

The Society – The First Twenty-Five Years

BY R. A. COOK

Inception

From the late nineteenth century men have studied and written about railway history. The pioneers appear to have worked in isolation, deriving their resources from membership of the professions and in some cases from their employment by railway companies. In the inter-war years, the growing interest in all things railway led to the formation of several societies. The strictures of the 1939–45 war inhibited organized interest in current railway activities, but encouraged consideration of their history in its widest sense, so that by early 1954 the idea of a society to cater specifically for such interests was being circulated. It found formal expression in a letter from Kenneth Seaward which was published in the July 1954 issue of *Railway World*:

“Although there are many Societies within the British Isles devoted to the study of railways and railway matters, very few show a deep interest in railway history. The majority of the Societies focus their attention on the locomotive and aspects of railway operation. There is, therefore, I suggest a need for a Society specializing in the serious study of railway history, with a view to the regular publication of a journal on this subject.”

All this activity brought together about sixty supporters and it was on this encouraging note that an inaugural meeting was called. Initially the promotion of a railway society was envisaged but amongst those interested were two concerned with canals, the history of which had been opened up by the publication in 1950 of *British Canals* by Charles Hadfield. At his suggestion it was agreed that if a society were formed, canals should be included in the prospectus and title.

The place chosen for the meeting was quite fortuitous, the promoters being temporarily in the area. Behind the unpretentious facade of the Grandmere Hotel in Preston, against a background of staccato exhausts from locomotives labouring up the main line from the Ribble Docks, the motion was proposed and approved at about 7.30 in the evening of 4 September 1954, that a society be formed with the title of *The Railway & Canal Historical Society*. Those present were Maurice Greville (who became member number one), Bertram Baxter, Gordon Biddle (the first Hon. Secretary), Charles Clinker (the first President), Kenneth Seaward and the writer. Geoffrey Holt (unfortunately unable to be present) was elected the first Hon. Treasurer *in absentia*. By the end of the year the Society had in its membership the majority of the leading railway and canal historians at that time.

The Early Years

Upon inauguration a maximum membership potential of 300 was envisaged, a reasonable figure considering that by July 1955 it had reached 103, but the formation of the Society undoubtedly promoted a wider interest in the history of both railways and canals. Initially the serious study of canals was confined to a handful of members, but the happy marriage of interest in these closely interrelated forms of transport has resulted in many railway historians widening their scope to include canals and vice versa. One of our founder members, Bertram Baxter, was a tramroad historian, and over the years there has been a

growing interest in this early form of railway, which constitutes one of several links between canal and railway studies.

The principal aims of the Society were printed in the first issue of the *Journal*: to foster serious research into railway and canal history and to establish closer links between these two studies, by providing the means for interchange of ideas and information between members.

Long-term objectives were the compilation of a bibliography of railway and canal history and an index of original documents and other material. The first was largely achieved by George Ottley's epic *A Bibliography of British Railway History* (1965) in which other members played a part, but no comparable canal bibliography has yet been compiled. Our research index of some 10,000 entries is a substantial collection of references to original source material from national, county and city archives down to the smaller local libraries. The task of adding references to the index, which covers both railways and canals, is a continuous one performed by a small research group led since 1964 by Harry Paar, the Research Officer.

Administration

The administration of the Society's affairs in the early days was carried out by a small Council under the chairmanship of the President. As the membership increased, so too did the work-load and the need for a broader-based administrative structure. A separate post of Chairman of the Council was created in 1957, Maurice Greville being the first to hold the position. Subsequently in 1964 a two-tier structure was adopted, with a smaller Managing Committee, consisting of the Chairman, Bertram Baxter, and other officers, to look after the detailed administration and answerable to the elected Council, which was still responsible for overall policy. Following our incorporation in 1967 this structure was retained, but the Managing Committee was expanded, as required by the Board of Trade, to include some elected members of Council as well as the officers.

The enlarged MC was ably led by Michael Reading as Chairman for 8 years from 1969 to 1977. However it became steadily more apparent that both MC and Council were too large and there was too much overlapping between the two. Following the report of a working party set up in 1976 to examine the constitution, structure and working of the Society, the committee work was streamlined; whilst the two-tier system has been retained, the numbers on both MC and Council have been reduced. Another change was the formation of a publications sub-committee chaired by Harry Paar, to deal with the detail of all publication matters, so that only firm proposals come before the MC.

