



PROBUS



RECORDER



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
(www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk)

Issue No. 239
December 2024

Chairman's Notes

How time flies, especially when it comes to the Chairman's report - takes me back to my schooldays. Then it was the Headmaster chasing me - now it's Nick!!

Before I go further, I must yet again raise the matter of the **Welfare Officer** appointment - which is such an important role in our organisation. The post still remains unfilled, and it would be lovely to think that one of us is filled with enough 'good cheer' at this time of the year to put themselves forward for the task!

The speakers this month were very good - thanks as ever to Roger Lester.

It is always most pleasing to welcome new members. This month Nick Ford was inducted into the Club and the résumé that he gave of his career was most informative and entertaining. We very much hope to welcome more new members in the near future.

At the time of writing, Margaret and I are very much looking forward to our Christmas Lunch next week at the Old Brewery and to the Dinner at the Royal Chase.

For ourselves, we have decided this year not to send Christmas Cards but to send a donation to 'Save the Children'. And so to end this session, Margaret and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support and friendship during the year, we wish you all a very Happy Christmas - and hope that 2025 will be kind to us all!

Andrew

SOCIAL

Social – December & January Club Events (Editor)

6 th December 2024	Visit – Hall & Woodhouse Brewery <i>Blandford</i>
12 th December 2024	 The Chairman's Christmas Dinner <i>The Royal Chase Hotel, Shaftesbury</i>
7 th January 2025	'Kreuzerkrieg' <i>Ian Mclellan</i>
21 st January 2025	Designing the RMS Queen Mary 2 <i>Dr Stephen Payne OBE</i>
	Club Lunch <i>Details TBC</i>



OUR MOST RECENT TALKS

‘A Peculiar Victorian Enterprise’

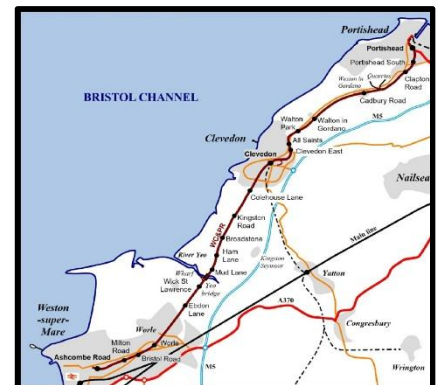
Brian Margetson
29th October 2024



Brian Margetson has spent his career designing buildings and other structures. His talk was about the Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Light Railway Company, which holds the dubious honour of being in Receivership for 31 of its 43 years.

The Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Light Railway (WC&PR) was a 14-mile standard gauge railway in Somerset. It was conceived as a tramway in the 1880s, opening between Weston and Clevedon in 1897 and completed to Portishead in 1907. The company operating the line went into receivership in 1909, but the railway continued to exist until 1940. The history of the railway is a litany of ill-judged market potential, overblown revenue expectations, under-estimated costs, construction delays, insufficient capital investment and lack-lustre levels of service.

The railway's problems started early. The idea was to link the North East Somerset towns to Bristol via Portishead. By this time, however, freight business in the port of Bristol had already been eclipsed by Liverpool. Despite the boom in seaside holidays, demand for passenger transport along the North Somerset coast was over-estimated. Slow service because of frequent stops, lack of customer comfort and inconvenient connections with main-line rail services, meant that projected levels of revenue from passengers never materialised.



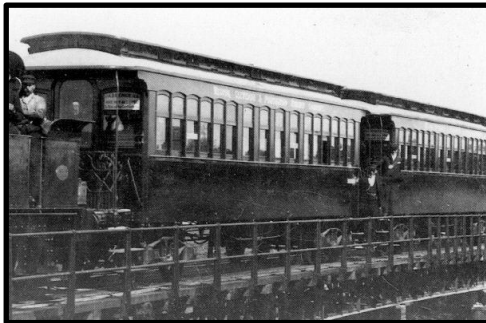
It was proposed that the line would run along the road in Weston as a tramway, and then off-road to Portishead. The Weston-Super-Mare, Clevedon and Portishead Tramways Act authorising its construction was passed in 1885. This stipulated that construction should be completed within five years. Construction on the line between Weston and Clevedon did not actually start until 1887, dogged by heroically optimistic costings, delays in purchasing the land and problems finding a builder. Further acts of Parliament were necessary in 1890 and 1892 to extend the time allowed. In 1899, the section linking

Clevedon and Portishead required a further Act of Parliament and further costly legal fees.

