Summer 2024

TOUCHPAPER

The Newsletter of the Royal Gunpowder Mills Friends Association
Registered Charity No. 1115237

AGM/Reunion Update

Watery connections to the GP Mills

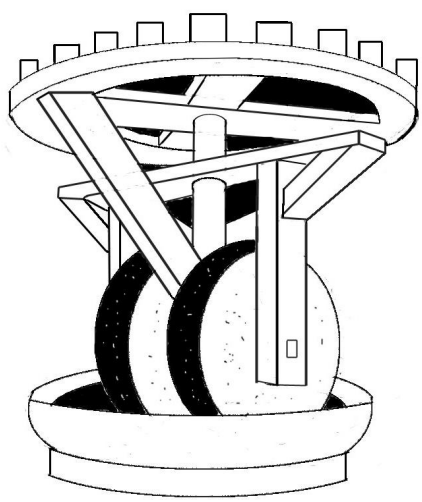
Another Cyclist's Encounter

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John Wilson Railway News

Obituaries:
Dr MC Black
Jim Burgess



Summer 2024

Officers of the Friends Association

Chairman

John Cook
63 Lakenheath
Southgate
London
N14 4RR

rgm.fa@virginmedia.com

Treasurer

John Cook
63 Lakenheath
Southgate
London
N14 4RR

rgm.fa@virginmedia.com

Secretary

Membership

Daphne Clements
56 Park Road
Enfield
EN3 6SR

wargmfa@btinternet.com

All enquiries relating to this newsletter and articles, not membership, should be addressed to:

Brian Clements
56 Park Road
Enfield
EN3 6SR

wargmfa@btinternet.com

Deadline for the next issue is August 24 2024

Editorial

Geoff Hooper has resigned from the Friends Committee and the post of Secretary has not yet been filled, hence no details on the previous page. Geoff has been a useful committee member for many years, with some gaps, and stepped in to do the secretary's job; we thank him for all his service. The post of secretary is currently vacant as is a committee seat; if anyone feels they are interested in helping to fill this place please contact the chairman or any other committee member before the AGM.

On the next page is important information on the AGM.

I have been busy with others working to replace the John Wilson Railway (JWR) station near the Main Lab. A report on this work appears at the end of this issue; the JWR team are very grateful to the Friends Committee for agreeing to finance this work that was necessary for safety reasons. Using reclaimed timber for the subframe saved us an estimated £250 but the Friends contribution was considerable.

Once again, I thank all those who have contributed although this is a thinner (at 26 pages) issue than we have had recently. I have a copy of the June 1997 Touchpaper that was 10 pages of A4 which would be about 20 pages in the current format. For many years it has been 32 pages. Any comments about size or content would be welcome, but if a larger size is thought to be better, we need fresh contributors.

Our records show that some have still not renewed, there is no renewal form in this issue and now that distribution is done by the printers it is not easy to remind individuals. If you know you have not renewed and intend to so do, please do it soon or you will not receive the next issue. If you do not wish to remain a member it would be helpful if you could let us know then we can remove your details. If you are uncertain about your renewal status please contact our membership secretary.

Brian Clements

SGM/AGM/Reunion Update

SGM/AGM/Reunion Lunch
Friday 28th June
10.30/11.00/12.00

The original date for this event had to be changed because the RGM has recently agreed a lucrative contract with a film company for a two week hire from 3-17th June. The filming will be covering most of the site with lorries and trailers in the car park and on the concrete pad.
In acknowledgement of the inconvenience caused RGM have offered to pay for the catering for lunch.
The SGM held on Friday 31st May, to consider an amendment to the Constitution, was inquorate so was adjourned until 10.30 Friday 28th June.
As per the Constitution, this meeting will be able to consider the amendment and vote accordingly.

