

THE ORIENT EXPRESS AND ITS INTERESTING PASSENGERS

by Roger Ellis

Tuesday 10 September

Our new programme got under way with something rather different. Our speaker was Roger Ellis, from Martock, and his subject was '**The Orient Express - and Its Interesting Passengers**'. He began his illustrated talk by briefly outlining the history of the company which was responsible for the famous train. The French financier George Nagelmackers visited the United States in the 1860s and met George Mortimer Pullman, an ironmonger, who had had the idea of developing luxury railway vehicles. He had acquired twelve coaches and refurbished these with a view to offering them on hire to American railroad companies. In fact his enterprise received publicity when one of his cars was used to carry Abraham Lincoln's body back to Illinois following his assassination.

Returning to Europe, Nagelmackers, taken with Pullman's idea, launched a company to develop luxury international express trains. The first proposal was for a Paris - Berlin service but this was thwarted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Instead, a Paris - Brindisi train was launched but this proved a financial failure. Then, in 1883, a Paris - Munich - Vienna - Budapest express was introduced and, by 1894 one could travel by the 'Orient Express' to Constantinople (later Istanbul) - via Bucharest, Belgrade and Sofia, although for some time the final leg of the journey had to be by steamer from Varma in Bulgaria. When through running was finally achieved, the eastward journey took 81 hours, the westward 78.

The luxury trains, operated by CIWL (or the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lit et des Grand Express Europeens to give it its full name) proved extremely popular and the 'Orient Express' attracted many famous (and infamous!) passengers over the years. Roger then entertained us with stories relating to some of these, beginning with millionaire arms dealer Sir Basil Zaharoff and continuing with the inventor of the submarine Thorsden Nordenfelt, the mad Duke of Marchena (who attempted to murder his new 19-year old bride on the train!) and Calouste Gulbenkian. Continental royalty often travelled on the 'Orient Express', including King Ferdinand of Bulgaria and his son (later King Boris III - who one one occasion after a footplate accident in which the fireman was killed, drove the locomotive for a while). Later, another royal passenger was the railway enthusiast King Carol of Romania. We then heard about the Maharajah of Cooch Bihar who was travelling to London, accompanied by his many wives and concubines. There were, of course, tales of international intrigue and passengers included Robert Baden Powell (at a time when he was acting as a British spy in the Balkans) and another famous spy, Mata Hari. In 1921, a terrorist bomb was detonated on the 'Orient Express' resulting in the deaths of 20 people.

There were, of course, many celebrities who travelled by the train, including the US-born cabaret entertainer Josephine Baker whilst, during the inter-war years, notable passengers included the future King Edward VIII (accompanied by Mrs Simpson) and the Swedish philanthropist Raoul Wallenberg. In January 1929 Agatha Christie travelled on the express when it became stuck in a snowdrift for six days - the inspiration for her famous Hercules Poirot mystery 'Murder on the Orient Express'.

Over the years the route of the 'Orient Express' varied and the service was augmented by the 'Simplon Orient Express' (from 1919 - 62) and 'The Arlberg Orient Express' (from 1930 -62) - apart, of course, from the war years in both cases. The advent of the Iron Curtain led to a serious deterioration in the service - running through several Communist countries; First Class coaches were withdrawn and longer passport and luggage checks were introduced.

THE ORIENT EXPRESS - continued

Finally only one through Paris- Istanbul coach was included in the trains composition. The timetable became highly unreliable and, together with the decline of popularity of sleeping-car travel, the final traditional 'Orient Express' ran in May 1977. The name continued, however, for a while with trains such as the 'Venice - Simplon Orient Express' (which ran from 1982 - 2005) and various services operated by Austrian Railways.

With all the intrigue associated with the 'Orient Express', Roger referred to the CIWL 'S' Class wagon-lit coaches introduced in 1922. These were unusual in that each entry cubicle served two sleeping compartments via a common door - ideal for romantic encounters and therefore extremely popular!

Roger concluded his presentation with a short 'travelogue' tour of various locations throughout Europe which he had visited by train in recent years. A vote of thanks to Roger for an entertaining evening was given by Malcolm Barton.

2019 – 2020 PROGRAMME

10 December	AGM followed by Quiz – set by last year's winner	Jim Allwood
14 January	The Horses That Made The Railways	Dave Mace
	<i>followed by</i>	
	S.A.R.A. and Beyond	Colin Price
11 February	The LT Museum and Steam on the Underground	Barry LeJeune
10 March	The Berliner – British Military Train	} Douglas Beazer
	<i>followed by</i> The Royal Train	
14 April	Railways in Art	Eric Bottomley
12 May	To Scotland for Steam – Part 2	Brian Arman
8-9 August	Railwells Model Railway Exhibition	

All meetings are held at Wells Town Hall, 7.00pm onwards for 7.30 start,
except Railwells, which is 10.30 – 5.30 Sat, 10.30 – 4.30 Sun.

