

Railway & Canal Historical Society

21st Annual Transport History Book of the Year Awards 2024



Judges' Report and announcement of winners

The Society's awards are made to the best new books in up to four categories and this year were chosen from those that received good reviews in our *Journal* issues of July and November 2023 and March 2024. For those unfamiliar with the process, the book reviewers score each book against four defined criteria. In 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.

Each winning author receives a cheque and a framed certificate. One of the category-winning books is then named as the overall Book of the Year and its author receives a further cash prize and the David St John Thomas trophy to hold for one year.

This year the judges short-listed seven titles, drawn from the 51 publications reviewed in the *Journal*, although not every one of these was eligible for the Awards. Exclusions can apply for various reasons. For example, books published by the RCHS itself are excluded, as are books largely comprising photographs with limited text, and reprints of earlier works. The number of *Journal* reviews this year was a substantial decrease on the previous year's figure of 77 and almost 50% below typical pre-pandemic levels. The reasons for this reduction perhaps deserve investigation as to the implications for the future of our field of interest, but this is not the time or place for that.

Looking at the subject matter of the short-listed books, such was the diversity that the judges were presented with difficulty placing them into the usual categories. After much discussion we agreed to simply judge each book against all the others, decide which merited prizes, bearing in mind that we can award a maximum of four, and then apply appropriate category titles. So, in no particular order, the first of the short-listed books was:

***The Tyne Coal Keel – a unique British watercraft, 1400-1890* by Adrian Osler, self-published, £16.99 (plus p&p) from Amazon or £24 (plus £3 p&p) with plates in colour direct from the author.**

The Keels provided a crucial link in the sea coal trade, transporting coal from loading points along the banks of the River Tyne down-river to the sea-going vessels which would take the coal south to East Anglia, London and south-east England. Remarkably, they performed this role for over 500 years, their trade only fading away from the mid-19th century with the introduction of steam powered tugs.

The government was not slow to appreciate the revenue raising potential of coal. From at least 1421 the keels' customary load of 21.2 tons was defined by statute as the taxable unit of measurement for the region's coal shipping trade, and this unit of measurement persisted until 1869. The author contends that this discouraged technical development of the vessels' design over time and led to a strongly conservative approach by all concerned.

No keel has survived, and no archaeological remains have been found in the river mud to date. Hence there have been many unanswered questions as to precise dimensions, hull form, construction and method of operation. From a limited range of source materials, together with his practical experience as a boat user, the author here attempts to supply answers to these questions. The result is an extremely detailed, almost forensic study of these elusive vessels.

Contemporary resources available to the author included four museum models, a number of paintings and drawings showing varying degrees of technical detail, some written accounts together with the works of antiquarians and more recent researchers. The digitisation of local newspapers and other documents has made such sources much more easily accessible. Despite the considerable existing literature about traditional river craft, there is little specifically about the Tyne keels. Much of what has been published has concentrated on the crews and labour issues.

The author systematically discusses the size, hull form and construction of the keels, moving on to methods of propulsion - rowing, poling, hauling, sailing and use of the tidal flow were all practised. The 'Keel Row' of the well-known folk song is unique but turns out not to have been the favoured method except in specific limited circumstances. He goes on to consider cargo handling and the various dangers of the job. Finally, he looks at possible antecedents of the design and how it may have evolved over the centuries. Many of his conclusions are necessarily speculative but founded on careful reasoning. He concludes with the hopeful suggestion that practical experimental archaeology in the form of a replica keel might help to resolve some of the puzzles that remain.

The text is well written. Many of the technical points are clarified by the author's diagrams and other illustrations which are well integrated into the text. The work is fully referenced and includes an extensive bibliography and index. The only suggestion for improvement would be a glossary of technical and dialect words. Most are explained in the text but a summary list would have been helpful.

***The Tralee & Dingle Railway* by Michael Whitehouse, Lightmoor Press, £60.**

The Tralee & Dingle Railway was a 3-foot gauge line, some 35 route-miles long including a branch line to Castlegregory, in remote County Kerry in the west of Ireland. It connected the county town of Tralee, already served by the broad gauge Great Southern & Western Railway, to the fishing port of Dingle. Its route involved crossing the mountainous spine of the Dingle Peninsula involving two summits, one of them the third highest in Ireland. The railway was built on the cheap with steep gradients and sharp curves, which caused operational problems from the outset. Opening in 1891, revenue never covered operating costs, so the railway was always in a situation of 'make do and mend'.

