

HISTELEC NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH WESTERN ELECTRICITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

No. 20

APRIL 2002

SPRITELY SPRING TO YOU ALL

What a relief it has been to experience some sunshine here at last. Have you noticed everyone is smiling.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting went off well (see report), which surprised your Secretary, who had been worried by the lack of people attending, but half a dozen attended on spec.

The Officers and Main Committee were all re-elected as follows :-

Chairman : John Gale
Vice-chairman : Chris Buck
Treasurer : Clive Goodman
Secretary : Peter Lamb
Committee : Paul Hulbert, David Hutton, David Peacock, Roger Hughes

South Sub-Committee

Chairman : Ted Luscombe (also Main Committee)
Committee : John Ferrier, David Hood, Keith Morgan, Mike Wreford

At the end of the official business, the Secretary made a plea for members to step forward and volunteer to research and write-up many of the histories of the old companies and municipal undertakings, which could form supplements to future newsletters. He is desperately short of such articles and it is believed that they are fairly popular with the membership. He has received one offer from John Perkin, anymore?

SOUTH SUB-COMMITTEE

Ted Luscombe agreed to stand as Chairman of the South Sub-Committee and was duly elected. We also have two new faces on the South Sub-Committee, David Hood and Keith Morgan – welcome aboard.

CAIRNS ROAD VISITOR CENTRE

Having got the works underway with the first stage complete, we decided to start cleaning in preparation for decoration, but have been thwarted by not being covered by insurance for "work". What a dismally slow process this is!

WEB SITE

Marcus has opened up a new section on the Web Site entitled "Study Corner". It is intended to advertise all the "histories" written to date, copies of which can be made available to the general public for a small sum. Also it is intended to list speakers and their subjects again available to the public. Members may contact the Secretary to be included, if they have suitable subjects within the industrial archaeological range.

WEEKEND AWAY 2003

You will have received your form for giving your views on where we go in year 2003. If you haven't returned yours by the date mentioned upon receiving this newsletter, it is not too late. Your views would be appreciated.

ENIGMA FILM

Following our trip to Bletchley Park last year, some of you may have ventured to see the film "Enigma". In the last newsletter I pondered why they did not use the main mansion in the film, but nearby, Chichley Hall. John Heath has read that there was too much modern development surrounding Bletchley Park. What a shame!

ASSOCIATION FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY – AIA

We have joined the AIA for a trial period to find out more about the organisation. The services they provide are many but include an Annual Review Journal, a quarterly IA News magazine, Field Weeks in the UK and abroad, Seminars and an Annual Conference. They provide positive initiatives and a base at Ironbridge. Their web site is as follows :- www.industrial-archaeology.org.uk

BRISTOL CENTRAL LIBRARY

The Library has been running an historical display, which includes the following :- "In 1910 the Chief Librarian had to report that during an electric light failure, both the "Electrical Review" and the "Electrical Times" had been stolen!

SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE

Clive Goodman and David Peacock have visited WPD Offices at Cardiff recently and have brought back numerous films to add to our archives.

REVIEW – ANNUAL LUNCHEON & HAYNES MOTOR MUSEUM

It was a wet and windy morning, when members and guests met in the café of the Haynes Motor Museum at Sparkford. If it had been possible to see the isobars, then it wouldn't have needed a very long tape measure to determine their distance apart!

However after warming ourselves with cups of tea and coffee, Roger Hughes asked us to split into two groups to make it easier to tour the Museum, Our guide was the son of the founder of the Museum, John Haynes (now where have we heard that name before?).

Apparently John Haynes, whilst still at school in the 1950's had built himself an Austin 7 Special and then wrote a book about the parts involved with diagrams. This marked the beginnings of what developed into the famous Haynes Workshop Manuals for which the Haynes Publishing Group is world-renowned. So take a note if you have a knack for making things, write a book about it! You might at least get it printed in Histelec News.

The Museum was founded in 1985 and has about 300 of its 400 cars on display. The Collection is divided into 7 halls. Hall 1 deals with the dawn of motoring exhibiting cars from before the World War I. Hall 2 consists of a sea of red sports cars, an impressive sight on entering the main display area. Hall 3 houses the international collection with cars from all corners of the World. It even includes a motorised rickshaw, of which 7 million run around India today. Hall 4 & 5 are used to house the British and American Collections with many cars from the 1950's and 60's. For some of us, this brought back memories of our parents cars and indeed our first ones. There was a Morris Minor van, which had been decorated externally and furnished throughout by an artist. Someone said it was reminiscent of a "Passion Wagon". Roger Horstmann and his brother had come hoping to see a car made by their old family firm and they were not disappointed. A newly acquired 1915 model was on display with an intriguing figure of a man on the bonnet with his hand in the air, maybe waving to crowds as it journeyed around the Spa City.

