arrived at his Mum’s house he entered with his own key. He called out a welcome but gets no reply. James took the groceries into the kitchen and left them on the table. Returning to the front room there is no sign of his Mother. He calls out but gets no reply. James goes to his Mother’s bedroom. Knocking on her door he still gets no reply.

Pushing the door open slowly, he finds his aged Mum still in bed. She looks so peaceful, but lifeless. Mrs Crabtree had lived a long life but during the night the Angels had come to take her.

Over the next few hours James’s day sped by in the affairs that followed his Mother’s passing. So it was late that day that he found himself back at Amberley Station. It had been snowing during the evening and the fresh crisp layer of snow was undisturbed as James made his way up the station yard. He entered the booking hall and knocked the snow off his shoes. Going to the ticket window he asked if the seven minutes past eight train was running and if it was on time.

The electrified lines through Amberley were subject to contact problems between the conductor rails carrying the power and the train when snow or ice abound. Luckily this evening the train to Pulborough was on time. James bought a single ticket back to Pulborough. He always brought a single ticket each way in case he stayed over at his Mother’s place. This particular night there was no way he was going to stay in the now empty cottage. James was feeling distraught by the events of the day. He made his way across the footbridge to the opposite platform to await the arrival of the seven minutes past eight train.

The Signalman on duty that evening at Amberley, (although these station personal were issuing tickets their prim job was the signalling of the trains and that had to take priority over the booking office work should the need arise so they were graded as Signalmen). The Signalman had to send in the daily report to Pulborough as this was the main station for accounts etc. for Amberley.

As the train approached the Signalman left the office/signal box. Locking the door he made his way across to the far platform with the day’s accounts to go to Pulborough.

Although it was only eight o’clock in the evening it was very rare to do any more trade in the booking office and if in the event of a ticket being sold the monies would just go into the following day’s takings. Any passengers at the station after this time were only going one way from the train to their home!

The train appeared out of the tunnel its headlight shinning bright in the darkness. Snow covered the platform and the Signalman could see the footprints of James Crabtree in the snow. It looked like he had come down from the footbridge and walked towards the front end of the platform but there was no sign of him returning to the main part of the platform. In fact there was no sign of James Crabtree anywhere on the station.

Our Signalman knew of James’s mother’s death that day. In a small village like Amberley news travels fast, even in the days before the mobile phone or inter-net! The train pulled into the station and slid to a halt on the slippery rails. The Guard looked out of his window not wanting to stay too long in the cold air. The Signalman walked to the Guard and gave him the letter for Pulborough station. He also mentioned the fact that there should be a passenger to get on for Pulborough. The Guard thought nobody should be about on a night like this. The Signalman was a bit concerned however as to where James Crabtree had gone as he told the Guard about the footprints in the snow and the events of the day in James’s life.

The Guard suggested the Signalman to advise the Driver to keep a lookout in case the said person had decided to continue walking off the end of the platform and worse still be lying on or near the track.

The Signalman went and told the Driver the tale and showed him where the footprints ended at the end of the platform. The Driver was not happy about taking the train forward in the dark if there was someone wandering around on the line. In the end he persuaded the Guard to ride up front with him to give an extra pair of eyes.

So eventually after some delay the train moved slowly out of the station. The Signalman watched it slowly moving away and as he did he again looked at the footprints in the snow, they just seemed to go off the end of the platform. After that the snow lay crisp and even apart from the rails where the train had departed. Where had James Crabtree gone? The Signalman remembering his duties made his way back to the signal box / office to advise the Pulborough Signalman why the train was taking so long to get to him and to find out from the Driver if he had seen anything. The Signalman also rang the Control Office to advise them of the delay and circumstances of what had occurred.

The Controller did not seem too worried and suggested that the passenger had just changed his mind about travelling. The Signalman agreed but if that had been the case where were his returning footprints in the snow? It would have been impossible to retrace his own footprints!

Eventually the train arrived at Pulborough and reported seeing nothing on the journey between the two points. So where had the elusive James Crabtree gone? The Controller suggested, as had been the case in the past, if the worst had happened, he might be found when it got light in the morning.

However the next morning which dawned sunny and bright if cold no sign was found of James Crabtree. The Control Office as a matter of routine informed the Police of the previous evening’s events. The local policeman was sent to call on James Crabtree at his cottage in Pulborough. He found it empty as James Crabtree had left it the day before and there was no sign of anyone being there since. Over the next few weeks no one came near the cottage and eventually the local Police made an entry to prove that the place was and had been empty since that fateful day.

