

Report for Historic Environment Group. November 2022.

Well, a visit with a difference (not the weather, which included another deluge)! Luckily most of our time was spent indoors, but at last we undertook our postponed June visit to the Tees Cottage, a set of buildings many of us have stared at while driving into Darlington and said 'I must see that sometime'!

We were greeted by the extremely friendly volunteers with a cup of tea which was most welcome as we waited for the rain to moderate; eventually it did and we headed out of doors. Our first stop was between the two sand filter tanks, both now filled with water, but until 1926 containing sand and gravel to purify the water. This was drawn from the Tees right next to the works and needed thorough cleansing before use, largely we were told because of the filthy habits of the people and businesses of Barnard Castle upstream! It then supplied Darlington and a wide area of Teesside.

Our next stop was the Gas Producer Plant, just behind the filter tanks. Here we were introduced to the gas engine which drove the pumps to raise the water from the Tees. Dating from 1914 this was a superb example of machinery driven today by mains gas, but until 1926 served by suction gas produced in the room next door; this was not fully abandoned until a serious explosion in 1955 (felt by workers in their cottages across the main road, but fortunately without serious casualties). Even today the cramped conditions and poor ventilation in this room made it clear what conditions must have been like for those tasked with the gas production – not to mention the noise of the machine in operation which was insistent and almost deafening.

Stepping out of doors we found the rain had stopped, so, after a quick look at the Blacksmith's shop, it was on to the highlight of our visit. Five days before our arrival, the volunteers had started the process of firing up the twin 1902 Lancashire boilers which drive the giant beam engine of 1904 in the adjacent main boiler house. The term 'boiler house' hardly does justice to this edifice which is still a sight to behold with its spectacular décor evidencing the pride and confidence of the late Victorian era. We watched as the volunteers fired the boilers, using the same basic principles as firemen with their locomotives on the contemporary steam locomotives. The extreme heat was quite welcome on this chilly October morning! Then it was up to the beam engine itself which was just about to start up after five days of preparation. At first all was shrouded in steam, but after a tense few minutes the engine almost completed its first revolution before coming to a halt. After five or six tries there was a small cheer as round it went and the engine went into operating mode. The size, power and style of this machine was, again, breath-taking as we watched it from all angles. Few of us were experts, but we all realised we were watching something very special from our industrial heritage.

There was just time for a final tea and biscuits before our two hours were done. Great thanks are due to Dave and his fellow enthusiasts for sharing their time and expertise. To anyone reading this and wondering whether Tees Cottage may be worth a visit, the answer must be a resounding 'yes'.

The Gas Engine



The Beam Engine



Tim Meacham 4/11/22.