

Wells Railway Fraternity

The speaker at the Fraternity's meeting at Wells Town Hall on 12th February was Mr Ian Hunter, whose subject was 'The Railways of Queensland, Tasmania, New South Wales and Victoria'. He began by reminding us of the vast distances in Australia, a factor which had resulted in a preference for air travel and nowadays the virtual disappearance of long-distance passenger trains. Some tourist trains still run, however, including 'The Ghan' and the 'Indian Pacific', the latter taking four and a half days to cover the 2,200 miles from Sydney to Perth.

Each Australian state had pursued railway development independently resulting in four different track gauges - standard (British) gauge in New South Wales, 5'3" in Victoria, 3'6" and 2'0" in Queensland. This led to great operational difficulties in later years as the various state systems were joined up - at one time, a journey from Sydney to Perth would involve no fewer than six changes of gauge. In 1964 the Federal Government adopted the standard gauge and the long and costly process of conversion commenced. Not until 2004, however, were Melbourne and Adelaide linked by standard gauge track. Each state originally ran its own railway system but a measure of privatisation took place in 1994, leading to the creation of new concerns such as Commonwealth Railways and Australian National Railways

Steam locomotives were mainly imported from Britain or built locally under licence; passenger and freight vehicles, however, always tended to follow American practice and since the 1960s, most new diesel locomotives were built in Australia under licence from American companies such as General Electric and General Motors. As in the USA, a great amount of freight continues to be moved by rail, commodities including sugar cane, potatoes, bananas and molasses, the latter in giant tank wagons. In Queensland, sugar cane trains weighing some 10,000 tons are often to be found.

Ian then gave us a pictorial tour of the railway scene in the four states of the title of his talk as he recorded it on visits to Australia in 2008 and 2011. As a railway modeller, many photographs illustrated the finer details of the subject, such as the survival of British-style semaphore signalling and station buildings and signal boxes often of corrugated iron construction. We were also treated to scenes of the Brisbane and Sydney suburban railway systems (the latter with double-deck trains), the Sydney monorail and Melbourne's famous Flinders Street station.

An informative and interesting evening was concluded with a vote of thanks by Chris Challis.

On the 12th March, we were pleased to welcome back our old friend Andrew Linham. During the 1960s Andrew filmed with a cine-camera much of the local railway scene, providing a most valuable record of trains on the Cheddar Valley line from Yatton, through Wells, to Witham Friary and on the Somerset & Dorset line from Bath to Bournemouth and its branch line from Evercreech Junction to

Highbridge just before and in the years immediately following the closure of those railways.

Over the years we have been privileged to see Andrew's films on several occasions but, having learned that they had now been digitalised, we looked forward to seeing them in their new technologically enhanced format and we were not disappointed. Andrew started with the Somerset & Dorset - a combination of two of his films and concluding with a record of a railtour using a diesel train, after the closure of the line to passenger traffic, visiting Radstock at a time when local enthusiasts were hoping to set up a preservation site there - an ambition to be frustrated in following years.

Next, we saw Andrew's magnificent film of the railway serving Kilmersdon Colliery which included the rope-operation of wagons down the steep incline to the Radstock - Frome line. This was accompanied by the wonderful commentary by the colliery railwayman Herbie Loader and his son Nelson.

Finally we were delighted - although somewhat saddened - to see Andrew's film of the last day of passenger trains on the Cheddar Valley line, on 7th September 1963, supplemented by views of a 'Strawberry Special' in 1964 and a final special train in 1969. The sight of trains at Wells (Tucker Street) station and crossing the notorious Priory Road level crossing was a nostalgic highlight.

On behalf of us all, Terry Fowler gave a heartfelt vote of thanks to Andrew for a most enjoyable evening. We were also pleased to welcome railway author, Jeremy Grayer, to our meeting to sign copies of the latest volumes of his 'Impermanent Way' series of books.

Further details of the Fraternity and its activities can be obtained from John Uncles (tel870158) or on the Fraternity's website www.railwells.com.