

Railway Ramblings

Issue 153

April 2023

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



*37510 brings new stock units 720559 and 720105 through Mead Lane, Hertford
23 February 2023*

Photo credit: Mikki Hart

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

Special 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 April 2023

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

11th April **Nothwards from Kings Cross** *Rob Freeman*

At Welwyn Garden City (14:00-16:30, doors open from 13:30)

25th April **The Epping Ongar Railway – Past, Present & Future**
Eddie Veckranges

Note: This presentation will immediately follow the AGM, which will start at 14:00

During May 2023

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

9th May **More from The Peter Bland Collection** *Bryan Cross*

At Digswell, Welwyn (14:00-16:30, doors open from 13:30)

30th May **Railtours and Specials from the 1980's** *John Day*

Donations are 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 have been reviewed and, with effect from the May meetings, will increase to £3 for members and £5 for non-members. (For the April meetings the old rates of £2 and £3.50 will apply).

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

The meeting on 25th April will be held at the Methodist Church, Ludwick Way/Cole Green Lane junction, Welwyn Garden City, Herts AL7 3PN

The meeting on 30th May will be held at Digswell Village Church Hall, Warren Way, Digswell, Welwyn AL6 0DH

Please note the change of southern venue and the new donation rates.



David Cole – Obituary

David Cole (RCTS 4799)
1932-2023

David was one of the stalwarts of the RCTS for very many years. He first joined the Society as a member of the London Branch in 1950 which, in those days, covered a large area around the Capital including the Home Counties. As far as can be established he was never on the branch organising committee, but took part in many of their activities, which in those days involved rail tours as well as works and shed visits. He joined the Society Management Committee (MC) in 1971 as Treasurer, a post he held until 1978 when he took over from John Sweet as MC Chairman. He continued in this roll until 1982 when he switched rolls to become Society Exhibition Officer, a position he held until 1989 before handing over to Bob Ballard. He was a stickler for accuracy & records at exhibitions with the cash from the sales of books, photographs and slides having to tally exactly. His MC life continued until 1992 when he stepped aside to allow others to be brought onto the Committee.

In 1981 he was involved in the opening of Ipswich Branch overseeing that everything was in order. Later in the early 1990's, along with the late Eric Palmer, he was responsible for starting other Branches close to the perimeter of the M25. One of these startups that David and Eric arranged was the Watford Branch of which he was also their inaugural Chairman. Having to travel from his home for many years, in Hitchin, a journey of around 20+ miles each way, he felt that with the growth of new homes in the Hitchin/Stevenage area it would be a viable proposition to start a Branch locally, hence the start of Hitchin Branch in 2001. One of his assistants at this time was Cyril Crawley, assisted by John Day and Bob Ballard. Cyril lived in Welwyn Garden City and along with David felt there could be sufficient interest to extend Hitchin Branch to WGC for some meetings. Of course, they were right and the rest of this story is now history.

David was the original Chairman of the London & Home Counties group of branches, which was a forerunner of today's regional meetings. These were sometimes held in New Zealand House where David was employed for around forty years. I can recall that even at home David would have Society photographs out on his lounge table, identifying each location and labelling them to go into the Society's collection. He was a true hard-working Society member right through until well into his eighties, when a serious back injury really caught up with him, even so his interest and enthusiasm were still there. He came to our Branch meeting at Hitchin on 10th January this year because he wanted to understand what Siemens were doing with the new digitalised signalling in our area on the ECML.

Outside of the RCTS David was a member of The Welsh Highland Railway, which he visited whenever he could. Also, he and Mary often toured in Europe by train although his interest there was scenic rather than the rolling stock and railways operations. Other holidays were spent going on many cruises, which they both loved.

David Elsdon/Bob Ballard



Chairman's Platform

It is with great sadness that we report the recent death of David Cole, whose obituary from the branch is published this newsletter. Before I was even a member of the RCTS, David was an active member, setting up first a branch in Watford and subsequently our branch here. When I first joined the Society, he was Chairman here and I used to help him with odd tasks, such as exhibitions and moving RCTS stock around (nothing changes!). At that time the national Society had a storage facility in "Access", in Stevenage, and David was transferring slides back and forth to his summerhouse, as he was involved in the immense task of captioning the collection, a task which continues at Leatherhead to this day. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the funeral on 21st March as I was in Norway at the time, but I know other members of the Committee represented us at the funeral. Thank you David for all you did for us.