Hall 6 is known as the Dussenberg Hall named after the most expensive car in the Collection – a 1931 Dussenberg model J worth about \$1.5 Million. Models such as this were once owned by the likes of Clark Gable, Greta Garbo and Howard Hughes. Finally we came to Hall 7 of Motor Sport, which contains Formula 1 cars and other club racing classics. Then it was time to "race" off down the A303 to the Holbrook House Hotel for our Annual Luncheon.

After our lunch, John Gale invited Sandy Buchanon, President of Somerset Industrial Archaeological

Society (SIAS) to address us on the activities of SIAS. Sandy referred to many of the industries, which have been prevalent in the County, but long since gone. He also mentioned the Turnpike Trusts and the vulnerability of Toll Houses to modern day road improvements. He touched on an amusing incident, when he was investigating a cast-iron dovecot standing on a mound of guano and subsequently found to contain a WWII unexploded bomb. "Bomb - who mentioned a bomb" said a startled dozing member, who had suddenly woken up.

Another successful event and a good annual lunch complete – was it really our 7th ?!!

Mike Williams

FRENCH NOUNS

A language instructor was explaining to her class that in French, nouns, unlike their English counterparts, are grammatically designated as masculine or feminine. In French "House," is feminine – "la maison.", "Pencil," is masculine - "le crayon."

One puzzled student asked, "what gender is a computer?" The teacher did not know, and the word wasn't in her French dictionary. So for fun she split the class into two groups, appropriately enough, by gender and asked them to decide whether "computer" should be a masculine or feminine noun. Both groups were required to give four reasons.

The men's group decided that computers should definitely be of the feminine gender ("la computer"), because:

1. No one, but their creator understands their internal logic
2. The native language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else.
3. Even the smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for possible later review; and
4. As soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

The women's group, however, concluded that computers should be masculine ("le computer"), because:

1. In order to get their attention, you have to turn them on.
2. They have a lot of data but they are still clueless.
3. They are supposed to help you solve problems, but half the time they ARE the problem; and
4. As soon as you commit to one, you realize that if you'd waited a little longer, you could have got a better model.

The women won!

REVIEW – AGM TALK

After the AGM, Mike Jones of SIAS gave a fascinating talk on "West Somerset Iron and Steam", the story of the iron mining industry of the Brendon Hills and the tramway, which took the iron down to the coast at Watchet and thence across the Bristol Channel to South Wales.

The industry started with the Romans, who left pits twenty to thirty feet deep called "old men's workings". Sir Thomas Lethbridge saw the potential in the first half of the 18th century, but things really started to move, when Sir Thomas Percy realised the high quality of ore samples from the Brendon Hills, which had very low phosphorus content.

The drawback was that a railway would be needed to deal with the 1200ft height difference between the mines and the port. It was to be a combination of a normal railway and an inclined plane. The West Somerset Mineral Railway Company was formed and its directors included Abraham Darby IV. They got off to a bad start - the first locomotive blew up after a water leak and fell off a cart on its way to Watchet. The inclined plane was an 1100 metre long twin track, with two winding drums linked on a common axle. The weight of the descending load of ore would help pull an empty or lightly loaded wagon up the opposite track.

Miners' lives were not easy, for example with eleven people living in a two-bedroom house. However a Miners' Reading Room over the boiler room of the winding gear hosted talks by local worthies. Many of the miners were Cornishmen, who came to Somerset when the Cornish mines closed.

The mines closed in 1883 when a new process meant that the iron works in Ebbw Vale could use cheaper, poorer-quality ore from elsewhere. The railway however stayed open until 1898. In the early 1900s the price of iron ore rose, and in 1907 a syndicate re-opened the Colton mine. They wanted to re-open the Rahley's Cross mine as well, but they went bankrupt before they could do so. Instead they started a block-making plant, but that went bankrupt as well.

However this isolated railway still had a few last adventures to come. Mr Angus, an Australian, borrowed the track to test out an automatic train control system, which successfully prevented a stage-managed crash. The end came when the rails were lifted in 1916, so that they could be re-used for the war effort. It is said that the wagons with the rails on them made the fastest-ever descent of the inclined plane! The railway was finally abandoned by an Act of Parliament in 1922.