Motor buses and lorries inevitably drained traffic away from the railway and passenger services were withdrawn in 1939. Freight traffic continued for a while longer, until eventually the only services running were the monthly livestock workings to serve Dingle market. These finally succumbed in 1953, but not before attracting the attention of many UK enthusiasts who travelled to Ireland in the early 1950s to enjoy the excitement of footplate trips on these final workings and to film and photograph them. CIE insisted on them signing indemnities for any injuries received!

The book has its origins in a slim history of the line produced by the present author's father, Pat Whitehouse, and John Powell. This was published by the Locomotive Publishing Company in 1954 – the year the RCHS was founded. Described as a second edition, the current book is a far more substantial volume in every respect but, the author assures us, has not overturned any of the original, very meticulous research. All the research notes from the original book have survived, including Powell's transcripts from the now-lost company minute books. The original text has been largely retained, augmented by much additional material that has come to light since first publication. The author has added material from the original research notes that failed to make it into the first edition and has also

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written sections that set the railway into its historical, political, economic and social context. It is not obvious where the new text has been added although there are a few instances of duplicated material.

There are verbatim extracts from various official enquiries into the railway, reminiscences from former staff and local people and many more photographs. The large format does full justice to these, setting the little trains into their wild, mountainous surroundings. Appendices include facsimile reproductions of the line's Light Railway Order of 1888 and its Byelaws and Regulations. The chapters on locomotives and rolling stock include many scale drawings. Good maps of the line are included on the endpapers. Sources are indicated generically in a bibliography and contributors acknowledged. There is an index. Production is well up to the standard that we have come to expect from this publisher.

***The Coming of the Railway: a new global history 1750-1850*, by David Gwyn, Yale University Press, £25.**

In 1970 Michael Lewis published his ground-breaking work, *Early Wooden Railways*. Fifty years later, writing in our *RCHS Journal*, he reflected that somebody still had to write *Early Iron Railways*... Whether this book is a direct response to that challenge is not entirely clear, but it does indeed fit the description. Taking a global perspective, essentially it provides an overview of the numerous technical, commercial, economic, social, political and legislative events and developments that came together and inter-acted during the 100 years from 1750 to create the modern railway that we are all familiar with. Nor does it overlook the significant personalities involved.

The book is an astonishing synthesis of published work by many people, including the author himself. It draws together information from a huge range of sources, in particular the many disparate papers presented at the series of Early Railway Conferences which commenced in 1998. Many other publications, both contemporary and modern, are also referenced, and these are not restricted to works written in the English language. There are almost 1100 end notes, and more than 600 publications are listed in the bibliography.

The author has adopted a thematic approach, starting from the point where there existed two distinct styles of wooden railway in England, the Shropshire type and the north-eastern waggonway. He discusses the evolution of track design as metal began to supplement or supplant wood for rails, the various circumstances in which railways were constructed in these early years, the change from animal and gravity haulage to mechanical traction, both stationary and mobile. After the end of the Napoleonic wars, the technology began to spread from the UK to continental Europe and north America, often with adaptation to suit local circumstances. Gradually, individual mineral-carrying railways developed into local networks, with a step change in 1825-1830 when the wider possibilities began to be realised, and the first main lines were mooted. Ultimately this led to national networks, carrying passengers and every kind of freight, although the pace of development varied from country to country. The author's contention that 1825 did not mark the beginning of the railway age in Great Britain is convincingly demonstrated.

The text is very readable, but so crammed with ideas and insights that it would certainly repay re-reading. The comprehensive end notes and bibliography will enable the reader easily to trace the origins of any specific themes and to explore them more thoroughly. The author cautions that this can never be the final word. Further research always has the potential to overturn accepted ideas.

***The Making of MacBrayne: a Scottish transport monopoly spanning three centuries* by Andrew Clark, Stenlake Publishing, £75**

The MacBrayne company had its origins in a Glasgow shipping concern run by the Burns brothers. In 1851 David Hutcheson & Co. was formed out of Burns' Loch Fyne and West Highland interests with David MacBrayne, Hutcheson's nephew, as junior partner. In 1879 Hutcheson retired and MacBrayne, at the ripe age of 61, became sole partner, changing the company's name to David MacBrayne & Co. The following year the company won its first Post Office contracts. The business was run astutely on tight commercial grounds with summer tourist revenues subsidising the unprofitable winter operations. In 1891 the Walpole Commission recommended government subsidies to support services to isolated Highland and Island communities, for social and economic reasons. MacBraynes Judges' Report 2024

became a monopoly, supported by the Post Office but distrusted by other government departments, and, inevitably, frequently criticised by island communities and their representatives in Parliament, who wanted better services and facilities. But only MacBraynes had the resources to substitute ships when breakdowns and overhauls disrupted normal service. The authorities were well aware that allowing competing companies to cherry-pick the profitable routes would require even larger subsidies for the remainder – a Catch 22 situation that dogs the organisation to this day. Should it be a social service or a commercial enterprise?