This month, at Welwyn Garden City, we have our AGM. As a break from the past, we are not then going to depend on volunteers to give presentations. Instead, we will have a full presentation about the Epping Ongar Railway, which will start immediately after the AGM business. To make this work we need to aim to complete the AGM as quickly as possible, consistent with doing it properly. This is achievable if you let me know, in advance, of any questions you want to raise.

In the March issue of *Railway Ramblings* we published the results of the Questionnaire about the branch future. Informed by that data your committee have now discussed what actions will be taken. I will formally report on the "Branch Future" at our AGM, but I can now tell you the outcomes.

Regarding venues - day-of-the-week and time of meetings will continue as at present but we are looking to change venues to reduce costs. With the vast majority travelling by car the availability of parking is more important than location although, if possible, we will seek locations where bus/train travel is also a practical proposition. Following a very positive reaction from those attending the February Welwyn Garden City meeting we have now made arrangements to change the future meeting venue from Welwyn Garden City to Welwyn (Digswell). Digswell Village Church Hall has easy car parking and is a short walk from Welwyn North station. Hitchin meetings are, at present unaffected.

The popularity of various presenters and the topics presented is an important factor and although it seems that many of you would come regardless, it does make sense to try to ensure that choices for our future programme are as popular as possible. We need to see an increase in the numbers attending.

In this edition of *Railway Ramblings* you will find another short Questionnaire. From its nature you will find that it is only really applicable to those who have attended some meetings, but who else can we ask? If you are like me, you may also find it difficult to recall presenters and their topics – the society website www.rcts.org.uk can come to your rescue as our Branch pages contain both brief reports on past events and copies of this newsletter. If you can help to guide us please do!

Finally, I turn to the amounts requested as donations. As I have said before, the current rates are not sustainable. With effect from the May 2023 meetings the new rates will be £3 for members and £5 for non-members. I believe that these rates are still a bargain – especially as they will continue to include tea/coffee & biscuits, as well as entry into the prize draw.

Steve Lacey

Reminder - Branch AGM

This will be at Welwyn Garden City on 25th April 2023. As a supplement to the February copy of *Railway Ramblings* you should have received the 2023 AGM agenda, the minutes of the 2022 AGM, together with the usual Officers' reports for last year (2022-23).

Please give these a read. If you have any questions, then if you can give advance notice this will enable the Officers to give a considered reply. Importantly, please note that for this year, the AGM will be immediately followed by a presentation about the Epping & Ongar Railway. I would really like as many as possible to attend.

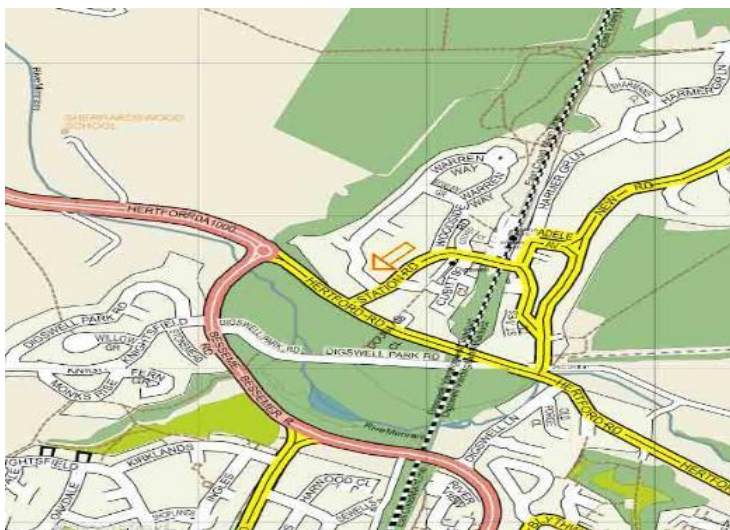
Steve Lacey

New Meeting Venue

Starting with the meeting on 30th May 2023 meetings in the south of our area will move from Welwyn Garden City to Digswell Village Church Hall, Digswell, Welwyn AL6 0DH



Digswell Village Church is located in Warren Way, Digswell. In this photograph the hall and adjacent car park are to the right of the picture. Apart from the car park there is on-street parking available in Warren Way and other roads. The parking restriction only applies 09:00 to 11:00 (to discourage commuters using the station).



Welwyn North Station is a short walk away.

The red arrow indicates the location of the hall.

