

## **Wells Railway Fraternity**

The Fraternity's Annual General Meeting was held at Wells Town Hall on the 14th December and, following the formal business, we enjoyed two short presentations by members. First, Paul Burdett intrigued us by asking if we could suggest any connection between the lubrication of the big ends on a steam locomotive and a problem with domestic egg production. He explained that some years ago, whilst working for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, complaints were received that a substantial proportion of eggs being sold displayed a strong fishy smell. The answer to this mystery was eventually found to be related to rape seed oil. After the oil had been extracted from the plants, it was found that the mush was being fed to poultry and that this contained traces of an acid which led to the unpleasant smell in some eggs. The oil, containing the same acid, was the preferred lubricant for steam locomotives at the time - and hence the unusual connection. Paul then taxed our minds further with some thoughts on the unusual relationship between the tractive force developed by a steam engine and the horsepower generated. The second offering was given by Ken Smith and featured a photographic record of an open day at Eastleigh in 2009 in celebration of the centenary of the founding of the railway works there.

On the 11th January, our speaker was Canon Roger Davis, Chairman of the East Somerset Society of Model and Experimental Engineers, and his subject was 'The Building of the Bath & West Railway'. A native of North Somerset, Roger served in the RAF where he trained as an electronics engineer, and then worked for some years for BBC Television. He then entered the church, serving in various parishes in the London and Home Counties area, before finally retiring to Wells.

Visits to model engineering exhibitions in Bristol led to an interest in miniature railways and in 2001 Roger attended an exploratory meeting at Bowlish which led to the founding of ESSMEE. A search for a permanent headquarters became pressing after the society acquired the track and rolling stock from a closed miniature railway at Brean. Various locations in the East Mendip area were looked at and for a while members helped with the running of the miniature railway at the Hunter's Rest near Timsbury. Finally, the society obtained the use of a redundant building at the Bath & West Showground. Whilst members set about refurbishing this building to provide a clubroom and workshops, the society provided a portable miniature railway at the 2004 Show and, as it was considered that a permanent railway could be an added attraction at the Showground, work then started on building such a line. This was to a mixed gauge of 5 and 7.25 inches and initially took the form of a circuit of the headquarters building. An ambitious project was then commenced, extending the line running on either side of Prestleigh Brook and around the ornamental lake near the southern boundary of the showground site, a total length of over half a mile. This took four years to complete and required the building of two substantial bridges. The first train ran over the completed railway in February 2008.

The society obtained a 25-year lease in 2007 and the little railway has proved a great success, over 60,000 passengers having travelled on it to date. Apart from a small grant, all the substantial costs have been met by means of loans from members - who also provided almost of the labour involved. Roger then outlined developments with regard to the locomotives and other rolling stock operated on the railway. Current projects included the provision of a new station building and the construction of the society's own steam engine.

The talk was accompanied by a splendid power point presentation which included video of the two royal visits to the line - by the Duke of Kent in 2005 and the Prince of Wales in 2009. A vote of thanks was proposed by John Blatchford who congratulated the society on the extremely high engineering standards which we had seen illustrated.

The next meeting will be held at Wells Town Hall at 7.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 8th February, when Simon Castens will be talking on the Titfield Thunderbolt and the Camerton branch. Visitors and prospective members are always welcome. Further details are obtainable from either Paul Fry (673187) or John Uncles (870158).

John Uncles