It was an extremely interesting talk, of which few of us knew anything about the subject. *Paul Hulbert*

WEST OF ENGLAND ELECTRICITY – LIFE IN A SMALL RURAL BRANCH

In response to a SWEHS appeal in 2001 for information on West of England Electricity Mrs. Grace Saffin from T8unton contacted Barrie Phillips. This summary of her time at Wiveliscombe Branch between 1939 and 1947 provides a useful social record of life in a small rural branch during the war years and before nationalisation.

Wiveliscombe is a historic market town situated on the edge of the Brendon Hills and is the gateway to Exmoor. In the early 1800's it boasted a public dispensary to allow "servants, labourers and apprentices to have free medical treatment and care" and its woollen trade flourished until 1833 when cessation of the slave trade reduced demand for its products.

Wiveliscombe was a Branch Office of Wellington District Electricity Company Limited, a subsidiary of West of England Electric Investments Ltd., which was a subsidiary of Whitehall Electric Investments Limited a.k.a. Whitehall Securities Corporation.

Grace started work in the Wiveliscombe Branch at 15 High Street in 1939, when only 15 years old. The four storey building, originally built in the 1829, appears rather narrow today, sandwiched between an Estate Agents and Solicitors offices. Local enquiries indicate it has had several commercial uses since the Branch was closed in 1947, such as the *Tangerine Tea Shop*, changing its name to *The Copper Kettle* when a Mrs. Peppard bought the then rather run down premises some 30 years ago. Today the property is a private residence, giving no clues to its past.

The regular staff complement pre-war consisted of Mr. Arthur Hammett, the Branch Manager, two electricians (one of whom Grace later married) and Grace in the showroom. She recalls regular visits from Mr. A. H. Short from Minehead, who was the General Manager for the areas covered by the Minehead Electric Supply Company and The Wellington District Electricity Company Limited. She remembers with a certain fondness that he was short by name and short by nature.

Her duties in the small branch were practically limitless - if something needed doing you did it. Whilst most of her time was spent manning the showroom, she also carried out meter reading and collecting. She recalls, with pride, keeping the showroom and office smart, cleaning the windows, arranging displays of small appliances on window dressing boxes and keeping black tiles surrounding the carpet gleaming. In winter the latest in coal-effect fires gave a warm welcome to the customers.



Wiveliscombe Branch Office & Showroom of West of England Electricity – Photo Barrie Phillips

Each week she was given an allowance of half a crown to go to the local nursery to choose cut flowers, which she would carefully arrange in vases around the showroom. She recalls a man coming to the showroom to apply an expensive gold leaf logo and the name "West Of England Electricity" to the glazed door panel.

There were no prepayment meters in Wiveliscombe in those days and on two or three days each week she carried out meter reading and collected money due from homes around the town, closing the showroom for a couple of hours if necessary. The task involved reading two meters, one for light and one for the more expensive power circuit, and then calculating and collecting the money due. Refreshed by cups of tea en route she would return on her bicycle heavily laden with coins to count, and on occasion's recount, to find that elusive farthing, so that all was in order to bank the money each Thursday.

Wiveliscombe, pre-war, was a thriving community serving a vast rural area, with a weekly market, several builders and Hancock's brewery. Today the wide flung community still supports some twenty shops, two small breweries (which as part of my research produce very drinkable ales) and a wide range of financial and professional services.

Before her future husband got called up Grace remembers him and others carrying out home guard duties at the towns substation, which transformed the 33 kV supply from distant Exeter for local

distribution. War was declared in September 1939 and the men went off to fight, leaving those behind to pick up essential tasks as best they could - and for a large part of the time Grace was on her own. She kept an eye on the electrician's stores beneath the showroom, which were accessed down steps from the pavement. She also carried out appliance repairs, replacing kettle elements and iron elements - recalling that re-calibrating the temperature control on the irons was sometimes a bit tricky.

Her hours were 9-1 and 2-5.30 Monday to Saturday with early closing on Thursdays. She recalls her pay was 7s 6d a week, inclusive of a passable manager's signature, should the need arise, and occasional relief shorthand typing duties at Wellington.

A Miss Moss, the Home Service Adviser from Minehead, came each month to give a cookery demonstration in the specially equipped kitchen above the showroom, which was separately accessed via an alleyway between the showroom and the next shop. The sessions were advertised in the showroom window and a leaflet enclosed with quarterly accounts. These demonstrations helped wives and mothers make the most of the limited range and quantity of food then available.

Wiveliscombe also had a town gas supply and each year the Wellington office would ask Grace to find out the local gas prices. She would ask the manager for the Gas Company, a Mr. Ponsford, for his company's prices, which he would give, but only in exchange for West of England's tariff.