The April Puzzle – Martin Elms

This month, the first letter of the answer to the following questions will spell the name of a much-missed joint railway:

1. Locomotive depot with code 81C	
2. ? Bulleid, a Southern Railway Locomotive Superintendent	
3. Railway station near Whitemoor Marshalling yard	
4. Name of locomotive 61001	
5. Station between Bedford and Bletchley	
6. South West Scottish port for Larne	
7. Station at Northern terminus of Central Line	
8. Name of locomotive D854	

9. Class name of diesel locomotives D9000 – D9021	
10. Station between Cromer and Mundesley	
11. Manufacturer of engines that powered diesel shunters in Class 02	
12. Name of locomotive W20	
13. Scottish junction station for Boddam	
14. Tunnel near Bath	

As usual, best of luck – my solutions are on page 16. No cheating!

Martin Elms

“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.

Questionnaire

Reader Survey – Branch Presentations

Following on from the survey at the end of 2022, your committee would now like your views about the presentations most recently offered. The responses received will be used to identify popular presenters and topics - and thus help shape the balance of our future programme.

Listed are the presentations at both Hitchin and WGC since the beginning of 2022. If you attended more than one of the Hitchin meetings please rate the presentations by awarding up to 6 points (in total) to them. You can distribute your points over as few or as many presentations as you wish. (eg HM 2, HE 2, HH 1, HB 1.) For those who attended at WGC, please rate the WGC meetings.

If you attended meetings at both venues please rate each separately.

Email your responses (the codes and the number of points you award) to Dave Elsdon (email: hitchin@rcts.org.uk.) by 30th April 2023. Feel free to add comments that you think might help.

			Hitchin			WGC	
	Month	Code	Topic	Presenter	Code	Topic	Presenter
2022	J	HA	Railway Heritage Trust	Andy Savage	WA	North from Euston	David Jackman
	F	HB	A1 Class - Prince of Wales	Rob Morland	WB	Hatfield – St Albans	Alistair Cameron
	M	HC			WC	Nepal & Pakistan	Geoff Warren
	A	HD	The Year 1965	Geoff Plumb	WD	Modern Image Not Quite	Peter Robins
	M	HE	Tay Bridge Disaster	Rudi Newman	WE	Last Half Century	Geoff May
	J	HF	UK Passenger Services	Paul Chancellor	WF	Branch Line to Disney	Steve Lacey
	J	HG	Journalist to Grumpy Man	David Percival	WG	GNR and Kings Cross	Ray Schofield
	S	HH	Hitchin, Last Few Years	Richard Allen	WH	York to Edinburgh	Stephen Gay
	O	HJ	Swiss Railways	Steve Ollive	WJ	GWR Preserved Locos	Richard Morris
	N	HK	The Southern	Des Shepherd	WK	Paris Metro	Mike Bunn
	D	HL	Potton & Hitchin	George Howe	WL	GNR to Enfield	Dave Cockle
2023	J	HM	Siemens ECML Project	Luke Regers	WM	Around London	Jeremy Harrison
	F	HN	Isle of Man	Geoff Brockett	WN	Railwayman Remembers	Dave Cockle
	M	HP	Harringworth Viaduct	John Hillier	WP	Patriot Project	Colin Hall

Help?

Trying to recall meetings some months ago may be difficult but your help in this will be much appreciated. Meeting reports (and back copies of *Railway Ramblings*) can be found on the Branch Pages of the society website: www.rcts.org.uk



Nene Valley Railway

Orton Mere Signal Box - Victim of Arson Attack.



This signal box which controls crossing trains at Orton Mere and trains entering the Nene Valley Railway from the mainline connection, via the Fletton loop, was torched on Sunday night 12th March, along with a number of cars in nearby locations. The box was extensively damaged, despite the prompt action of the Fire Brigade. Plans are already in place to enable the continued safe running of trains and the use of the loop to allow trains (including *Sir Nigel Gresley*) to access the NVR. One can only speculate as to the sad lives these people lead, that makes this a highlight (no pun intended) to their weekend. I can already hear people mumbling about the “youth of today”, but let me counter this with the fact that two of our younger supporters have set up a “Go Fund It” page which, in 3 days, has already raised £6,300. Their mother explained:

“My son, Harry, and his friend, Oliver, are both 12-year old boys. They attend Nene Park Academy School and are both extremely passionate about trains. Both boys have had this love from a very young age ...they live, sleep and dream trains! Most of their free time is spent watching and photographing the trains, at Orton Mere. They enjoy talking to the friendly volunteers at the station. When they’re at home Harry and Oliver spend time running their Hornby and LGB train sets. When they heard about the signal box fire on the NVR both boys were mortified and can’t understand why some people want to spoil what others enjoy! They want to help put things right! They want to take action by trying to raise as much money as they can to help restore the signal box. They feel, if they help, the trains can soon be back on track again. Then, of course, they can both go back down to the railway and enjoy their passion!”