Over the years the Council and MC have received considerable professional help from our Honorary Solicitor, David Tew, a recent example being the changes in our constitution required by the Companies Act 1975.

Journal

With a small and widely scattered membership it was imperative to establish a journal, and a modest beginning was made in January 1955 with the first issue of volume 1, containing little more than the Society's aims and introductory substance; yet it carried an enquiry by Geoffrey Holt for information on the opening of Carlisle Citadel station, and oddly enough in our Jubilee year the answer to that question is as elusive as ever.

The first volume consisted of four slim issues of duplicated typescript in quarto format. In the third issue Jeffery Spence was confirmed as Honorary Editor, a

position he has held with distinction ever since. In the fourth issue there appeared three important features which were to remain for many years: the annual list of railway opening centenaries (by Maurice Greville); the annual listing of railway Acts (by Charles Clinker and later by Geoffrey Webb), and the invaluable "Recent Literature" section which was, until his retirement at the end of 1978, under the able hand of William Skillern. In the late 1960s the compilers' circumstances caused the termination of the first two features, but the third has fortunately been taken over by Donald Steggles. Another major research feature was begun in 1957 with 'Accessions to Record Offices', which continues in the hands of its originator Maurice Berrill.

The number of pages in the *Journal* gradually increased and from 1956 there were six issues per year. The content was also improving in quality, reflecting the great scope of members' interests and the vitality of the Society. Volumes 9 and 10 (1963 and 1964) were improved by use of an offset litho process to reproduce the quarto typescript. With volume 11 the long-awaited change to a printed octavo format in card covers was welcomed, although the number of issues was reduced to four per year. From 1974 (vol. 20) rising costs forced a further reduction to three issues, but from the second issue in 1975 (vol. 21) the more modern, and cheaper, offset method was adopted, together with a change to A5 size; this has permitted a substantial increase in the number of pages and the content.

The 'Letters to the Editor' feature has always proved a lively platform for the exchange of views and the enlargement of knowledge. Our most prolific contributor has been Mr. H. V. Borley, with some 80 letters and articles to his credit; they are models of both interest and accuracy.

Although the *Journal* has never been on general sale it is a reflection of the growing interest in our field of study that 50 libraries now subscribe.

Bulletin and Book Reviews

All Society news was initially contained in the *Journal*, but as pressure on space increased it was decided in 1959 to launch a separate monthly Bulletin of forthcoming events, queries, administrative notes and general news. For a period it was duplicated and despatched by a commercial printer, but the Society is greatly indebted to Rhodes Thomas, the editor for the last few years, for the considerable savings he has achieved by carrying out the full production himself. The number of issues per year has recently been reduced to 9 in order to contain continuing inflationary pressures on costs.

Book reviews were also published in the *Journal*, but with their increasing number, this feature too was replaced in 1975 by a duplicated work which, at small cost, contains far more reviews than could be printed in the *Journal*. The reviews are also now more topical.

Library

Until 1974 the books sent for review formed the core of the Society's lending library, to which were added the books and other material donated by members. For many years the library was housed and administered by Peter Stevenson, before being transferred to Leicester Museum under the care of Philip Stevens. The usefulness of the facility was greatly reduced by the withdrawal of the special postage rate for printed matter, and the decision was taken to dispose of all the printed books.

Arrangements were made for the manuscript and other special research material in the Society's collection to be housed in the Birmingham Central Reference Library.

Events

It is impractical to mention more than a selection of the events which the Society has promoted over the last 25 years. The first visit was in March 1955 when Charles Hadfield led a party to tramroad and canal sites near Wolverton, Blisworth and Stoke Bruerne. This was of particular interest to those of us who were not then familiar with canals and was also the occasion of our first misadventure when the coach became stuck crossing a humpbacked bridge. In September we journeyed on the St. Helens Canal to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the commencement of its construction. Such a trip is now unrepeatable because the canal has been filled in. The event had its moment of humour, although it was not apparent to the trail of disgruntled motorists held up when the Sankey Bridge was lifted long before our boat hove slowly into view. Here, too, we had our first media publicity when Gordon Biddle was interviewed by the BBC Northern Home Service. In the following year our visit to the Ellesmere Canal was filmed for television.

