

Report of the 37th Conference of the International Association of Transport and Communications Museums (IATM)

London, England, 26 June to 1 July 2011

Magnificent summer weather greeted the delegates from 15 countries in Europe, Australasia and North America when they assembled in London at the end of June 2011 for the 37th Conference of the International Association of Transport and Communications Museums (IATM). The Conference was hosted by the London Transport Museum (LTM) in Covent Garden under the auspices of its Director and current IATM Board member Sam Mullins. The theme chosen for the Conference was “Extending the Reach of the IATM Museum”. It proved to be an apt choice and delegates heard much which would assist them in reaching out to new real and virtual audiences.

For many delegates this was their first visit to the recently re-opened and rejuvenated London Transport Museum. It occupies a former flower market building in what is now one of the popular entertainment areas of central London. The energy which permeates Covent Garden spills over to the Museum which throws open its doors to the tens of thousands of people who come into the area every day.

The Museum first occupied sites in the outer parts of London but saw the advantages of a central location early on. When the flower market moved to a less congested area the Museum acquired its building in 1979 and, after the building was refurbished, opened to the public in 1980. Ten years later a second make-over took place followed 15 years after that by the presentation offered to visitors today. In just over 30 years in Covent Garden the Museum has welcomed over 6 million visitors.

In planning the Conference theme, Sam Mullins wanted to share lesser known aspects of London's history as an industrial city. This provided the leaping off point for a fascinating guided tour led by Sam in the afternoon of Sunday, 26 June prior to the introductory talk on the topic that evening.



Sam took an enthusiastic group on a fascinating afternoon walk from Covent Garden down to the River Thames, across to the South Bank, then east and back over the river to return to the LTM. Along the way we saw 18th century church

architecture, the evidence of 16th century riverside palaces and their water gates



providing direct access onto the river, the site of the first major sewage system to deal with the overloading of London's pre 19th century systems which discharged directly out into the river, and the parallel site of the world's first underground railway system and the artificial site created along the river bank for it. We saw where Isambard Kingdom Brunel built his first pedestrian suspension bridge, known as the Hungerford Bridge, across the river and how the bridge was quickly removed to accommodate the need to bridge the river in the same place for the newly built railways. We were intrigued to hear how the cables from the bridge had been repurposed for use in the suspension bridge at Clifton near Bristol soon thereafter.



On returning to the north bank we detoured briefly through the early 19th century Somerset House which has been restored to former splendor and now serves as a host for many cultural groups. On this hot Sunday afternoon its huge courtyard and multitude of fountains were serving as a “de facto” beach for inner city residents.



Our walk covered a square of about a mile or less on each side yet it was packed with the rich evidence of the past of this magnificent city.

The evening lecture presented by Alex Werner, head of History Collections Department of the Museum of London built on what we had seen in the afternoon. Alex, using the material on the development of London from the outstanding Museum of London, was able to illustrate several points germane to the role London had played in the development of the industrial world. He pointed out that in the first quarter of the 19th century London had evolved into the largest city in the world, surpassing anything in Asia and Europe. He also dispelled the notion that all developments related to what we know as the Industrial Revolution had taken place in the central and northern areas of England. He was able to provide examples of such innovation in London itself, including marine engineering, printing and brewing. He also spoke of the tremendous impact on commerce brought about by the development of the massive docks downstream of London Bridge. Conference participants were subsequently able to see the surviving evidence of this activity from two centuries ago. Parenthetically, it must be noted that the Museum of London has excellent exhibits depicting the development of the industrial world and the industrialization of commerce through the dockyards built to serve London's trade. It is highly recommended to everyone interested in understanding how this leading global city evolved from its very earliest times.

Formal business began on Monday, 27 June with a welcome from IATM President Dr. Michael Dünnebier of the Verkehrsmuseum Dresden. Michael spoke to the work of IATM and the strategic priorities the Board had decided to pursue, including one which encompasses the theme of the conference. He noted the wide geographical spread of attendees, the variety of types of institutions represented and the opportunity for engagement, partnerships and learning inherent in the Conference. Michael warmly thanked Sam Mullins and his staff at the London Transport Museum for hosting the conference and invited suggestions for where it might take place two years hence in 2013.

Sam Mullins, in his turn as host, welcomed participants and provided a sketch of the host institution, its history – as recounted above --, and its thematic approach of bringing a focus in exhibits on the impact of London's transport systems on people's lives in all three time periods: past, present and future. Sam mentioned the LTM's rich graphic design heritage and its decision to compare the London experience with that of five other world cities: New York, Paris, Delhi, Shanghai, and Tokyo. He noted the LTM's special focus on children and the impact of emerging technologies and he provided a candid insight into the economic circumstances facing the museum – and its proposed strategy to increase revenues rather than cut services and staff.

From there we proceeded to the keynote address by Andrew Scott, well known and recently retired Director of the National Rail Museum in York who had, during his final year served as the Acting Director of the National Museum of Science and Industry, the NRM's parent body.