If you wish to help in their aim, please visit their Just Giving page by following the link:

https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/sarah-walker-788?utm_term=PY4Q2z73e



Harry and Oliver beside Orton Mere signal box

Article and photos provided by Steve Lacey



The Flying Codman: 12th April

- Daytime Service - Fish, Chips and Steam!



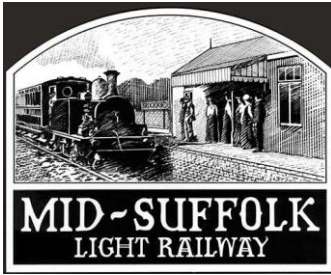
Enjoy one of the NVR daytime Fish and Chip Services with Family and Friends. Jump on board one of the heritage train whilst you all tuck into a freshly cooked chippy tea from Fryz of Bretton Chip Shop.

Your ticket will reserve you a seat on the 14:00 train that departs Wansford Station and your pre-ordered meal will be served to your table when you get to Orton Mere Station.

For more details and to book tickets:

[The Flying Codman - Daytime Service | Nene Valley Railway Ltd \(nvr.org.uk\)](http://nvr.org.uk)

Details courtesy the Nene Valley Railway



Mid Suffolk Light Railway

Easter Steam-Up

9th Apr 2023 – 10th Apr 2023

The first major weekend opening of 2023 will be the Easter Steam-Up.

All the Middy attractions, Museum, Restoration Shed, Tea Room and The Middy real ale bar will be open and ready for a great weekend's entertainment.



The visitor loco 'Marcia', the 99-year old Peckett 0-4-0T from the Kent & East Sussex Railway will be completing her outings with us this weekend before returning home, so this will be the last chance for seeing this delightful little engine working on the Middy. Not to be missed.

And of course, there will be the traditional Easter Bunny Hunt for the younger visitors!

Tickets from the Ticket Office on the day or pre-book at [Book Tickets - Mid-Suffolk Light Railway Museum \(mslr.org.uk\)](https://mslr.org.uk) to save waiting in the queue.

Bank Holiday Steam Up

30th Apr 2023

A typical Middy Steam Railway Day with regular steam trains made up of genuine Victorian 4-wheeled coaches, which you can ride as often as you like, and all the usual attractions open including the Museum, the Restoration Shed, Bar Coach, Tea Room and Souvenir Shop.



Plus, plus, plus, a major added attraction. The Deputy Chairman of the Guild of Railway Artists, Malcolm Root, will be staging an exhibition of some of his magnificent paintings and will be at the Middy during the day.

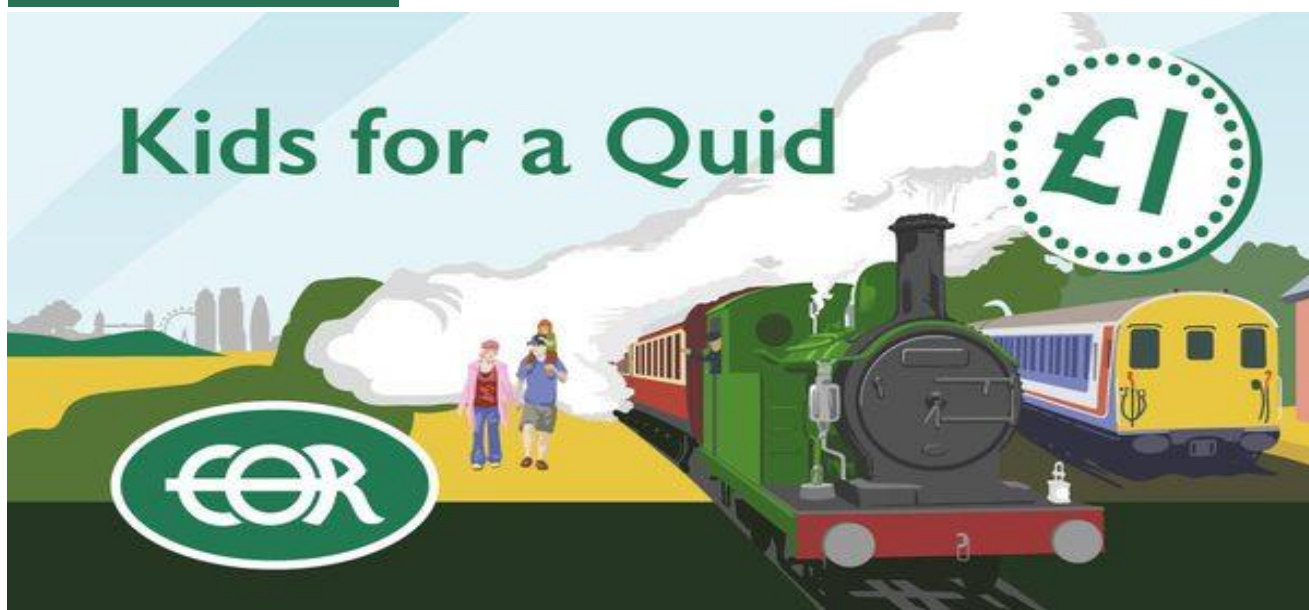
Opening time 10.30, first train 11.00.