Another historic canal cruise was that in 1961 to celebrate the bi-centenary of the opening of the Bridgewater Canal and which included the unique experience of being transported by the Anderton Lift. Boat trips have played a large part in the popularity of the canal visits; many members have been introduced to the pleasures of canal cruising by these events. Even the totally industrialized landscapes are more attractive and interesting when viewed from a passing boat, as some of us first discovered on the Birmingham Canal Navigations cruise in 1957. In complete contrast was the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation trip in May 1970 organized by John Boyes.

Visits to the sites of defunct canals have also proved equally popular and there are many members, through the expertise of our tour leaders, who know that a canal is far more than just a trough of stagnant water wandering through the countryside, and that the visible remains are many.

The earliest railway visit was on 30 April 1955 with a tour of the remains of the Leicester & Swannington Railway. There were suspicious looks from house-holders as members studied the ventilation shafts in the streets lying over Glenfield tunnel. On the following day some of us were introduced to tramroads, when we viewed the site of the Ashby Canal lines. This day was somewhat marred by our finding an unfortunate rabbit afflicted with myxomatosis, which had to be despatched as humanely as possible. Both visits were led by the President, Charles Clinker.

In 1958 we celebrated, with the Railway Correspondence & Travel Society, the 200th anniversary of the first railway Act, that for the Middleton Railway. Other early railway visits included those to the Surrey Iron Railway and the Canterbury & Whitstable Railway. In 1975 the Society A.G.M. was held at Darlington and Ken Hoole and Dr. Barnett led a most interesting two-day tour of the Stockton & Darlington Railway to celebrate the 150th anniversary of its opening. The furthest north we have ventured has been to Carlisle when a small party was conducted over the Carlisle & Silloth Bay Railway and associated docks. Other visits of especial interest have been to South Wales, the Forest of Dean and the Cromford & High Peak Railway. Tramroads have formed an integral part of many tours, amongst them being the Stratford & Moreton Railway, the Peak Forest Tramway, and various lines in South Wales and near Congleton. Similarly many tours have reflected the close link between railway/canal history and industrial archaeology. For example the Reading area tour in 1977 included a visit to the Crofton pumping engine house to see the beam engines in steam. Street tramways have not been totally excluded, the Blackpool

system being included in the itinerary of May 1973. Several museums have also been visited, even those featuring model railways at Derby and Pendon.

Weekend seminars were held at Pendley Manor in 1973 (on the theme of Waterway Engineering over Three Centuries) and at Bristol University in 1975 (on Railway Stations). They were both very successful and enjoyable occasions, but the officers, mindful of the formidable and rising cost of attending such functions, and desiring to retain the AGM as an annual week-end feature, did not feel it wise to continue the venture.

A public lecture by an eminent invited speaker was organized by the Society at the Science Museum, London in 1972. Although it was intended that this should become an annual event, it was regretfully discontinued after 1974 as it did not prove effective in its main aim — to introduce the Society and its subjects to a large number of non-members.

Local Groups

The largest membership has always been in London and the south-east, approximately a third of the total, but other concentrated groupings lay in the east and west midlands and in the north-west. The first local group to be formed was in Birmingham and its first meeting was on 6 September 1955. The group prospered and in 1960 changed its title to West Midlands Group. The inaugural meeting of the East Midlands Group took place in July 1956. Soon afterwards a group was formed in London, and the North Western Group held its first meeting in March 1958. A North Eastern group was formed towards the end of 1959, and it has resolved the problem of providing facilities for a more dispersed membership by joint arrangements with the North Eastern Railway Association. A small group was formed in the south-west in 1962, but the sparse membership there, and great travelling distances, led to its disbandment as a formal group although occasional visits in the area have continued from time to time. These are the 'official' dates of formation (as recorded in the early volumes of the *Journal*) but in all areas members had been meeting and organizing visits much earlier, sometimes within a few days of our inauguration.

