

In the Beginning

Gordon Biddle

The editor has suggested that, fifty years on, I might like to recall something of the Society's early years when I was its first Hon Secretary, and some of the personalities who played leading parts. The inaugural meeting of the founder members in September 1954 was recorded in the *Journal* of July 1994: Bertram Baxter, C R Clinker, R A Cook, M D Greville, K P Seaward and myself, with Charles Hadfield and G O Holt *in absentia*. All the founders agreed to serve as a Council, although Baxter subsequently changed his mind due to heavy other commitments, and H A Vallance of *The Railway Magazine* took his place. What follows are personal recollections aided by early Council minutes — handwritten in a hardback exercise book for the first five meetings — the *Journal*, and a detailed account of the first four years by the then Hon Treasurer, G O Holt, given to me by his wife Margaret who died last August, aged 86.

One over-riding impression is the practice of addressing everyone by surname, even close friends, which in the present call-centre age ('Hello! I'm Cheryl') must sound very odd. I was already on Christian name terms with Geoffrey Holt and the youngest Council member, Ray Cook who, two years my junior, I had known at school. I soon became on first name terms with Charles Hadfield, Jeffery Spence and, after he joined the Council, Charles Klapper, but between everyone else it was always surnames.

The Secretary was expected to deal with everything other than finances, including organising events and collaborating with the leader of an outing, who on occasions was also the Secretary! Looking back, I am amazed that in the first full year we put on five events country-wide, including two weekends. With no car, I well remember reconnoitring the 1957 AGM weekend at York by public transport, including getting a bus to reach the remains of the obscure Heck & Wentbridge Railway. Another vivid memory from the same year was of a tour of abandoned sections of the Oxford Canal in Warwickshire, an area I knew well. As we approached Hawkesbury Junction to see the Newcomen pumping engine, now at Dartmouth, the driver of our Midland Red bus thought that with care he could get under the low wooden

bridge on the Wyken Colliery branch railway. He realised the truth when the bridge beam gently pressed itself into the vehicle's roof, making a large dent. To his relief — and mine — it sprang out again when he backed out, leaving hardly a mark.

A particular memory from a few years later is of our trip through Standedge Tunnel on the Huddersfield Canal in the engineer's inspection boat, organised, I think, by Alan Voce. The craft was a dumb buttoy powered by the simple device of taking a portable pump on board, dropping the suction hose over the bow and the discharge hose over the stern, and slowly proceeding through the lamp-lit darkness by jet propulsion. Smoke drifted in from the parallel railway tunnels, while water fell from the reservoir shafts in the roof. Some members returned by boat, but I joined the others to walk back over the top and see the shafts and reservoirs.

Another early task was editing the first three *Journals*, having them professionally typed and duplicated, and mailing them. The first ran to six pages and No 2 to seven, but No 3 was a disaster. An ambitious 17 pages, it was typed, duplicated and despatched by a member who offered to do it at cost, thereby making a considerable saving, but it contained so many typing mistakes that it was decided that I should reissue it with an apology to members. I still have the offending number. After that Jeffery Spence began his long stint as Hon Editor.

At first, members were allocated a membership number, but we soon dropped that. Greville asked to be No 1, where I was happy to oblige, W J Skillern who also became a Council member was No 2, and Clinker was No 5. At each meeting new members' names were read out for election, and we were greatly encouraged when we reached the 100 mark within a year. The age range was much wider than it is now, from teenagers to septuagenarians, with a good number of twenty- and thirty-year-olds. The idea was that any undesirables could be rejected (with a refund), not that we had any, and we soon abandoned the practice. Robert Aickman, Charles Hadfield and L T C Rolt had just formed the Inland Waterways Association, followed by a split with Aickman who carried on alone. I recall Hadfield passing me a note



Above: Standedge Tunnel, 15.4.1961 — Biddle, left; Voce, centre, wearing beret [M'chester Guardian]

Below: Sankey Bicentenary, 17.9.1955 — Sheldon, far left; Clinker, 5th from left [G Biddle]