Plan for the Event

10.00 Tea and coffee in the Women at War room opposite Walton House
10.30 SGM
11.00 AGM
12.15 Move to the Café
12.30 Buffet lunch
13.15 Group photo
13.30 Ride on JWR to the North Station and return
14.00 Ride on the tractor trailer around the North end of the site
The above is the plan but we all know what happens to well laid plans ….Hope to see lots of you at this event.

Daphne Clements

WARGMFA@btinternet.com

Watery connections to the GP Mills

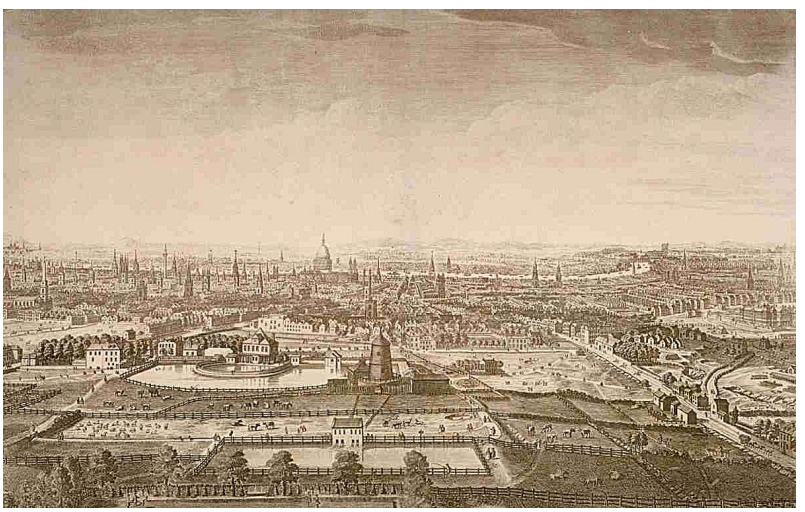
I note with interest that this year is the 300th anniversary of the birth of the celebrated civil and mechanical engineer John Smeaton, 1724 – 1792. Smeaton has a connection to the Royal Gunpowder (RGP) Mills at Waltham Abbey, because in 1767 he created a new design for edge runners to incorporate gunpowder, which was used here and elsewhere from then on in.

On learning of this anniversary I was reminded that I had encountered Smeaton before in relation to another site to which I have a connection. The site I refer to is New River Head (NRH) in Islington, where in the 1980s I was working in my first Water Industry job as a junior laboratory technician. To explain the Smeaton connection however, it is necessary to provide a short preamble about the New River to put this into context….

The New River connection

The NRH laboratories where I began my career were built in 1938 for the then Metropolitan Water Board. They were constructed specifically for their scientific operation, known as "Water Examination" (still being referenced in my time until the 1990s). The building remains today, grade 2 listed, but it has long since been repurposed into private flats. They form part of a much larger site with other buildings that was once occupied by a large circular pond, known unsurprisingly as The Round Pond. This is where the so-called New River once terminated on completing its course from near Ware in Hertfordshire. Since 1948 it has ended at reservoirs in Stoke Newington in east London. The New River is neither river nor new. It is in fact, a manmade channel and was established in its original much meandering form between 1609 and 1613 to bring a supply of fresh drinking water from springs in Hertfordshire to London. Like the RGP Mills, NRH dates to the seventeenth century and yet remains an operational site to this day.

By the eighteenth century demand for water in London had increased significantly. In response to this, in 1709 a new open reservoir was built, not quite on the NRH site, but nearby on higher ground. From this, water was distributed under gravity to the surrounding area, mainly around Clerkenwell and the city. Initially the power required to move the water uphill from The Round Pond at NRH to the new "High" or "Upper Pond," was provided by a wind powered pump resembling a windmill, constructed a year earlier in 1708. It was inevitably unreliable, only operable when the wind blew, and eventually in 1720 the sails were removed and it was abandoned. The base of it remains to this day. Wind power was then replaced with horse power, but this was little better than before. Improvements did not arrive until 1768, almost fifty years later, following the advent of steam engine technology.



