

HISTELEC NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH WESTERN ELECTRICITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Web Site : www.swehs.co.uk

No. 8

April 1998

CHAIRMAN STAYS FOR A THIRD TERM

At the annual general meeting on the 21st March at Taunton, John Haynes, Chairman, agreed to stay in post for a further year. David Hutton stood down as Vice-Chairman and Barrie Phillips became Vice-Chairman. Peter Lamb and Clive Goodman stayed in their posts as Secretary and Treasurer respectively. Roger Christy was voted in as the new Chairman of the South Sub-Committee.

After the AGM, Roger Eckersley, a well-known speaker on Somerset history, gave a fascinating talk on the "Civil War and Rebellion in Taunton".

SWELA

The Society is trying to gain affiliation status with the South Western Electricity Leisure Association (SWELA). To do this we need to change our Rules slightly to adjust to theirs. Your Chairman has come up with the idea of adding a rider dismissing those SWELA Rules which would never apply to our organisation. The benefits of so doing are mainly twofold, to be eligible for an annual subsidy and possibly to gain insurance cover.

A motion to that effect was put the Annual General Meeting. After much discussion about the above, it was passed on the understanding that the Committee would explore the benefits and disadvantages further, the new rule giving them the flexibility to join SWELA if they considered it advantageous.

ARCHIVES

Graham Warburton has been beavering away putting the CCD Photographic Records into a decent state for posterity. He has pasted the photographs on paper in sleeves in the same manner as most of our photographic archives are kept, but he has labelled them all in superb hand written tape-face. Also each album has been labelled boldly so that it can be easily appreciated what each contains. Well done and thank you, Graham.

During January and February, John Gale and Peter Lamb chose to spend much time at the Archives, in order to compile a major index of the records up until 1948. By the Autumn we will be able to offer any

member a copy of the index. In the course of this activity, it was realised that the some of the old Company Records were in a sorry state. Chiefly the accounts were held in old rusty and dilapidated files. New foolscap lever-arch files have been purchased. All minute books and accounts have been suitably labelled at the same time.

The next task will be to compile an index of all SWEB material.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

We are sending out a reminder to those who have not rejoined this year. We know the sub is low at £5 and therefore its a nuisance to have pay such a small sum. We have considered devising a sub for longer period, but that creates problems on our records and since our future relationship with SWEB is bit hazy, we are reluctant to commit the subscription rate for a long period, so bear with us.

THIRD ANNUAL LUNCHEON

The Winter Luncheon in January again proved very popular this year with 43 members and friends attending, an increase in numbers over previous years. The venue was St. Olaves Court Hotel, Exeter, which was a change from the first two years.

The day itself was beautifully crisp and sunny and prior to our arrival at the hotel, 30 of us visited Exeter City's Royal Albert Museum. Barrie Phillips, who had organised the event, had given up any hope of a guide, but when we were half way round, one took pity on us and gave us a very interesting conducted tour of the City's Silver Gallery, which is extensive. Other exhibits include pre-historic relics, Roman. Medieval and Victorian displays, a large Natural History Gallery and a Painting Gallery.

Arriving at the Hotel at 12.15pm it proved to be an excellent choice, and everyone (well nearly everyone!) agreed that the food was of a high standard with sendee to match. Because the number attending was a little higher than expected, we were comfortably squeezed into an elegant room, like one big happy family! I am sure we all enjoyed each others' company. We were pleased that Robert Symons and his wife, Teresa,

attended the Luncheon as our guests. Robert had then been recently appointed SWEB's Operations Director, the first Britisher to do so since the Americans bought SWEB. After lunch, Robert spoke about his experiences with Georgia Power in Atlanta. He enjoyed 3 months during 1997 with SWEB's parent company in the Georgia sunshine. During his talk he mentioned such exotic locations such as Mississippi and Savannah, places I have only heard about in Jazz numbers! Finally Robert went on to say how well SWEB had coped with the Winter gales despite having a reduced workforce. He painted a very optimistic picture of SWEB's direction. Finally Robert said how pleased he was that the Historical Society were collecting and storing electrical items and equipment at our Cairns Road premises. He thought we were doing an important job, which he very much supported. David Hutton proposed a very entertaining vote of thanks with everyone departing to all parts of the South West. Many thanks to Barrie for organising such a splendid day.

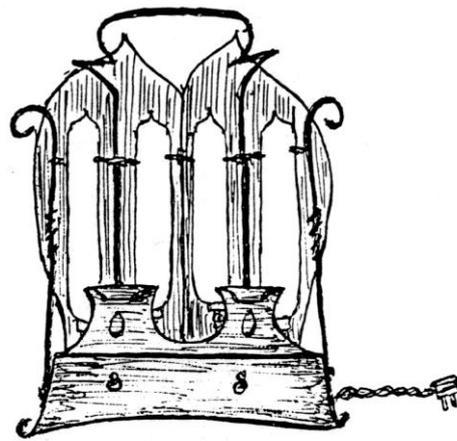
John Haynes

A BIT OF HISTORY, A BIT OF LUCK!

If you take a piece of ordinary wire and pass a current through it, it becomes red hot and it won't be long before it oxidises in air and "burns out". This is the problem which faced early electrical engineers, when trying to make electrical heaters (and lamps). They tried to embed the wire in a layer of vitreous enamel to keep it from the air, but different rates of expansion led to short working lives.

The first successful solution was the Dowsing fire of 1896. This consisted of glass tubes, which in effect were large tubular lamps, 8 ins. long x 2 ins diameter, in which were housed a carbon filament producing about 250 watts. Two or four tubes, plain glass, frosted or sprayed orange, would be used in each fire. Later in about 1910 a device working in a similar way, but using a quartz tube, which allowed higher ratings called the Bastian tube, was introduced. Both these devices were rapidly superseded by the discovery in 1906 of nichrome wire which resists oxidation in air and has been used ever since for heater elements.

