

Judges' report and announcement of winners

Ladies and gentlemen, members and guests, welcome to the 2021 RCHS Book Awards. For a second year we are unable to hold our traditional presentation evening but this year, thanks to Zoom technology, we can at least hold a virtual meeting to present the judges' report and announce the winners. Reading has been one of the pleasures that have helped keep many of us going during lockdowns. Although the volume of books published during the year was less than normal, some excellent new books have appeared for our enjoyment.

As long-standing members will know, the Society's awards are made to the best new books in up to four categories and this year are chosen from those that received good reviews in our *Journal* issues of July and November 2020 and March 2021. We are making awards in two categories. Each winning author will receive a cheque and, when circumstances permit, a framed certificate. One of these category-winning books will then be named as the overall Book of the Year and its author will receive a further cash prize and, under normal circumstances, a silver cup to hold for one year. The cup is currently with a previous winner in Scotland but I hope to retrieve it in the coming months. The prize money comes from a generous legacy left to the Society by the late David St John Thomas, author and publisher, which will enable us to continue these awards for the foreseeable future.

Once again I would like to express my sincere thanks to those who work behind the scenes to make these awards possible – Matthew Searle and his team of book reviewers, whose informed assessments enable a draft shortlist to be drawn up for the judges. For those unfamiliar with the process, the book reviewers score each book against four defined criteria. In descending order of importance these are: their perceived contribution to transport history, the quality and extent of research involved, their clarity and interest of writing and their presentation and usability. These weighted scores are the starting point for short-listing. The judges review the highest scoring books and settle on ideally three or four titles in each category for detailed consideration.

My thanks must also go to this year's fellow judges, who are volunteers drawn from the Society's membership. This year, Ray Shill and Michael Marriott put themselves forward. Ray will be well known to many of you, a prolific researcher and author, interested in many aspects of transport history but perhaps best known for his work on industrial railways and Midlands waterways. For many years he has been actively involved with the West Midlands regional group. Mike lives in south London and is interested in all aspects of social, transport and local history. He is a qualified Guide in the City of Westminster & Borough of Camden and recently has been involved in a project to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Regents Canal.

The judges short-listed six titles this year, drawn from the 69 books that received reviews in the *Journal*, substantially down on the previous year's total of exactly 100. As ever, new publications about railway-related subjects were plentiful and we selected four for consideration. The first of these was:

***The Corris Railway – the story of a Mid-Wales slate railway* by Peter Johnson, published by Pen & Sword Transport, hardback, £30.**

Compared to the likes of the Talylyn and Festiniog Railways, the Corris is one of the less well-known of the Welsh narrow gauge lines. Peter Johnson has produced a

comprehensively researched history of the enterprise from inception to preservation, building on the account in his earlier book about the GWR's narrow gauge lines. Built to transport slate from the quarries in the Dulas Valley, north of Machynlleth, to a wharf on the River Dovey, traffic was initially worked by gravity and horse power. In fact steam traction was specifically prohibited. When the management sought to carry passengers and introduce steam locomotives, the Board of Trade refused sanction because of failure to conform to the deposited plans. Once passenger services were eventually introduced, the railway enterprisingly capitalised on its picturesque location by tapping into the tourist potential of Cader Idris and Talyllyn, running road excursions connecting with its trains. From 1878 the line came into the ownership of the Imperial Tramways Company which underwrote its losses until 1930, when the GWR, another benevolent owner, took it over. The Corris survived the Second World War but closure came in 1948. Unlike better known Welsh narrow gauge railways it was not an immediate target for preservationists, although its remaining locomotives and some rolling stock were transferred to the Talyllyn Railway. It was not until the 21st century that passenger services were restarted on a short length of line.

The author has consulted archives which include railway company, Court of Chancery and Board of Trade records at The National Archives, parliamentary records at the House of Lords library, Imperial Tramways reports, contemporary newspaper articles together with more recent magazine reports about the restoration efforts. This has enabled him to produce a well-rounded account discussing the people connected with the railway as well as events in its history. Coverage is not extended to the railway systems within the quarries that the Corris served.

The writing style is generally lucid although occasionally quotations from minute books are cryptic and unexplained. Production values are high although arguably some of the older photographs have been over-enlarged. The volume is heavily illustrated and includes an index, bibliography and good maps, although the *Journal* reviewer found that continuity between the Ordnance Survey 6-inch maps reproduced on the endpapers was initially confusing. Some overlap between sheets might have been helpful. The six appendices include 15 pages of comprehensive statistics from Board of Trade returns, although the 1880-1883 column headings (and figures?) are out of sequence.

