

Railway Ramblings

Issue 150

January 2023

The monthly newsletter of the RCTS Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch



The evocative music of the Gresley chime reverberates around Digswell as 4498 Sir Nigel Gresley passes Welwyn North en-route to Lincoln on 2 December 2022

Photo credit: Tom Gladwin

Railway Ramblings is published by the committee of the Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch of The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society. Such committee does not endorse any personal opinions expressed in this publication.

Branch Programme

Note: In the event of any late change to the programme, everyone on the distribution list for this newsletter will receive an emails advising the details of the change.

During January 2023

At Hitchin (19:30-22:00, doors open from 19:00)

10 th January	Siemens-ECML Signalling Project	<i>Sarah Ponting</i>
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At Welwyn Garden City (14:00-16:30, doors open from 13:30)

31 st January	Swanning Around – London in 1980's	<i>Jeremy Harrison</i>
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During February 2023

At Hitchin (19:30-22:00, doors open from 19:00)

14 th February	Railways & Tramways of the Isle of Man	<i>Geoff Brockett</i>
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At Welwyn Garden City (14:00-16:30, doors open from 13:30)

28 th February	A Railwayman Remembers	<i>Dave Cockle</i>
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Donations will be requested for attendance at branch meetings – these, together with book sales, go towards the costs of hiring the venues, speakers expenses/fees and the provision of tea/coffee & biscuits during the meeting. These are currently suggested as £2 for members and £3.50 for non-members.

Hitchin meetings are held at Tilehouse Street Baptist Church Hall, Upper Tilehouse Street, Hitchin SG5 2EE

Welwyn Garden City meetings are held at the Methodist Church, Ludwick Way/Cole Green Lane junction, Welwyn Garden City, Herts AL7 3PN

“Zoom” Virtual Presentations

Some RCTS branches are offering Zoom virtual presentations. In addition, there are “national” Zoom presentations (on the fourth Thursday of each month). Details of these can be found on the RCTS website (and in the *Railway Observer*). Members can register and then take part in any of these events.



Chairman's Platform

By the time you receive this issue of *Railway Ramblings* the 2022 Christmas festivities should be over and you are probably preparing to "welcome in" 2023. (Unless of course you are reading this in 2023!). Happy New Year to you all and let us all hope that, unlike the last couple of years, there are no nasty surprises through this year.

The cold spell before Christmas was a timely reminder of how our plans can still be disrupted by the weather. I trust that you all received my "last minute" emails about the December Hitchin meeting and that nobody made a journey to an empty hall! The winter is not over yet, so please keep a watch on your email inbox as I will send out similar messages in future if necessary. Fortunately, the thaw came in time for the Welwyn Garden City meeting. This was quite well attended and we enjoyed mince pies and sausage rolls with our tea & coffee.

A big thank you to both Jill and Janet who have been providing our catering throughout this year (at WGC and Hitchin respectively).

Personally, in the build-up to Christmas 2022, I saw Santa many times on the Nene Valley Railway and, as usual, it was a most enjoyable experience. As with many of our heritage lines, the NVR Santa Specials are an important source of income and it was great to have a year free from the restrictions of the previous couple of years. Nearly a year to rest before it all starts up again!

A month ago, if you can recall that far back, this newsletter contained a short questionnaire seeking your views about how we take the Branch forward. I was pleased to see that some of you responded straight away and through December a few responses continued to be received. But most of you have still to let us have your views. If you have still to contribute then don't forget to let us know by 14th January. I want our decisions on the future of the branch to be based on the views of the broad mass of members and not just those who currently attend meetings (of course, it is important that we have their views as well).

In case you have mislaid it, the questionnaire is repeated in this issue. However, if you have already responded please do not do so again!

Steve Lacey

Membership Renewal Reminder



Current membership UK rates will remain frozen for 2023.

They are:

Online RO	£20
Printed RO (UK)	£33

The Society encourages UK-based members to pay their renewals by Direct Debit. There is a £2 discount for doing so. If a direct debit mandate is not already set up, members can sign-up online with our new service provider, GoCardless.

[Renew Online](#)

The Snowstorm?

– a short story by Martin Elms

I drove onto the open space behind Low Marsh signal box and carefully locked my “pride and joy” Morris Minor, which I had saved up for in my two years as signalman here.

I crunched over the ballast covered ground and climbed the stairs onto the balcony looking, out of habit in both directions along the tracks. All quiet, only the flickering red semaphore signal lights on this still moonless night.

I entered the signal box which despite the always-lit coal stove, was only just warm due to the many drafts around the loose-fitting windows

I greeted Joe, who I was to relieve at 22:00.

“Not bad out there”, he commented. “dry moonless night”, putting on his coat. We both signed the box register with the change of shift details and Joe clumped out down the stairs and away into the dark

Moments later he returned.

