

Wells Railway Fraternity

The speaker at our meeting at Wells Town Hall on 8th March was Richard Pelham whose subject was 'American Narrow Gauge Locomotives'. He interpreted his topic so as to cover not only locomotives found in the United States but also the numerous examples built by American manufacturers (such as Baldwin, Lima, Porter and Alco) for service throughout the world. He pointed out that the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Philadelphia was the world's most prolific manufacturer, producing during its existence of well over a century some 76,000 steam locomotives; it was not surprising therefore that many of the machines which we would see during his presentation came from that stable. American firms were generally able to meet very short delivery dates and consequently won many export orders when British and European companies were often unable to compete in this regard. For example, a repeat order for engines for the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway went to Baldwin, despite all previous examples having been built in Britain.

During the First World War, American firms built many small narrow gauge locomotives for use on the light temporary lines laid to feed the Front Line with supplies and ammunition. Several of these engines still survive and Richard's first photographs were of one recently restored and in action on the Leighton Buzzard Railway in Bedfordshire. This was followed by a second example on a heritage line in Northern France. There then followed a whirlwind world tour taking us to India, South East Asia and South America and we saw examples of all manner of steam locomotives, built to a variety of gauges between 2'0" and 3'6", geared and articulated types and those burning not only coal but wood, oil or biogas. In Brazil we saw massive compound locomotives built in 1947 and in Ecuador the very last American-built narrow gauge engine, which appeared some six years later. Also in Ecuador we were treated to amazing views of steam trains toiling up to the Devil's Nose, some 12,000 feet above sea level. The first half of the evening concluded with a brief visit to Cuba where the last survivors of a once large number of American-built engines still find use on the sugar cane plantations at harvest time.

Resuming after a refreshment break, Richard then turned to the USA itself. First we went to Disneyland to see a couple of narrow gauge engines which had been drastically rebuilt so as to represent the great man's idea of the iconic 'Wild West' locomotives of the 1880s - completely unrecognisable from their original appearance. Richard then outlined the history of the extensive network of 3'0" gauge lines built up in the late 19th century in Colorado, Utah and northern New Mexico by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad and other companies. A few of these lines still survive as tourist railways, the most well-known being the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, which extends for some 63 miles, and the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. Both of these use classic Denver & Rio Grande steam locomotives, particularly of the 'Mikado' type. The earliest batch of these, which appeared in 1903, earned the nickname 'Mud Hens' on account of their tendency to derail, whilst the peculiar 'bear trap' spark arrester gear fitted to their chimneys gives a rather strange appearance to British eyes. We also learned that one of a later batch of 'Mikado' engines had belonged for many years to the famous screen cowboy Gene Autry. Richard showed us breathtaking views of trains on these lines against the backdrop of the southern Rocky Mountains and ended his talk by saying that on his latest visit to the Cumbres line, there had been an unseasonal light snow fall and this produced a truly beautiful enhancement to the last pictures in his presentation. In addition to his talk, Richard also brought an interesting selection of memorabilia in the form of works plates from a variety of American-built locomotives. A vote of thanks for a fascinating evening was given by Ken Smith.

The next Fraternity meeting will be held at Wells Town Hall on the evening of 12th April. The speaker will be Mick Hayes and his subject will be '25 Years of Electric Trains to Ipswich'. For further details of the society's activities, please contact Paul Fry (673187) or John Uncles (870158) - or visit our website www.railwells.com.

John Uncles