London from Islington Hill, by Thomas Bowles, c. 1740

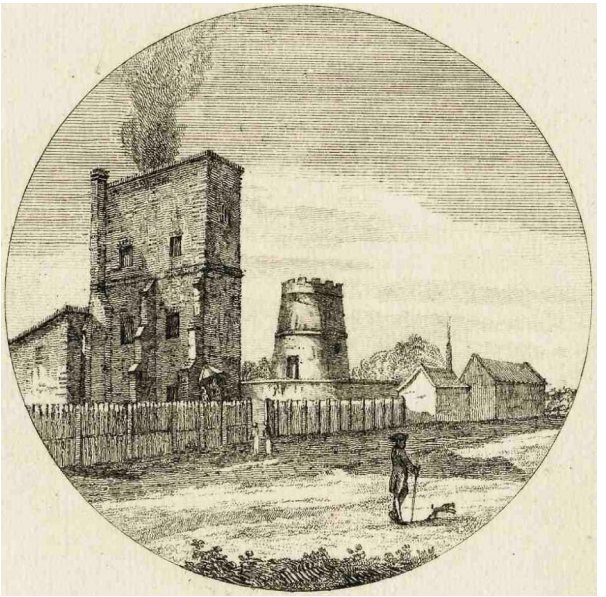
Centre left: The Round and Outer ponds at New River Head
Centre right: The sail-less windmill
Centre foreground: The Upper or High Pond

Note, St Paul's Cathedral centre top

Enter John Smeaton

John Smeaton, who had established himself as a leading engineer in the 1750s, was commissioned in 1766 to investigate methods of improving supply to the Upper Pond. He recommended a steam engine that would more than double the pumping power of the horse works and, he suggested, be cheaper. Designs for a Newcomen-type beam engine were prepared in 1767, incorporating experimental improvements. The steam engine, Smeaton's first, was erected in 1768 to the north-east of the former windmill, under the supervision of the recently appointed Robert Mylne. Mylne was one of the founder members, along with John Smeaton, of the Society of Civil Engineers, the first engineering society in the world, established in 1771. Mylne was by then the surveyor to the New River Company, which had been founded by Hugh Myddleton over a century earlier to construct and run the New River enterprise. NRH became its headquarters and it was still the head office of its descendant organisation Thames Water Authority, until 1987 when I was working there. The Authority, previously the Metropolitan Water Board from 1903 until 1974, was privatised two years later.

Smeaton’s new steam powered pump at NRH was more successful than its predecessors, but by 1774 it had become clear that it did not work anything like as efficiently as had been hoped. In 1811 it was replaced with a more powerful Boulton & Watt engine. These were again upgraded between 1897 and 1901, and steam power was eventually replaced by electricity in 1950.



New River Head engine house, as built in 1766–8

(John Smeaton, engineer), from the north-west c. 1780.
Behind, the former windmill of 1707–8

The River Lea connection

Production at the GP Mills at Waltham Abbey was utterly reliant on the River Lea, as were many other manufacturing businesses that were packed along its course to east London. By the eighteenth century, the NR Company also found itself needing to draw upon the same resource for its own purposes. This is because the springs at Amwell and Chadwell, that sourced the New River, were no longer reliably sufficient to meet the demand of a growing population and customer base in London. A solution to make up the deficit was therefore proposed by The New River Company by augmenting the supply from the River Lea via a channel connecting it to the New River, at the start of its course near Ware.

This was not popular with existing downstream businesses, resulting in widespread fear that lower flows and poorer sufficiency would negatively impact navigability and manufacturing. One of the biggest of these must surely have been the Gunpowder Mill, then in Walton family ownership. Only a few miles south at Waltham Abbey, it was reliant on the river to power its mills and keep pace with customer orders, none more important than those of the military who required its reputable product for national defence purposes.

