

Wells Railway Fraternity – October 2012

The Fraternity's activities in September were tinged with sadness following the death on 28th August of our former chairman, David Stephens, who had served as a committee member for the best part of a quarter of a century until increasing health problems had led to his standing down at our 2011 AGM. On both occasions when we met in September a few minutes were spent in silence as we fondly remembered David and all that he had done for the society.

For local railway enthusiasts, the month marked two important anniversaries - a 150th and a 50th. On 1st September 1862 the Somerset & Dorset Railway came into being with the amalgamation of the Somerset Central and Dorset Central Railway companies, whilst almost exactly 100 years later, on the 8th September 1962, the last 'Pines Express' ran over the S&DJ line from Bath to Bournemouth, hauled appropriately by 'Evening Star', the last steam locomotive built for British Railways.

To celebrate these two anniversaries, the Fraternity made a sentimental tour from Wells by vintage coach on the 8th September over part of the Somerset & Dorset line. Amongst the sites we visited were the stations at Midsomer Norton and Binegar whilst we stopped for coffee at The Natterjack (formerly the Station Hotel) at Evercreech Junction and lunched at the Gartell Light Railway at Henstridge. We enjoyed a ride on the latter narrow-gauge railway which runs mainly over the formation of the old S&D before we ventured into Dorset to visit the restored station at Shillingstone. We were blessed with fine weather and the day proved to be a most enjoyable one although some of us who remembered the old line were saddened to see how in places its course was being slowly obliterated by nature and by man.

At the first meeting of our new season at Wells Town Hall only three days later, the Somerset & Dorset was still on our minds when we welcomed back our friend from South Yorkshire, Mick Hayes, who took us on a photographic journey over that railway. Mick has amassed a large collection of photographs of the line, some dating from late Victorian times and the early 20th century, and others down to the last days prior to closure in the 1960s. His slide show began at Bath Green Park station and we called at virtually every station all the way to Bournemouth West and then along the line branch line from Burnham-on-Sea to Evercreech Junction. A vote of thanks for a fascinating evening was given by David Fisher.

At the meeting on the 9th February, we were pleased to welcome back after several years Tim Maddocks, one of Network Rail's Customer Services Managers. His subject for the evening was entitled 'The Cotswold Redoubling Project' and related to the section of the old GWR line between Oxford and Worcester, a distance of some 51 miles. This was originally built by the Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway in the early 1850s (always known by

railwaymen as the Old Worse and Worst) and served Charlbury, Ascott-under-Wychwood, Moreton-in-Marsh, Honeybourne and Evesham. Over the years this developed into a busy secondary main line but following the Beeching Report, in 1966 it was selected for severe rationalisation. Some stations were closed and demolished and the signalling system was simplified. In 1971 more economies were made by singling the double track except for a central 11-mile stretch. Previous express trains were withdrawn and a poor service using diesel railcars was substituted. The line continued to be used by freight trains but the singling often led to unacceptable delays when a train was running late and this could have far-reaching consequences in the Midlands and on the Great Western main line. A further proposal to close the central section completely and work the remains of the line as two branches was fortunately not proceeded with.

In 1982 Cotswold Line Promotion Group was formed to bring pressure on BR to improve services and in this regard it was successful. Honeybourne station was re-opened in that year but despite a rapid rise in the number of passengers using the line, the level of performance reached an all-time low. With the advent of privatisation and the introduction of a consequential system of financial penalties relating to train delays, it became obvious that, despite the introduction of better trains, the track capacity had to be increased and a plan for reinstating the double track between Evesham and Moreton-in-Marsh and between Ashcote-under Wychwood to Charlbury was adopted.

Work commenced in 2009 with a six-week closure of the line to enable essential preliminary tasks to be undertaken. Repair work was undertaken on the half-mile Campden Tunnel, the only one on the line. Tim reminded us that this tunnel, near the village of Mickleton, had been the site of the so-called Battle of Mickleton in 1851 when a dispute between the contractor and the company had led to a stand-off, with some fist cuffs, between two large gangs of navvies - the victorious party being led by the Company's engineer - none other than Isambard Kingdom Brunel !

Remedial work continued throughout 2010 with a major project being the replacement of a bridge at Honeybourne in October. A new single track steel bridge had been provided in 1971 and it was decided to replace this with a new double-track reinforced concrete structure. Tim showed us a video of the bridge replacement in quick-time so that the many hours involved were compressed into just a few minutes - a surreal experience. The bridge spans the course of the former GWR Cheltenham - Stratford-on-Avon line and a diverted major farm track. We were reminded that the Gloucestershire - Warwickshire Railway were currently pressing on with the restoration of this line northwards to Broadway and had a long-term ambition to continue to Honeybourne which would involve passing under the new bridge. The heritage railway had therefore installed a short length of rail there as a statement of intent ! A new home had been found for the 1971 bridge on the Telford Steam Railway at Horsehay.

The following year had been one of major track laying and the redoubled section of the Cotswold Line was officially re-opened on the 22nd August 2011. Tim was pleased to have been able to arrange for the first steam-hauled charter train to travel over the line shortly afterwards. The new track arrangements had also been designed to improve access to the highly successful Long Marston Freight Terminal (formerly a Ministry of Defence depot and served by a 3-mile branch line from Honeybourne). A new junction had been formed there and Tim had been delighted when he had been allowed to choose a name for it - Honeybourne Stratford Line Junction.

Tim's presentation was supplemented with a series of his slides recording the works in detail. Stations had been refurbished and signalling brought up to date so that the whole line is now controlled by four signal boxes. It was pleasant to note that Moreton-in Marsh retains its traditional GWR semaphore signals. Tim concluded by commenting that the revival of the Cotswold Line served as an excellent example of what could be achieved by pressure and supporter groups acting these days under the aegis of Community Rail. A vote of thanks for a most informative presentation was given by Roy Kethro.

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

John Uncles