The railway also had technical problems. Wooden sleepers rotted. The bridge over the river Yeo at Wick St Lawrence sank and had to be shored up repeatedly. The tramway section in Weston had to be taken up because the rails were several inches above the road surface. In an early example of a now-familiar bus replacement service, horse busses had to be used to link the station to the seafront. Up until 1908, the promised connection to the Great Western Railway service was only achieved through a curved line at Clevedon, so tight that locomotives had to have some of their wheels uncoupled in order to use it.



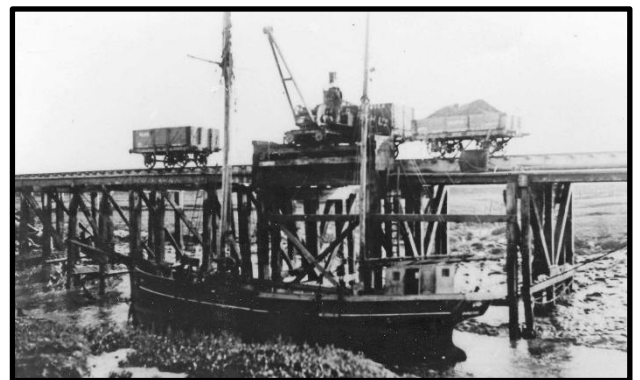
The railway was single track with passing loops, requiring complicated manoeuvring if two trains were using the line. There were nineteen halts, most of which had only a small



shelter and no platform and were merely calling places next to level crossings. Rolling stock was an eclectic mix of second-hand locomotives and carriages, including six passenger cars with open end viewing balconies originally intended for Argentinian railways. In 1901 there were only two freight wagons, but this number had increased to 27 by 1940, as the railway increasingly relied on freight business from the quarries in the area.

Projected revenue, promising investors over 7% returns on investment proved a vanishingly distant prospect. By the 1900s, the company's debts were so large that its creditors forced a restructuring and a change of leadership. An injection of funds from the Excess Insurance Company allowed the completion of the line from Clevedon to Portishead, but the company remained financially unviable. In 1909, it was forced into receivership. Colonel Stephens, the so called "Light Railway King" was appointed as manager in 1911. For the next twenty years, he managed the railway, along with a number of similar lines, from an office in Tonbridge, Kent.

Efforts were made to increase freight business. A wharf was built at Wick St Lawrence to improve coal supplies and transport stone from the quarries. However, the railway continued to operate on a shoestring. Freight business virtually dried up in the 1930s, when the quarry companies changed to transporting their products by road. Passenger numbers, which had never lived up to original expectations, dwindled. Lack of investment and declining levels of customer service meant that the railway's closure in 1940 was inevitable.



There probably never was a viable business case for the WC&PR. It was a triumph of Victorian hubris over commercial reality and common sense. Enthusiasm for linking seaside towns was misjudged. As Beeching concluded in the 1960s, rural transport services just don't pay. Rural train and bus services, where they still exist today, only

survive with lashings of public subsidy. The WC&PR was caught in a spiral of high infrastructure and operating costs, limited revenue and non-existent margins for investment. It limped on for much longer than might have been expected, a metaphor for Twentieth Century industrial decline.

It would be reassuring to think that today's infrastructure and large-scale procurement projects were immune from optimistic revenue projections, under-estimated costs, delays, cost overruns and ever-increasing reliance on subsidies from the taxpayer. But then, it would also be reassuring to think that we learn the lessons of the past.

The Chairman thanked Brian for his interesting talk and, after inviting questions and the audience absorbing the answers, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

‘Antarctica My Way’

John Highnam
12th November 2024

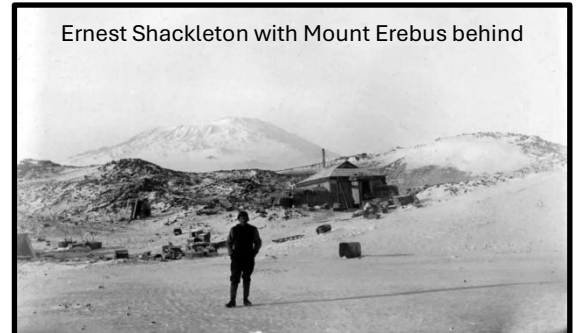


John Highnam once took a flight over Antarctica from Christchurch, New Zealand. He gave an interesting talk on the nature of the least well-known continent on Earth and his own experience of it.