The groups have pursued particularly active policies and the adherence of their members has been very marked. All groups have been responsible for many visits, and many of the tour notes have been printed for general circulation. Particularly noteworthy are those of the East Midlands Group which have card covers and are of bookcase size and form a useful permanent reference series. The groups have also taken it in turn to organize the Society AGM weekends, and this has taken a heavy burden from the Council. The success of these events is but one example of the solidarity achieved by the group structure of the Society; no voluntary central organization, however dedicated, could have achieved such programmes.

The fieldwork these visits provide under expert guidance is of great value, whilst the tour notes generally embody the best information available, and the social aspects are by no means to be undervalued. In many instances the visits have also provided the opportunity to study how transport fitted into the industrial pattern of the area, and this interweaving of transport, industrial, economic and social history points to a pattern for the future.

The comprehensive survey, undertaken by the West Midlands Group under the leadership of John Denton, of what is now Telford New Town, before the entire site was cleared for building, merits special mention. Details of the sites of tram-roads, canals, railways and industries were recorded on cards which are now

lodged in the Shropshire Record Office. To visit the area now is to realize how important this task was.

Many members live in places remote from group activities — those in the west country have already been mentioned. The scarcity of members in South Wales, and in the Edinburgh and Glasgow areas of Scotland, is both surprising and unfortunate. Many questions about the complex transport networks in these regions remain to be answered, lest anyone surveying the now crowded book shelves feels that the last word has been written.

Publications

The first Society publication appeared in 1965, being a short history of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway by one of our founder members, Geoffrey Holt. Our then President had offered in 1959 the Clinker Premium to encourage original research in a competitive way, and our second publication, *How Ffestiniog got its Railway* (1965) by Michael Lewis, resulted from this scheme, running to a second edition in 1968. Although some other awards were made from time to time the Premium did not bring forth the results envisaged in the long term, and was withdrawn in 1977.

Our third publication was a map of the Kington, Leominster & Stourport Canal by Richard Dean, an excellent example of cartographic history which sold well. Others include railway chronologies of Lancashire and Cheshire by the late Maurice Greville, reprinted, with corrections, from the Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire, the Warrington booklet by Peter Norton, and the historical maps of pre-grouping company systems. Mention should also be made of the two invaluable Decennial Journal Indexes by our former Sales Officer, Bertram Cooper, whose hard work in publicizing and selling our work was of such great value during his long period of office.

Financial

In any voluntary organization first priority must always be to ensure that all financial matters are fully accountable to the members. It is also essential to keep the subscription to a minimum and to provide a service giving good value for that subscription in order to make membership attractive. A comparison of subscriptions over the years is meaningless due to the enormous change in money values, but for the record the first subscription was £1 - 1s - 0d.

At first all monies were held in a central fund. As the question of publications arose a separate fund was set up for this purpose, initially by a grant from the central fund, but to build it up voluntary donations were solicited. Since then the fund has shown quite a healthy surplus for a society of our size. The general fund itself has, in most years, shown a small surplus. In late 1971 the voluntary method was invoked to set up the Research Fund, to provide grants to those whose original research is hampered by financial considerations.

The Society has always paid its way and maintained the necessary surplus to continue its operations. For 14 years, from 1964 to 1978, credit for this goes to John Broadhurst who discharged the duties of Honorary Treasury impeccably. These years included the very difficult period of high inflation, which could have been damaging if our finances had not been skilfully handled.

Incorporation

At the mid-point in our course to date the step was taken to elevate our Society from an association to a bona-fide legal entity. Many meetings preceded this important action, both at Council and membership level, and with the Board

of Trade. It is a tribute to the skill, financial generosity and devotion of Charles E. Lee, closely supported by David Tew, that all affairs went smoothly and on 14 November 1967 we became an incorporated body having charitable status within the framework of the Companies Acts. This raised our nominal status and enabled us to go forward with a greater sense of responsibility and purpose towards our declared objectives. The practical advantages include the ability to own property, to take legal action if necessary, and to enjoy the benefit of covenanted subscriptions.