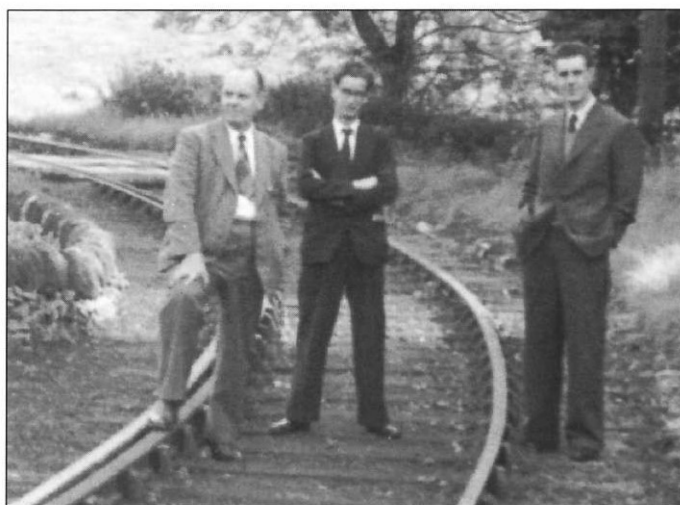


suggesting that if someone called Aickman applied for membership it should be referred to the Council first. Aickman didn't.

Holt was a professional railwayman, and Clinker had been one. Most of the founders already knew one another. Holt and I knew Clinker well, Holt from 1943 when he was seconded by the LMS and Clinker by the GWR to wartime military liaison duties at Oxford. Clinker was an only child whose father, a distinguished electrical engineer and an FRS, died in a North Wales climbing accident before the war. He retired from the Great Western at the age of 40 — Holt thought after a disagreement — having served the minimum 20 years to earn a pension, and went to Cornwall to live with his mother, a charming, gentle old lady. There he devoted himself to building up Locomotive & General Railway Photographs with two partners. Commercially the business was a failure, but I've always regarded the assembling of such a vast number of historic railway photographs, many by well-known photographers, as Clinker's great achievement. After passing through several hands the collection is now at the National Railway Museum at York.

It was through LGRP that I first met Clinker in 1950, and through him Greville and Spence, both of whom Holt also knew. In turn I introduced Clinker to Cook. Hadfield had just published his *British Canals*, during which he had contacted Clinker on related railway questions, and it was he who suggested that canals should fall within the Society's remit. Ken Seaward none of us knew, although it was his letter to *Railway World* which began it all. After some years on the Council he left to work overseas, rejoining the Society on his return.

The first Annual Meeting weekend at Leicester included coach tours of the Leicester & Swannington Railway and the Ashby Canal and Ticknall Tramroad, at fares of 4s.7d and 5s.7d respectively. The next year's was based on Gloucester, where two days' hire of a Bristol Carriage & Tramways Co saloon coach cost us £15.10s.0d. Despite some well-founded reservations by one or two of us, the Council boldly decided in 1955 to invite the public to travel by special train on a Sunday from Manchester Liverpool Road to Liverpool Crown Street, to mark the 125th

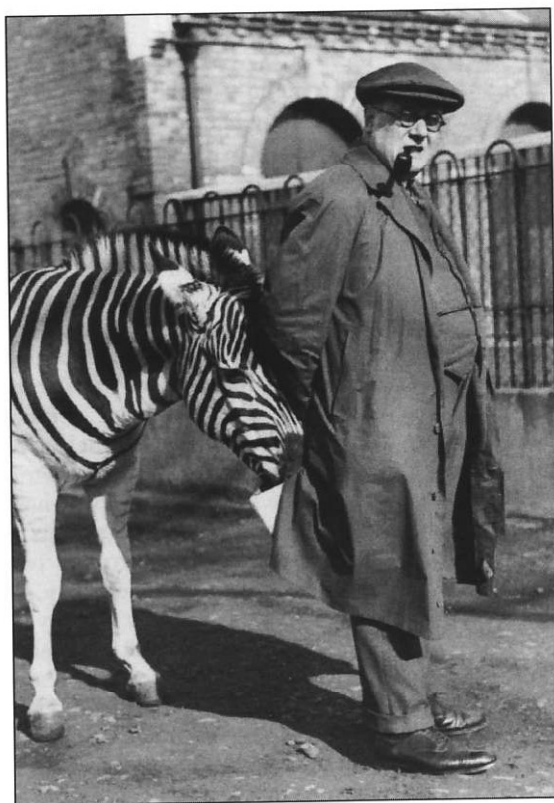


C R Clinker (left) with W A Stern and P Caldwell at Gotham curve on the Cromford & High Peak line, 20 August 1956 [A E Bennett]