THE WESTON, CLEVEDON & PORTISHEAD RAILWAY

by Christopher Redwood

Tuesday 8 October

Our speaker started by reminding us that he had, in fact, spoken to the Fraternity on this subject previously - in September 1999 and he hoped that nobody would still recall that meeting!

Christopher began with a brief historical background to the WC&PR. The Bristol & Exeter Railway was opened as far as Bridgwater in 1841, with a short branch line to serve the then small fishing village of Weston-super-Mare. Another branch was built from Yatton to Clevedon, opening in 1846. Both Clevedon and Weston rapidly became fashionable resorts with the population of the latter growing rather faster than at Clevedon. Nearer Bristol, the embryonic port of Portishead was connected by rail to the city in 1862 and three years later there was an abortive attempt to extend that line to Clevedon.

In the last years of the 19th Century, the desirability of connecting Weston and Clevedon by a direct route resulted in the promotion of the Weston & Clevedon Railway and this opened in 1897, the company being able to take advantage of the Light Railways Act of the same year, whereby signalling and the protection of road crossings were minimised. The 4-mile single track line, originally referred to as a tramway, ran into financial difficulties almost from the beginning and the company was destined to spend many years in receivership. Nevertheless, it proved possible to extend the line to Portishead in 1907. The line never enjoyed much goods traffic but some coal from South Wales was landed at Wick Wharf whilst the extension through the Gordano Valley did see the movement of road stone from the Conygar and Black Rock Quarries there. In 1911 the famous Colonel Stephens became General Manager of the WC&P and he was to operate the line, together with his several other light railways, in his inimitable manner until his death in 1934, when William Austin took over its running.

Christopher illustrated his talk with many photographs of the line and its fascinating rolling stock. Most of its locomotives were acquired second-hand from various sources whilst the original six coaches came from the Lancaster Carriage & Wagon Co., having been built for an Argentinian railway which was then unable to pay for them. With their pronounced American appearance, these were known locally as the 'Cowboy' coaches. At various times, the Railway also had two rail-mounted Fordson tractors for shunting, a Drewry railcar and an ex-SR petrol railcar. Latterly, three ex-LSWR coaches and three ex-LBSCR 'Terrier' 0-6-0Ts were acquired.

Accidents were rare, a train colliding with a waggonette on one occasion whilst the 2-4-0T *Hesperus*, (ex-GWR No.1384) ended up in a rheen (drainage ditch) after a bridge collapsed under it.

The line finally closed on the outbreak of the Second World War and the GWR was obliged to take over the line for wartime wagon storage. All the surviving rolling stock was scrapped with the exception of two 'Terriers' which survived to pass into BR ownership for a while.

Christopher supplemented his presentation with two short pre-war cine films of the line and also entertained us by reading a poem written in 1925 and singing a song about the railway, both in local Somerset dialect !

Roy Kethro proposed a vote of thanks to Christopher for a most interesting evening recalling one of our fascinating local lines.

THE POLITICS OF THE S & D RAILWAY CLOSURE

by Colin Divall

Tuesday 12 November

Our speaker on the 12th November was Colin Divall, Professor Emeritus of Railway Studies, University of York, and the subject of his lecture was something rather unusual for a railway enthusiast audience. His presentation was entitled in full 'The Puffing Billy of the Hedgerows' and concerned the political background behind the closure of the Somerset & Dorset Railway over the years 1951-1967. For this, he had made a detailed study of various documents (especially those in the Public Record Office) and of other sources.

Professor Divall began by explaining that, before the Second World War, railway companies were able to withdraw services and close lines by decision of the board of directors, but, on Nationalisation in 1947, closures became the prerogative of the newly-established British Transport Commission acting through the Railway Executive. Objections and representations were considered by one of the new Transport Users Consultative Committees appointed to cover different areas of the country.

Regarding the S&D line, the Wells and Bridgwater branches had been closed in the early 1950s and the first hint of the possible closure of the main Bath to Bournemouth line, together with the Evercreech Junction - Highbridge - Burnham-on-Sea branch, came in June 1951. The S&D had been developed as a North – South line by the Midland and London & South Western Railways and was therefore something of a thorn in the side of the GWR. Under British Railways, the line was divided between the Western and Southern Regions with the boundary being changed from time to time.

It was obvious that the line was losing money and in February 1955 the annual deficit was estimated at £215,500 (well over £2M at today's values). Later that year the SR closed four halts in Dorset - hardly likely to reduce the deficit to any degree. In November 1960, the WR presented a case for re-routing long-distance trains (including the 'Pines Express') and, in this connection, there was talk of providing a spur from the Midland Bristol - Mangotsfield - Bath branch to the GWR main line west of Bath. In February 1962, both regions proposed the closure of the S&D between Bath and Templecombe and in September of that year, the 'Pines Express' was re-routed via Oxford, interestingly at the request of the London Midland Region.