West of England Electricity operated a prompt payment discount for punctual payers. To deal with those at the other end of the cash flow spectrum, Grace would periodically receive get a Cut-off list from Wellington. She would then ring around those erring customers, saying "if you don't pay up you will be cut off next Wednesday" and, miraculously, the showroom would become very busy.

Grace left West of England Electricity in 1947 to have their first child, though her husband continued working for SWEB as an electrician, and later charge-hand electrician, until ill health forced his retirement in 1982.

Barrie Phillips

OBITUARY

Brian Jordan passed away in January at the very early age of 57. He will be dreadfully missed by his partner Gill and at many of our events. During his last 5 years with SWEB, Brian was promoted to Account Manager (Torquay) based at Exeter dealing with the sale of Electricity contracts to commercial and industrial customers. He took voluntary redundancy in 1996 and became a consultant to the same customers he had been dealing with. He was a keen traveller to exotic locations.

REGENERATION

Last year WPD finished removing the switchgear and transformers from the Portishead Generating Stations' sites to a new location adjacent to the BSP. This completes a clean-up operation, which has lasted 5 years. The Bristol Evening Post reported that the cleared area is to be landscaped to create a Central Park, a green lung in the £400M development scheme of the old docks area.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



The late Len Weir, a keen photographer, took this picture at St. Just signpost in Cornwall, which was published in the SWE Magazine Spring 1957 with the following caption :- *"If you find the sermon dry, why not come to our church"*.

MEMBERS NEWS

JOHN HAYNES – John is singing at the Welsh Eisteddfodd at Langollen in July this year – not on his own, but with the Trevera Male Voice Choir, singing a Czeck song in Czeck or will it be Cornish Czeck?

STEVE RICHES – Steve has joined the Bath Choral Society and is still one of our few working members. We need more members like him.

MIKE NORMAN

Mike has had two knee replacements and is doing very well.

COLIN HILL

By the time you read this, Colin will have given a talk in April to the Newcomen Society in Manchester. Since it was to be at UMIST, he considered it was going to be quite a challenge.

KEITH HULBERT

Congratulations to Keith & Pat Hulbert on the birth of their 2nd grandson, Harry, son of Peter & Jayne of Brisbane, Australia, which is why Keith & Pat are out of the country helping with the new arrival. Brother Paul says it's an excuse to go diving again! Nevertheless it's a long way to go to baby-sit!!

JOHN CONEYBEARE

Also John and Janet have become grandparents for the first time. The parents have named him Benedict.

WHO AM I?

My first is in health and is also in treasure,
My 2nd you'll find in leisure and pleasure,
My 3rd you will find at the end of this line,
My 4th is in cooking for which I am fine,
My 5th is in trouble, which I always abhor,
because in housework, it's a terrible chore,
My 6th is in reliable and also in trust,
My 7th is in fire and yet not in dust,
My 8th is in clear and yet not in bright,
My 9th is in iron that makes the work light,
My 10th is in time that I keep without error,
My last is in money that I save with much pleasure,
My whole is something that all houses require,
I can do all the hard work and yet never tire.

FOR YOUR DIARIES

PROGRAMME for the NEXT HALF YEAR

Sat. 25th May **"ELECTRICITY IN ST. AUSTELL & FALMOUTH"** talks by the **TWO JOHNNIES**

John Heath & John Haynes

12.30pm for lunch at the ISCA Centre, Summer Lane, Exeter with talk at 2.00pm

Sun. 23rd Jun. **VISIT FORDE ABBEY & GARDENS, NEAR CHARD**

2.00pm beforehand lunch at the Windwhistle Inn.

Sun. 14th July **SUNDAY LUNCH AT A DEVON HOTEL, Saunton Sands Hotel, Braunton, nr Barnstaple**

Sat. 21st Sept. **VISIT TO WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY**

Starting at Bishop's Lydiard with host Graham Warburton with lunch at Minehead

Sat. 26th Oct. **"STANDING STONES IN NATIONAL PARKS"** talk by **Brian Byng**

Lunch at 12.30pm at the ISCA Centre, Summer Lane, Exeter with talk at 2.00pm.

Sat. 30th Nov. **"ILLUMINATING HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN THE SOUTH WEST"**

Talk by Mark Wood-Robinson at Clarence House**, Portishead – Lunch there also at 12.30pm

** Clarence House is a very well appointed privately run club, which was once the CEGB Social Club. It has a pleasant hotel air about it.

NEXT EDITION

This newsletter is produced every four months depending upon material available. Please send information, articles, photographs or letters to :- Peter Lamb at 35 Station Road, Backwell, Bristol BS48 3NH or telephone him on 01275 463160 Or e-mail him on lambpandv@talk21.com

Who did not get the "who am I"? –electricity, of course.