anniversary of the opening of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway. After lengthy negotiations British Railways agreed to provide a train, and tickets were printed, but shortly beforehand it was cancelled owing to lack of support. After all, most of the journey could be made by ordinary train. By contrast, the previous day's celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Act of Incorporation of the Sankey Brook Navigation was an immense success. The civic heads of Widnes and St Helens accompanied us on a nine-mile trip along the St Helens Canal from Widnes to Winwick lock in the ex-Leeds & Liverpool shortboat *Leo*, including a civic reception at St Helens Town Hall. Strangely, a few years later we had a trip in the same vessel on the Lancaster Canal, where she operated as a trip boat named *Shelagh*. As it happened the cancelled rail tour did produce two positive results. Holt expanded his tour notes to form the Society's first publication, *A Short History of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway*, 22 duplicated foolscap pages of typescript, which a few years later went into a printed second edition. Further, I made a short recording about the anniversary on BBC radio by landline from their Leeds studio to Manchester. After I had finished, Manchester said they could hear the rustle of my script, so I had to do it all over again.

Clinker, Greville and Hadfield recruited a number of well-known names, including D S M Barrie, Michael Robbins, Charles E Lee, Vallance, T S

Lascelles, H P White, C L Mowat and Theo Barker. Later, Clinker gained new members from his evening classes on railway history held at various centres in the Midlands — he then lived at Rugby — in which I believe he was a pioneer. As president, Clinker took the chair at Council meetings. Most new organisations have teething troubles, and it must be admitted that he was something of a trial. He had a ponderous manner which at times could be overbearing and pompous, a trait which put off one or two potential members who would have been very valuable to us, including Jack Simmons. Clinker and Spence kept each other well at arm's length. Like Greville, both were bachelors (Clinker married later in life after his mother died), and as well as being a good cook Spence was an excellent character actor. He delighted in mimicking CRC, as we called him, and I had many a hilarious meal with him at his house in Caterham.



*M D Greville, who was fond of animals,
pictured at London Zoo in the 1950s.
This was not an RCHS outing!
[G Biddle]*

Both Holt and I had reservations about accepting office. We had young families, and Holt lived at Penrith where he was on call during alternate weeks, and periodically spent time at Derby as a visiting lecturer at the Railway Staff Training College. I was undertaking professional exams and knew I was likely to be moved in my job. In fact I had three different addresses during my term as secretary. The officers were bombarded with presidential memos, at times several a week. Spence called them 'directives', and characteristically ignored most of them. But Holt and I had no option but to reply. Some of Clinker's memos were critical to the point of being objectionable, sometimes copied to selected Council members as well. Twice we decided to resign, but were persuaded by Greville to carry on.

Greville was a short, stocky man, always wore a cap, smoked a pipe, and had a great sense of humour. He was very knowledgeable about all kinds of topics, and was very fond of animals. But underneath he was also very shrewd, and obviously had a quiet word with Clinker at times of tension. He was the oldest Council member, a former marine underwriter who devoted his retirement to researching closed lines and stations, through which he became close friends with Spence. A lot of their work went into Clinker's *Register of Closed Passenger Stations and Goods Depots*. I always felt rather sorry for Greville. He had no home of his own, preferring to rent rooms on a board-and-lodging basis. Consequently he moved a number of times, and for a time lived with the Clinkers at Rugby.

