

WELLS RAILWAY FRATERNITY

Exactly a year after giving us the first part of his presentation 'Rails around the World', Mike Beale returned to Wells Town Hall on 9th November to conclude his account of his travels as a railway consulting engineer. After 20 years with British Rail, on privatisation Mike moved to the Halcrow company and he had previously told us about his work in Thailand, Egypt and Hong Kong.

Mike began the second part by saying that in 2002 his work took him to Australia where Halcrow were involved in several railway projects and initially he spent some time in Sydney where he was able to explore the various main and electrified suburban lines serving that city. We saw a variety of slides illustrating these services including some of double-deck suburban trains. The main line trains linking Sydney with Melbourne and Brisbane looked rather familiar as the XPT diesel units were closely based on the highly successful British High Speed Train although some included sleeping cars. Mike explained that for various historical reasons railway development in Australia had been somewhat hampered with each state choosing its own gauge without any regard for its neighbours. Thus, today there are therefore 17,600 km of lines built to the standard gauge (as in Britain), 17,000 km to the narrower 3 ft 6 ins gauge and some 8,000 km to the broader 5 ft 3 ins gauge. In order to improve matters sections of the latter gauge lines have over the years been converted to standard gauge to provide a basic network linking Perth with Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane whilst a north-south link had been added recently with the long-awaited completion of the line from Alice Springs to Darwin. As in the USA, having regard to the great distances between the principal cities, most Australians preferred to fly and the very limited service of long distance trains was nowadays patronised mainly by tourists.

Mike's work was soon to take him to Perth where a new 70 km long commuter line was to be built mainly on the broad central reservation of a freeway as part of a scheme to revitalise and develop public transport in the sprawling city. Western Australia is the largest state in the country and occupies about one third of its area but with a population of only 1.8 million; and of these some 1.4 million lived in Perth, the state capital. Understandably, railway development in Western Australia was very sparse, the original lines being built to transport grain and timber to ports whilst some appeared during the Australian Gold Rush period. The state was noted for the jarrah hardwood tree which was felled in huge quantities for export worldwide until the advent of conservation concerns particularly for use as railway sleepers. Long distance trains are few but the famous 'Indian Pacific' runs across the whole continent linking Perth and Sydney. There are a handful of preservation sites in Western Australia and after seeing some scenes on these, we moved on to some similar sites in South Australia. Victoria came next and its capital Melbourne has an electrified suburban system dating from the last years of the 19th century and two large termini, Flinders Street and Spencer Street (now renamed Southern Cross). The city also boasts a thriving street tramway system which is still being extended, its routes now totalling 340 km! We saw something of nearby preservation sites and a ride on the famous 'Puffing Billy' narrow gauge line up into the hills. Our 'visit' to Australia concluded with a brief glimpse of a museum line in Queensland.

The final project upon which Mike worked took him to New Zealand where he was seconded to the Auckland Regional Council for 11 months in connection with improvements to the suburban lines in that city. Mike took the opportunity to see as much of New Zealand as time permitted and took the train over the 800 km main line to Wellington, the central section of which was electrified at 25kV some 20 years ago. We then crossed the Cook Strait onto South Island and here we saw scenes featuring the famous steam-hauled 'Kingston Flyer' which runs over the mountains from Christchurch to Greymouth, reaching an altitude at Arthur's Pass of 737 metres above sea level. The line also features the famous unventilated and single bore Otira Tunnel, through which the steam locomotives had to be 'shut down' and towed by diesels.

For our final view in New Zealand, we returned to the North Island for a brief look at the eccentric Driving Creek Railway on the Coromandel Peninsula. This narrow gauge line was originally built by a local potter for the transport of clay to his workshop but was later developed as a tourist attraction, offering breathtaking views as the little train runs up into the hills.

A vote of thanks was given by Simon Kennedy.

The Fraternity meets monthly at Wells Town Hall. Further details are available from Paul Fry (673187), John Uncles (870158) or on the society's website www.railwells.com

John Uncles