Reproduced courtesy of the MSLR



Epping Ongar Railway

14th, 15th, 16th April and 31st May only.



Keep the (grand)kids entertained on a day out with a steam-hauled train service when the Child tickets are just £1! (Standard child fares apply on other dates.)

Ride both steam and diesel trains. One of the EOR steam engines is expected to grace the rails, alongside a diesel locomotive. Regular services will operate between Ongar, North Weald and Epping Forest.



Ride a traditional London Bus.

The EOR heritage buses run regularly throughout the day to connect their train services with the tube at Epping. Start your journey there, or take a ride during the day.

There is a buffet at North Weald Station and a small sweet and cake shop at Ongar - but with big tables on the trains you can also bring an 'indoor picnic' - the bar's not open these special days, but you can bring your own bubbly! You can purchase bacon baguettes, freshly-baked sausage rolls, snacks and pasties to make your picnic as delicious as possible.

Keep an eye-out over the countryside and forests as you travel - you may see cows, a deer, a buzzard and, from some parts of the line and on a good day, a view of London's skyline. All this from the comfort of your seats!

Or, just watch the trains as they go by. Enjoy the sound and smell of a steam locomotive. Try to drag your children from the footbridge when a steam engine goes underneath!



The Penny Salon micro-gallery at Ongar station will be open, and will have a photographic exhibition entitled "Beeching and after – 60 years since the Beeching Report changed the face of British railways".

If the weather is favourable, there are a number of local walks from both North Weald and Ongar stations. Your ticket is valid all-day, so why not break your journey and explore the historic town of Ongar, or take a stroll through the local countryside and return on a later train?

The following fares apply on 14, 15 and 16 April and 31 May only. Standard child fares apply on other dates.

Adult: £18. Child: £1. Under 3s are free - no ticket needed.

These fares offer unlimited travel on all EOR train and heritage bus services on the day of your visit!

With these fares you can afford to bring not just your kids but your kids' friends too! Grandparents can afford to be generous and ALL the grandchildren can come together.

For further details and to make bookings:

[Buy Tickets | Epping Ongar Railway \(eorailway.co.uk\)](http://eorailway.co.uk)

Details reproduced courtesy Epping Ongar Railway

Note: Eddie Veckranges, from the EOR, is giving the presentation at Welwyn Garden City on 25th April.

Newsletter Distribution

This e-newsletter, *Railway Ramblings*, 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



Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway

Special Steaming Day – Sunday 16th April



GWR Steam Locomotive No.4144 is on hire from Didcot Railway Centre and will be hauling 1950s period carriages for a Special Steaming Day with extra return trips of the line on Sunday 16 April 2023. In addition, railcar W55024 will operate several shortened trips from Chinnor for added variety and interest.

Join the heritage trains at either Chinnor or Princes Risborough stations – for details see the following: [Arriving « Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway \(chinnorrailway.co.uk\)](http://chinnorrailway.co.uk)

On board, relax and enjoy the panorama of the Chiltern foothills - as the scenery gently unfolds past your window you may spot some of the local wildlife and the ubiquitous Red Kites whirling overhead!

For more information please visit the Journey Guide: [Journey Guide « Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway \(chinnorrailway.co.uk\)](http://chinnorrailway.co.uk)

Standard Travel tickets are issued as go-as-you-please All-Day Rovers and are valid on every train. Stay for a whole or half-day - or come for just one return journey if you only prefer a taster - you can also choose to break your journey at Chinnor or Princes Risborough. No seat reservations are required - which means that you can choose to sit in any seating areas on every train - look through the carriages and choose those that you like – C&PRR aim to provide ample seats according to the time of day!

