

HISTELEC NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH WESTERN ELECTRICITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

No. 26

APRIL 2004

HAVE A GREAT SUMMER

We have a good programme for the Summer, so I hope to see you there. The Boat Trip at Plymouth seems to have captured many peoples' imagination with 60 people signed up with deposits. When the notice goes out there will still be an opportunity for others to join the Trip.

10th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting went off well (see report), Chris Buck got re-elected and we have new committee member in David Hole. We are delighted to welcome him on board.

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

- Chairman : Chris Buck
Vice-chairman : Roger Hughes
Treasurer : Clive Goodman
Secretary : Peter Lamb
Committee : David Hutton, John Gale,
David Peacock, John Heath,
David Hole
- South Sub-Committee
Chairman : Ted Luscombe (also on Main
Committee)
Committee : John Ferrier, David Hood, Keith
Morgan, Roger Christy

At the end of the official business, a talk was given by Marcus Palmen "The Incas of Peru". See the review later.

WEEKENDS AWAY

The arrangements for the Cornwall weekend are all in hand with 46 people signed up to stay in the St. Michael's Hotel in Falmouth. The committee have made the decision to arrange a weekend away in 2005 to stay on the South Coast, probably Hastings to visit places like the Arundel Castle, Brighton Pavilion and Amberley Museum and possibly Bluebell Railway, date 1st/2nd Oct.

CAIRNS ROAD

The carpet at our new meeting room has been laid and the chrome and blue chairs, which we acquired from the old Avonbank building have been repaired. The backs were worn through and have been reupholstered. You will be pleased to know that it looks very business-like.

TEN YEARS AGO – WOW!

Ten years ago, we had the Inaugural Meeting at Taunton Training Centre on 19th March 1994 and there were 25 people present, the founder members. The instigator, Peter Lamb, became the first Chairman assisted by John Haynes as Vice-Chairman, Alan Kitley as Secretary, Clive Goodman as Treasurer.

Those present with Chairman Peter Lamb, were Joff Bullen, Dave Cousins, John & Jo Dike, Nick Dodridge, Roger & Anthea Christy, late Gordon Day, John Ferrier, Muriel Isaac, Alan Harris, John Haynes, Paul Hulbert, Les Knight, Ted Luscombe, late Noel May & Margaret, Barrie Phillips, John Sparrow, John Redgrove, Steve Tole, Mike & Jenny Williams and the speaker the late Dr. Harry Nabb, a gas historian, who eventually joined. What happened to Alan Harris, John Sparrow and Steve Tole? Alan Kitley and Clive Goodman were not present.

Within two years the membership had grown to 87 and now stands at 120.



Founder Members excl. Paul Hulbert, photographer

TALLEST WIND GENERATOR

They are proposing to build the tallest chimney in the world (3,280 ft) in the Australian outback. The temperature difference between the top and the bottom will create a updraft of about 50mph, which will drive 32 turbines. At ground level will be built a giant greenhouse with a 4 ½ mile circumference to collect the sun's heat. Designers hope that the station will generate enough electricity for 200,000 homes. The dimensions of the parts sound crazily large, which could be so easily damaged.

THE INGENIOUS ENGINEER

An enquiry from the Society of Automotive Historians of Britain about Dr. John Purves has unearthed fascinating information about this ingenious West Country engineer. He was born in Taunton in 1870 and gained a degree at Edinburgh University. He established an electrical consultancy at 82 Queen Street, Exeter in 1908, then establishing the Paignton Electric Light & Power Company with his brother William. In the 1920's he devised hydro-electric schemes on five rivers on Dartmoor for Torquay Corporation, which were turned down by Parliament after representation by the Dartmoor Preservation Society, details of which are in our archives. In the late 1920's he was major player in the setting up of the West of England Electricity Company (The researches for SAHB motivated publishing the supplement to the newsletter attached).

In the 1930's he designed the "Dynasphere", which could be described as a spherical motorcycle. This he did with the assistance of Douglas's of Kingswood, Bristol, the nearest motor-cycle manufacturers at that time. His experiments were conducted on Weston Sands and elsewhere. The Dynasphere was virtually a motor-cycle carriage, which ran in spherical rails with its weight causing it to roll along the ground. The contraption was steered by tilting it with the carriage remaining upright. It reached a speed of 30mph with only a 6hp engine. He died in 1952 at Cullompton; I wonder what he thought of nationisation?



