

THE AMATEUR HISTORIAN

Vol. 2 NO. 9

DECEMBER, 1955-JANUARY, 1956

The Railway and Canal Historical Society

by C. R. Clinker

The Titchfield Thunderbolt film and the agitation about the Kennet-Avon canal are two very different examples of the way our railways and canals are in the news. Mr. Clinker tells us how this new interest has brought co-operation in the writing of better history.

The definition of "history", as applied to railways and canals, is by no means easy, particularly in the case of the former. A railway consists of a large number of components—locomotives, rolling stock, fixed plant, signals, buildings, operating activities, staff, organisation, and so on. A strict interpretation of "railway history" would embrace all these features. In fact, each is regarded as a separate entity for the purposes of study; very few people indeed are qualified to assert that they possess sufficient knowledge to cover the whole subject in detail and there has been a natural tendency to specialise in one aspect. Even this course, commendable though it is, cannot be followed completely or satisfactorily without some knowledge of inter-related aspects, however slight this may be.

As generally understood, the term "railway history" is applied to the origin of railways and their academic history, along with the genesis and development of individual companies. In parallel, the place of railways in the

economic and social framework of the country is, or should be, included. In other words "railway history" is the basic story of a railway's creation and existence. Similarly the term is usually applied to the inception and construction of canals, not to their engineering works, equipment and working, although, the whole subject being of much smaller proportions than that of railways, some people treat the scope more widely.

It is a common, but quite erroneous, belief that railways started in 1825 with the opening of the Stockton and Darlington. Few people realise that they were developed as an adjunct to the medieval mining industry of Central Europe as early as the 12th century. The earliest known illustration of these lines appears in *Der Ursprung gemeynner* published in Germany by Johan Haselberger in 1519. Even less well known is the fact that the development of the railway as a public means of transport took place entirely in Great Britain. The first railway, or "tram-

THE AMATEUR HISTORIAN

way" (from the old Scandinavian word *traam* or *tram*, meaning a beam of wood), was brought into use at Wollaton and Strelley near Nottingham in October, 1597. From that date onwards there is ample evidence of the opening of tramways in Northumberland, Durham, South Wales and other highly industrialised areas. The now standard gauge of 4 feet 8½ inches between the rails has been traced back to the "rut-way" roads of Babylonian times, through Greece to Italy and the Roman invasion of Britain.

Until about 40 years ago the study of railway history was a haphazard affair indulged in as a leisure time pursuit by many with little regard for accuracy, still less with the knowledge necessary to obtain and check facts. Much of their history was built up on hearsay with little or no attempt at confirmation. The results of these findings were embodied in numerous books and pamphlets which have, until very recent years, been looked upon as reliable sources and quoted accordingly. The harm done by these authors is incalculable yet, oddly enough, their larger works still command high second-hand prices fantastically out of proportion to their value as works of reference.

Unfortunately publication of this shoddy type of book by authors ill qualified to write them continues, if less numerous than before. It is a matter for concern and regret that publishers should allow the appearance of such works which are naturally at once seized upon as "railway history" and absorbed as such, without regard for factual accuracy or completeness of the story.

Despite, or perhaps partly because of, these handicaps, the serious study of railway history has since the war been put on a much firmer and more scientific basis. That there has been a great increase in this study is not in doubt at all, but what has engendered this revival? It seems certain that two dis-

tinct factors are involved. First is the wholesale closure of many railways whose history is of more than ordinary interest and the likelihood that more will follow; second is the availability to every genuine student of the immensely valuable archives of the British Transport Commission. Never before, except to the privileged few, has the whole of a company's minute books and other contemporary documents been at the disposal of the research worker. He is now able, for the first time, to study railway history from the inside instead of making-do with secondary sources, newspapers and hearsay, for construction of a story which, from mere absence of material, may be either incomplete, inaccurate, or both.

These two factors have brought about a great change in the study of railway history, except for a small number of authors who still cling to the use of discredited secondary sources. But the serious student is now able to differentiate between good and bad work and these writings are gradually being disregarded. The student has been helped in various other ways, notably through the pioneer work of the University of Birmingham in providing extra-mural courses in the study of railway history along orderly and scientific lines. These courses have been followed by similar ones organised by the universities of Nottingham and London. The response has been very gratifying and first results are encouraging.

The study of canal history is of very recent origin. Little work had been done in this field before about 1950 when the opening of the British Transport Commission archives made available an enormous untapped volume of material which is now being explored and written up by a small number of workers. Mercifully the canal historian works in virgin ground and is not plagued by a mass of inaccurate writing by predecessors, as is his railway counterpart.

MIDLAND RAILWAY.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

BETWEEN

LONDON

AND

UTTOXETER, ALTON, ASHBOURNE,
LEEK, & MACCLESFIELD.

To and From St. Pancras and Moorgate Street Stations.

Third Class Tickets are issued by all the undermentioned Trains

For FEBRUARY, MARCH, and APRIL, 1880.