For fares and timetable enquiries: [Buy Tickets « Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway \(chinnorrailway.co.uk\)](http://chinnorrailway.co.uk)

Information reproduced courtesy of the C&PRR

The April Presentations (1)

Northwards from Kings Cross - Rob Freeman

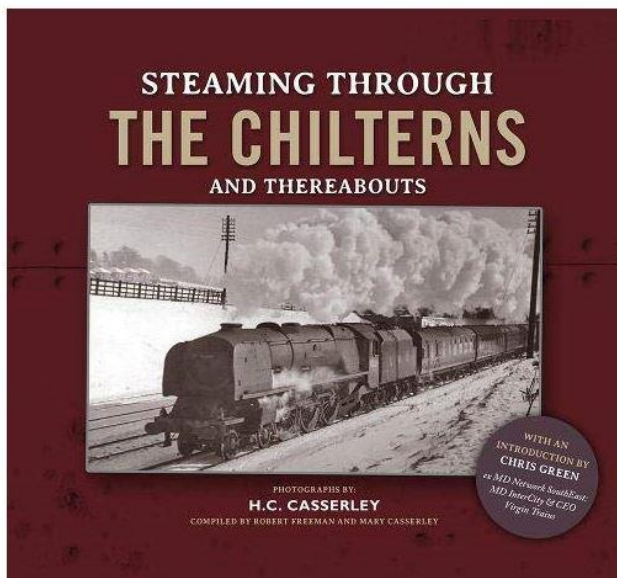
11th April at Hitchin

525 A H Peppercorn
10.05 Leeds-Kings Cross
Grantham 8th July 1948



Courtesy of the H C Casserley Collection

This Gems presentation is from the H C Casserley Collection which consists of eight sections, covering a broad selection of topics around the country. The section given priority for this evening will be Northwards from Kings Cross. The other topics included in the presentation (in no particular order) will be Westward from Paddington, Great Eastern Lines, Woodhead, Early Diesels, South West from Glasgow, Duchesses at Berkhamsted, and Un-rebuilt Merchant Navy Pacifics. Mary Casserley has given permission for Rob Freeman to show these, with no fee.



The book full of more HCC photos "Steaming Through the Chilterns and Thereabouts" will be promoted at the meeting – with a £2 discount for RCTS Members! Rob will have signed copies of the book with him.

The April Presentations (2)

The Epping Ongar Railway: Past, Present & Future - Eddie Veckranges

25th April at Welwyn Garden City



Ongar MPD 1938

Eddie has provided the following introduction to his presentation:

The present-day Epping Ongar Railway was born as a heritage railway in October 2004. This was 10 years after the closure of the underground 1994.

My talk will take you through the history of the branch to the present day, when in the 1860s it started as a steam railway and now steam has returned once again to grace the scenic line.

We will see how the line started from the 1850s as part of the Great Eastern Railway's plan to push east toward Chelmsford or Braintree. It never got there and remained on London's periphery in Essex eventually becoming part of the London Underground's expansion after WW2.

The Ongar section in Essex fell under the underground control, as there was no link to British Railways. This meant the Underground had a line which from the start was not commercially viable, being a single track well into Essex unlike say the Metropolitan in the North West of London going into Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire. The Met and the Central Line both cross the M25 boundary.

This Cinderella section of the London Underground unfortunately never had a long-term future. Closure came in September 1994. Soon after the Epping Ongar section was put up for sale by the Department for Transport, with the successful bid aiming to run trains over the section. The Line opened in October 2004 as heritage railway with the aim of eventually running steam trains.

(continues >)



GWR Hall Class 4953 "Pitchford Hall" at work on the Epping Ongar Railway

Today the railway runs a combination of steam and diesel trains using various slam door rolling stock built in the 1960s and 1970s.

Photos and text provided by Eddie Veckranges EOR

Reminder: This presentation will follow on immediately from the branch AGM



Join the Branch Committee

Please consider joining your branch committee.

Anyone prepared to take on the committee role is invited to discuss this with Steve Lacey or Dave Elsdon in the first instance.

Puzzle Solutions

Solution to the puzzle in this issue (page 6):

1. Southall. 2. Oliver. 3. March. 4. Eland. 5. Ridgmont. 6. Stranraer. 7. Epping. 8. Tiger. 9. Deltic. 10. Overstrand. 11. Rolls Royce. 12. Shanklin. 13. Ellon. 14. Twerton.