Andrew's talk, on the power and perils of partnerships in museums, reflected the current challenging environment faced by almost all museums and the way in which partnerships may provide a way to navigate through the difficulty. He identified two drivers for collaboration: those with a focus on efficiency and those with a focus on growth. He also observed that the more audiences value the museum experience the greater will be the financial security of museums.

To that end Andrew noted that museums do not respond to funding pressures in the same way as do commercial entities which tend to focus more on goals. He described strategies whereby museums can attain these outcomes through collaboration, contracting out and mergers with a focus on shared goals. Of them mergers are the most common means in the UK; the Liverpool and Newcastle Museums being good examples which provide more capability, clout and cost savings. A similar approach is under discussion for the four disparate museums depicting the history of the Royal Navy.

He identified three issues that need to be addressed in deciding a best approach: how to reduce administration costs; how to get funders to value and appreciate the museum(s); and how to have the biggest impact on audiences. And he emphasized that museum leaders have a duty to maximize value. He observed that transport museums do not think much about these matters but that they should.

He provided examples of how economies of scale were being achieved by collaborative activities among several of the UK's national museums who now share common services provided by contractors. He also mentioned collection sharing activities involving large and small museums as a way of increasing outreach and collection exposure.

As expected, Andrew provided a thought provoking appreciation of the strategic challenges facing museums and the ways in which these challenges can be addressed by bold action.

The balance of the morning was devoted to presentations of two examples of collaboration between member museums. In the first, Michael Dünnebier and David Bowes described two successful exhibits, "The Art of the Poster" and "Under Attack" which were partnerships between the London Transport Museum

and the Verkehrsmuseum Dresden. Both have been described in the IATM Journal and Newsletter.



The second example featured Jürgen Franzke describing “Planet Railway” and the other collaborative activities to mark 175 years of railways in Germany. These have also been described in recent IATM publications.



Monday afternoon was given over to a fascinating guided tour of the sites on and around the Thames connected to the father and son Victorian engineers Marc and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Our first stop by river cruise was the remnant of the launching slips for Brunel's enormous vessel the "Great Eastern" at Millwall on the Isle of Dogs. It was hard to imagine the spectacle of this enormous ship being launched sideways into the Thames in 1858. Nothing comparable in displacement to her was built for another 40 years.



From there we moved to the remarkable Brunel Engine House Museum in Rotherhithe and its historic Thames Tunnel.



It was a unique experience. Our host for the occasion, Robert Hulse the Museum's Director, shared with us the antecedents and then the history of the "oldest tunnel in the oldest underground in the world". We saw evidence of the huge early 19th century project to drive a tunnel under the Thames to circumvent the congestion caused by the availability of only one bridge crossing. We were also able to gain a sense of the magnitude of the contribution of the Brunel family to public engineering works in the period. A highlight of the visit was a presentation and reception in the only recently re-opened subsurface Grand Hall at the south end of the Tunnel.



We also travelled the length of the Tunnel on the modern Overland rail service that operates in it.



This entire experience had such an impact that the group repaired to the nearby



historic Mayflower pub to recover.

For those of the group whose London knowledge was confined to the West End and South Kensington it was an eye-opening exposure to the broader scope of the historic city and a look at the rapid redevelopment occurring in the former dockland areas to the east of the financial centre.

Tuesday's activities were divided into morning sessions and independent museum visits in the afternoon or a visit to the London Transport Museum's collection storage depot at Acton.

The talks featured Alastair Dodds and Jilly Burns speaking about outreach programs of the Royal Museum of Scotland (RMS). Alastair explained how duplicate artifacts from the collection were used to give hands on experience in research and restoration to under-skilled young people. The object was to broaden the horizons of the participants and raise their self esteem with the ultimate object of encouraging them to continue their education.

Alastair also spoke about the efforts by the RMS to review its collection holdings and to place duplicate material with local museums that otherwise would not have been able to exhibit such material.

Jilly Burns spoke about the broader RMS effort to engage with smaller museums throughout Scotland through artifact loans, training and the development of local links which provide reciprocal benefits.

The next presentation was by Stephen Quick from the Canada Aviation and Space Museum who spoke about the Museum's work to make itself relevant in contemporary life. Stephen spoke about the decision to add space flight to the Museum's remit in the light of Canada's role in the International Space Station and its strong space program and the efforts the Museum has made to take its presence beyond its physical location through partnerships.

The morning closed with an impressive presentation by two of those directly concerned on how the LTM was engaging with young people to provide

multiplicities of meaning for collections and to examine how outreach activities might bounce back into the museum to influence its internal workings.



After lunch a contingent went off to see the LTM reserve collection at Acton while others dispersed across London to visit other museums of their choice such as the Imperial War Museum's HMS *Belfast* at her mooring just upstream from Tower Bridge.



Wednesday was given over to a menu of possible field trips. Some people went to the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon in north London where they were greeted by former IATM President and retired RAF Museum Director General Michael Fopp. Others visited the Buckingham Railway Centre and Bletchley Park the site of wartime code-breaking exploits. A group went off to see the Postal Museum and Archives and the largest contingent headed off to the Brooklands Museum and Mercedes World at Weybridge, Surrey.