In 1905 David MacBrayne's son Hope finally took over from his 86 year-old father as chairman. All was well at first but the First World War wrecked the company's finances. The cross-subsidisation arrangement no longer worked because tourist traffic evaporated. The company had to be bailed out by the Post Office in 1915. The firm struggled after the war, with no finance to renew the fleet. It was eventually taken over in 1928 by a consortium consisting of Liverpool-based Coast Lines and the LMS Railway. Alfred Read of Coast Lines as managing Director became the new driving force. New vessels were put in hand. Road haulage and bus services were expanded.

The company struggled again after the Second World War, for similar reasons. It was not included in the Labour Government's post-war nationalisation programme but was finally taken into public ownership in 1969. It thereby lost its commercial independence and was instead controlled by civil servants in distant London and Edinburgh. Trading as CalMac, it is currently owned by the devolved Scottish government. An enlightening aspect of the recent story is the author's explanation of the financial engineering necessary to comply with EEC competition rules.

The author interweaves the commercial history of the business with detailed operational histories of the numerous vessels and the routes they operated. He also provides portraits of the principal characters involved. The approach is largely chronological but occasionally jumps about towards the end of the story – perhaps a case of writer fatigue creeping in as he neared the end of this exhaustive 500-page marathon? However, few criticisms can be made. Perhaps for readers unfamiliar with the geography, more maps might have been helpful. There are one or two but they are not listed in the contents so are hard to find. Sources are listed generically at the end of the book. MacBrayne's original records could not be found but the company's story has been told by extensive reference to government department papers and parliamentary reports, GPO and LMS records, shipbuilders' records, newspaper reports and much else. Appendices include a fleet list from 1851 to 2021. The many illustrations include quite a few showing ships' crews as well as the vessels themselves. The comprehensive index includes references to the photograph captions, which is not always the case. As our reviewer remarked, 'Given its size, weight and the time it took to complete, it was clearly a labour of love on the part of the author'.

***The Deeside Line: Scotland's Royal Railway* by Keith Fenwick, The Great North of Scotland Railway Association, £10**

Enthusiastically reviewed in our *Journal*, this is a concise but wide-ranging history and description of the 43-mile branch line from Aberdeen to Ballater, the nearest railway station to Balmoral Castle. Queen Victoria vetoed the line from continuing to Braemar since that would have brought it too close to the royal residence. Instead, from 1904 the railway ran its own connecting bus service. The line closed in 1966, despite BR experiments with a battery powered multiple unit train. The author goes on to describe what remains can still be seen, including repurposed station buildings and a short length operated by a railway preservation society.

Attractively presented with many colour illustrations alongside the historic b&w photos, maps and a bibliography are included.

***150 Years of Manx Railways* by Barry Edwards & Richard Kirkman, Lily Publications, £24.50**

The book begins with a brief overview of the island's railway history, followed by a series of chapters covering every known railway, including funiculars, tramways, industrial lines and some quaint oddities such as the Cunningham Camp escalator. These chapters begin with a short resume of each line's history up to the mid-20th century, ground which has already been extensively documented in the earlier histories listed in the bibliography. This is followed by Judges' Report 2024

a much more detailed account of more recent events, including the efforts made to retain those railways that still operate. Each chapter is heavily illustrated, many of the more recent photos being the work of Barry Edwards, although a number of earlier colour photos and historic monochrome views are also included. The photographs tend to concentrate on the familiar steam trains and electric tramcars. There is relatively little coverage of the railway infrastructure. Excellent maps of each railway are presented, along with stock lists for the still-operational lines.

T.A. & C.H. Walker: Shipbuilders, Railway and Civil Engineering Contractors: from Sudbrook to South America by Richard Clammer, Lightmoor Press, £40.

The author's curiosity was aroused during a guided tour of Sudbrook, an industrial village on the western shore of the Severn estuary, best known for being the location of the pumping station that drains the Great Western Railway's tunnel under the Severn. It was also once the location of a small shipyard that had never been researched. He set out initially to produce a list of the vessels built by this yard, mostly small coasters, tugs and barges, but the research expanded into a wider story which sets the work of the shipyard into the context of the careers of Thomas Walker and his nephew Charles Hay Walker, two of the more significant civil engineering contractors of the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1879 Thomas Walker contracted with the GWR to complete the Severn tunnel, the workings of which had been flooded by ingress of water from the Great Spring. A paternalistic employer, he built the village of Sudbrook to house his workers and their families, providing a chapel, school and medical facilities. The tunnel was opened to traffic in 1886. There would appear to be two interconnected reasons for creating the shipyard here: in 1885 Walker had signed a contract to construct docks in Buenos Aires which would require numerous workboats to fetch suitable stone and other materials from the Uruguayan side of the River Plate estuary and, with work on the Severn tunnel coming to an end, building his own vessels at Sudbrook would provide ongoing employment for at least some of his workforce, as well as providing an ongoing income stream from rental of his housing stock. The first vessel was completed in 1888 and steamed to South America, shortly to be followed by several sister ships.