In the summer of 1997, my wife and I set off, full of curiosity, on a mystery coach tour organised by my cousin's church. When we were well under way (too far to bail-out), our leader announced that the destination would be Mablethorpe on the Lincolnshire Coast. "What is there at Mablethorpe?" enquired my wife. "Caravans and chip shops", I replied, although I had never been there. I added that there may be a junk shop selling a Dowsing Tube Fire, a much desired item for my collection.



ARCHER SYSTEMS HEATER, BLACK STEEL BASE, WROUGHT IRON SUPPORTS, COPPER REFLECTORS, BRASS LAMP HOLDERS, AND SWITCHES, Four "PEARL" GLASS DOWSING TUBES, 1000W TOTAL

Mablethorpe was actually quite good for a sunny day, a vast clean beach, a fine new promenade, caravans and chip shops and a large shop selling antiques, collectables and junk and, (wow!) a Dowsing tube fire. It was almost complete but very tired looking and one of its lamp-holders was a replacement. It had all its tubes and its connectors, so I bought it for more than a Yorkshire-man likes to pay.

After many hours of work, it is now clean, polished, refitted with a matching lamp-holder and in working order, well not working as the tubes are 110 volts. The non-matching lamp-holder looked very old and careful examination showed it to have copper "brushes" instead of the usual brass plungers and it was 1 inch diameter instead of 7/8 inch. The Sunco Catalogue in the SWEHS Archive confirmed that Dowsing tubes were usually supplied with 7/8 inch BC caps, but 1 inch were available to special order. The heater was made by Archer Systems and its switches are dated 1903. If anyone can offer any information on its "provenance" please let me know.

Where should we go for a Bastian Tube Heater?
Severn Beach, Barry Island?

Suggestions please

Colin Hill
Member
Huddersfield

A Dowsing
Tube



ENIGMA CODE BREAKING

At a March meeting of the Retired Professional Engineer's Club in Bristol, David Whitehead (member) gave a very interesting talk on his experiences at Bletchley Park during the War. He was assisted by Frank Crofts, who was involved with Colossus, reputed to be the first computer.

avid told us how he had been with the Post Office Telephones at the outbreak of the War and was drafted to Bletchley Park. There he worked on machines known as Bombes involved in the process of code breaking. He was able to describe in some detail one of these machines known as Cobra, which is surprising after some 50 years! After the War, David made his career in CEBG Telecoms retiring in 1983. Peter Lamb

ARCHIVE & MUSEUM VISITOR CENTRE

Unfortunately there is no action to report. We are still hoping and expecting that money will be released to create the Visitor Centre.

Even if we were able to gain access to the toilets at Cairns Road, it would be helpful to those regulars, who attend on the first Thursday in the month.

We would like to see more members joining us for lunch at the Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road, Redland, Bristol on the first Thursday in the month. Harry Cardy's recommendation on the food fare seems to have fallen on stony ground.

COME & JOIN US AT THE CAMBRIDGE!!!

MEMBERS NEWS

David Legg, who is our honorary auditor, following his heart attack has had a heart bypass operation. He is doing fine even managing to audit our accounts for 1997.

John Redrove's wife, Maureen, reported in the last newsletter to be seriously ill, has sadly died. We offer our sincere condolences to John.

IRONBRIDGE WEEKEND

Following the success of the weekend in Fowey in October 1997 with 43 members attending, your Committee have decided to book a weekend at Ironbridge, Telford, Shropshire for the weekend of 15th/16th October 1999 i.e. next year. The hotel will be the Madeley Court Hotel, which was originally the home of Abraham Darby, the founder of the Coalbrookdale Ironworks, who incidentally came from Bristol.

In September this year we will be going out to the membership to ask you to return a deposit to secure a place at this weekend in 1999. Please put a note in your diary for next year, if you would like to join us.

DIARY NOTE

Thurs. 7th May Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Sun. 17th May BOAT TRD? ON THE DART

Meet 10.30am Totnes, boat to Dartmouth for lunch followed by a trip across to Kingswear to catch steam train to Paignton and thence Western National Bus back to Totnes.

Thurs. 4th June Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Thurs. T* July Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Sat 3rd July VISIT BLAGDON P/S Lunch at the New Inn, Blagdon followed by a conducted tour of the Pumping Station including a fascinating Water Museum, trout pond etc.

Thurs. 6th Aug. Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Thurs. 3rd Sept Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Sat 26th Sept ELECTRICITY IN CORNISH

MINES Talk by Eric Edmonds at 2.15pm at SWEB, Sowton Offices, Lunch beforehand at the Blue Ball Inn, Sandygate near the Exeter Motorway junction.

Thurs. 1st Oct Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Thurs. 5th Nov Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Sat 14th Nov. MAGIC LANTERN SHOW 2.15pm

Aztec West Offices of SWEB Original Victorian slides and projecting lanterns with nostalgic views of the West Country.

Thurs. 3rd Dec Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm
Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

NEXT EDITION

Please send information, articles, photographs or letters to Peter Lamb at 35 Station Road, Backwell, Bristol BS48 3NH or telephone him on 01275 463160.

The next item is creating a precedence, but here goes. Barrie Phillips has asked us to do a "commercial" for a small charge!! (a back-hander to the editor!!)

THORVERTON VINTAGE CAR RALLY & COUNTRY FAYRE

June 13-14, 10.00am to 6.00pm everyday Featuring the Essex Dog display Team and the Mid-Wales Axe Racing Team plus the parades of steam engines, rollers, tractors, cars, motorcycles and dozens of static engines.

For further details contact 01392 860827