

Railway & Canal Historical Society

22nd Annual Transport History Book of the Year Awards 2025



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 2024 and March 2025. 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 panel of judges reviews the highest scoring books and settles 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 monetary prize and the David St John Thomas trophy to hold for the year.

This year the judges short-listed six titles, drawn from the 44 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 reprints of earlier works and books largely comprising photographs with limited text. The number of *Journal* reviews this year was again well down on typical pre-pandemic levels, no doubt due to a combination of factors. Like everything else, publishers' costs have increased, reflected in price increases, which must have some effect on sales. One major publisher has moved to supplying review copies in electronic format, which deters some of our reviewers. There has certainly been a proliferation of photograph album style books of late, but these are outside the scope of our awards. As the age profile of our membership slowly but steadily increases, one is left wondering whether the market for serious transport history is shrinking and therefore less attractive to authors and publishers.

On a more positive note, some excellent new books made it through to this year's short-list, including two in the Railway History category. The first of these was:

***Railway Travel in World War Two* by Peter Steer, published by Pen & Sword Transport at £25.**

The author sets out to test the commonly perceived view that wartime railway journeys were inevitably slow, overcrowded, uncomfortable and late-running. As is so often the case, the real situation was much

more nuanced. As had happened during the First World War, the Government took control of the UK's railways at the outbreak of war but operated them at arm's length through the Railway Executive Committee, which was formed of senior railway officers. Its records show that tensions between the government and the REC were a persistent feature throughout the war. The government was anxious to reduce 'unnecessary' passenger traffic to free up capacity for other vital flows: coal from the north-east, because coastal shipping was vulnerable to U-boat attack; movement of troops, weapons and munitions and of imports, because merchant shipping had been diverted from the east to the west coast ports. On the other hand, the REC members' instinct as railway professionals was to try to meet the needs of whatever traffic presented. Ironically, much additional passenger traffic was the direct result of government actions: government departments being relocated away from the capital, military personnel taking leave, parents of evacuees visiting their children in the country, shadow factories being established in safer, often rural areas, requiring workers to relocate or commute longer distances. Much of this traffic was facilitated by concessionary fare arrangements, so it was very much a case of mixed messaging. Publicity campaigns to reduce 'unnecessary' journeys such as leisure and holiday travel were commissioned but decisions were left in the hands of the general public and the data to demonstrate their effectiveness or otherwise does not exist.

The author discusses how these various conflicting factors interacted and evolved over the course of the war. The difficulties of operating and using the railways in wartime conditions are examined both from the operators' and the passengers' perspective.

Developed from an Institute of Railway Studies/University of York Master's degree dissertation, the book is not encumbered with detailed references but does include an extensive bibliography, including an itemised list of files consulted at The National Archives and London Metropolitan Archives. These include government, parliamentary and REC records. Other sources listed include contemporary national and regional newspapers, wartime railway periodicals and some modern websites. Whilst perfectly satisfactory for the general reader, anyone wishing to trace the precise origin of specific information is thereby put at a disadvantage.

Despite its academic origins, the judges felt that the book was written largely in clear and readable language. The typeface was clear and easy to read. There were a few misspellings of place names and other minor typographical errors. The index could have been more detailed and again contained the occasional typographical error, suggesting that more careful proof-reading was required. Illustrations are grouped together in the centre of the book but not numbered, listed or referenced in the text.

Our second railway title was:

Crumlin Viaduct by Gordon Wood, with Neil Parkhouse and Stephen Rowson, published by Lightmoor Press at £60.

This is a book which covers much more subject matter than its short title might suggest. It tells the story of a spectacular and innovative structure which carried an increasingly heavy traffic during its lifespan, albeit with regular repair and maintenance but relatively little modification. The tale begins with an account of the railway politics behind the construction of the Newport, Abergavenny & Hereford Railway's Taff Vale Extension, which provided standard gauge access to the South Wales valleys and their mineral wealth as an alternative to Brunel's broad gauge South Wales Railway. It describes the reasoning behind the choice of an iron Warren Truss structure, a recently patented design innovation, as opposed to the tried and tested

alternative of a brick or masonry viaduct. The concept was promoted by Thomas William Kennard and the railway company appointed him to design, manufacture and construct the viaduct. They insisted on a fixed price for the contract but omitted to formally document this at the time. Kennard's engineering talent might have been exceptional but his project management and financial skills proved less so. The author has been able to recount this part of the story in great detail, along with the subsequent court proceedings for under-payment that Kennard instigated against the railway company, which were eventually settled after two years by arbitration. Another chapter describes the Viaduct Works that Kennard established in the Ebbw valley to manufacture components for the viaduct and which had an afterlife of some 20 years, continuing to manufacture bridges and machinery, including much for export markets. The author goes on to describe how the traffic across the viaduct changed over the years, some notable incidents, and then recounts its closure and how it was safely dismantled. To Gordon Wood's text and drawings, the associated authors have added many illustrations and captions and a chapter about the London Stereoscopic Company, in which one of TW Kennard's brothers was a partner. Through this family connection, Crumlin Viaduct became one of the earliest major civil engineering works to be extensively photographed.

