

# HISTELEC NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH WESTERN ELECTRICITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Web Site : [www.swehs.co.uk](http://www.swehs.co.uk)

No. 11

April 1999

## 5 YEARS OLD & NEW CHAIRMAN

At the AGM on the 20<sup>th</sup> March at Taunton, we had a change of Chairman. John Haynes stood down after two years as Vice-Chairman and three years as Chairman. Yes, the Society is now 5 years old!! Thanks to John Haynes for steering the Society over the last three years. Amazingly he did this whilst nursing a serious illness, involving operations and numerous treatments. It is a great credit to him for his keenness and loyalty to the Society in such circumstances.

The new Chairman is Barrie Phillips and the Vice-Chairman is John Gale, we wish them well.

David Peacock joined the Main Committee :-

Chairman : Barrie Phillips

V. Chairman : John Gale

Treasurer: Clive Goodman

Secretary : Peter Lamb

Committee : Chris Buck, David Hutton, Paul

Hulbert, David Peacock & Mike Williams

South Comm. Chairman : Roger Christy

Sth. Committee : John Ferrier, Ted Luscombe, &

Mike Wreford

**IRONBRIDGE OCTOBER 1999** Following the reminder with your membership renewal for the Ironbridge Weekend on 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> October, there has been a good additional response of nine, bringing the total now to 40. We should have a super time. The Assistant Director of Ironbridge Museums Trust has agreed to give us a talk at the Friday evening dinner and we have obtained the services of an opera singer at the Saturday evening dinner.

## IRENS PAPERS & PHOTOGRAPHS

Mrs. Joan Irens has deposited with us many papers and photographs belonging to her late husband Bill Irens. Chairman of SWEB between 1952 and 1969. The Archive will be that much richer for the information, particularly about the Pocket Power Stations and to Proteus engines involved in their installation, mainly for peak lopping.

## TAVISTOCK HYDRO-SCHEME

Recently an old hydro-electric station has been found at Tavistock (Parkwood Road), which has lain undisturbed for well over 30 years. It is situated in the Kaminski Garden Centre, which is to be redeveloped.

It belonged to a firm "Devon Woolcombers Ltd." and the plant consists of three alternators, two in situ and one spare made by GEC. The water turbines are by Hay Maryon of London. The rest of the equipment was made and installed by Newman Industries of Yate near Bristol. We are unsure of the date of installation, any ideas?

The electricity so generated fed into the West Devon Electric Supply Co. Ltd. network together with two others, one at North Tawton by the same firm and the other alongside in Parkwood Road operated by Farm Industries Ltd.. which has been removed a long time ago.

When we were first alerted, Mike Wreford (member) kindly went to investigate and made an inventory of the equipment. This information has been despatched to an Archaeological Unit at Nottingham, who have involved English Heritage. The latest information is that the equipment is likely to be moved to another site in order to allow redevelopment of the Garden Centre.

## MEMBERS NEWS

New member joining us is Bob Scanlan. Welcome to Bob. We hope you will find much fun & friendship.

David Hutton has had a busy time recently, with a major house extension and a long holiday in New Zealand and Australia, but also suffering the loss a his father-in-law whilst on holiday. Then to cap it all, being made a grandad and having to drive up to Newcastle to view the new offspring. Few!! Marcus Palmen, our computer expert, has kindly fitted a scanner to Peter Lamb's PC. Roger Horstmann has moved from Bath to Cornwall just when we are going around the family firm in April (how inconsiderate!!). but he will be there to show us around.

## WINTER LUNCHEON - SIDMOUTH

The Winter Luncheon is always enjoyable and with Charles Isherwood promised as the guest speaker, it became an event not to be missed. The pre-publicity also mentioned a visit to an observatory, but whoever heard of an observatory at Sidmouth!

Well, the members of SWEHS are now well aware of the wonderful institution, which is the Norman Lockyer Observatory. We were welcomed in the recently completed planetarium and treated to a lecture and audio/visual display on the forthcoming solar eclipse, including practical advice on how to enjoy the eclipse without damaging your eyesight. Then without leaving our seats we were given a tour of the night sky, planets, Orion, the Plough, the Northern Cross etc.