To allay these fears, legal limits were placed on the amount of water that could be taken from the Lea - an early form of abstraction licensing if you will. This was not achieved in practice until 1770 however, when an automatic wooden balance system (working akin to a ball valve arrangement) was installed to manage flows through a sluice gate where the two water courses were connected. The architect and engineer responsible was Smeaton's contemporary, Robert Mylne, whose 1760 design for the first Blackfriars Bridge in London, was chosen over those of established engineers, such as John Smeaton.

Although the wooden balancing mechanism is now long gone, the Portland stone housing which encased it can still be seen today. In 1856 the cut connecting the Lea with the New River was straightened and a new, more modern flow gauge installed in another location nearby. The building that houses this remains and is still known as The "New Gauge." It was designed by Robert Milne's son, William Chadwell Mylne.

Robert and William Mylne were from a dynasty of talented architects and engineers, originally from Scotland. Their contribution to water supply technology, architecture, and civil and mechanical engineering was immense. Unlike Smeaton however their names and huge achievements are much less widely known.



The remains of the balancing tank designed by Robert Mylne in 1770



The New Gauge, designed by William Chadwell Mylne in 1856

Phil Smart

Another Cyclist's Encounter

In August 2023's edition of Touchpaper, Peter Stone entertainingly recalled a footpath encounter where he "stumbled across a photoshoot involving a beautiful naked girl." The incident I recall occurred after RARDE Waltham Abbey staff had emigrated to Fort Halstead. I remember a fellow colleague at Fort Halstead recalling a similar encounter in quite some detail. It made a huge impression upon him. In the interests of propriety, I shall spare you the gory details.

My colleague was a well-known member of Fort Halstead's cycling fraternity and regularly commuted to work on his bike. His route was via the Old Polhill road, now a barely accessible trackway, that descended down the North Downs scarp face from the Polhill Arms towards Twitton. One day, he set off on his commute not suspecting anything untoward to happen. Little did he know what was in store for him because along his route there was a photoshoot taking place where he was to find an attractive naked woman draped over a sports car.

Those involved in the photoshoot had chosen the location because they thought there was very little chance of being disturbed by prying eyes. Imagine the surprise of all concerned when my colleague burst into view and discovered the naked lady being photographed. My colleague told me that the woman covered herself up in embarrassment, and who can blame her? I suspect it was embarrassment all round. What he didn't tell me was whether it was a brief or a long encounter – it certainly was a close encounter. If that were I, I would have made my apologies and then promptly have left. It just goes to show that life can be full of surprises. Maybe, this tale should encourage us to cycle the paths and byways of England?

Martin Gough

The Science of Bombing

Although nominally ERDE was all one big happy family, looking back on it there was very little interchange between the North and South sites. In fact there was very little interchange between Superintendencies. The only cases I can remember were people who had done something wrong and were sent to P1 (Nitrocellulose Based propellants R&D) as a punishment. I have my own theory on this; Superintendents did not like to lose their experienced staff!

However, on one of the very few occasions that I ventured onto the North Site (I have no idea why) I found myself in the library. I was not looking for anything in particular, but was just wasting time, when I spotted a book on the bombing of Tokyo. It was an American scientific treaty on the theory of creating a Firestorm. A Firestorm is created as a result of the heat from an original fire creating an updraft, which then sucks in more and more surrounding material to feed the fire. The book laid down the conditions needed to produce a Firestorm such as wind strength, type of buildings, density of housing and difficulty in firefighting. It suggested a density and frequency of bombing, together with the mixture of bomb types required. Wikipedia puts the casualties at 100,000 dead. It also states that technically it may not have been a true Firestorm due to the strength of the prevailing wind. I was a bit shocked. I had heard of Dresden but not of the Tokyo Firestorm. I had not appreciated how much careful planning was needed; I thought you just kept bombing.

A TV programme on the Blitz claimed that on the night that inspired Bomber Harris's famous "They sowed the wind and now they are going to reap the whirlwind" speech the Germans were trying to create a Firestorm in London.

