

CHAPTER XII

NEWCASTLE AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

I WENT over to Newcastle in the summer of 1854. I took with me the books, reports, minutes, and correspondence, to place them in the archives of the amalgamated company. There was still a good deal of work to be done, as was likely to be the case with so large a concern; and I was told that if I would write a letter, there was likely to be an opening made for me, into which I could fit nicely. As I had been of some use in pushing on the amalgamation, and had worked hard for its completion, some of the directors thought that I might still be retained in the service of the company.

There was not, perhaps, much room in the offices of the Central Station at Newcastle; so I was put into a waiting-room alongside the secretary's office, lit by a skylight; and there I worked among my papers and correspondence. It was rather fruitless and monotonous work. There was little special business to do. I never saw the Board, and only once attended a committee meeting of the directors. Mr Bourne introduced me to some of his friends at Newcastle; but I was comparatively alone in the place, and away from my family, who were still at Leeds; as well as from my acquaintances in that

neighbourhood. As the central offices were only to be temporarily at Newcastle, and as it was proposed to remove them to York, I waited to see what the result might be as regarded myself. I took lodgings in the Elswick Road, and even went so far as to go to York and look after a house there, in the event of my being removed to that city.

Meanwhile, in order to occupy my evenings, I proceeded to make some inquiry about the early history of George Stephenson, of whom I had published a brief account some five years before, in a London journal. It was fine summer weather; the days were long and fair; and the places to be visited were all within easy reach of Newcastle. After my work at the office, I could leave the station, and spend a few hours on making inquiries, then home by the late train about ten o'clock. On Saturday afternoons, when the office work ended at two, there was still more time for my investigations.

I went first to Wylam, Stephenson's birthplace. I found the cottage at High Street House—the red-tiled, rubble house, in which the great engineer had been born. I entered, and asked the old woman if this was the place. "Aye," she said, "Geordie was born here, in this very room." Everybody knew him as "Geordie." I asked if there was any old person in the neighbourhood who knew old Robert Stephenson, his father. "Yes," she answered, "there's auld Kit Heppell, wha kennt him verra weel." After looking over the place, and observing the colliery waggon road which still lay in front of the door, I went to the village of Wylam, past the old pumping engines and disused locomotives, and found Kit Heppell. He was an old man, but had still plenty of life in him. "Yes, he knew Old Bob,

Geordie's fayther. He wur like a pair o' deals nailed together, and a bit o' flesh i' th' inside—as queer as Dick's hatband: went thrice about, an' wudn't tie. His wife Mabel wur a delicat' boddie, and varry flighty. I kennt them verra weel: they wur an honest family, but sair hadden doon i' th' world." Then he told me of the small earnings of Old Bob, and the difficulty he had in bringing up his family of six children; of his love for birds and animals, and the stories he told to the children by his engine-fire; and of his having left Wylam when the coal was "worked out," and gone to live at Dewley Burn, near Throckley Colliery.

On another evening, I went to Ovingham, to ascertain whether George Stephenson's birth had been registered there. The village of Ovingham is situated further up the Tyne. Thomas Bewick, the reviver of the art of wood-engraving, was born near it, at Cherryburn, a single house on the south side of the river. The stream here pours over a gravelly, shallow bed, and ripples past willowy islands, while little villages peep out from amidst the thick foliage. The scene is perfectly rural, and entirely free from the smoke of coal engines. Not far off is the fine old ruin of Prudhoe Castle, protected by a deep fosse, formerly crossed by a drawbridge. Ovingham is on the north side of the Tyne, and the river is crossed by means of a ferryboat—

"O, where is the boatman, my bonny hinney?
O, where is the boatman? bring him to me—
To ferry me over the Tyne to my honey,
And I will remember the boatman and thee."

I was ferried across; but found no record in the register of the birth of George Stephenson. I observed the tombstones of the Carrs (to whose

family George Stephenson's mother belonged) underneath the central window at the east end of the church, as well as the tombstone of Thomas Bewick, under the western gable. Although my expedition was fruitless, I enjoyed the beautiful evening, and the lovely scenery.

I afterwards went to Heddon-on-the-Wall, to inspect the register there; but no record of George Stephenson's birth could be found. The probability was, that it was not registered, as in former times registrations were very imperfectly conducted. Most of the places in the line of road from east to west, have the name of "wall" attached to them—being in the direction of the old Roman road. They begin at Walsend, or at the end of the wall, below Newcastle; and extend westward through Walbottle, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Wall Houses, Wall, Walwick, Walton, and so on, as far westward as Bowness on the Solway, where the Roman wall ended. At Heddon-on-the-Wall, the vallum passed through the centre of the village.