The Dynasphere on trial on Weston Sands with Dr. Purves at the controls with his wife alongside

LONDON CELL-BUSES

Three hydrogen powered buses have hit the capital's streets to reduce pollution as part of a 2 year European trial. Each bus is powered by six cylinders of hydrogen and a fuel cell system, placed on the roof. The buses were built by Daimler/Chrysler in Germany, assisted by BP, who provided the hydrogen refuelling facilities.

REVUE OF THE ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Just under 70 members and guests attended this year's annual luncheon on the 24 January at the Bishops Court Hotel, Torquay. We were fortunate in obtaining the services of Glyn England as our guest speaker. Glyn served as chairman of SWEB in the mid seventies, moving on to become chairman of the CEGB from 1978 – 1982. As well as recalling a few memorable highlights from his career in the ESI, particularly in his early days as a junior engineer, his talk also touched on a number of important public and political issues of the day relating to electricity generation. Some of his subject matter was drawn from a presidential address titled 'The View from my Window', given to the West of England Metals and Materials Association at Bath University on 2 April 1982. He presented a copy of that address to the Society at the end of his talk. That 'view' had encompassed reflections on aspects of the history of electricity supply in the UK, including the lessons that could be learnt from that past experience, as well as a few personal thoughts concerning the future and a mention of some of the CEGB's preoccupations at that time. Of course that address had been delivered when ESI privatisation was only a twinkle in Margaret Thatcher's eye and it is interesting to read the text with the benefit of hindsight some 20 years on. As Glyn pointed out, the notable thing about that address, given from the perspective of the chairman of the CEGB, was that the previous day his services had been dispensed with (ie sacked) by the then Tory Secretary of State for Energy. He had fallen victim to a change of government. Having prepared the address as the view seen by the CEGB chairman, he then found himself giving the address as the former chairman looking for another job!

Earlier in the day around 35 of the party had assembled for morning coffee at Kents Cavern. Suitably refreshed we were taken just inside the cave entrance for an introductory audio/light presentation before embarking on an underground guided tour of what proved to be a very extensive limestone cavern system. Our guide was a delightful young Irish lassie, who kept us enthralled with details concerning the history and formation of the prehistoric cave system, its exploration and the artefacts discovered that had provided a picture of previous occupancy by cavemen and wild beasts. We had the opportunity to remind ourselves of some simple geology, perhaps learnt during schooldays of long ago, as well as to see some good stalactite and stalagmite formations – now what was the trick for remembering which grew up from the floor and which came down from the ceiling? At one point our guide extinguished the lights so that we could experience the feeling of true 100% darkness. Fortunately she had a torch to find the light switch again! Before moving off to the lunch venue, everyone had the opportunity to look around a gift shop, which, not surprisingly, appeared out of the darkness at the end of the tour.

Chris Buck

(I thought the hotel was rather charming and the food was pretty good as well. May be I am a bit biased, since we stayed there overnight and would recommend it. Ed.)

REVIEW OF THE AGM & INCA TALK

A good attendance of 38 greeted the celebrations for the 10th Anniversary of the Inaugural Meeting (on 19th March 1994). Chairman Chris Buck opened a bottle of bubbly to toast the occasion and a cake, made by wife, Ann, was cut and distributed.

The AGM business was dispensed with in ½ hour, including the election and an agreement to make minor alterations to the Rules. No major changes were made to the committee. After the formalities, we had a super talk.

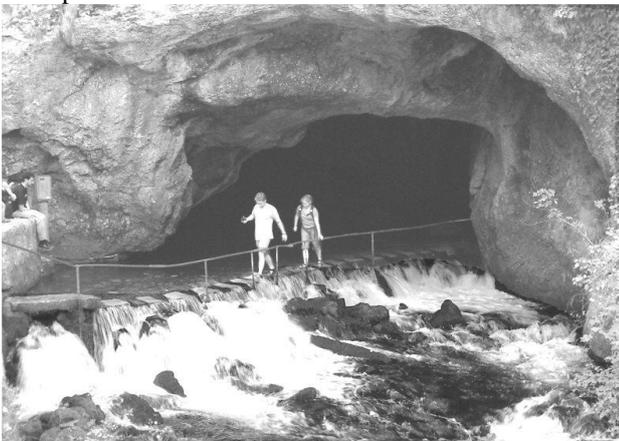
Unfortunately our scheduled speaker, Sheila Eckhart is seriously ill and Marcus Palmen stepped into the breach. Marcus gave a fascinating talk on the “Incas of Peru”. It was an illustrated talk using an electronic projector – probably the first occasion we have had a talk using such equipment. The talk was an interesting perspective of the history of the Incas and their unusual culture and, of course, some magnificent shots of the incredible terrain in their mountainous region of the Andes.