They had calculated that the River Thames would be at a very low tide and knew this would complicate firefighting. The story went that the German aircraft turned for home earlier than planned due to a forecast of poor weather approaching. This proved to be incorrect but spared London from a Firestorm. I discovered from my own investigations in the National Archives that the Germans had a scientific approach to bombing themselves. There would be a mix of bombs used. Delayed action fused HE bombs would penetrate the ground giving an earth shock. This would disrupt water, electric and gas mains. And so hamper firefighting and ensure fires escalated. There would be surface burst bombs and parachute mines to damage housing as far as possible. And there would be incendiary bombs* and petrol bombs as part of the mix to create fires and maybe a Firestorm on this occasion. The 1Kg incendiary bombs consisted of a magnesium alloy body filled with thermite. Live versions still crop up on mantlepieces to this day. In the Archives I came across the fact that the Germans dropped petrol bombs, but I had never heard of them before, nor could a quick Google search turn anything up. I assume that it was a form of Napalm.

And one last thought. Every bombing incident was dealt with by an onsite emergency worker. Usually the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) Warden. He would contact the HQ Control to request help with rescue and firefighting etc. It was very well organised. The first thing that was always requested was the WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) wagon. They gave out tea and food, and I suspect, sympathy. I think that must have been very important for morale.

* When I was a child, my neighbour had worked for the Gas Board. He told me that during the war he was stationed on top of Gasometers. When incendiary bombs dropped on the gasometer, and broke through the roof, he would put a patch over the hole to stop the air getting in and mixing with the gas. Presumably the bomb burnt out harmlessly inside the gasometer.

Peter Stone

Potpourri

No, I do not know what it means either.

TOMS BALLS

Yes, you are right. The name was deliberately chosen to allow silly school boy jokes. I cannot remember who coined it.

Tom came to us from RARDE. This was an almost unheard of move in those days (pre privatisation) and I have no idea why he came. He also brought his wife with him, who had a job in the Admin. They were in the habit of walking the South Site together during the lunch hour. One day Tom came back to the office with a collection of balls. They seemed to be made of terracotta and were somewhere in size between a golf ball and a tennis ball. They were hollow with holes symmetrically arranged around them and the surface was scored as if by a large comb. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of them. Tom had found them by digging in the ground near to the Chemical Engineers offices. Why he was digging in the ground was not a question that occurred to me to ask at the time.

We were obviously intrigued and scratched our heads as to what they might have been made for. The best suggestion as I remember it, was they were the packing for a distillation column. I wonder if our readers have any other thoughts? And what would have been distilled on what would appear to have been an industrial scale?

Subsequent to my writing the above our ever vigilant Editor came up with the answer. They are Guttman Balls. Designed by a gentleman of the same name they were used in the manufacture of mixed acid as is used for nitrating Nitroglycerine and Nitrocellulose. They seem to have been packed into towers as a condensing medium above the vessels where the acids were mixed together.



Guttmann Ball

"After a serious explosion in 1894 following the recommendation of the subsequent Committee of Enquiry a second plant was erected in 1897, this time back on the original north site on Edmonsey Mead to the north. In 1904 the Quinton Hill plant was put into reserve and Edmonsey became the Waltham Abbey nitroglycerine producer."

[Extract frm Les Tucker's article in Touchpaper June 2003. At sometime the South Site plant would have been dismantled and was the source of balls. Ed.]

YOU ARE FREE TO GO

When I first worked on the “Plant” I was baffled by the use of this term. It was used by the process workers as a swear word substitute. The explanation, I eventually discovered, was quite convoluted. We had a Scientist called Jim (Titch) Lermitt. He was very much an old-fashioned gentleman in the very best sense, with emphasis on “Gentle”. Rumour had it that he had gone to a boarding school somewhere on the South Coast that was so genteel that they went out for Sunday afternoon tea. On one occasion the lads had finished a job and the Chargehand said “Okay you can all F**K Off now”. Jim apparently said “Don’t say that, say You are free to go”. Hence the use as a swear word substitute.