The disappearance of James Crabtree was a talking point in both villages and many farfetched excuses were put forward as to what had happened to him. After nearly two months the stories faded and James’s Mother’s funeral took place with a huge crowd attending. Most it was said came to see if James would suddenly turn up! Unfortunately the attendees were disappointed and there was no sign of James Crabtree. The stories about where James was were resurrected for a week or so and again slowly faded into history or legend.

Moving onto the same day Friday February 13th but it is now 1970. It is again a cold evening and it has been snowing in the area of Amberley. Like 16 years previous the snow lay thickly on the ground. The clock in the signal box come booking office at Amberley Railway Station showed eight o’clock. Suddenly the outside door to the booking hall opened letting a flood of cold air in, followed by an elderly man in his late 60’s.

The man came over to the booking office window and asked the Signalman whether the seven minutes past eight train to Pulborough was on time. The Signalman looked at the man and asked if he meant the 8.12 train?

The man looked puzzled but asked if the times had changed. The Signalman replied that yes the services going north had been at 12 minutes past the hour for some years now. The man nodded and said it had been a long time since he had travelled at that time of night.

So after buying his ticket, a single to Pulborough, he left the booking hall to make his way to the opposite platform. The snow lay evenly on the tarmac of the station platform. The Signalman watched the man head for the footbridge leaving his footprints in the snow.

The bells in the signal box announced the train was on its way. The Signalman pulled the levers in the box to clear the signals for the approaching train. For some reason he seemed drawn to go over to the other platform to see the train away. Normally the trains in that direction the Guard would see that passengers were on and off safely and all the doors were shut before giving the Driver the all clear to depart. So it was unusual for the Signalman to go over to that side of the station unless there was a reason to speak to the train crew. So why on this one occasion was he drawn to go over to see this particular train?

Later on he would be unable to say why he had gone over to see this particular train, apart from thinking perhaps he thought the platform might be dangerous and the elderly passenger might want help. However at the time he was not sure why he was so keen to go out from the warm of the station buildings into the cold night air.

However go he did. When he reached the opposite platform there was no sign of the elderly passenger! The Signalman could see the footprints in the snow where the intending passenger had come over the footbridge but instead of going to the cover of the waiting room the footprints went to the end of the platform!

After that the snow laid unbroken either side of the rails, and there were no sign of the footprints returning. The Signalman stood looking at the footprints in amazement!

There seemed no logical explanation for what he was looking at. He was brought back to reality with the arrival of the train in the platform. The Guard opened his door. The Signalman walked up to him.

“What’s up?” asked the Guard. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“I think I might have!” replied the Signalman.

“Yeh, that’s about all you will see around here this time of night!” laughed the Guard.

“No” replied the confused Signalman. He told the Guard about the vanishing passenger.

It was now the Guard whose face drained of colour! By a strange coincidence 11 years ago to the day this Guard was on the same train although this day it was timed a few minutes later. It was he and the Driver on that fateful day that looked out in vain for James Crabtree!

The Guard told about the fateful trip 11 years before and he recalled it was the same date Friday 13th February. Both the men shuddered as they thought about what had happened all those years before and this evening.

The Guard asked the Signalman what he wanted to do about the missing passenger. The Rule Book did not cover disappearing passengers especially 11 years apart! So the Guard suggested they keep an eye out en route to Pulborough as he had done years before! This they did and as 11 years before, but there was no sign of the intending passenger.

The next day the local policeman hearing the tale of the night before brought in a photo from 11 years ago of missing person James Crabtree. The Signalman looked at the photo in absolute shock staring back at him was the face of the passenger that never boarded the train the night before!!!!

Could this have been James Crabtree trying to get to Pulborough on the same train as 11 years ago? Even if this was so he would have been 11 years older and this person had looked the same as 11 years previous! The original thoughts years ago were that James had either disappeared to pastures new or even fallen in the river and been swept away in the dark of the night! So could this have been the Ghost of James Crabtree still trying to get home??? It had been Friday 13th February and it had been snowing just as 11 years before!!!!!

Since then February 13th has fallen on a Friday some severn times but no sign has been seen of an intending passenger for the London train after eight in the evening. Could it be that the conditions have not been the same? In other words there was not any snow on the ground or the fact that at many times during that period the station at Amberley has not been staffed at that time? However the next time February 13th falls on a Friday is the year 2026. What would it be to be at Amberley station at eight o’clock that evening especially if it there was snow on the ground!!!!! Might you join me there in 2026?

One final point I should tell you.

I was that Signalman on duty at Amberley in 1970!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!