A NATURAL PUZZLE

The Intermittent Spring of Fontestorbes, France

Now that the summer holidays are on the horizon, anyone visiting the South of France this year, particularly the Midi-Pyrénées, may be interested in visiting this very unusual yet fascinating attraction. It is bound to intrigue the engineers among us who will no doubt start pondering how this strange natural phenomenon works.

Imagine a stream gushing out of a cave. Gradually the flow reduces until it has almost stopped and visitors can enter the cave across stepping-stones. Soon however the flow increases again until it is flowing at its maximum rate, and anyone inside the cave has to wait until the flow drops again. The entire cycle takes about an hour and the flow varies from 1800 litres per second maximum to 50 litres per second minimum.



Fontestorbes spring in full flow

The spring is only intermittent during the summer months - mid July until the end of November depending on the amount of snowfall in winter and rain in spring. Fontestorbes is a completely natural phenomenon and is one of less than thirty intermittent springs in the world.

The reason for this strange behaviour is unknown. It is suggested that there is a cavity somewhere inside the mountain, which provides a natural siphon mechanism.

However, the passage is impenetrable for divers, so a proper explanation is unlikely to be found. Fontestorbes is in the Cathar region of France near the small town of Lavelanet in the foothills of the Pyrénées south west of Carcassone.

We stayed in an excellent gîte with a swimming pool on site. The five gîtes on this property belong to a young English couple who are the son and daughter-in-law of friends of Margaret's sister. They bought the property and moved to France about a year ago. If you book a holiday there you will receive a very warm welcome. It certainly lives up to its web site name of www.hideawayinfrance.com

Paul & Margaret Hulbert

WAVE POWER

Plans are being drawn up for the first large-scale power station driven by wave energy to be installed at the Faroe Islands by SeWave, a joint marine energy company owned by Wavegen and SEV, both Scottish companies.

WINDFARMS AT SEA

The DTI has authorised plans for 15 off-shore wind farms, which means that some 2000 turbines will be built for use around the UK coastline providing between 5.4 to 7.2 Gwatts generating capacity by the end of the decade. The new Energy Bill going through Parliament will allow developers to build wind farms up to 12 nautical miles from the shore in shallow waters, such as Thames Estuary, Greater Wash and the North West – just wait for the first ship collisions!

OBITUARY – Scovell Whitmore

I am sad to report that Scovell Whitmore, Deputy Chairman of SWEB 1959 – 1977 passed away in January after an illness lasting over 4 months, he was aged 90.

MEMBERS NEWS

Peter Bulley

Peter has had a double hernia recently and has now fully recovered.

John Haynes

John & Ellie are moving to the Bristol area from Cornwall after over 30 years, having purchased a house in Congresbury to be closer to their children in London.

Les Knight

With this talk of West of England Electricity, Les tells me that he started with Exe Valley in 1931 at Witheridge.

COMMEMORATION AT POOL

Recently there has been a ceremony to commemorate the site of the former Tram Depot at Pool, Cornwall by the placing of a plaque on the wall of MacDonald's Restaurant by the Chairman of the Tram Centenary Committee, Colin Saxton. Also present was a lady, who remembered riding on the last tram 76 years ago. A pity they didn't remember that the original building also housed the Carn Brea generating station and when both trams and generation closed down, the buildings became the headquarters of the Cornwall Electric Power Company. The front building had much character to it and it was a shame, when it was demolished a few years ago, to make way for a MacDonalds – disgraceful!!

THEATRE MUSEUM, COVENT GARDEN

Recently the editor visited the Theatre Museum at Covent Garden, London and found this delightful info.

Letter to Patrons of the Savoy Theatre dated the 28th December 1881 - The Stage will be lighted this afternoon for the first time by electric lamps.