“O bye-the-bye the direct phone to control at Carlisle isn’t working – again. But Bob, at Garsdale, will pass any messages to you on the omnibus phone which is O.K.”

Low Marsh is a signal box about halfway between Ribbleshead and Garsdale on the Settle and Carlisle railway line, it has fifteen levers and has a main-to-main trailing crossover which sees little use and like the signal box seems only to exist to shorten the signal box distances, which with less trains nowadays – 1965 - could only spell a short future.

There isn’t and never was a station here, the only habitation being six railway owned cottages occupied by the local permanent-way gang and some distant farms. I lived about seven miles away and was glad of my “pride and joy” that replaced my trusty bike in harsh weather.

On the night shift there were unfitted freights passing through and the up and down St Pancras to Glasgow sleeping car trains – the main trains of the entire day.

At two o’clock, between the procession of freights, I went onto the balcony and was surprised to see heavy snow falling and the clouds about to cover a bright full moon.

The phone rang, it was Bob, as message passer

“Control have told me that the up-sleeper is held at Carlisle and the down one at Skipton. They are organising a snow plough, from north of me, to you where the crews of the goods trains have reported the snow drifts. It is to plough the up-line then cross over at your box to the down and plough northwards back to me. The permanent-way gang at your place have been called out to clear and check the crossover”.

I repeated the message, and he rang off.

Outside I could hear and then see the gang busy on the crossover.

The ganger Fred came into the box dripping wet snow over the highly polished floor to belatedly report their presence.

I was told in all cases get the register up-to-date and get it signed.

Fred did as he was bid, dripping over the pages, and I told him that when the plough was signalled from Garsdale I would tell him. In the meantime they were safe to work on the crossover, as now all trains had stopped running to allow uninterrupted snow clearance.

Bob rang to inform me that the plough was on the way and feeling that “all hands to the pumps” was required I put my coat on and armed with the box broom and shovel left the relative warmth of the box to help, in the now less heavy but persistent snow, to clear the crossover points.

I had “one ear open” for the signal bells and after about half an hour I heard them. I left the gang, returned to the box soaked but feeling glad to have helped to get the trains running again, and hung up my now dripping coat.

Locos 44567 and 44673 arrived and were sandwiched between the snow-covered ploughs they stopped in a swirl of smoke and steam south of the now clear crossover.

A figure left the front loco cab and entered the box. He was clad in a long black mac and wearing the obligatory trilby hat. It was district inspector Allen a highly respected and well-informed man. He also entered details of his presence in the register, and he apologised for dripping snow on its pages. Of course, I didn't dare comment, hoping that the writing was still legible

On his instructions I busied myself with the signals and, with his assistance, the point lever.

Thanks to the efforts of us all concerned, the points moved over, and inspector Allen hand signalled the movement onto the down line. He then wished me well, I updated the register with the events, tried my best to dab up some of the wetness on its pages and signalled the ploughs away to Garston. The locos whistled and I watching its flickering red taillight disappear northwards

Looking out, the snow had stopped falling, the moon had reappeared, and the landscape looked Christmassy, and the area was deadly quiet with the shiny now cleared tracks disappearing in the distance in the cutting made by the ploughs with the signal red lamp lights reflected on the rails

I was surprised to see the time - nearly six.

There was a noise outside and my relief Charlie came in, wiping his highly polished boots on the doormat

He didn't have any snow on him or his boots!

Martin Elms

New Members

We welcome James Fraser, from Stevenage, as a new member of the RCTS and to the Hitchin and Welwyn Garden City Branch. James joined the Society when he visited the RCTS stand at the Warley Model Railway Show in December 2022.

We also welcome Philip Hickey, from Letchworth Garden City, as a new member of the RCTS and the Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch.

London Highlights from my Archive - Paddy Carey

In this feature, Paddy picks up his reminiscences at Stratford, where we ended in the October issue of Railway Ramblings:

On my return journey to home, I first moved on from Clapham Junction to Stratford. I had been unsure of how I should get back to Hertford but had then found a train to Stratford - and then on to Broxbourne - could be an interesting way. This was a new route for me to experience.

I first noted a London Underground train, 3237, which I think is 1972 stock:



I thought at the time it seemed an unusual location for an Underground train but I clearly had not researched this trip as I should have!

Also at Stratford, I saw 321 440

The Class 321s were built by BREL and a major order had been placed by Network SouthEast so that they could modernise the Great Eastern extended suburban routes.



First Great Eastern inherited some Class 321/4 units from the Euston route and when the Great Eastern franchise was transferred to National Express and then Abellio Greater Anglia

the liveries were altered. Franchise changes for Class 321s saw a lot of transfer from former Operating Companies as can be imagined.

As far as I can check 321 440 is currently stored.



This picture shows 360 166 - a Siemens 'Desiro' four-car set built for First Great Eastern. Again, franchise changes resulted in changes in the livery and 360 116 appears to be in the gradual transition stage to that of National Express.