Solution: SOMERSET and DORSET

Martin Elms

What Went on at the Ally Pally?



RCTS stand, Alexandra Palace, 19 March 2023

March 18th & 19th saw the annual “London Festival of Model Railways” exhibition at the Alexandra Palace. The RCTS stand was staffed by our branch on behalf of the society nationally but, as the cost of having a full stand - which would also have allowed us to sell from our extensive branch stock of pre-owned books, has now become completely uneconomic so we were only selling new RCTS publications - and recruiting members.

Over the two days eight new members were signed-up, from many parts of the country and £400 of books sold. Quite a few RCTS members dropped by for a chat and many sample-copies of the *Railway Observer* were handed out.

Steve Lacey and Dave Elsdon set up the RCTS stand on the Friday and staffed it on the Saturday. Dave Elsdon and John Dossett staffed the stand on the Sunday and dismantled it after the show closed to the public.

Quite exhausting but enjoyable.

Exhibitions During April

1st April

Royston Model Railway Club

Bassingbourn Village College

South End

Bassingbourn SG8 5NJ

Open 10:30 to 16:00

Admission £5, and accompanied under 16's free.

15th April

Mill Green Museum & Working Mill “Railway Event”

Bush Hall Lane

Hatfield AL9 5PD.

Open 10.00 to 17.00

Admission £5, children £1.50

22nd April

Luton Model Railway Club

Stopsley High School

St. Thomas' Road

Luton LU2 7UX

Open 10:30 to 17:00

Admission £8, children £4, family £20

29th April

De Havilland Model Railway Club

Ludwick Way Methodist Church

Ludwick Way

Welwyn Garden City AL7 3PN

Open 10:00 to 17:00

Admission £5, children £2

We will have an RCTS stand at each of these events. Please drop by and say hello.

Helping at Exhibitions

Any branch member who would like to assist at future exhibitions should speak to Dave Elsdon.

New Members

We welcome Philip Clarke, of North London (N22), Callum Amos, of Welwyn and Nick Marvell, of Stevenage, as new members of the RCTS and to the Hitchin and Welwyn Garden City Branch.

They all joined when they visited our stand at the “London Festival of Model Railways”.

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The Travelling Companions

– a short story by Martin Elms

I hurried along Platform One at Kings Cross on this cold January night intending to catch the 17:14 train to Cambridge. As expected, the train was very full. I hoped to find the leading coach would have a seat for me, as passengers didn't usually walk this far. This coach would also suit me as the train was booked into platform one at Cambridge and I would be near the exit gate.

Whistles were loud and shrill with imminent departure time. I clambered in the nearest coach door of the steam shrouded train. It was unusual, as the leading coach was a corridor type with compartments instead of the usual open one. I shuffled along the corridor and, after almost giving up hope of a seat, found the front second-class compartment only had three passengers. As I slid the stiff door open, I felt the heat and the stuffiness of the compartment. This comprised of mixed odours including perfume and musty seats combined with a tang of stale cigarettes.

I settled down next to the door, facing the rear of the train, being careful to shut it firmly. Glares from my new travelling "companions" gave me the impression that, as well as being unwanted, I dare not leave any sort of gap between the door and the frame!

The train lurched forwards as the train's Class 47 locomotive erupted into a noisy smoky departure, perhaps it was as well that the window was tightly closed.

The dim compartment lights made the initial reading of my evening paper difficult but about halfway through Gasworks tunnel the train began to accelerate and after a while the lights grew slightly brighter. I settled down to read.

Suddenly I found my concentration lapsed. The newspaper was becoming a distraction to me. I became fascinated by my companions, in particular their dress sense! I surreptitiously glanced at them over my paper. The man opposite to me had the appearance of an elderly retired Colonel, perhaps from of a long-forgotten army regiment. He sported a complete huge walrus-type moustache. He was wearing a trilby hat firmly placed on neatly trimmed grey hair. Wearing a baggy dark green checked suit shouted of someone living back in the 1930's. His trouser turn-ups were accompanied with black socks and highly polished heavy shoes. He was wearing a regimental tie which complemented his dress code, but he was definitely not dressed in the style of this year - 1974. He looked old fashioned as if he was an escapee from a west-end play about the army period of several decades ago. His posture in his seat was rigidly "militarily" upright. Reading a copy of the Times newspaper, which I could not read in the dim compartment lights, he appeared to be a contented gentleman.