BLOOD TESTS

From time to time, we all had a blood test at the surgery. It was carried out by a man who sat the other side of a desk with a tube in his mouth. He never said a word. Rumour had it that he was actually a pathologist and was very cheap. You walked in sat down and put your hand on the desk. He stabbed your index finger with a pointed piece of metal, not a needle. This was reused over and over again after being immersed in an alcohol solution. I have to say if someone tried to do that to me today, I would tell them that they were “Free to go”. The Process Workers complained that it was their social finger and that it would ruin their weekend.

If anyone does not understand any of the above; my advice to my children in such circumstances was always “Ask your mum”.

Peter Stone

Obituaries



Dr MC (Martin Charles) Black

Dr MC Black died suddenly and unexpectedly on 26th January 2024. His career largely revolved around academia. He studied Physics at Imperial College London from 1969 to 1972. He went on to teach Physics at the Langley Park School for Boys and, from 1987 to 1990, the Haileybury School, delivering excellent A-level results.

During his university years he became Honorary Secretary the Royal College of Science Union for 1971-1972, That was followed by a smooth transition into the following year, 1972-1973, whereby MC was elected to the sabbatical post of Imperial College Union Honorary Secretary, and was simultaneously Bar Committee Chair and one of very few who have edited “Felix” for just one edition. Felix is the student newspaper of Imperial College London. The newspaper is published weekly during term time with approximately 30 issues per year, and is distributed around the various Imperial College campuses.

Thus began MC’s decades of service to the Royal College of Science (RCS) Association , as Honorary Secretary (again) from 1983 to 1994, and culminating in his years as President from 1998 to 2002, He was a stalwart of the committee holding numerous offices over the years. This was a period during which he would also sit on Imperial College Court, and from 2004 there followed twenty years at the helm of the RCSA Trust as its Chairman.

To all these College roles, MC brought his trademark characteristics: a formality and diligence in administration, a fierce custodianship of funds and strong adherence to tradition.

He was a meticulous researcher for the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. Fifteen years of diligent research into Victorian Literature fed into his 'Detective Walks' around London, and, of course led to his Doctorate in Sherlockiana, a source of much pride to him. More recently, MC was proud to have established the 'Dr MC Black Prize' which has now been awarded twice to "one or more final-year undergraduate students within the Department of Physics adjudged to have produced outstanding laboratory based practical work not involving substantial use of computers". He was an active member. of the Institute of Physics.

MC spent a significant part of his career as publisher for the University of London, based in Senate House which was built over 23 Montague Place, where Arthur Conan Doyle had lived in 1891.

He is of course better known to the Friends Association members as a Trustee and Committee menber of the Friends, for a whille acting as Treasurer. He was an active volunteer on the Royal Gunpowder Mills site on days when it is open to the public where he could often be seen guiding and directing people from a table normally covered with paperwork and forms.He started that volunteering back in 2004. In recent years he was also a member of the Broxbourne Probus Club which meets monthly at the Brickenden Grange Golf Club, also the Hoddesdon Rotary Club which meets at the Sun Inn, Hoddesdon, every Monday.

Certainly a unique character who will be missed by many. Our thoughts are with all those who knew MC, and with his brother Andrew who lives over in Portland, Oregon.

Geoff Hooper

Jim Burgess



It is with much sadness that we have to report the passing away of Jim Burgess, or “Gentleman Jim” as he was fondly known to many, on 11th May 2024. Jim was born on 30th December 1940 in Luton. He had a difficult youth, in and out of hospital on account of his “gammy leg” but he bore it stoically, and went to university at Imperial College working for Professor Ubbelohde. The latter was a great connoisseur of wine, an interest from which the College benefitted greatly during the years when he was Chairman of its Wine Committee. Jim may well have participated!