Finally at Stratford, 96063 is 1996 stock built for London Underground by G.E.C. - Alstom - Metro Cammel and were used on the Jubilee line.

The last leg of my trip home was back to Hertford East with a stop at Broxbourne.

I now reflect that I did not, at the time, have the two books from Middleton Press in the London Suburban Railways series - 'North London Line' and 'West London Line'. However, I have them now, bought on the book stall at our RCTS meeting in Welwyn Garden City!

Paddy Carey



Swapping 92 Squadron for a Sleigh!



In December everything changes at the Nene Valley Railway as Wansford is transformed into Santa mode. The platform is covered by marquees, which keeps out the wind, (generally straight from Siberia across East Anglia), rain, but this year snow!

The marquees are heated to keep the public warm while queuing to see Santa and are left in place until early January to help with the clean-up!



The public book in at the specially erected desk where tickets are checked and passengers pointed in the direction of their coach. Sticky badges with children's ages are given for parents to stick on their children; child safeguarding regulations preclude us doing it now! There are often carol singers here as well. Passengers then queue to meet Santa along the covered platform where volunteers compete to sell goods to this captive audience. There are knitted goods, wooden crafts, like tree ornaments and of course 92's stand!



Knitwear stall and the '92 stall with Phil gloating about the 300 raffle tickets he sold in 1 day!

Passengers are then let into the grotto area. In pre Covid times the Barnwell building was Santa's grotto, but now he sits on the stage in a more open area. We also have a fabulous magician/juggler who entertains the passengers, as the elves select the age appropriate children's gifts for Santa to give out.



Our magician/juggler entertains my family and friends.

Then the main event - as Santa and his elf give out the presents on the stage. Rules for Santa include keeping your hands visible at all times for the photographs and only putting children on your knee if the parent asks and lifts them there. No grabbing at random children!



Someone you may recognise with my elf.

After the presents, the passengers get on the train where they have festive food and drink. For one select group who have hired the St Nicholas Lounge (takes up to 16) they are visited by Santa who gives out individually labelled presents and then leaves them to enjoy included food and a free bar!



My family and friends in the Lounge with one of the other Santa's

Meanwhile, Santa moves through the rest of the train chatting to the passengers again, until he reaches the far end of the train, where he hopes his elf has left the bag with his clothes! He needs to change into civvies before the train arrives back at Wansford, as by then a new Santa is in the Grotto and there can never be two Santa's visible at once!

This year (2022) things have further changed - with 2 separate sets of coaches. One rake is all first-class using the Belgian "Wagon Lits" cars and the restaurant car, the other is the "classic" rake using BR Mk 1 stock. In both sets all seats have a table so you can bring your own food if you wish. All children in both classes see Santa and the gifts are the same selection. This year we also employed one Santa for a couple of trains who was a fluent signer to cater for one group of children.

Not everything went according to plan this year (does Christmas ever go to plan!) but in the main we coped and people seemed appreciative of the efforts of the volunteers.

By the time you get this, it will all be over for another year, so I hope you had a Happy Christmas and we will see you again in the New Year, Ho, Ho, Ho!

Steve Lacey

Newsletter Distribution

This e-newsletter is distributed by the Branch Chairman (Steve Lacey). If you do not currently receive a copy directly but would like to do so, provide him with your email address and you will be added to the list. Conversely, if you currently receive a copy but wish to be taken off the distribution list then please advise him accordingly. Steve's email address is gricersteve@hotmail.com

Back copies of *Railway Ramblings* can be found in the local branch pages of our society website <https://rcts.org.uk/>

The January Puzzle – Martin Elms

Continuing the seasonal theme, the first letter of the answer to these questions will spell a familiar greeting:

1. City with a Paragon station	
2. Tunnel on East Coast main line south of Retford	
3. Name of diesel locomotive D227	
4. Locomotive depot with code 63A	
5. East Anglian seaside town with three termini stations	
6. Name of locomotive 35014	
7. South coast seaside town at end of branch from Polegate	
8. South Eastern and Chatham railway locomotive engineer 1899 – 1913	
9. Station on GW near Bristol with two branch lines leading from it	
10. L&SWR locomotive works	
11. Heads of ? railway station	
12. Name of locomotive 46100	
13. Name of large marshalling yard in Sheffield	
14. Junction for Gloucester docks	
15. ? and Farcet ECML south of Peterborough	
16. ? North Road between Sandy and Cambridge	
17. Name of locomotive 6928	

As usual, best of luck – my solutions are on page 15. No cheating!

