# **SPEED TO THE WEST – A GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY JOURNEY**

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A fascinating, illustrated presentation was greatly enjoyed by those attending the PMS evening on Friday 8th December 2019. A brief summary is provided below for those unable to be there.

The famous Brunel London to Bristol railway line was opened in 1841. The next section to Taunton and eventually to Exeter was constructed by the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company and these were completed in 1842 and 1844 respectively.

Brunel’s initial design for the Exeter to Teignmouth stretch, later to be extended to Newton Abbot, was for an ‘atmospheric system.’ This propelled the train along by the force of air travelling down a central pipe, that ran parallel to the track. It was to be powered by pumping stations situated at regular intervals along the edge of the railway. Unfortunately, there were many unforeseen problems with such an initiative - from rats regularly chewing and damaging the protective, leather flaps, to sporadic loss of momentum as the train passed between individual pumping stations. Eventually, the entire scheme had to be abandoned, leading to considerable financial loss for its investors.

Timber viaducts were often preferred in Devon and Cornwall to straddle the many valleys. There was a plentiful supply of woodland locally, making these significantly cheaper to build; however, as the trains and rolling stock became larger and heavier, they had to be replaced with stone viaducts.

The standard track gauge used by most railway companies remained at 4′ 8″, but, for many years, Brunel continued to favour the 7′ gauge. This resulted in a mixed gauge system and the need for a ‘Break of Gauge’ at changeover points. Parliament eventually declared that all railways were to conform to the same standard gauge and in May 1892 all of Brunel’s 7′ gauge track had to be replaced. Quite remarkably, this was completed by an enormous workforce, within a single weekend!

The importance of the arrival of the railway to the South West cannot be overstated. The track extended right into the Millbay Docks, which had been expanded to accommodate transatlantic crossings. By 1904, more than 500 liners were docking at Plymouth. The city itself had become a popular resort and the gateway to the ‘English Riviera.’ GWR posters of the time even encouraged people to holiday out of season due to its mild climate. Original posters enthusiastically promoted the pleasures of “Bathing in February on the Cornish Riviera” or encouraged holiday makers to visit, appealing to their patriotism with “See your own Country first.” The popular, regular, train service departed from London Paddington at 10.30 am daily. GWR owned hotels were constructed e.g. The Tregenna Castle Hotel, which opened in 1895, thus providing a seamless transport system for those who could afford such luxury. Soon, larger carriages were needed to accommodate the increasing numbers of passengers. The South West maintained its popularity after the first WW, appealing to a broad clientele as illustrated by the ‘Holiday Haunts’ Booklet. This catered for a wide range of tourists as a valuable source of ‘places to stay and things to do.’. It was updated and published regularly and relatively affordable at 6d in 1930. Business was booming!!

***By Dr Susan Overal***