Gordon Wood's 30-year research project began with the chance discovery at Paddington of boxes of documents about the design and construction of the viaduct. The detail this has provided about how a major civil engineering project was carried out in the mid-nineteenth century is eye-opening, although he does not go into whether or not this was typical of its time. The information on Kennard's sourcing of materials is also illuminating, revealing, for example, the complicated multi-modal logistics involved in obtaining iron from his father's works at Falkirk.

The judges had a few misgivings. Although sources are referred to in chapter end-notes, the locations of these documents are not always given. Certain parts of the text are quite technical and perhaps difficult for non-engineers to follow, and some might find the sheer number of photographs of the viaduct a little repetitive. This is a large and weighty volume, and therefore not cheap. For those readers who are undeterred by these matters, the book is beautifully produced to the publisher's customary high standards, and the large format certainly does full justice to the many photographs.

The judges decided that their Railway History Book of the Year was *Crumlin Viaduct*.

The next category was Canal and Waterways History. There was only one work in this category, another heavyweight volume:

***Arteries of International Sustainable Industry: The Swansea Canal and its Early Railways* by Stephen Hughes, published by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales at £45.**

The Swansea Canal was a product of the 1790s canal mania, a speculative venture promoted by local landowners and commercial interests. The author sets the canal into its local, national and global context. Not just a transport artery, it also provided a sustainable supply of process water to a range of industries because, like other South Wales canals, it ran downhill continuously from valley head to the coast and was fed by abundant Welsh rainfall. It enabled what at the time were globally significant industries to develop and flourish in the Swansea valley. Coal, copper, iron and tinplate were of particular importance and the canal's associated network of feeder tramroads was second only to that of the Great Northern coalfield around Newcastle.

Written in four long chapters, the first gives a brief overview of the history of inland navigation and associated early railways in Wales. The second concentrates on the building of the Swansea Canal. The author notes the use of 'hydraulic mortar' for waterproofing the aqueducts, preceding Telford's use of it by several years. The design of each type of structure along the canal is discussed in archaeological detail, illustrated by photos, drawings and many of the author's paintings that reconstruct vanished features. The third section considers the canal's impact on economic growth. A major goal of the promoters was to enable cheaper and more efficient access to the coal and mineral resources of the middle and upper Swansea valley, to feed raw materials to the copper, tinplate and iron industries located along the navigable lower reaches of the River Tawe, to enable industrial growth locally and for export to the wider world. The old-established pits near Swansea produced soft, bituminous coal but the canal opened up the hard, anthracite reserves further inland, which had specialised use in malting and lime burning. Later, iron-masters developed the technology to use anthracite to make iron, which led to works being built higher up the valley, generating urban development. Each of the principal industries is discussed, followed by consideration of quarrying, potteries, brickworks, chemicals, brewing and other economic activities.

The author moves on to consider the early railways, which, under the Canal's enabling Act, could be built up to 8 miles distant. In total they amounted to almost 140 miles and were an essential and integrated part of the transport infrastructure. Discussion of the early use of steam locomotives in South Wales follows. The final chapter pulls together the many themes explored, summarising the canal's and the Swansea valley's contribution to the first Industrial Revolution. Inevitably, the economic shifts of the late 19th and 20th centuries meant the decline of trade on the canal. Carriage tolls were no longer collected after 1931. Its water-supply role meant that it was not totally abandoned however, and growing interest in leisure use and amenity value have led to partial retention and a degree of restoration. The book concludes with a vision for the future and a gazetteer of features still extant and visitable. There are extensive references at the end of each chapter, a full bibliography, a glossary of technical terms and an index.

In a way the book is the final part of a trilogy, following the author's *Archaeology of an Early Railway System: the Brecon Forest Tramroads* and *Copperopolis: Landscapes of the early Industrial Period in Swansea*. Understandably there are many references to these publications.

The judges had two main concerns. The first was that internal referencing between text, illustrations and maps was poor. For example, there is a strip map at the end of chapter 2 which numbers all the canal features discussed in that chapter, but no indication of its existence is given in the text and the reader only discovers it on turning to the last page of that chapter. Our other concern was the division of focus in the book between a broad coverage of waterway and early railway developments generally, and the specifics of the Swansea Canal and its associated railways. The parts about the Swansea Canal and its engineering tended to be more readable. Perhaps a case where less could have meant more? We were also puzzled about the meaning of the tag-line in the book's title: 'Arteries of International Sustainable Industry'. This reader also noticed a few irritating errors which should have been picked up in proof-reading, for example the key to the shading of the map on p.164 is wrong and 'Thomas Boulton, the steam engine entrepreneur' surely refers to Matthew Boulton?