There are three quite large refracting telescopes at the Observatory each housed in its own dome. One of these is Sir Norman Lockyer's own instrument dating from 1870. Sir Norman Lockyer was Professor of Astronomical Physics at the Royal College of Science and founded the Observatory when he retired to Sidmouth at the age of 72. Perhaps his greatest claim to fame is that he discovered the element Helium in the Sun, and named it after the Greek word Helios, some twenty years before the element was discovered on earth. The domes cannot have any heating so if you ever visit them in the winter be sure to wrap up well.

The Observatory is run by a society of unpaid volunteers, who had yet more treats in store for us. There is a radio communications section that tracks both geo-stationary and polar satellites. Digitally scanned images of weather systems and very detailed photographs of the ground taken from space were demonstrated. The Society is to be congratulated on the quality of their demonstrations and the professional way in which they work.

We enjoyed a good lunch at the Fortfield Hotel. In the opening remarks our Chairman told us that there was another great man of science associated with Sidmouth. He was Sir Ambrose Fleming, who invented the thermionic valve and was also consultant to both Taunton and Exeter Electricity Undertakings. He is buried in the same cemetery as Sir Norman Lockyer. Charles Isherwood did not disappoint us with many amusing anecdotes of happy days in Liverpool, Cornwall and Bristol including his Wartime exploits. For some reason, which I could not understand, he seemed to have enjoyed his time in Cornwall the most!!

We must all thank Barrie Phillips for organising such a wonderful day.  
*John Coneybear*

## NORTHERN NEWS - EXHIBITION OF EARLY APPLIANCES

Colin Hill (member) who collects old historical appliances and has a formidable collection reports from Huddersfield :-

I held my second small exhibition at the Colne Valley Museum near Huddersfield in the 1998 Summer. My first exhibition had been afflicted with snow and this time I competed with the World Cup. Nevertheless quite a good attendance was achieved and again lots of visitors were surprised and interested. This time I concentrated on the early days i.e. 1900 to 1930's, and showed how decrepit items may be satisfactorily restored to something like original condition using a few simple tools and lots of patience.

Perhaps this display was too effective as a lady has asked me to restore two "light fittings". A visit to her house revealed two 3 light electroliers of splendid and ornate design, which were installed when the house was built in 1898!! Since then they have been given many thick coats of paint. Not the easiest task will be removing them from the ceiling which is very high up. Watch this space for the outcome.

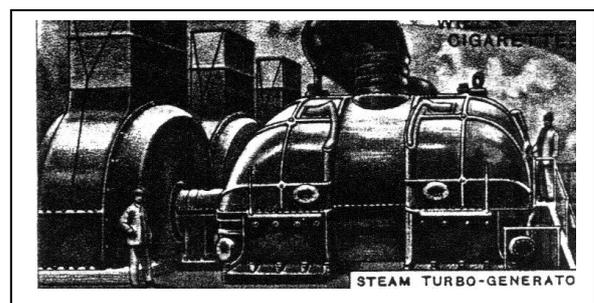
**Colin Hill**

*(Sorry this was not published earlier, it arrived just too late for the previous edition)*

## CIGARETTE CARD CORNER No.2

John Haynes has a series of interesting old cigarette cards. Here is the first of the 1927 series no.28 "Wills Engineering Wonders", with the following reverse script :-

"STEAM TURBO-GENERATOR, U.S.A. As a result of the success of the Electric Tube Railways of London, similar facilities were projected for New York. Geological conditions did not permit the driving of tubes and shallow underground lines were carried through solid rock. The scheme proved highly successful, and the construction of new lines and the growing traffic have made continually increasing demands for power. The Westinghouse Electric International Co. constructed for this purpose a giant turbogenerator, which was at the time of building the largest in the world. This great 70,000kilowatt power unit comprises one high and two low pressure turbines".



## REUNION OF EX-CHRISTY BROS STAFF

There was a unique reunion of ex-SWEB staff in Okehampton recently because most of them were employees of the old West Devon Electric Supply Co.Ltd., which became part of SWEB in 1948.