***British Railways Stinks – the life and work of Britain's last railway chemists* by Dave Smith & colleagues, published by Gresley Books, an imprint of Mortons Books Ltd, hardback, £14.99**

The author and his collaborators are representatives of the last generation of chemists employed directly by British Railways. This book covers their experiences between the mid-1950s and privatisation in 1996, attempting to answer the question 'what does a railway chemist do?' The light-hearted, anecdotal approach to a serious subject that the authors have adopted might not be to everyone's taste and some might take issue with the double meaning of the title. The authors observe that the railway was dominated on the one hand by engineers and on the other by operational staff, so the chemists in a sense were outsiders in a group of non-like-minded people, scientists regarded with curiosity, suspicion or awe. Perhaps this helps account for the modest, under-stated yet slightly anarchic approach adopted in this book.

That said, the book undoubtedly deals with important and serious matters and gives a sense of the very real contribution made by this branch of BR's Scientific Services function. Some of

the work was routine, such as quality testing of purchased materials to confirm that they met specification, but the chemists were also called in to deal with specific issues, such as the infamous 'wrong sort of snow' that fell in 1991, or the serious problems of leaves on the line and fire safety on trains, following a fatal fire on the Penzance sleeper in 1978. The chemists were sometimes called on to act as expert witnesses, helping the police with their enquiries and appearing in court. They investigated complaints about services and claims for compensation. The impact of the 1974 Health & Safety at Work Act impacted significantly on their work. Consideration of safety on the operational railway was well established but the occupational health issue was something new and had far-reaching consequences.

The book could have done with more careful proof reading and is rather old-fashioned in its design with the illustrations grouped together in a block. Subjects are arranged thematically in chapters but there is no index and no references to guide further reading. Nevertheless the book covers important new ground and the authors' chosen approach has resulted in a very readable text which certainly succeeds in its stated aim of informing the reader about what BR's railway chemists actually did. The judges were left with the feeling that there remains an unfulfilled need for a serious study of the subject.

***The Diary of Thomas Baron 1855–1862 – a London & North Western Railway Engineman at Work* by Edward Talbot, published in co-operation with the London & North Western Railway Society, softback, £20.**

The starting point for this book is a document preserved at The National Archives - the 'Diary of Driver T. Baron'. It is not so much a diary, including just a few brief comments of a personal nature. Rather, it is a logbook of Baron's daily duties, recording the date, his driver's or, later on, fireman's name, the locomotive's name and usually the destination, type of traffic and mileage run. In June 1855, at the age of 20, Baron was taken on as a cleaner at Preston and he recorded his first trip as a fireman on 5 December of that year. His first driving turn was in August 1857 and he achieved promotion to driver in April 1862. His final promotion in 1877 was to night foreman at Abergavenny engine shed. He died in 1910 at the age of 74.

Baron's text is transcribed in full on the left-hand pages of an 85-page chapter, with a parallel commentary by the author opposite. The commentary adds such information as details of the likely services he was working, gleaned from surviving working timetables of the period, the loading points of some of his goods turns and details of the locomotives he worked on. This is followed by a series of short supplementary chapters contributed by Harry Jack and Michael Bentley which set the diary into context. One of these gives biographical details of Baron. Another provides observations by a current day driver and there are also some extracts from later 19th century written accounts of working on the railway.

The book is extensively illustrated with photographs of the types of engines that Baron fired and drove, although the pictures unavoidably date in the main from a slightly later period than that covered by the diary. Nevertheless, they give a clear idea of the working conditions of the day, the crew protected only by a weatherboard yet regularly working turns of 12 hours or more, year round, in all weathers. Men of iron indeed. On one occasion Baron records the accidental death of his driver, who missed his footing trying to board the moving locomotive at night and was run over. Baron simply records that he worked the train for the remainder of that turn. There are no entries for the next three days, on the fourth day he was back at work and on the fifth he attended his mate's funeral before going on to work. The photographs are

supplemented by paintings and views of model locomotives that would have been contemporary with the period covered by the diary, together with appropriate maps and plans, all reproduced to a high standard.

The text is very readable and the reproduction of these early photographs is exemplary. There is a bibliography but no index, though there is probably less need for one in a work of this nature.

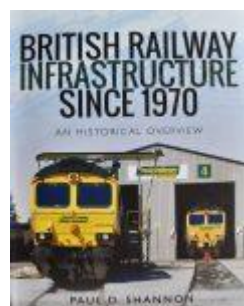
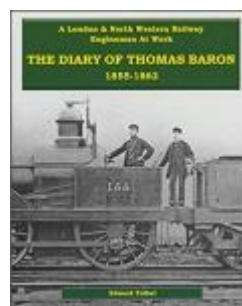
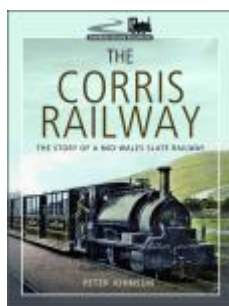
The great value of the book is that it is a probably unique account of the working life of an engine driver at this early period, beginning, as it does, only 25 years after the opening of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway. It gives a glimpse into a little known and little researched period of railway history.