He started work at the then Explosives Research and Development Establishment (ERDE) on 6th July 1967 and married Frances in 1970. They had two children; Geoffrey and Helen. Jim started work in the Explosives Branch which at the time was run by George Whitbread, and his direct line manager was John Hicks, for whom Jim had a very high regard. I worked with Jim from 1972 when I joined ERDE and we got up to a lot of "interesting" escapades. We were known by the then Safety Officer Vernon Griffiths as "the terrible twins". He was right! Notwithstanding this Jim was promoted to Principal Scientific Officer in 1978. He was moved into, and got out of, Royal Ordnance in the mid-1980s. Thereafter Jim did a variety of jobs, including Staff Officer to Alan Owen who was then Head of the Site. In 1988, shortly after Alan Owen's retirement he was promoted again, this time to Senior Principal Scientific Officer, running the Energetic and Polymeric Materials branch responsible for the assessment of propellants. He then moved into a classified job. His subsequent career took many twists and turns. When it came to site closure in 1991 he, like most of us, moved down to Fort Halstead. He subsequently spent a short time in MOD HQ in London before being transferred down to Abbey Wood in Bristol, and eventually back to Fort Halstead, to his spiritual home. There is no doubt that his work contributed much to the safety and security of the country.

So much for his professional career, what about his domestic life? Well, he was a very accomplished musician, both player and composer. He wrote no less than 48 pieces and was a pioneer in the use of Sibelius, a composition and notation computer software program, presented to him on his retirement, which facilitated the translation of rough written notes into professional looking scores.

He was also a keen member of the Social Club Music Society which used to meet upstairs in the Old Club.

On a broader basis he was a key player in the move of the Social Club from Powdermill Lane to its then new home in the North Site canteen. Regular readers of Touchpaper will know that he (and Frances) were active Committee members of the Friends Association.

He was also a skilled writer, having written two books; one an autobiography of his early life from his birth up until he joined ERDE. The second covered his MOD career from then on. He was assiduous not to breach the Official Secrets Act, so this is all about people and their foibles; not about technical programmes, and it is much the better for so doing. He changed the names so as to protect the innocent, but it was pretty obvious who everyone was. I was "Harry", but the veneer of disguise was rather thin! Jim was also a lover of naval history and, as a youngster; he had always enjoyed trains.

I have never met anybody who had a harsh word to say about Jim. He was liked and respected both at work and socially. He will be sorely missed as a friend and colleague.

Geoff Hooper

John Wilson Railway Report

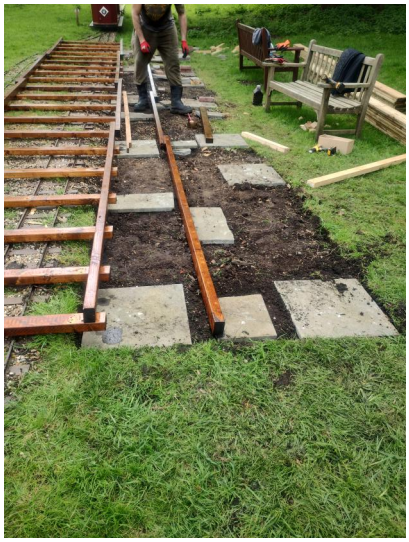
On the 14th April during a RGM open day a member of the John Wilson Railway (JWR) Crew had the misfortune to put his foot through the wooden platform at the North Station. On closer inspection it was clear that the platform had rotted underneath. We immediately stopped using the platform, requesting passengers to alight from the other side of the train onto grass.
On the 17th April the station was dismantled with Julie kindly removing the rotten wood for us.



Site of the station cleared of original woodwork

Catherine Cavanagh, the new manager, suggested we could use the wood removed from L157 during restoration work and the paving from next to the café, both now surplus to requirement.
A large quantity of wood was retrieved by Luke, Brian C and Brian P which had to have all nails and screws removed. This was a mammoth task as the original builders had been very generous with the fixings.

The team, assisted by Brian S and sustained with cake, proceeded to build a substantial sub-frame which was liberally dowsed with preservative.





