

Wells Railway Fraternity

The Fraternity's Annual General Meeting took place at Wells Town Hall on 11th December and was tinged with sadness as we remembered the three long-serving members whose deaths had occurred during 2012 - Paul Fry, David Milton and David Stephens. After our customary refreshment break, with seasonal mince pies, members then set about tackling the Annual Quiz - the winner on this occasion being Brian Neill.

Our speaker at our first meeting of 2013 - on the 8th January - was Mr David Mead, who, despite the atrocious weather, had travelled from his home in Teignmouth to be with us. His 33-year career had been with London Transport and upon retirement, he held the post of Chief Civil Engineer responsible for the underground lines. He first of all commented that the date of our meeting coincided almost to the day with the 150th anniversary of the completion of the world's first underground railway between Bishop's Road (Paddington) and Farringdon Street (a distance of nearly 4 miles across London) on the 9th January 1863. This event was marked with a formal celebratory dinner in the latter station and the line opened to the public on the following day.

Mr Mead's illustrated talk began surprisingly with an artist's impression of the site of central London in prehistoric times, to remind us of its geological inheritance, mainly of clay. He then moved forward to London of around 1800, then the largest city in the world, the River Thames full of ships from all around the globe. Development was hampered, however, as road access to the south was only available by means of the ancient London Bridge and comparatively recent bridges at Blackfriars and Westminster.

An ambitious project for a tunnel under the Thames between Wapping and Rotherhithe was started in 1824 with Sir Marc Isambard Brunel as its engineer. The tunnel was not to be opened until 1843 however - albeit then only for pedestrians - and its construction was beset with many problems; during a major flooding disaster, Sir Marc's young son, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was to play an heroic part. For this project, Sir Marc designed the first tunnelling shield, an ingenious invention, the basic principles of which are still found in many of the sophisticated tunnel boring machines in use today. Rotherhithe Tunnel was sold to the East London Railway in 1869 and eventually became an important part of the new and successful London Overground system in 2007.

The Metropolitan Railway of 1863 was mainly built on the 'cut-and-cover' method, the first lines being built just below major roads. A few years later a similar principle was used by the rival Metropolitan District Railway but the first section, between Westminster and Blackfriars, however, was built on land reclaimed from the Thames. This also incorporated a major new sewerage scheme, and on completion, all was covered by the Victoria Embankment and Gardens. Extensions of the District Railway were complicated by the absence of suitable roads under which the line could be driven and the company was forced to buy land and buildings. Also, within the City of London, the Corporation insisted that new highways should be built over the new railway and not

buildings, thus depriving the company of substantial income potential. An example is Queen Victoria Street, to the east of Blackfriars. Elsewhere, in Bayswater, a couple of houses in Leinster Terrace had to be demolished and the company was compelled to reinstate the frontage with dummy house fronts - to the displeasure of the GPO as the 'fictional' addresses became the subject of many practical jokes.

Both the Metropolitan and District Railways were originally operated with steam locomotives and although exhaust steam was condensed, smoke remained a major problem until the advent of electrification from 1903. The first 'Tube' railway arrived in 1890 with the opening of the City and South London Railway, originally from King William Street to Stockwell, and trains running in tunnels, of circular section with a diameter of only about 10 feet, driven deep below ground level. At first cable haulage was proposed but it was decided to use electric locomotives - a bold choice in view of the infancy of electrical technology. The original coaches were most unusual in that they had no windows. Access to stations was by means of lifts - another example of new technology. Most of the tube lines under Central London were completed between 1900 and 1910 and in 1911 the first escalator was installed at Earl's Court station. The public were at first very nervous about using the 'moving staircase' and for a while a disabled man with a wooden leg, 'Thumper' Harris, was employed to travel up and down the escalator all day to inspire public confidence.

Mr Dean gave a brief survey of developments during the 20th century, the most significant probably being the bringing of all underground, tram and bus services under the control of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933. He covered major schemes such as the building of the Victoria and Jubilee Lines, the Docklands Light Railway and the extension of the Piccadilly Line to Heathrow Airport (and later Terminal 4).

In the 1960s there was a major diversion of the Circle Line in connection with the large-scale Barbican Redevelopment and Mr Dean was the Resident Engineer for this project. The redevelopment included new buildings for the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the school insisted that noise and vibration from the railway should be minimised. This was successfully achieved in a novel way by elevating the railway slightly within its tunnel and cushioning the tracks with rubber blocks - a technique subsequently used elsewhere in London.

Mr Mead touched on some of the types of rolling stock used on the Underground, including the new 'S' stock trains currently being introduced to replace the trains which have served the Circle, District and Metropolitan Lines for the last 40 years or more. Finally we saw a few illustrations of interesting surviving station buildings before the final slide showing the famous Underground map originally devised by Harry Beck. A vote of thanks for a most interesting talk was given by Chris Avery.

The next meeting will be held, as usual, at Wells Town Hall on 12th February when Mr Ian Hunter will be giving an illustrated talk on the Railways of

Australia. For further details of the Fraternity's activities, contact John Uncles (tel: 870158) or visit our website www.railwells.com.