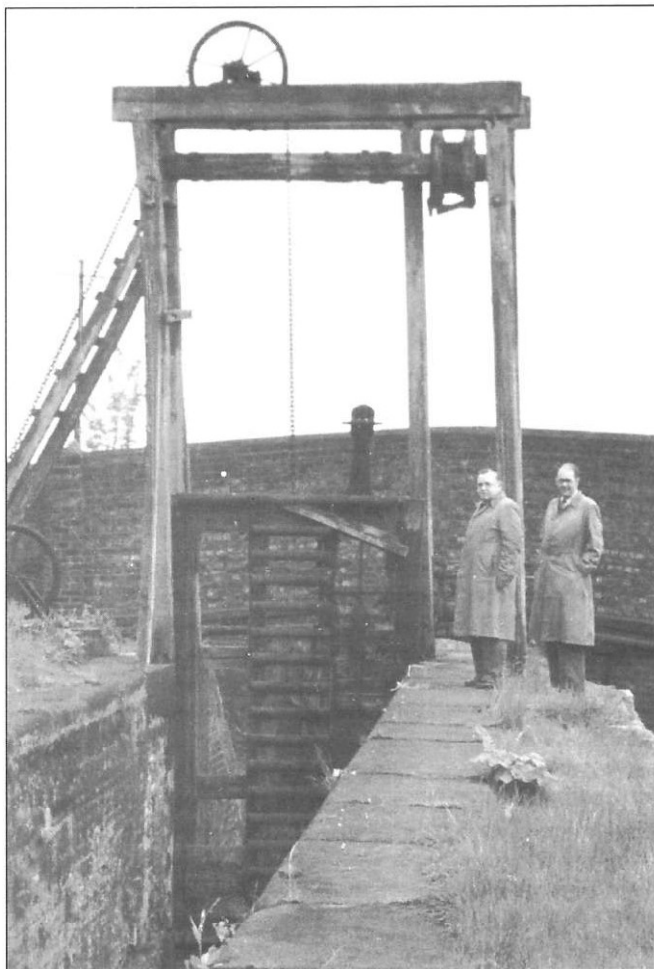
CRC also had a proprietorial inclination to take unilateral action, thereby causing more trouble. Fairly early he decided I needed an assistant and without telling anyone he invited John Sheldon to take on the publicity work and bookings for events. The Council and I accepted it with the best possible grace, but the arrangement lasted barely twelve months, and later Sheldon confessed to me that he had found the work too time-consuming. He went on to become the long-standing chairman of the very successful East Midlands group. Early in 1956 Greville quietly proposed separating the positions of President and Chairman, to which the Council agreed, and after the AGM Greville took the chair with Hadfield as vice-chairman. Thereafter there was much less presidential interference and harmony reigned.

Greville saw his chairmanship as a stopgap. Charles Klapper was co-opted on to the Council and

he began a long and fruitful period as Chairman, consolidating the early work. A genial and avuncular figure, he edited the weekly *Modern Transport*, was widely experienced and had a good business brain. One of his first acts was to stop the exchange of memoranda and leave day-to-day management to the officers' discretion. We now had 220 members, and towards the end of 1957 Holt and I, quite independently, felt that we could hand over to someone else without undue disruption. I was about to move yet again, and he had been offered a permanent post at Derby. So we gave six months' notice of our intention to relinquish our posts at the 1958 AGM. At the same time the Council accepted my suggestion that there should be a separate programme committee, and for some three years Kathleen Stephens acted very ably as Programme Secretary. I succeeded her, and eventually local groups took on society events other than the Annual Meetings. Meanwhile Maurice Berrill followed me as Hon Secretary, and F G M Watson became Hon Treasurer.

Charles Hadfield became President in 1961. A former senior civil servant, he was an even better diplomat than Greville, and later I learned of how he had helped to keep the young Society on an even keel. He devised the present system of a separate Council and Management Committee which has stood us in such good stead, instituted a two-year term for the presidency, and instigated the Publications Fund.

Although Charles E Lee declined a seat on the Council he made valuable contributions to the Society, not least proposing that it should become incorporated as a company limited by guarantee, paying for the registration and printing of the Memorandum and Articles of Association from his own pocket. Immensely knowledgeable on all manner of subjects, his somewhat ascetic aspect belied a warm and kindly nature. Unfailingly, he always dressed in a grey suit, with a wing collar, grey Homburg hat, spats and patent leather shoes. An abiding memory from before the formation of the Society is of Clinker, Cook and I taking him to see



*Charles Hadfield (on the left) at Trench Lock
on the Shrewsbury Canal; date unknown
[R A Cook Collection]*

the Ticknall Tramroad, including some stone sleeper blocks in the long wet grass of Lount Wood. By the time we put him on a London train at Leicester his feet were soaked.

My most lasting impression of early members will always be of their dedication to the Society, which has been continued by their successors ever since. I doubt whether they envisaged the standing the Society would have achieved in fifty years, or even whether it would last that long. Those who are still with us have cause for pride.