Matters were changed by the 1962 Transport Act with the new British Railways Board clearly expected to make the rail network more profitable whilst the Treasury was increasingly concerned at the mounting losses. The remit of the TUCCs was curtailed and henceforth only evidence of possible hardship could be considered, although the Labour Government, elected in October 1964, allowed certain financial aspects to be considered with regard to rail closures. Just previously to this, the Beeching Report had recommended the total closure of the S&D and the first TUCC hearings into the proposal took place in October 1963 and the objections led to stormy scenes.

Our speaker had examined the objections in detail, particularly the case against closure put forward by Dorset County Council, who had been critical that there had been no attempt to modernise the line with, for example, the use of diesel trains and converting many intermediate stations into unstaffed halts.

POLITICS OF THE S & D CLOSURE - continued

The TUCC, however, reported quite quickly two months later but in view of the implications of the Beeching Report, a delay of 18 months ensued. In May 1965 the South Western Economic Development Council suggested that at least part of the southern section of the S&D should be retained in view of the likelihood of extensive urban development of a part of South East Dorset between Poole and Blandford.

The closure of the line was, however, agreed in the following month with the consent of the then Minister of Transport, Tom Fraser, being given on the 6th September 1965. Closure was due to take place in January 1966 but had to be postponed following a further controversial TUCC hearing at Blandford and problems with arranging replacement bus services. The S&D finally closed on 7th March 1966 but it was noteworthy that the new Transport Minister, Barbara Castle, imposed a moratorium on the sale of any of the trackbed for a period.

Simon Kennedy proposed a vote of thanks to Professor Divall for a most interesting and thought-provoking talk.

RAILWAY JARGON or is it TERMINOLOGY? - continued from last newsletter

by Roy Kethro

If you travel from a main station these days chances are you won't go to the '*booking office*' to buy your ticket. You will either buy it in advance on-line or obtain it from a self-service machine which now masquerades as the '*travel centre*'. When you approach the platform the '*ticket barrier*' has now become the '*gateline*' with automated barriers which scan your travel '*document*' and allow you through.

Towards the end of my career at Temple Meads we saw the emergence of a team of young ladies who were recruited to hang around near the '*gateline*'. Their remit was to help the occasional traveller who is unfamiliar with rail travel. We referred to them as '*care bears*' and I suspect that the idea came from the '*greeter*' who you sometimes encounter on entering a large supermarket or diy store.

Now call me cynical if you like but they were all agency staff in the early days and I certainly formed an opinion that they were recruited for their appearance rather than their knowledge of railway operations. I did spend some time with them explaining how to read the '*station working book*', of which I was the compiler for several years, especially as it bore only a passing resemblance to the '*public timetable*'.

Once on the platform you will be lucky to find a '*porter*' to help you with your baggage these days so make sure you have a pound coin to unlock a push-along trolley. The '*platform chargeman*' now sports a badge identifying him or her as a '*service delivery assistant*'. In reality they are '*train dispatchers*' which sounds terribly American.

RAILWAY JARGON - continued

The person who gives the driver the '*tip*' or '*right away*' to depart used to be called a '*guard*'. For many years they have been '*conductors*' on local services or '*train managers*' on principal services. These terms reflect their changing role in collecting fares and managing the '*on-board services*' team.

During your journey you might be accosted by a '*travelling ticket inspector*' whose name badge will probably say '*revenue protection team*' these days. To save the carpets becoming covered in little bits of confetti, as used to happen when we had '*snappers*' punching tickets, the tool they used will now have been replaced with a felt tip pen.

The '*buffet steward*' has now become the '*customer host*' and in an effort to sell more merchandise, the marketing people devised the idea of trolleys perambulating up and down the aisles rather than rely on the thirsty and hungry having to fight their way along to the buffet car. Inevitably this led to the emergence of colloquial names such as the '*trolley dolly*' to name one of the more polite ones. Totally frowned on in these days of political correctness of course due to their being non-gender-neutral as well as somewhat derogatory.

One final thought. The term '*customer host*' referred to above reinforces the acknowledgment in recent times that the long suffering '*passenger*' is now considered to be a '*customer*' with all the expectations of service quality associated with that label.

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The next newsletter will be issued in April 2020. Please sent your contributions to the Editor by the end of March.

AND FINALLY :

Did you know that the LNER Class A3 pacific "Flying Scotsman" has set two world records for steam traction?

It was the first steam locomotive to be officially authenticated at reaching 100mph, when hauling a short test train on 30 November 1934.

During a tour of Australia, on 8 August 1989 "Flying Scotsman" set another record en route from Melbourne to Alice Springs, travelling 422 miles from Parkes to Broken Hill non-stop, the longest such run by a steam locomotive ever recorded.