The danger of fire from contact with the lights is with these lamps absolutely abolished. The light is produced by heating a filament of carbon in a vacuum. If a lamp breaks, the air rushes in and the light goes out instantaneously. Those members of the audience, who wish to inspect the arrangements on stage are requested to keep their seats after the performance for a few minutes, when they will be admitted on presentation of their visiting cards by the pass door on the stage level, on the right hand side of the stage.

RICHARD D'OYLY CARTE

Proprietor and Manager

CRADLE GUARDS

Graham Warburton has been researching at the Public Records Office (PRO) at Kew, and found this minute:-

PRO-RAIL 418/52

LMS Mech.& Elec. En2rs. Comm.

Minute Book No.31.

"A 33,000 Volt CEB line fell across railway at Cheadle Heath on 25/1/1935 in an exceptional gale. The 11.44 Express from Manchester Central to Sheffield was in section and could not be stopped. No damage to engine, rolling stock, telegraphs or signaling and no passenger complaints".

He makes the point that no mention is made of any form of guard and the inference is that there were railway telegraphs at this time, and at this voltage, I would have thought it most likely the railway circuits would have been underground! Can any member please advise me where information could be found, which pinpoints the requirement for railway telegraphs to be protected by some form of guard. When was it agreed and who by?

The railway built a four pole "cage" to protect their lines (as pointed out when we visited the West Somerset Railway), later superseded by a power company building "cradle guard" no doubt due to an exorbitant charge made if the railway company did the work.

Incidentally - many railway cradles still exist of various designs between Exeter and London - so please look out for them, particularly in the Exeter-Temple Meads section, all SWEB standard. Most cradles over roads have been dismantled even the beauty on the Bridgwater main to Bowhayes Cross tower line at Keenthome, Spaxton on the A39. I did however find one on the A39 near Street last summer and photographed it - so if there's one near you take a picture, they are getting rare! Oh yes and don't forget to obtain the pole sizes etc!

Any info. to - *Graham Warburton* Tel : 01823 413676.

Thanks!

WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THAT WAY"

or The History of Standard Railway Gauge - Anon (Reproduced by kind permission of the 7¼ inch Gauge Society Ltd)

"Why is the Standard Railway Gauge (distance between the rails) here in the United States of America such an odd size?"

"What - 4 feet 8 ½ inches? – because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the first US railroads".

"Why did the English build them that size?"

"Because the first railways were built by the same people who built the pre-railway tramways, and that's the gauge they used".

"Why that gauge then?"

"Because that was the normal wheel spacing of wagons prior to the tramways"

"What, like stagecoaches, but why that size?"

"When they tried other sizes the wheels broke on the long distance rutted roads in England because that's the spacing of the ruts".

"So who built the original rutted roads?"

"The Romans did for their Legions, as they did throughout Europe. The ruts formed as a result of much use by Roman war chariots and other wagons".

"So why did Imperial Rome build their chariots that size?"

"Because that was the width of two horses which was the standard motive power for each chariot".

So next time you are handed a specification and told "We have always done it that way", and wonder what horse's ass came up with that, you may be exactly right, because Imperial Roman chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses.

Now move forward 2000 years or so. When you see a Space Shuttle sitting on it's launch pad waiting for the off, pay particular attention to the two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters (SRB's) made by Thiokol at their factory in Utah. NASA engineers who specified these SRB's would have preferred them to be a bit fatter, but they had to be transported by train from the factory to the launch site, and the railroad is routed through a tunnel in the mountains, the width of which was based on standard gauge track, which as we have already discussed, is about the size of two horses' backsides.

So a major Space Shuttle design feature of what is arguably the most advanced transportation system ever invented was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of a horse's ass.

And suitably edited by John Ferrier!!

(Ed – Yes, John wrote this line?)

MUGGLETONIANS

We all know now where John Muggleton got his rhetoric, dispensing commercial policy and enthusiasm in equal proportions at the SWEB in-house management courses. The Bristol Evening Post reported recently on an obscure Christian sect started by Lodowic Muggleton, a London Weaver, in 1652. He and another man had a vision that they were two witnesses foreseen in the Book of Revelations as the heralds of Judgement Day. They preached incessantly, gathering a large flock due to their more relaxed services in local taverns, which proved very popular. It is probable that the sect survived up until 50 years ago, since its records were found in a remote farmhouse in Kent in 1970. Although there was a branch in this area, our John is not admitting any linkage!