These quibbles aside, the book is a fully-rounded history, which records the canal's infrastructure and explains why it was built as it was, and then sets the canal into its historic, economic and geographical context. In this respect, it probably sets a new benchmark for waterways history. Despite the lack of

competition, the judges agreed that this book fully deserved to be their Canal & Waterways Book of the Year.

Next we considered two books in the Popular History category. First up was:

***Iron, Stone and Steam, Brunel's Railway Empire* by Tim Bryan, published by Amberley Publishing at £22.99.**

As the title makes clear, this account focusses on Brunel's railway work for the Great Western Railway and the various associated companies that in due course became part of it. The outlines of Brunel's career are already well documented - things have clearly moved on since the publisher of Tom Rolt's 1957 Brunel biography had to ask who Brunel was. We don't learn very much that is new in this book. Certainly there are no major surprises. The author has produced a balanced account, highlighting Brunel's enormous energy and capacity for hard work but also examining his obvious difficulty in delegating, almost obsessive attention to detail, his parsimony when dealing with contractors and some of his more ill-judged and costly decisions – locomotives, atmospheric propulsion and the broad gauge. Yet the directors kept faith with him despite the complaints of shareholders and many difficult meetings.

The author has evidently immersed himself in the published literature as well as mining the primary sources which, as Director of the Brunel Institute in Bristol, he is very well-placed to do. There are twenty-five pages of endnotes, a five pages list of sources and bibliography as well as an index, list of Brunel's UK railway projects and notes about his (relatively few) overseas commissions. Illustrations are grouped together towards the end of the book and are listed at the back but not referenced in the text. The list might more usefully have been located at the front of the book. Our conclusion was that this is an excellent introduction for someone new to the subject.

Our second short-listed Popular contender was:

***The Life of LTC Rolt: where Engineering met Literature* by Victoria Owens, published by Pen & Sword History at £22.00**

Although Tom Rolt (1910-1974) wrote three volumes of autobiography, there were inevitably some areas of his life about which he was circumspect, opaque or perhaps less than objective. And so, as with any autobiography, there is always the opportunity for an independent author to throw new, more objective light onto their subject.

Victoria Owens' biography begins with brief accounts of Tom Rolt's antecedents, seeking out character traits her subject might have had in common with them. We are then conducted through his early life, highlighting formative experiences, both positive and negative, and the sources of his personal interests and some of the themes which he would expand upon in his later writing.

We learn about the family's house moves, from Chester to rural Cusop, near Hay-on-Wye in 1914, then to a smaller property in Stanley Pontlarge, near Cheltenham, following an unfortunate investment decision by his father. Tom spent an unhappy few years at Cheltenham College, before persuading his father to let him leave early. Always intrigued by machinery, through the good offices of family friend and 'courtesy uncle' Kyrle Willans, he took up an unpaid pupillage with an agricultural engineering business run by the Bomford family at Pitchill, near Evesham. Here Tom gained an understanding and respect for the craftsman's skill,

gained through long practical experience. By 1928 Willan was general manager of Kerr Stuart & Co. in Stoke-on-Trent and Tom took up a 3-year engineering apprenticeship, one of the highlights being his involvement from start to finish in erecting a 4-8-0 steam locomotive for export to Argentina. During this time, he was introduced to the delights of the inland waterways when helping to move Willan's boat Cressy to new moorings at Stoke. In a moment of enlightenment, Tom realised that his consuming interest in engineering and his feeling for the natural world were not irreconcilable.

Sadly, Kerr Stuart went into receivership in 1930, before Tom had completed his apprenticeship but, through his friends, he was enabled to complete his time at R. A. Lister & Co. of Dursley. Here he encountered a different system of work, assembly line production, which did not appeal to him. Listers did not offer him a permanent post on completion of his apprenticeship. Would he have accepted it if offered? A series of unsatisfactory short-term jobs followed. At this point Tom decided on a change of direction – a life afloat on the canals while he would try to support himself by writing. Most of us will be familiar with at least some of his literary output, which ranged from engineering biography, the histories of waterways, railways and industrial companies to early ballooning and even ghost stories.