My two other travelling companions were ladies. One old and the other middle-aged. Like the "colonel" both were dressed in what seemed to be old fashioned clothing. The older lady was dressed in a large mink coat. This was tightly buttoned up over a long flowery dress which spread out from the bottom of the coat. On her head was the most bizarre hat, complete with a face-covering net. The middle-aged lady was wearing a smaller, but equally strange out of mode, hat. This was adorned with a large feather decoration. She was wearing a two-piece skirt and jacket.

This, like the other two, was of a bygone period and style in dull green throughout. Stiletto heeled shoes and stockings complete with seams Both ladies had large handbags which occupied the empty seats beside them. This appeared to be an act of defiance to deny anyone to sit beside them!

I tried not to stare but could not resist glancing occasionally at them. I tried to guess where they could be from. More importantly to me was the question where were they going? Why were they all wearing this dated “get up dress code” - I filled my head with guesses more to amuse myself than using practical and local knowledge. Would their journey end at Cambridge?

I guessed they were from a West End play by Agatha Christie perhaps and did not have time to change after the performance. Alternatively, they could be travelling to a play and have changed into costume in advance, to save time and a dressing room, was another wild thought. Or perhaps going to a 1930's fancy dress party which I was sure they would win!!

The train continued on its way, and my companions, in the traditional British style, said nothing to anybody else. The two ladies did whisper occasionally, but only to each other. The younger one leaned right forward to catch the older one's voice.

The train jerked and slowed down. The ladies attempted to look through the well steamed-up dirty window.

“We are approaching Stevenage” I volunteered helpfully – I hoped.

They did not acknowledge me but stood up and made movements to vacate the compartment. Being a gentleman, I stood up to slide open the stiff heavy door and moved into the corridor to let them pass. I was rewarded for my action by a curt nod from the elder one and a faint smile from the younger as they swept by in a haze of expensive perfumes.

The “Colonel” suddenly almost leapt into action as he seemed latterly to realise where he was. He put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out and opened-up a pack of cigarettes – “Capstan” I noticed was the brand. With the ladies having vacated the compartment he lit a cigarette with an ancient looking petrol-wick lighter. He then exited, passing me with a nod of his head, and walked along the corridor. He kept a respectful distance behind the retreating ladies.

The train clumped, banged, and ground to a halt in the dimly lit Stevenage station. This was in the last period of operation and was soon due to be replaced on a new site.

“Now I know” I said aloud “They are appearing at the Gordon Craig Theatre in some 1930's play, I bet”

I could not resist another look at them. I slid open the window of the compartment we had been travelling in and looked out along the steam shrouded platform. A group of noisy rude teenagers passed by. I ducked my head in fear that one of them could hit or spit at me. They passed by, as I looked out again a few better-behaved passengers walked by towards the footbridge. There was no sign of my three companions anywhere on the platform.

Whistles blew, the train moved off and quickly accelerated away from the platform in another cloud of diesel smoke, steam, and fumes. I looked intently back to the station. There was no sign of them. I returned to the now empty compartment.

I saw the magazines the ladies had been reading on the seat. They had left them in their hurried exit from the train

One was “The Lady” dated December 1934. The other “Country Life for Oxfordshire” issue for January 1935. They were both in virtually mint condition!

The Colonel had left, on the seat he occupied, “The Times” newspaper dated 14th January 1935. It was almost in pristine condition but had been lightly used.

Were these theatre props? No, these were giving the appearance of having been newly published.

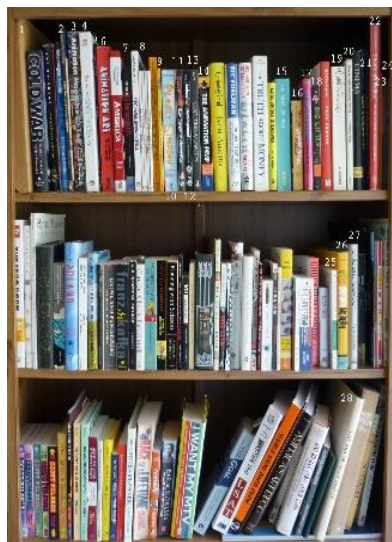
On the floor opposite me, obviously dropped by the Colonel, was a train ticket.

I picked it up and was amazed at the ticket travel information. I stared at it in disbelief.

A Third-Class Single from Norwich to Yarmouth dated 14th Jan 1935.

Martin Elms

Our Book-Table



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