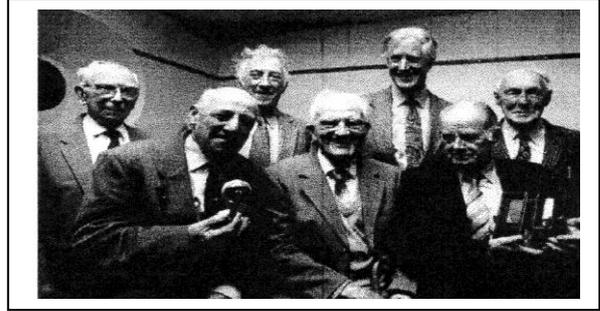
The reunion was organised by Roger Christy and Mike Wreford, who coincidentally did not work for the old Company. However Roger, now retired from SWEB, is the grandson of Frank Christy, the prime mover in the formation of the Company and together with his son Geoffrey, played an important part in the development of an electricity supply network in both West Devon and North Somerset. The name "Christy" is synonymous with electricity in the area.

The Company was formed in 1930 to bring together many small supply companies into one comprehensive scheme and it was exceptional because it was probably the most sparsely populated area in England, the supply area being 830 sq. miles with only a population of 76 persons per sq. mile. The area included such towns as Tavistock Okehampton, Bude, Holsworthy and Chagford, and, naturally, there was a great deal of pride amongst the staff at this achievement.

At a recent committee meeting of the Historical Society, Roger mentioned that since he had had his early training with Cromptons and then at Eastern Electricity before joining SWEB in Cornwall, he had never had the opportunity to meet the old Christy staff. Mike Wreford on the other hand knew all the old staff still living, since he lives in Okehampton and has kept in touch with them. A Get-together was suggested and a unanimous acceptance of the idea was received. A luncheon was held, which extended well into the afternoon. Many items were brought in and many stories exchanged with many recollections of working in adverse conditions.

The oldest person attending was Mains Foreman **Trefor Williams**, who although in a wheelchair, still contributes much to any gathering. **R.T.(Bob) Gale**, always an innovative engineer, had served in the RAF during the War and received recognition and instant promotion for his modifications to dynamos which improved the battery performance on several types of aeroplanes. Another was **George Cutland** of Mary Tavy. He remembers starting work on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1930, the day before his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, with the old Okehampton Electric Light Company. He started as an office boy at St. James Street. Upon nationalisation, George was charged with packing the Company Stamp and sending it to Custom House. In 1937 he was transferred to Tavistock and retired in 1976. **Cyril Nobby Clarke** also of Mary Tavy started work in 1940 and was involved in the construction of the Okehampton to Exeter 33,000 volt line. He was also involved in the construction of the Tavistock to Plasterdown line before being called up to join the

Royal Navy. He rejoined the old firm after the War and retired in 1989 serving 49 years!



Two more members of the party have tales. There was **Charlie Curtis**, who was an installation inspector at Okehampton before retiring with 49 year's service. He remembers being called out to Belstone in 1963. "There was two feet of ice on the edge of the church and the weight of the ice had brought down the lines" he said. On another occasion that same winter, his van became stuck at Whiddon Down. He walked home to South Zeal. "The next day I returned to recover the van and all I could see was the aerial". Another ex-employee was Jim Bulley who served 44 years as an electrician at Okehampton. On two consecutive Christmas days he gave up his time to get the pumps working again at Meeth Clayworks.

Others at the reunion were :-

**Basil Jones** -electrician 1947-1993

**Brian Jeffery** installation Inspector 1945-1993

**June Slee** Service Centre assistant 1943-1961

(her late husband, Bob, serves 40 years)

**Bill Millman** - electrician - 1947-1994

Arthur Painter - electrician - 1947-1986

**Ken Pearce** - chargehand - 1947-1986

**Tom Watkins** - installation inspector - 1945-1993

Seldom can there have been a gathering of people with such along service record. With an average of over 40 years service, they were all proud to have played their part in a developing industry. The total work experience was 638 years, a record that will be difficult to replicate.

## ARCHIVAL ACTIVITY

Not only have we had donated the Irens Collection, mentioned elsewhere, but also a large archive from the old CEGB Control Centre at Durley Park, which is being investigated by Roger Hughes, member and ex-CEGB. Jim Whitehead has also handed us a large collection of SWEB photographs & slides. John Gale is busily sifting through these.