His subsequent achievements were significant. It is now over fifty years since Rolt's untimely death and the publication of this biography is a poignant reminder that his efforts and those of other pioneers in preservation and conservation were instrumental in initiating a major change in the course of transport history, bringing public and government attention to the gradual demise of commercial carrying on Britain's canals and inland waterways. This foresight and campaigning prompted the subsequent creation of an important commercial leisure industry. Likewise, he helped lay the foundations of the heritage railway movement through his involvement with the Talylllyn Railway, and he also fostered interest in the field of industrial archaeology.

Through the co-operation of family members, the author was given access to Rolt's papers, including unpublished manuscripts, photographs and family memories. Other sources included material held in the Rolt Collection at Ironbridge, the Waterways Archive at Ellesmere Port and The National Archives. The book is fully referenced with a bibliography and index. A small selection of photographs is grouped together in the middle of the book. It would have been good to see more but no doubt business considerations dictated otherwise.

The judges decided to award the prize for Popular Transport History to *The Life of LTC Rolt*.

One more short-listed book remained to be considered:

***Chalk Farm Railway Lands: a guided tour 1830 – 2030* by Peter Darley, published by Grosvenor House Publishing at £25.**

This large format paperback is difficult to classify, being a history of the area, a field guide to what remains of its railway infrastructure and it concludes with a vision of what might be achieved in the future to make these remains accessible to the public. The author is founder of the Camden Railway Heritage Trust, deeply involved in trying to raise the profile of a site that was the earliest and one of the principal goods stations serving the metropolis.

The book begins by imagining George and Robert Stephenson taking a walk around the area in 1830, taking in the local topography and planning the London & Birmingham Railway's approach to London. The presence of the Regent's Canal was both a problem and an opportunity. A goods station adjacent to the canal would provide easy access to the London Docks but crossing the canal to take the line further south would complicate construction and subsequent operation of the railway. They took the decision to raise the railway over the canal and to operate the line beyond to Euston station by gravity downwards and rope haulage by stationary engines upwards. The site of the goods station had to be built up to railway level, whilst the haulage engines could be installed in vaults below the new surface level.

Subsequent chapters take us chronologically through the various phases of growth during the 19th century, with much enhancement of facilities, and describe some of the other industries attracted to the location because of the connection the railway provided to much of the rest of the country. The importance of the horse to operations is described, along with the facilities that they required, ditto the steam locomotive. The 20th century decline because of road competition is charted, together with the impact of the whole enterprise on the surrounding areas.

The author has hard words to say about certain 21st century redevelopments on the former railway lands, due to ignorance of the site's history and the extent of surviving heritage. The book is intended to put this information on public record in the hope that future development might be better informed and more respectful of that heritage. But it is also aimed at a wider readership and finishes with a vision of what might realistically be achieved in the way of making the unique surviving features accessible to the general public. The story told makes an interesting comparison with the redevelopment of the nearby Kings Cross goods yard, which underwent a full archaeological survey, with the report published. The present author has also written about that area.

The book is profusely illustrated with maps, paintings, photos and drawings, many of the latter from Network Rail archives, all well integrated into the text. A particularly commendable feature is that, where necessary, historic maps and plans have been annotated or redrawn to make the author's points clear. References, sources and bibliography are grouped together at the back of the book but there is no index.

The judges agreed this book merited a Special Prize, only the third such in the twenty-two year history of these Awards.

The judges' final task was to decide the overall winner of the David St John Thomas silver cup and title of 2025 Transport History Book of the Year. The judges had to compare four excellent category-winning books on widely divergent subjects. *Crumlin Viaduct* is a remarkable book, the result of 30 years' work by the author, who sadly did not live to see the physical finished product. It contains rather more than its title suggests. *The Swansea Canal and its Early Railways* likewise is more ambitious in intent than its title suggests. Besides being a detailed archaeological and historical record of the canal and its feeder tramways, it attempts to explain the part it played in the whole industrial history of the Swansea Valley and that area's significant and perhaps overlooked role in the industrial revolution. *The Life of LTC Rolt* is a considered and very readable biography of a significant figure in our field of interest, some of whose books have been in print more-or-less continuously since first published more than 50 years ago – quite an achievement for a non-fiction writer. Finally, *Chalk Farm Railway Lands* takes an original and unusual approach to local transport history and in another of its guises, as a guidebook, must certainly encourage its readers to go out

and look for themselves. One hopes that those responsible for redevelopment of the area will take note too. The competition was close and the judges were divided in their views but, by majority decision, decided that their Book of the Year was *The Swansea Canal*.

As ever, 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, Gerald Leach and Tim Edmonds agreed to serve. Gerald is the immediate Past President of the Society and active in the organisation of its North-west Group activities, so will be well known to many members. Tim was the first administrator of these Book Awards and remains a book reviewer for the *Journal*.

I should also like to record my thanks to 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 the generous prize fund legacy which will enable us to continue these awards for the foreseeable future.

Philip Brown

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