The Brooklands Museum is located at the site that was synonymous with auto racing and flying in Great Britain between 1907 and 1939 when it closed and the site was given over to aircraft production. The group was welcomed by the Director of the Brooklands Museum, Allan Winn in the evocative Members Lounge of the original clubhouse.



Thereafter we enjoyed a tour of the hangar in which part of the aircraft collection is housed and then the workshops and exhibition areas for the incomparable automobile collection.



We were fortunate to be able to see a reproduction 1954 Mercedes racing car make a run along a section of the remaining banked track for a camera crew



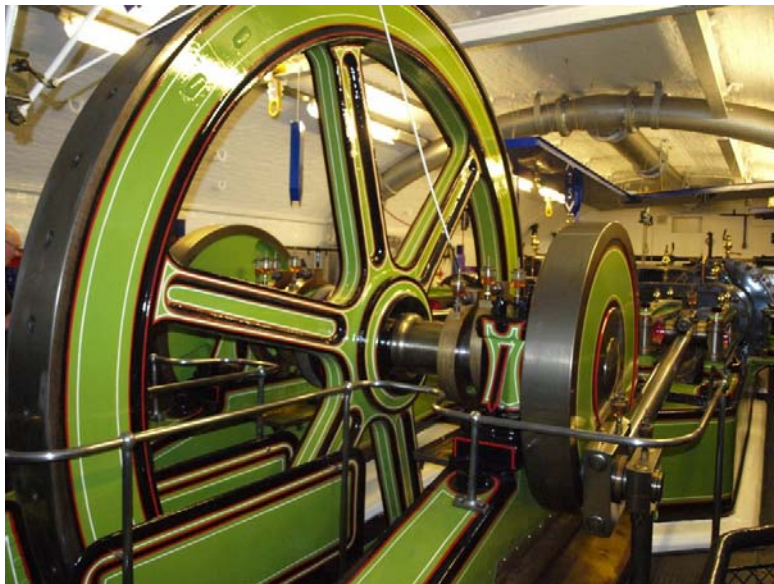
and the record holding Napier-Railton car being prepared in the open air for an appearance at the Goodwood Festival of Speed.



Most people walked over to the adjacent Mercedes World, built on the concept of the Mercedes Museum in Stuttgart. There they viewed automobiles from the Mercedes collection, tried on many of the new models on sale for size, and experienced the amazing race track simulation stations deployed to challenge and delight visitors.



A quick trip back to central London allowed just enough time before everyone assembled for the Conference banquet at a most unusual venue, the Tower Bridge Engine Room. This was another opportunity to see some massive late Victorian engineering at very close range.



We dined adjacent to the very well preserved and interpreted machinery that originally raised and lowered the bascules carrying the roadway.



Michael Dünnebier thanked Sam and his LTM team for putting together such an informative and enjoyable week.



Thursday morning and early afternoon were given over to sessions in which IATM member museums could share news of projects of mutual interest. We heard from Stephen Quick and Alastair Dodds on their collaborative efforts to restore Bristol Beaufighter aircraft in each of their collections. A panel discussed the various considerations impinging on the operation of large technological artifacts. And finally we heard from Sarah Jane Brazil on the conclusion of her work on “Trainworks” in Australia, the first installment of which she shared with us in Germany in 2009. After lunch Chris Taft shifted our attention to new work on the development of the British Postal Museum and Archive and Claire Dobbin, Senior Curator at LTM spoke about partnership opportunities with LTM.

The evening was given over to a terrific tour of the recently rejuvenated St Pancras Railway Station and its associated hotel. Our tour guide was Roderick Shelton who had been the architectural historian advising on the restoration work. The result was impressive with the station, now the home of “Eurostar” as well as domestic rail services, having the feel of a modern air terminal in the context of a mid 19th century rail terminal. The rebuilt clear span train shed, the largest in existence when built, was particularly noteworthy. The work on the hotel, which had been underutilized for decades, was similarly impressive and pleasing to the eye.



Following such an intensive exposure to the art of saving and reutilizing large structures we were treated to a very gentle evening at the new Kings Place development next to the St Pancras Basin off the Regents Canal. It was a clear reminder of the crucial role played by canals in the development of transportation networks in Britain in the 19th century.



Friday morning was devoted first to the Annual General meeting of IATM



followed by a concluding presentation on the New York Transit Museum by its Director, Gabriel Shuster. This was a very welcome in depth look at a major American transportation museum and what Gabriel showed us provided a very interesting comparison with the history and scope of our host Museum. It is hoped that we can learn more about this very significant Museum and its lessons for IATM members.

Participants enjoyed a final lunch together during which Sam and his staff, especially the indefatigable Lyndsey McLean, were thanked again for their splendid efforts in producing a stimulating program and a most enjoyable, memorable and informative set of visits and social occasions.

We look forward to meeting again in 2013.

Christopher J. Terry, Ottawa