***British Railway Infrastructure Since 1970 – an historical overview* by Paul D. Shannon, published by Pen & Sword Transport, hardback, £25.**

In a concise text, the author provides an overview of the major changes to the UK's railway infrastructure during the last 50 years. Individual chapters deal with passenger stations, freight terminals, motive power depots & marshalling yards and electrification & signalling. The civil engineering aspects of railway infrastructure, such as the renewal or repair of bridges or the elimination of level crossings, are not explored. Even so, this is a huge subject so inevitably the book can only identify the main trends, illustrated by examples drawn from around the country, rather than provide a comprehensive record. Essentially the book is a photographic essay with the text of each chapter broken up by pages of intervening photographs and their quite detailed captions. Trains tend to feature in most of the views, the inclusion of the surrounding infrastructure sometimes seemingly a secondary consideration.

Perhaps the most significant change during this period noted by the author was the decline in freight traffic so that the railway became largely passenger orientated. That said, the photographic coverage concentrates more on freight operations, the less public-facing side of the business and, in particular, records many facilities that were provided to cater for traffic flows that came and went within the period under consideration. The numerous passenger stations opened or re-opened in recent years are relatively under-represented.

Production values are to this publisher's usual high standard. There is a very brief bibliography and a two-page index of locations. The text is competently written but sources are not cited. Presumably the author relied on those mentioned in the bibliography – Baker atlases, Quail maps, and the periodicals Rail, Railways Illustrated and Branch Line News. Tables listing passenger line closures, openings and re-openings and electrification schemes are included.



Bearing in mind the four criteria by which they were asked to assess these books, the judges agreed that the award for Railway Book of the Year should go to *The Diary of Thomas Baron* by Edward Talbot. Not only does it explore a little-studied period of railway history but, by making available the full text of Baron's diary, it could well encourage further analytical work on the data he recorded all those years ago.



Presentation of the Society's certificate to Ted Talbot at the Amerton Farm Railway. The locomotive is Isabel, W. G. Bagnall no. 1491, built just down the road in Stafford.

The second category in which an award is to be made this year is Canal and Waterways history. Two titles were short-listed, the first being:

***James Smart of Chalford – working life on the Cotswold canals and linked waterways* by Hugh Conway-Jones, published by Black Dwarf Publications, softback, £18.**

James Smart was a canal carrier and merchant based in Chalford on the Thames & Severn Canal in Gloucestershire. His father, William, was a boatman before him. James first joined him on the narrow boat Emma in the late 1840s at the age of nine. In 1857 William accidentally fell from the side of a lock and was drowned. James was appointed captain of the barge Sampson in his place. James married in 1861 and in 1869 went into business on his own account, becoming captain and owner of the barge Perseverance. Known as Stroud barges, such vessels could trade the full length of the Stroudwater and Thames & Severn Canals but could also venture out onto the Severn estuary to the Forest of Dean ports, Bristol and beyond. The business evidently thrived for James subsequently added more barges and also narrow boats to his fleet, enabling him to trade to Birmingham, the Black Country and the Cannock Chase collieries. In 1879 he purchased the coal wharf, house and outbuildings adjoining the basin at Chalford and began to operate as a coal and brick merchant as well as a carrier.

Remarkably, James never learned to read or write although he clearly had a good head for business and, it was said, an excellent memory. His wife dealt with the paperwork of the business.

Following a general introduction, each chapter covers a specific geographical area of Smart's operations – traffic to and from the Midlands, the Forest of Dean, Chepstow, Bristol, the Thames Valley and so on. James' son Harry took over running the business in the 20th century and the book concludes by briefly relating subsequent events including the end of canal carrying in 1930 and sale of the business out of the family after the Second World War.

The book is based on a surviving collection of over 1000 letters, postcards and telegrams sent to Smart by his customers, suppliers and boatmen, painstakingly cross-referenced to the corresponding voyages recorded in the tonnage books of the various canal companies. These give a remarkably detailed insight into the day-to-day mechanics of running of the business. No doubt a modern haulier would be all too familiar with some of the difficulties recorded – delays waiting for loads, delays en route, delays discharging, customers making impossible demands...

There are good, clear maps of the canals and waterways traversed by Smart's boats and barges, together with extracts from large scale Ordnance Survey plans of specific localities mentioned in the text. The book is illustrated by many excellently reproduced period photos. Not surprisingly, few are directly related to Smart and his business but they vividly illustrate commercial activity on the waterways at the time.

