

Wells Railway Fraternity – May 2013

The meeting at Wells Town Hall on 9th April began on a sad note when the Chairman, Colin Price, led us in a period of silence as we remembered two members who had died since our last meeting - the renowned artist David Fisher of Midsomer Norton and Terry Miles of Shepton Mallet. We were also saddened to learn of the death, at the age of 90, of Harry Viles, the driver of the last regular passenger train into Wells over the Cheddar Valley line in September 1963.

We then welcomed our two speakers, Douglas Lindsay and Dave Whitchurch, from the Bristol Group of the Festiniog Railway Society. Dave began by describing, with the aid of slides, a trip over the Festiniog Railway, originally built 200 years ago to link the slate quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog with the harbour at Porthmadog. The line was built to an extremely narrow gauge, slightly less than 2 feet, and in the 1950s was to become one of the earliest railway preservation projects, not only in Britain but in the world. Part of the line was flooded by the Central Electricity Generating Board for a pump-storage reservoir in the 1960s and the Festiniog Railway was successful in building a deviation, using much volunteer labour, to take the line higher up the mountainside, involving a remarkable spiral section to gain height. Dave reminded us that the railway could claim two 'firsts' - the introduction of steam engines on such a narrow gauge in 1863 and the remarkable Double Fairlie articulated locomotives a decade or so later.

The second half of the evening was taken up with an account by Douglas of the rebuilding of the Welsh Highland Railway, built to the same 2'0" gauge but which had a very short life, being closed in 1936. The railway runs from Caernarfon to Porthmadog and although started as a long-term restoration project, the reconstruction of its 20 mile length was achieved in a commendably short period, thanks mainly to encouragement from the Welsh Assembly which made a substantial EU grant available for the purpose. The line was finally completed to connect once more with the Festiniog Railway in 2011. Being built much later than the Festiniog Railway, the WHR does not have the same loading gauge restrictions as the latter and services today are mainly handled by three very powerful and comparatively modern Beyer Garratt articulated steam locomotives, rescued from South Africa. The account was accompanied by a computer presentation containing some 400 photographs! A vote of thanks was given by David Humphreys.

For further information about the Fraternity's activities, please contact John Uncles (tel. 870158) or visit the society's website www.railwells.com.

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