Martin Elms

The January Presentations

Siemens-ECML Signalling Project, the First of its Kind - Sarah Ponting

10th January at Hitchin



*LNER's Azuma fleet is already equipped with ETCS equipment.
(Photo: MARSHD200)*

The decision to re-signal the southern end of the East Coast Main Line (ECML) has been well publicised. It is to be part of the Digital Railway initiative, although ERTMS (European Rail Traffic Management System) and its ETCS component (European Train Control System) have been around much longer than the 'Digital Railway' banner.

ERTMS has been in development since the late 1980s and ETCS has matured into a reliable product which is being adopted right across Europe and beyond. In Britain, it is deployed on the Cambrian Line, commissioned in 2010, on the central core of Thameslink in London including an Automatic Train Operation (ATO) overlay – a first in the world – and soon on the Great Western Main Line from Paddington to Heathrow Airport, facilitating Crossrail and Heathrow Express operation.

So, what is special about the ECML? This will be the very first UK main line to be equipped over a considerable distance and where conventional lineside signals will be removed once all operational and technical elements are fully proven.

(Reproduced from "RailEngineer")

(For more details see [ERTMS on the East Coast Main Line - Rail Engineer](#))

Sarah tells us that her presentation will cover the East Coast Digital Programme - to include engineering aspects and how implementation brings the line up to European standards. The associated benefits will also be covered to include employment opportunities, carbon reduction, less maintenance and a safer railway for passengers and staff.

Swanning Around – London in 1980's

- Jeremy Harrison

31st January at Welwyn Garden City



Preserved LNER A4 Pacific No. 4498 'Sir Nigel Gresley' and ETHEL head a 'Santa's Steam Special' - from Marylebone to High Wycombe, about to take the Northolt line at Neasden South Junction in December 1987.

Photos: Jeremy Harrison



Capitalcard publicity leaflet (featuring swan), with a London Transport District Line Train of D Stock approaching Barking.

In 1986 Network SouthEast and London Transport introduced the One-Day Capitalcard, giving unlimited travel across Greater London by Train, Tube and Bus, with the slogan 'All You Need To Swan Around London'. Jeremy Harrison took advantage of this to Swan Around London with his camera, photographing the Capital's Railway Scene as it then was: whatever was to be seen, from mundane tube trains to steam specials. This presentation covers the period from 1987 to 1992: over 30 years later, a challenge to the audience is to see what (if anything) hasn't changed!

Questionnaire (for those who have not yet responded!)

Membership Survey – Branch Meetings

As reported, the branch currently operates with a monthly financial deficit and this cannot continue indefinitely. This questionnaire is a continuation of the consultation to seek remedies.

Please continue and complete if, given the right circumstances, you would attend branch meetings. Email your responses (the numbers corresponding to your choices) to Dave Elsdon (email: hitchin@rcts.org.uk) by 14th January 2023. Feel free to add comments that you think might help.

Saving money. One option is to change the meeting location(s), especially if less costly venues can be found.

Where would you like the meetings to be?

11 Hitchin 12 WGC 13 Digswell 14 Don't mind 15 Other (*please specify*)

Preferred day(s)

21 Mon 22 Tue 23 Wed 24 Thur 25 Fri 26 Don't mind

Preferred time?

31 Morning 32 Afternoon 33 Evening 34 Don't mind

How would you normally expect to get to meetings?

41 Car 42 Bus 43 Train 44 Cycle 45 Walk 46 Other

Increasing attendance. The membership has a diverse range of interests and, to maximise attendance at meetings we need ensure our broad programme is relevant.

What types of presentation interest you most?

Era 51 Steam 52 Modern 53 Any

Location 61 UK 62 Overseas 63 Any

Topic 71 Traction 72 Operational 73 Any

Increasing donations. Requested donations almost certainly need to increase.

What amount would you suggest we ask members/guests to contribute per meeting?

Members 81 £2 82 £3 83 £4 Guests 91 £3.50 92 £4.50 93 £5

(Currently £2)

(Currently £3.50)

Please send in your responses by 14th January.

If you don't normally attend meetings, this is an opportunity to tell us why not.

Puzzle Solutions

Solution to the puzzle in this issue (page 11):

1. Hull. 2. Askham. 3. Parthia. 4. Perth. 5. Yarmouth. 6. Nederland Line. 7. Eastbourne.
8. Wainwright. 9. Yalton. 10. Eastleigh. 11. Ayr. 12. Royal Scot. 13. Tinsley.
14. Over. 15. Yaxley. 16. Old. 17. Underley Hall.

Solution: HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU

Martin Elms

And a Final Photo



*Nene Valley Railway - Wansford Station
Featuring the newly repaired crossing gates*

Photo credit: Steve Lacey

Railway Ramblings is published by the committee of the Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch of The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society. Such committee does not endorse any personal opinions expressed in this publication. The committee comprises Steve Lacey (Chairman), David Elsdon (Secretary), Paul Holloway (Treasurer), John Dossett (Newsletter Editor) and Roger Moulden. The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation Registered with the Charities Commission.