Subframe supported on slabs and treated with preservative

Lorraine ordered the decking from Jewsons using the RGM account.

On the 24th April the decking was delivered, directly to the station, whilst we were working on the sub-frame. By the 8th May the decking was in position and screwed in place. On 9th May Brian C used additional screws to make sure it wouldn't move and then he treated the platform with decking oil.



The 12th May was another open day at the Mills and the JWR ran a service using the new platform but we needed to rope off the back of the platform because there is a drop of 30cm and we were concerned that someone might try leaving the platform that way and possibly slip. It was obvious that we needed to replace the fence that John Wilson had used on the original station.

Unfortunately, it was rotten at the base and would have made a very insubstantial barrier if all the rotten wood was removed. Searching online a picket fence was found at Jewsons so on 20th May Lorraine ordered the picket fence panels. These are made with treated wood so would need only preservative from time to time, rather than white paint frequently!

On 29th May the wrong fencing was delivered so Lorraine copied the order for me and I went down to meet the driver at the North Station. He showed me his manifest and it matched the fencing on his truck but not that on the order form I was clutching. He took a photo of the order form and said he would ring his boss but that they were having trouble with their phones. I refused, politely, to accept the fencing and he took it away again. Back to Walton House to ask Lorraine to speak to Jewsons which she willingly did. Jewsons said they would investigate and get back to her.

Later Lorraine emailed me to say Jewsons admitted it was their error and promised to deliver on 5th June. I reminded Lorraine that, due to the filming, we could not have deliveries until after 17th June.

I am really hoping that we can get the station finished, with fencing, by the date of the AGM/Reunion. Those of you who can make the new date of Friday 28th June will be able to take a ride on the John Wilson Railway to see the station funded by the Friends.

The Friends paid for the following items ordered by the Mills Company (ex VAT) as the Company could reclaim the VAT.

Decking	£257.04
Picket fencing	£252.00

Also they paid for the following (including VAT) which were purchased locally.

Presrvative and decking oil	£84.00

The JWR Crew are: -
Luke Savile, Harry Ward, Brian Clements, Brian Pegrum, Brian Shelley, Daphne Clements, Mary Shelley and Kevin Smith.

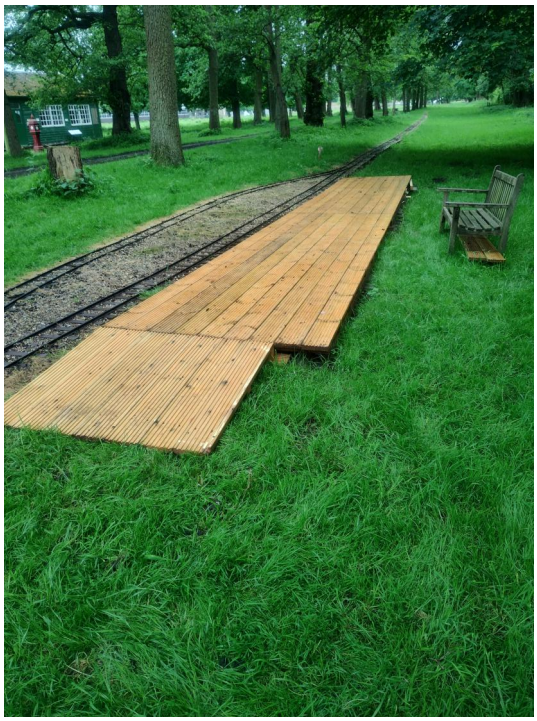
Daphne Clements WARGMFA

Particular thanks to Luke, Brian P and Brian C who went in on additional days to move the project along swiftly.

The photo on the back page (taken in April 2017) shows that the original station had not yet been built. Ed.



Daphne, Luke and Brian P discussing progress on May 8th



Almost finished, just needs a fence...





Daphne driving Tram at North end of railway, John Wilson checking points.
These photos were taken in April 2017.



North end runaround NB First station not yet built

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