Here are a few facts about Antarctica, some of which are well-known, others less so. It is big: with an area of 5.5 million square miles, it has twice the landmass of Australia. It is mountainous: mostly 9,000 feet above sea level, with bare rock protruding above the ice sheet that is approximately 1.2 miles deep. The vast ice sheet extends far into the sea around the coastline. About 70% of the world's freshwater reserves are frozen in Antarctica, which if melted, would raise global sea levels by almost 200 feet. The continent is peppered with volcanos, some of which are active. In the mists of geological time, when it was part of the Gondwana supercontinent the landmass now known as Antarctica had a temperate climate and was lushly forested. Tectonic drift and climate change over many millions of years have made it the coldest place on Earth, with the lowest recorded temperature of -89.2°C. It is constantly windy: winds of 200 mph are not uncommon. It is dry: a polar desert, shot-blasted by constant winds. Parts of the interior receive only about 2 inches of precipitation a year, in the form of snow. Below the thick ice sheet there are vast freshwater lakes. The sub-glacial Vostok Lake is one of the largest lakes in the world, 2.2 miles below the surface ice.

There are no permanent human settlements on Antarctica, but 14 countries maintain research stations, and at least 6 lay claim to sovereignty of parts of it. The continent is governed under the Antarctic Treaty, agreed in 1959 in the midst of the Cold War, originally by 12 countries. Eighteen others have subsequently joined in. The Treaty restricts military activities and exploitation of the continent's vast mineral resources.

Human activity in the region is, however, quite recent. Early world maps featured a hypothetical southern continent, *Terra Australis*, because it was assumed that it would be a necessary counterbalance to known lands in the northern hemisphere. James Cook entered the Antarctic circle in 1773. He did not get closer than 75 miles from the coastline of the continent, before retreating due to pack ice. Seal hunters were probably the first humans to get close to the landmass in the early Nineteenth Century. Various expeditions by British, Russian, French and American sailors discovered parts of the periphery, but it was not until 1895 that the crew of a Norwegian whaling ship made the first confirmed landing on the continental landmass of Antarctica. Ernest Shackleton led various expeditions to Antarctica in the early 20th Century, including the climbing of the volcano Mount Erebus. A Norwegian expedition under Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole in 1911, beating an ill-fated British expedition under Robert Falcon Scott. Shackleton's 1914 expedition is legend of heroic failure and superhuman endurance.



John explained that he had a long-standing fascination for Antarctica and for polar exploration. In 1978, he had an opportunity to join a special day-long New Zealand Airlines flight from Christchurch. A DC10 flew over Antarctica giving all on board spectacular views of the continent, plenty of food and drink and a jolly good time. A year after John's "unforgettable experience", New Zealand Airlines stopped these flights after One of its DC10s crashed into Mount Erebus with the loss of all on board.



The Chairman thanked John for his interesting talk. After inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

The Monarch and the Dustman: the story of Edward Foster, VC

Paul Hooley

26th November 2024



Our Probus member Paul Hooley gave a fascinating talk on how the bravery of one ordinary soldier during the First World War was recognised by the King; how this served to lift national morale, and how it helped to foster acts of generosity and friendship after the war.

Corporal Edward (Ted) Foster was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) in 1917 for an act of astounding courage. Born in Tooting in February 1886 and brought up in London, he was affectionally known as 'Tiny'. He was six foot two inches tall and weighed over twenty stone. Prior to volunteering for service in the war at the age of 29, he was married with a daughter and worked as a refuse collector for Wandsworth Council. He enlisted in the 13th Service Battalion (Wandsworth), part of the East Surrey Regiment. The battalion was made up of mainly local men and became known as the 'Wandsworth Regulars'.



Posted to France in June 1916, the Battalion was involved in the great battles on the Western Front, fighting at the Somme, Lens and the push towards the Hindenburg Line in the spring of 1917. Foster's act of extraordinary heroism came in April 1917 during the offensive, later known as the Battle of Arras. Near the village of Villers-Plouich, Foster's Battalion was held up by two German machine guns, which were entrenched and protected by barbed wire entanglements. Foster and another Wandsworth man volunteered to charge the German machine gun nests. Under heavy fire, the two men, armed with Lewis machine guns and Mills bombs, somehow managed to force their way through the wire and into the German trench. Heavily outnumbered in close hand-to-hand fighting, the two Tommies killed a lot of Germans, took the trench and 'neutralised' the two machine guns. This allowed their company to advance through the village and reach their objective on the further side. Foster re-joined his platoon and remained with it throughout a day of heavy fighting.