Stations.	From LONDON Weekdays.				Sundays.			
	a.m.	5 m.	11 41	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.
LONDON Moorgate St. dep.	5 15	9 37	11 41	3 12	2 26	2 26		
" St. Pancras "	5 27	10 0	12 0	3 30	2 50	2 50		
UTTOXETER	5 27	2 10	5 13	4 27	7 15	7 15		
ALTON	12 26	3 23	5 44	8 10	8 10	8 10		
ASHBOURNE	10 5	3 23	5 44	8 10	8 10	8 10		
LEEK	12 55	1 30	6 55	8 50	8 50	8 50		
MACCLESFIELD	1 30	6 55	8 50	8 50	8 50	8 50		

Stations.	To LONDON Weekdays.				Sundays.			
	a.m.	5 m.	11 41	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.
MACCLESFIELD ..dep.	7 15	10 20	11 41	3 35	5 55	5 55		
LEEK	7 27	10 32	12 0	4 12	6 31	6 31		
ASHBOURNE	7 0	8 10	11 5	4 25	6 35	6 35		
ALTON	8 22	11 20	12 0	4 41	6 58	6 58		
UTTOXETER	7 40	8 51	11 58	2 33	5 13	7 35	6 42	6 42
LONDON, St. Pancras arr.	11 50	2 55	4 15	6 30	9 45	2 0	4 15	4 15
" Moorgate St. "	12 7	3 16	4 30	7 7	10 0	0	0	0

THROUGH TICKETS, Ordinary and Return, are issued between London, St. Pancras and all the above mentioned Stations, and are available for travelling either via Derby, or Burton, as the Train best suits.

JAMES ALLPORT, General Manager.

RIGHT.—Title page of the Act of Parliament incorporating the G.W.R. in 1835.

LEFT.—Midland Railway handbill advertising services to the Churnet Valley line in 1880. This example was found in 1951 when dismantling a framed photograph.—

With acknowledgements to L. and G.R.P., Bristol.



ANNO QUINTO & SEXTO

GULIELMI IV. REGIS.

Cap. cvii.

An Act for making a Railway from Bristol to join the London and Birmingham Railway near London, to be called "The Great Western Railway," with Branches therefrom to the Towns of Bradford and Trowbridge in the County of Wilts. [31st August 1835.]

WHEREAS the making a Railway from Bristol to join the London and Birmingham Railway near London, and also Branch Railways therefrom to Trowbridge and Bradford in the County of Wilts, would be of great public Advantage, not only by opening an additional, certain, and expeditious Communication between the Cities and Towns aforesaid and the several intermediate and adjacent Places, but also by improving the existing Communication between the Metropolis and the Western Districts of England, the South of Ireland, and Wales: And whereas the King's most Excellent Majesty in right of His Crown is entitled to certain Lands upon the Line of the proposed Railway: And whereas the several Persons herein-after named are willing at their own Expense to carry into execution the before-mentioned Undertaking; but the same cannot be effected without the Authority of Parliament: May it therefore please Your Majesty that it may be enacted; and be it enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons,

35 D

[Local.]

THE AMATEUR HISTORIAN

As always in a specialised study of this nature, many of those engaged in it were known to each other and a considerable interchange of information and experience took place in correspondence, by informal gatherings and in visits of small parties to places where field work was needed to reinforce academic knowledge. Although one or two existing national societies included railway history as a sideline amongst the aspects catered for, it was felt that the number of workers in this field justified, and would profit from, the formation of a separate organisation devoted solely to this subject. Several well-known historians met to discuss the idea and at a meeting held in Preston in September, 1954, the Railway and Canal Historical Society was formed. The inclusion of canals was decided upon because no existing society covered this very important form of transport and because of the very close ties between canals and railways, particularly in the first half of the 19th century. Moreover, many early tramroads were of canal origin and the link was, therefore, a natural one.

The purposes of the society are divided into short-term and long-term objectives. The first includes the straightforward aim of bringing together those taking a serious interest in the railway and canal history of Great Britain; it provides also for taking every possible step to raise the standard of original research, with special emphasis upon the accuracy of published data, and for the dissemination of historical information amongst members and the general public by meetings, intercourse, discussion, lectures, correspondence and circulation of notes and papers. Finally, it is intended that the society shall act as a channel of communication between those engaged upon similar lines of research. Among the ways in which these objectives are being implemented are the issue of a quarterly *Journal* containing notes and news, forthright reviews of relevant books, tables of

data, original articles (some being papers delivered at the society's indoor winter meetings) and accounts of visits to places of historical interest.

The long-term objectives are perhaps rather ambitious but they are being tackled with enthusiasm in the knowledge that, when completed, the work will be of immense value. The society plans to prepare a complete bibliography of printed books and other material relating to railway and canal history. The absence of such a work is at present a serious drawback and its eventual publication will be of great benefit. It is also intended to compile a record of material held by county archivists, local libraries, museums and in private collections. This companion work is likely to prove a lengthy task, but foundations have been laid and a start made towards assembling the information. Both plans are being carried out entirely by members of the society and the co-operation of archivists, librarians and others concerned is being sought as occasion demands.

There is plenty of evidence that the society is filling a gap in the organisation of historical studies. The number of members who had previously worked alone on their chosen subject is surprising and they are already feeling the good effects of being brought into touch with others similarly engaged. It is particularly encouraging that many young people, some still in their 'teens, feel their interest is sufficiently strong to bring them into a society whose older and more experienced members are able to help them with advice and friendly guidance. The society is particularly anxious to encourage its younger members for it is in them that the results of the present attempt to build up scientific methods of study will be seen. There are already signs that this new era is successfully launched and the young members, imbued with a sense of responsibility and high regard for accuracy, will in due course replace the old order.