We have recently acquired a whole 1938 newspaper "Bideford & W. Devon Gazette" with a full front page advert for "West of England Electricity" and a full inside page story of the Bideford & District Electric Supply Co.Ltd. The information therein will be a useful archive.

## **THE VAGARIES OF CHOOSING A HOTEL OR RESTAURANT MENU**

Recently we despatched a member of the committee to explore hotels and restaurants in the South West for the next Annual Luncheon. His report follows :-

"The menus nowadays are richly endowed with flambouant words that you wouldn't have seen on a menu ten years ago - "noisettes", "tartare", "duxelle", "coulis", "timbale" and written in a curious inflated language with eccentric capitalisation's. In one restaurant, I had "Fanned Galia Melon and Cumbrian Air Dried Ham served with a Mixed Leaf Salad" followed by "Fillet Steak served with a Crushed Black Peppercorn Sauce flamed in Brandy and finished with Cream", which together were nearly as pleasurable to read as to eat.!

I was greatly taken with this new way of talking and I had great fun from speaking it to the waiter. I asked for a lustre of water freshly drawn from the house tap and presented au nature in a cylinder of glass, and when he came round with the bread rolls, I entreated him to present me with a tonged rondel of blanched wheat oven baked and masked in a poppy-seed coating. Warming to this new language, I asked for a fanned lap coverlet, freshly laundered with a delicate scent of Omo to replace the one that now lay recumbent on the horizontal walking surface anterior to my feet, when I was handed a card, which said "Sweets Menu". Surprise, surprise, it was in no-nonsense English again.

It's a funny thing with English diners, they let the restaurants dazzle them with piddly duxelles of this and fussy little noisettes, but don't muck about with their puddings. All the dessert entries were for gooey dishes with good old English names. I had stick}' toffee pudding and it was splendid.

The waiter then invited me to withdraw to the lounge, where a caisson of freshly-roasted coffee awaited, complemented by a chefs own selection of mint wafers. I dressed the tabletop with small circllets of silver specially crafted at the Royal Mint and, suppressing a small eruption of gastro-intestinal air, effected my egress!!"

*Harry Crusty*

## **PROGRAMME -put dates in your diary**

### **Thur 22<sup>nd</sup> April SALTFORD & BATH VISITS**

Visit Salford Brass Mills at 10.45am as guests of BIAS, 12.00 lunch at Bird-in-Hand pub, then at 2.15pm visit to Horstmann's Factory in Bath. (Note above meeting on Thursday) Thurs. 6<sup>th</sup> May Bristol Get-together - Lunch 12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

### **Sun. 23<sup>rd</sup> May DAY IN DEVON**

10.30am Steam boat ride on Roadford Reservoir, lunch there and then visit the Pumphouse and at 3.30pm on to Dingle's Village at Lifton

Thurs. 3<sup>rd</sup> June Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Thurs. 1<sup>st</sup> July Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

### **Sat. 3<sup>rd</sup> July VISIT HESTERCOMBE GDNS**

12.30pm Lunch at Merry Monk and then proceed to visit the lovely gardens of Hestercombe House.

Thurs. 5<sup>th</sup> Aug. Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

Thurs. 1<sup>st</sup> Sept. Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

### **Sat. 25<sup>th</sup> Sept. BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR**

At Exeter, John Dike to give an unusual interactive presentation involving live entertainment of pictures and music. Before lunch at Exeter Arms.

Thurs. 7<sup>th</sup> Oct. Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

### **Fri./Sat./Sun. 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Oct. IRONBRIDGE**

Weekend at the Madeley Court Hotel and visiting the five major museums in the Gorge.

Thurs. 4<sup>th</sup> Nov. Bristol Get-together - Lunch

12.15pm Cambridge Arms, Coldharbour Road

### **Sat. 27<sup>th</sup> Nov. CABOT & THE MATTHEW**

At the Create Centre, Cumberland Basin, Bristol Rodney North will give a talk on the above, including part of the ship's voyage to America and beforehand lunch at the Pumphouse Pub

Thurs. 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 on 01275 463160.