

Wells Railway Fraternity

The guest speaker at our meeting at Wells Town Hall on 8th February was Simon Castens and his subject was 'The Titfield Thunderbolt and the Camerton Branch'. After a computer hitch had been overcome we settled down to an evening of pure nostalgia. Simon began with a brief outline of the history of the branch line which linked Camerton with the Avon Valley at Limpley Stoke. The line was partly built on the route of the old Somerset Coal Canal and opened in 1910. It was destined to have a fairly short life of just under a half century, ending shortly after Camerton Colliery closed in 1950 - the other major colliery served by the line, at Dunkerton, had stopped working earlier, in the 1930s. The line was then used by the BR Bridge Department for storage and the rails were finally lifted in 1958.

Simon pointed out that when Ealing Studios decided to make the film 'The Titfield Thunderbolt', the Talylyn Railway was the only enthusiast-run line anywhere and speculation has taken place as to whether the little Welsh railway was the inspiration for Tibby Clarke's story. There can be little doubt that the film served as encouragement for the movement which has resulted in today's preserved and heritage railway tourist industry. With the help of old photographs of the line and stills from the film, Simon then spoke of the making of the film in July and August 1952. The station at Monkton Combe served as that of the fictional village of Titfield, the name being a composite of Titsey and Limpsfield, two adjoining villages in Surrey. The film company hired two ex-Great Western '1400' Class tank engines from British Railways and these were transferred to Westbury (Wilts) for maintenance whilst the other locomotive which starred as 'Thunderbolt' was the Liverpool & Manchester Railway 'Lion', built in 1838. This veteran was brought to Bristol and amazingly was then allowed to run under its own steam from Bristol to Monkton Combe. The ancient carriage used on the branch train came from the Wisbech and Upwell Tramway and, sadly, this historic vehicle was broken up for scrap following the filming, although a similar vehicle does survive today in preservation.

Simon then featured various locations on the line and gave brief summaries of the careers of most of the stars who featured in the film, including John Gregson (the Squire), George Relph (the vicar), Godfrey Tearle (the bishop), Naunton Wayne (the town clerk), Sid James, Gabrielle Brune and Edie Martin. We also learned something of the Bedford bus which was hired from a local company at Winsley and the steam roller which was involved in the duel with the branch line locomotive. Most of the cast stayed in two local hotels and we were intrigued to learn that the waterwheel at Limpley Stoke Mill was used to generate electricity to enable film clips to be shown there. Not all the scenes in the film were shot locally; for example, the attempt to steal a replacement tank locomotive was filmed at Oxford engine shed whilst scenes of it running through the streets were taken in Woodstock.

A vote of thanks was proposed to Simon for giving us a fascinating evening which for many of us brought back many memories of a time now gone for ever.

Our next meeting will be held in Wells Town Hall on Tuesday, 8th March, commencing at 7.30 p.m. when Richard Pelham will be talking about American Narrow Gauge Locomotives. Further details of the Fraternity's activities are available from Paul Fry (673187), John Uncles (870158) or on the society's website www.railwells.com.

John Uncles