

'George Stephenson, tribulations, trials and triumphs' was the title of David Williams' presentation to the January meeting. George was brought up in Wylam, in a tiny one roomed cottage by parents Mabel and Robert who was a pitman. George was the 2nd of six children. He started work in the pit at 8 years old. None of the children went to school and George didn't learn to write until he was 18. His sister Anne left for the USA aged 18. His other sister Nellie started work in service in London. George was always very sure of himself, but developed a reputation for falling out with his superiors. He married Fanny and the couple moved to Newcastle where George worked in Newburn pit. George and Fanny had 2 children, Robert and Fanny, but daughter Fanny only lived for a few days. She was followed by her mother who died shortly after. Add to this tragedy, George lost his job. He did find other work but it was in Montrose. His sister Nellie, who had never married now returned from London to look after Robert. There was further misfortune when George's father was blinded by hot steam from one of the boilers and was forced to stop work. George had to return from Montrose and initially he was unable to find work. However, a new colliery was opening in Killingworth, where there was a recurring problem with a steam pump. Although George was not a qualified engineer he was good at making machines work. George was given a week to sort it out, which he did in 3 days. Then began a change in fortune for George. He was awarded a 12 month contract at £200 a year and he was now able to send Robert to school, where he excelled at technical subjects. George then married Betty at the 2nd time of asking. She was musical and enjoyed the liberal arts, so was able to help George with his broader education and his social skills.

George and Robert persuaded the wealthy Pease family from Darlington to invest in a steam engine railway, which would also take passengers. The official opening took place on 27th September 1825, when Locomotion¹ hauled 33 wagons, despite two being temporarily derailed, and 300 passengers, at a maximum speed of 15 mph to Stockton Quay where an estimated 40,000 onlookers were waiting. Apparently the noise of the engine in reverse gear was tremendous.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 26th February when Paul Isherwood will be speaking on 'Child Gambler wins back Life'.

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