For this act of '*most conspicuous bravery and initiative*' Corporal Foster was awarded the Victoria Cross, the supreme gallantry honour. He was also awarded the Médaille Militaire, the highest of France's military honours. News of Foster's act of bravery was enthusiastically greeted at home. At a time of war weariness due to food shortages, heavy casualties and the threat of aerial attacks, the public needed a hero. Foster, an unassuming giant of a man from humble origins, yet capable of extraordinary valour, fit the bill perfectly. In Wandsworth, there was a great deal of local pride that 'one of their own' had been universally recognised. The fact that a dustman, a man of low social status, could be awarded the highest military honour, did much to rally national morale.

Home on leave in July 1917, Foster was given a hero's welcome. Crowds thronged the flag-bedecked streets around his house, and he was cheered home. Wandsworth Council convened a special meeting in honour of their most famous employee, praised his exploits and gave him a standing ovation. Conscious, perhaps, of the strength of public interest in



Corporal Foster, the medal-giving ceremony at Buckingham Palace, on 21st July, was held in public. King George V presented Foster with his VC, not in the usual setting of the state rooms, but in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace so that the huge crowd gathered outside could witness the King Emperor honouring the humble dustman.

Nine hundred and forty-seven thousand British and Commonwealth servicemen died in the Great War. Corporal Foster survived. On his discharge from the army, Wandsworth Council made him 'Dusting Inspector', a position he held for twenty-six years and which he believed had been specially created for him for winning the VC. Always a shy man, he lived a simple life up to his death in 1946.

However, he remained a local celebrity. In November 1920 he was chosen to be one of the 'Bodyguard of Heroes' who formed the Guard of Honour at the burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. In July 1923 he attended the visit of the King for the opening of what became known as King George V Park in Wandsworth. Because of his towering stature and the VC on his chest, he stood out from the crowd. The King halted the official proceedings to go into the gathering to speak to him. This gesture endeared the King to his subjects and further raised Foster's standing in the community. A footpath in the park is named Foster's Way.

The legacy of Foster's bravery and the connection between the Wandsworth Regulars and the ground they fought over in France lived on after the war. When the fighting was over, communities were encouraged to support the British League of Help. This organisation channelled efforts to support post war reconstruction in northern Europe through twinning arrangements with communities in Britain. In October 1920, the Mayor of Wandsworth visited Villers Plouich and saw at first-hand the total devastation there. On his return to England, he urged his fellow Councillors to adopt the community of Villers Plouich. Despite dissenting voices concerned about serious poor post-war conditions in Wandsworth, the Council agreed to fund raise for the village in France. Items of clothing and other goods were collected, and cash donations amounted to £1,250, a considerable sum in today's value. These funds helped to rebuild the village and the local school. The renaming of a village square as Rue de Wandsworth is testament to the generosity of the people of Wandsworth and the lasting memory of a connection forged by war.



***Although Paul finishes his talk at this point, he produced a surprise visitor/guest – the Mayor Gillingham – as a way of bringing the story further up to date, the reason being that the Mayor (*Roger Weeks*) had previously been involved in WWI artefact recovery - also from the same small French village! Roger gave a brief résumé as to how and why he had become involved, but also agreed to talk to the Club at a date yet to be agreed about his own task and its linkage to the same French village.

The Chairman then thanked Paul for his interesting talk, and the Mayor for his attendance and his agreement to tell his own tale in due course. After inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines



OBITUARY



Bertram Akhurst

1928 - 2024

It was with sadness that we learned of the death of our late Probus member Bertram Akhurst on 5th November, peacefully at home in Wincanton, at the age of 96.

Although he was a long-time member, ill-health prevented him from attending many meetings in recent years, but he still made great efforts to attend coffee mornings at the Old Brewery.

Although in his working life he was an educational psychologist, he was always extremely “air minded”. He had grown up in Kent where his father worked for the Kent and East Sussex Railway, and the family lived in what he referred to as a ‘semi-rural’ village. He wrote that *‘in his childhood flying was still a novel, glamorous and rather dangerous activity.’* He was smitten with the flying ‘bug’ and spent the whole of WWII and beyond either as an Air Cadet or as a member of the RAF. He had hoped to be mustered as aircrew, but the Service had other ideas, and he ended up in a ground role on a number of bases within the UK, before being ‘de-mobbed’ in 1947 at the age of 20. His links with the RAF remained very strong throughout his life, and many of those with whom he served remained friends to the end.

Bertram went on to have a significant career as an educational psychologist and a university lecturer, undertaking jobs in many parts of the UK and overseas.

Our Branch was represented at his funeral by 4 members, and Peter Marshall provided some fitting words in tribute to Bertram as a friend and Probus colleague. The photograph above was taken at the Chairman’s Christmas Dinner in 2011.

ENDPIECE – Editor

Deja Vue?