There is an index and detailed references, if required, are available in a typescript of the text deposited at Gloucestershire Archives.

***Harecastle's Canal and Railway Tunnels* by Allan C. Baker and Mike G. Fell OBE, published by Lightmoor Press, hardback, £25.**

Covering both canal and railway tunnels, as well as some mining and other industrial history, this book did not readily fit into the Book Awards' usual categories. After discussion, the judges decided to place it in the canal & waterways class because the greater part of the book deals with this aspect of the subject, and the publisher lists it this way too.

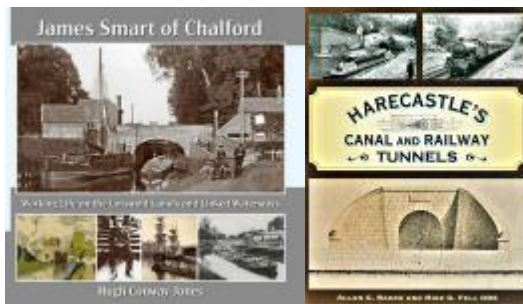
Harecastle Hill, in north Staffordshire, is part of a range of high ground that separates Stoke on Trent from areas to the north, significantly including the Mersey estuary. In planning his Grand Trunk Canal to connect the Mersey to the Humber via the River Trent, James Brindley elected to build what was then almost certainly the world's longest transport tunnel, 2,880 yards long, through the Hill. Construction began in 1766 and took just under nine years to complete. The commercial success of the canal led to the tunnel becoming a bottleneck since boats could not pass each other within it. Operations were further complicated by the discovery of coal and ironstone measures within the Hill. These were exploited via side canals off the main tunnel. In due course Telford was engaged to build a second, parallel tunnel. Preliminary work began in 1824 and it opened three years later in 1827, whereupon northbound traffic used the new tunnel and southbound the old.

The North Staffordshire Railway bought out the canal proprietors in 1846 and it too routed its main line from Macclesfield to Colwich through Harecastle Hill. This involved three separate tunnels, placed between and above the canal tunnels. The engineer responsible was G P Bidder and Thomas Brassey was the contractor. Work commenced in 1846 and was completed in 1848.

The authors go on to recount subsequent events in the history of these structures, including the use of canal tugs and the substantial reconstruction of the railway infrastructure carried out by BR as part of the West Coast Main Line electrification scheme of the 1960s. The final chapter covers the coal and ironstone mining within the hill and the associated industrial railways and iron works.

The authors have drawn on an impressively wide range of archive sources, including material from The National Archives, the Institution of Civil Engineers, the diaries of James Caldwell, Kidsgrove Library local history collection, several county record offices, the Coal Authority, the House of Lords Record Office, Keele University, the National Waterways Museum and many individuals.

The book includes numerous maps and plans. Some of those reproduced photographically from archive documents are not easy for aged eyes to read, with low contrast and reduced scale reproduction. Use of a lens was found helpful. There is excellent photographic coverage, including a series showing the interior of the closed and partially blocked Brindley tunnel, surveyed in 1979. Our Journal reviewer thought perhaps there were too many pictures of trains, which added little to the story.



Both these books broke new ground and exhibited high standards of scholarship and production. Whilst *Harecastle's Canal & Railway Tunnels* was essentially a study of local history and industrial archaeology, *James Smart of Chalford* had wider relevance, setting out for the first time a description of how a canal carrier's business operated in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The judges therefore decided to award the Canal History prize to *James Smart of Chalford*.



Hugh Conway-Jones receives the Society's certificate from Book Awards administrator Philip Brown. The location is bridge 25 on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, along which James Smart's boats once regularly plied.

The judge's final task was to decide the overall winner of the David St John Thomas silver cup and prize for 2021 Transport History Book of the Year. The judges had to compare the respective merits of the category winners in dealing with their chosen subjects, bearing in mind the criteria of their contribution to our field of interest, depth of research, writing style and overall presentation.

The two books, Edward Talbot's *The Diary of Thomas Baron* and Hugh Conway-Jones' *James Smart of Chalford*, had several things in common, both attempting to reconstruct and interpret the working lives of people through the records they left behind and which have fortuitously survived, both exploring relatively little-known or understood areas of 19th century economic activity. The judges felt that *James Smart of Chalford* presented a broader picture than was possible with the relatively limited material available about Thomas Baron. Both books were beautifully produced and presented but again the judges felt that the narrative chapters about James Smart were more reader-friendly than the raw diary entries with accompanying commentary that comprised the main part of *Thomas Baron*.

Accordingly, the judges agreed that ***James Smart of Chalford*** by Hugh Conway-Jones was their Transport History Book of the Year.



Philip Brown

March 2021