Conclusion

Our membership showed a steady increase over many years, but latterly has remained at just below the 500 mark; this and other matters were studied by the working party of 1976, which consisted of Professor White, Grahame Boyes and Keith Holt. Their well-reasoned report, based upon a questionnaire circulated to members, and the subsequent debate within the Council and at an Extraordinary General Meeting, showed that there was widespread support for a broad-based approach to transport history; whilst railways and canals will remain the twin primary subjects at the core of our activities, there was general agreement that the Society should also encourage research into other forms of transport associated – either in competition or in cooperation – with railways and canals. The formation of a Road Transport History Group is a firm step in this direction, although our *Journal* has for long reflected such wider interests in a limited way.

In retrospect, what have we achieved in the last twenty-five years? That we have achieved growth and sense of purpose is beyond question. The various facilities built up painstakingly over the years – the *Journal*, the research index, the index of members' interests, the book reviews, and others – are ample proof of this. However, we must dwell no longer on our past, there is still much to do and in looking to the next twenty-five years we must be mindful that the greatest asset of the Society is its individual members and their contributions to the common weal, contributions which nearly always bring rewards in the form of tangible support for personal projects, additional or amending information, and channels of publication.

Postscript

This account of the Society's development is a story of achievement through the voluntary labours of many individual members. Some of them have been named, but inevitably there are many omissions. The list of principal Society officers below fills only some of the gaps. Although it is not practical to list all the past and present officers of the Society and the Groups, in our Jubilee year it is right to acknowledge the enormous contribution made by them, particularly those who served in the early years when the foundations were being laid. A special mention is perhaps due to those who have served the Society and the Groups again and again in several different capacities. Finally the help given by members without office must be stressed. They write articles, review books and send items to the bulletin and recent literature editors; they assist with the compilation of the research index, and answer specialized queries for the research officer; they give talks and lead visits; and they help in emergencies or in some special task. The history of our Society is the sum total of all these contributions.

PRINCIPAL SOCIETY OFFICERS 1954-79

Presidents

1954-61 — C. R. Clinker	1970-72 — G. J. Biddle
1961-63 — E. C. R. Hadfield	1972-74 — J. E. Norris
1963-65 — C. F. Klapper	1974-76 — P. A. Stevens
1965-67 — C. E. Lee	1976-78 — Dr. M. J. T. Lewis
1967-70 — G. O. Holt	1978— — Prof. H. P. White

Vice-Presidents

1960-61 — E. C. R. Hadfield	1972-77 — M. D. Greville
1976— —	1977— — C. E. Lee
1960-67 — H. A. Vallance	1978— — Prof. T. C. Barker
1961-76 — C. R. Clinker	1978— — G. O. Holt

Chairmen of Council

1956-57 — M. D. Greville	1963-64 — B. Baxter
1957-63 — C. F. Klapper	

Chairmen of Managing Committee

1964-66 — B. Baxter	1969-77 — M. P. N. Reading
1966-69 — A. P. Voce	1977— — G. A. Boyes

Hon. Secretaries

1954-58 — G. J. Biddle	1964-67 — P. A. Stevens
1958-60 — M. I. Berrill	1967-74 — J. R. Harding
1960-62 — A. P. Voce	1974-76 — A. P. Voce
1962-64 — J. Bryant	1976-79 — M. R. Prew

Hon. Treasurers

1954-58 — G. O. Holt	1962-64 — C. P. Weaver
1958-60 — F. G. M. Watson	1964-78 — J. H. Broadhurst
1960-62 — M. I. Berrill	1978— — P. R. Davis

When did who stop trying?

BY MICHAEL ROBBINS

John Denton's article "When did we stop trying?" in the November 1978 *Journal* raises a number of issues about the "rise and fall" of the canal and railway ages. He puts forward a distinction between the "hard facts" approach, which measures the peak of development by reference to maximum mileage open, tonnages carried, and the like, and the "assessment of faith" approach, and he invites the historian to consider "when we stopped trying". This distinction is indeed important in relation to the external world which the transport providers live in, and it may help to explain why considerable investments have been made and confidence in the future continued to be loudly proclaimed long after the objective or statistical peak had been passed, at a time when by the normal tests decline had already set in.