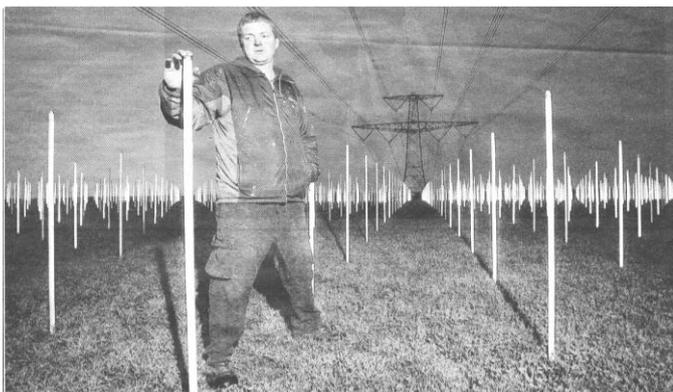
SYMPTOMS OF SENILE VIRUS

1. Causes you to send the same e-mail twice.
2. Causes you to send a blank e-mail.
3. Causes you to send e-mail to the wrong person
4. Causes you to send e-mail back to the person who sent it to you.
5. Causes you to forget to attach attachments.
6. Causes you to hit "SEND" before you've finished

FLUORESCENT TUBES POWERED BY PYLONS

The local Bristol papers have been full of an incredible demonstration by an artist, Richard Box, attached in some way to Bristol University and to Prof. Henshaw in particular. You may recall that Prof. Henshaw has been researching links between cancer and the magnetic fields from Pylons for many years, but last Summer, his theories were given a big knock by Dr. David Lloyd of the National Radiological Protection Board. Lloyd stated "Studies like ours have so far failed to uncover a pathway by which magnetic fields could cause childhood leukaemia"

So what has Richard Box been up to? He has obtained 1300 fluorescent tubes, the sort you find in any office building throughout the land, and stuck them in a field off the A46 directly under a pylon line. Unlinked and unpowered by any conventional source, row upon row begins to glow as dusk sets in. It is decidedly uncanny and a remarkable display.



Richard Box with 1300 fluorescent tubes under pylons

HISTORY NEWS FROM SOUTH WALES

Campaigners are trying to save an historic generating station on the River Teifi at Newcastle Emlyn. A consortium has been formed to purchase the power house to restore it and make it a tourist attraction. It powered the street lighting nearly 100 years ago. The station still houses its original hydro-electric turbines made in 1908 and it is reported that it is the only working example of its type in Britain.

They have been "pipped at the post" by a private buyer, who has obtained planning permission for a bungalow nearby, but they hope to maintain a public access to the site. We will try and keep in touch with this project. (Submitted by Member Bill Harris)

FOR YOUR DIARIES – a Reminder PROGRAMME for the NEXT HALF YEAR

Sat. 24th Apr. "EMPIRE & COMMONWEALTH MUSEUM" at Temple Meads, Bristol

12.00 Lunch at a Don Giovanni's Restaurant, Temple Gate. Beforehand park cars in car park behind restaurant and at 2.00pm walk across the main road for a conducted tour of this fascinating new Museum.

Sat. 22nd May VISIT THE BAKELITE MUSEUM, Williton - Meet for lunch at 12.00 noon at the Masons Arms.

Sun. 27th Jun. PLYMOUTH BOAT TRIP

The Sound and Naval Dockyards – Meet at the Barbican, Phoenix Wharf at 11.30am. Lunch will be served on the boat.

Sun. 25th July SUNDAY LUNCH AT THE PASSAGE HOTEL, Newton Abbot

Meet 12.00noon – more details to follow

*Fri/Sat/Sun. WEEKEND AWAY IN

8th/9th/10th Oct. CORNWALL

Staying at Falmouth, including coach trips to the Levant Beam Engine, Porthcurno Telegraph Museum and many other sites.

Sat. 30th Oct. MEMBERS' OPEN DAY – At Cairns Road

Members to be shown around in the morning with a buffet lunch in house, followed by a talk in the afternoon by Member Colin Hill.

Sat. 27th Nov. "FAMILY HISTORY – FACT or FICTION" at Clarence House, Portishead

At 2.00pm talk by Pat Hase, with sit-down meal beforehand.

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 lambvandp@uku.co.uk