

Wells Railway Fraternity – November 2012

On the 13th November, John Blatchford concluded his account of his 'life with railways', the first part of which we heard following last year's AGM. For this evening's presentation, entitled 'Building A Railway', John began by briefly reminding us of his time with the family's structural steel business at Midsomer Norton. This business diversified into the manufacture of reinforced concrete engineering products, initially at Tor Hill Quarry, Wells, and latterly at Emborough Quarry, near Chilcompton, in the 1980s. To allow us to orientate ourselves John began by showing an aerial photograph of the latter quarry, taken towards the end of the Second World War, showing its large area bisected by the lofty railway viaduct carrying the Somerset & Dorset Joint line.

As an engineer, John had noted that concrete works in Belgium and elsewhere on the Continent usually made use of internal narrow gauge railways laid with light track of about 35 lbs per yard, and he incorporated a similar facility at Emborough. In 1982 he acquired his first locomotive, a small Ruston & Hornsby diesel, from Corsham depot, being surplus to the requirements of the Royal Navy. This locomotive acquired the name *Tinkerbelle* and had been built to the slightly unusual gauge, favoured by the Admiralty for their armament depots, of 760mm. Hence, the track at Emborough was built to this gauge.

In 1996 the concrete manufacturing ceased and John found himself with a large derelict quarry with a short length of railway. He decided therefore, in his retirement, to extend the railway into a circuit around the quarry and he set about acquiring more locomotives, rolling stock and track, much of which came from naval depots. We were intrigued to learn that some track John bought later had, however, come from depots of the former Soviet Navy ! The line currently extends for about 1.25 miles and , having passed through the idyllically named Dingley Dell, runs in the western half of the quarry alongside the extensive lake which had formed there.

John gave us a full description, with excellent illustrations, of the locomotives and the many and varied items of other rolling stock which he had acquired over the years and entertained us with anecdotes about the steep learning curve involved in matters such as rail bending, bridge construction and modifying the mainly 5- and 10-ton wagons for various purposes, including a recently-built passenger coach. He also provided some interesting figures of the costs involved in building a railway such as that at Emborough - a task not to be entertained lightly even on a 'Do It Yourself' basis. For instance he had estimated that a mile of such a railway required about 56 tons of second-hand 35 lb rail, some 2,000 sleepers, 36,000 track clips and fishplates and many tons of ballast.

A vote of thanks was given by Derek Lampard who reminded us that the Fraternity had been privileged to visit the Emborough railway in 2009. He

congratulated John on his inventiveness and ingenuity in undertaking such a bold venture and expressed the meeting's gratitude to him for giving us such an interesting, entertaining and enthusiastic account of it. For further information about the Fraternity's activities, please contact John Uncles (tel. 870158) or visit the society's website www.railwells.com.

John Uncles