Thomas Walker died in 1889. His will appointed executors to provide for his family and to ensure completion of outstanding contracts, including the Buenos Aires docks and the Manchester Ship Canal. Such was the scale of the business that several private Acts of Parliament were required to ratify the executors' actions and grant them the necessary powers to continue the business. It was not until 1898 that the executors' business was concluded and a new company, C. H. Walker & Co. Ltd., was founded with Thomas Walker's nephew, Charles Hay Walker at its head.

The heart of this book is an account of the vessels built at the Sudbrook yard, some built for the Walkers' own use, others for outside clients. The author interweaves this with details of the two Walkers' professional careers and family life. Although the author claims the book to be the result of a 'lockdown journey', the global extent of his research, sometimes via third parties, is truly impressive. He was able to flesh out the story with more personal detail thanks to contact with descendants of Charles Hay.

Given the less than glamorous nature of the vessels built by Walkers, the photographic coverage is surprisingly comprehensive, supplemented by several general arrangement drawings, plans of various dock contracts undertaken and a comprehensive yard list of vessels constructed, along with a bibliography of sources and index. The story of Sudbrook village is brought up to date with a description of what remains are still to be seen.

These were the seven short-listed books from which the judges had to select those that, in their view, made the most important contributions in our field of interest. Their choices were as follows:

Early Railways Book of the Year: David Gwyn, *The Coming of the Railway – a new global history 1750-1850*

Light Railway Book of the Year: Michael Whitehouse, *The Tralee & Dingle Railway*

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Maritime Transport Book of the Year: Andrew Clark, *The Making of MacBrayne - a Scottish transport monopoly spanning three centuries*

Docks & Shipping Book of the Year: Richard Clammer, *T. A. & C. H. Walker – shipbuilders, railway and civil engineering contractors*

The judges' final task was to decide the overall winner of the David St John Thomas silver cup and prize for 2024 Transport History Book of the Year. The judges had to compare four excellent books on widely divergent subjects. David Gwyn's *The Coming of the Railway* consolidates a large amount of primary research by numerous authors to fill a long-standing gap in the literature. Michael Whitehouse's *Tralea & Dingle Railway* is a beautifully produced account of a minor rural railway which is unlikely to be bettered in the future, and is also a tribute to a previous generation of enthusiasts, researchers and authors. Andrew Clark's *The Making of MacBrayne* is a tour-de-force of a company history, again, unlikely to be superseded and Richard Clammer's *TA & CH Walker*, as well as spot-lighting an almost forgotten small shipyard and its less than glamorous products, is the first book-length biography of the Walkers. A difficult choice but, bearing in mind the criteria by which our reviewers assess the books, the panel's decision was in favour of David Gwyn's *The Coming of the Railway* because of its ambitious world-wide scope and also its topicality as we approach the Stockton & Darlington Railway's 200th anniversary in 2025.

Once again, sincere thanks go to those whose work behind the scenes makes these awards possible – Matthew Searle and his panel of book reviewers, whose informed and objective assessments enable a draft shortlist to be drawn up for the judges.

Thanks go also to this year's fellow judges, who are volunteers drawn from the Society's membership. This year, Roger Brice and David Pedley agreed to serve on the panel. Roger, a former secretary of the Society and still very active in its affairs nationally as joint webmaster and, in the North West Group, as walks co-ordinator, will be well known to many members. David is a retired solicitor, a Society member for 50 years and a book reviewer since 2011. He was physically involved in early workcamps on now long-restored waterways, and for a while lived on the Grand Union Canal in a Little Ricky star class boat. Legally he created a high court precedent in company law arising from a contentious two-year argument in the national council of the Inland Waterways Association over traditional narrow boats.

I should also like to thank the many publishers who, over the years, have willingly co-operated by supplying the judges with review copies of the short-listed books. Finally, as always, we acknowledge the late David St John Thomas, author and publisher, who left the Society a generous legacy to provide the prize fund, which will enable us to continue these awards for the foreseeable future.

Philip Brown

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