

Wells Railway Fraternity

At our meeting held at Wells Town Hall on the 12th November, we were delighted to welcome back once more Colin Boocock who had travelled from Derby to be with us. On this occasion Colin took 'Railways of India' as his subject, featuring mainly his second visit to the sub-continent made in 2008. His presentation, superbly illustrated, began in Delhi where we first of all visited one of the major railway museums where the exhibits were maintained in spotless condition. We were enthralled to see a museum employee not only polishing a locomotive but dusting it with a pan and brush! The collection also included the oldest surviving locomotive in India, the 'Fairy Queen', built in Leeds in 1855. Whilst in the area we also saw the curious surviving ancient monorail worked by a steam locomotive with only three wheels, all in line, whilst stability was maintained by means of a strange outrigger running on the normal road surface.

Leaving Delhi, Colin then took us on a photographic trip on the 2'6" gauge line up into the foothills of the Himalayas at Simla, the favourite resort of the British administration during the hot summer months. The final 60 miles of this line, now operated with diesel locomotives, climbs at an average gradient of 1 in 30 and the terminus is at 6,988 feet above sea level. The town clings to the hillside and still has European features such as a church and university buildings, in Victorian Gothic style.

Returning to Delhi, Colin's travels then took him along the main line running to the south-east, stopping at Agra for a visit to the Taj Mahal, of which Colin showed us a beautiful selection of photographs. Eventually arriving at Siliguri, we again headed north towards the Himalayas, this time over the famous Darjeeling Railway. This 2'0" gauge line runs for 55 miles, reaching a summit of 7,407 feet at Ghum before dropping to reach Darjeeling itself, some 600 feet lower down. The Darjeeling Railway is now designated as a World Heritage Site and is still worked by a fleet of 'B' Class diminutive tank engines, most of which were constructed in Great Britain between 1889 and 1928 with a few others built locally, the last in the year 2000! These magnificent little locomotives currently require a crew of five men - in addition to a driver and a fireman, a third man sits on the cab roof shovelling coal down to the fireman, whilst a further two men sit on the front buffer beam pouring sand onto the rails as and when required to avoid the engine slipping, especially in wet weather. The engines need to stop frequently for water and the local housewives also make use of the lineside water tanks for their domestic washing. Over its whole length the line follows a road and towards its terminus runs through a narrow shopping street where the traders rapidly remove their stalls and wares from the tracks only a few minutes before the train makes its stately way through.

Finally we saw something of Kolkata - Calcutta to most of us - with its amazing traffic jams with motor vehicles in competition with ox-drawn wagons and carefully avoiding the cows who wander everywhere with impunity, being regarded as sacred by Hindus. In addition to stimulating our railway interests, Colin was able to give us a real picture of contemporary life in India with stark contrasts between the growing prosperous new society and the sprawling

shanty towns with their great poverty. Colin and his wife Mary act as ambassadors for the Railway Children Charity, which is supported by the Fraternity, and Colin was able to update us regarding the important work being done in India by the charity. The government and the railway police were now becoming far more supportive in the efforts being made to address the many problems faced by the multitude of children, mostly orphans or runaways, who make their homes within the vast railway stations in the cities of the sub-continent. A vote of thanks for a most was given by John Uncles.

Our December meeting will be taken up by the society's annual general meeting but on the 14th January 2014 two of our members will be giving us very different short talks - on the Paddington Sleeper Accident and on Restoring a Clyde Puffer. Meetings are held in Wells Town Hall, starting at 7.30 p.m. and further details are available from John Uncles (tel.870158) or on our website www.railwells.com.