I followed up my search by degrees. On another fine evening, I left the train at Ryton Station, was ferried across the Tyne, and made my way to Dewley Burn, where old Robert Stephenson lived for a time with his family, and where his son George first began to work for his daily bread. Near the house where he lived, are to be seen the burn and the clay-pits where he used to make his dirt-pies with his companion Bill Thirlwall, and afterwards his model clay engines, using the hemlocks for imaginary steam-pipes. It was curious to find how interested the people were in communicating everything they knew about "Geordie." Colliers, brakesmen, enginemen, and others—all who had known him intimately, or

had worked with him, or had even heard traditions of him, were equally willing to help. There was no jealousy about him. He was one of themselves, and they were proud of him. He had toiled amongst them with his hands, worked his way up perseveringly from one position to another, and after he had been lifted by his genius to the highest position, they were prouder of him than ever. What Robert Nicoll said of Robert Burns might be applied to him—

“ Before the proudest of the earth
We stand, with an uplifted brow ;
Like us, thou wast a toiling man—
And we are noble now.”

On another occasion, I crossed the fields to Callerton Pits—the fields where George, when a boy, had pulled turnips at twopence the day, “and many a cold finger,” he said, “I had.” The pits are now all closed, but I saw the place where George had first driven the gin-horse at an increased wage of eightpence. A collier who remembered him, described him as “a grit growing lad, with bare legs and feet.” And he described, with great gusto, Geordie’s fight with Ned Nelson, the bully of Black Callerton.

Another visit was made to Newburn on the Tyne, where George was first taken on as assistant fireman, and afterwards promoted to be full fireman. When his wages were raised to twelve shillings a week, he declared himself to be “a made man for life”! There he learnt to read and cast-up accounts, and fairly entered upon the work of self-education. A brief interruption occurred. He fell in love with Fanny Henderson, and married her at the parish church. I found her marriage duly registered, and took a tracing of it. Both the signatures were written in the hand of the bridegroom, who had

evidently brushed them over with his sleeve before they were dry. After the marriage, the couple rode off to Willington Quay, George's young wife riding on a pillion behind him, and holding on by his waist.

I next went to Willington Quay, fifteen miles down the Tyne, to see the house where the newly wedded pair had taken up their abode. It was standing then, though it has since been removed to give place to the Stephenson Memorial Schools. But it would have been better to keep the birthplace of Robert Stephenson as it stood. It was at Willington that George took charge of the engine at the Ballast Hill, and in his spare hours worked at self improvement. William Fairbairn (afterwards Sir William) told me that he had known George Stephenson well while living by the quayside—that he often visited him at his fireside, and admired the neatness, cleanness, and tidiness of his wife and her household arrangements. Fairbairn used to take charge of George's engine to enable him to earn a few extra shillings in the evening by heaving ballast out of the ships' holds. He said he also remembered George's taking to clock-cleaning and shoe-making, and that there was scarcely anything to which he was not willing to put his hand. William Coe informed me that he had bought a pair of shoes, of George Stephenson's make, for 7s. 6d., and they were not only cheap, but excellent.

My next visit was to Edward Pease, father of all the Peases, at Darlington. I wrote to him and requested an interview on any Saturday afternoon—that being my holiday, and the only day on which I could conveniently leave Newcastle. He kindly granted my request, and mentioned a day on which I could meet him. I went out one Saturday after-

noon, and saw the fine old man. It was a pleasure to meet such a cheerful, beneficent gentleman. He was eighty-eight when I saw him, and he was as bright and hopeful and as communicative as ever. "Aye!" he said, "and you are inquiring about the beginning of the railway? It is truly a wonderful story!" And then he told me of how the project of the line from Darlington to Stockton was started—how the canal was first proposed, and Brindley, and Whitworth, and Dodd, and Rennie, suggested their schemes—how Stockton waited for Darlington, and Darlington waited for Stockton, and yet nothing was done. Then in 1810 a railway was proposed, but the committee went to sleep. Canals and railways—railways and canals; still no progress. And yet the coal owners were very anxious to get their coals to York as well as to the sea. "I got my friends," said Mr Pease, "to subscribe for shares in a railway in 1818, but we were defeated in three successive sessions by the Duke of Cleveland. Still we persevered. I wrote letters, which were published in a York newspaper, showing the uses of a railway worked by horses. We thought nothing of the locomotive at that time. At last we got our Act. But Mr Lambton, afterwards the Earl of Durham, had a proviso inserted requiring us to charge only a half-penny per ton per mile for all coal intended for shipment at Stockton. This was to prevent our line being used in competition against his coal shipped at Sunderland. Although we thought it might be ruinous, it actually proved our safety."*

Then he went on to speak of the first interview he had had with George Stephenson and Nicholas

* It was thought that this low rate would ruin the venture. See *Life of George Stephenson*, Centenary Edition, p. 70.—ED.

Wood. The two strangers from Killingworth called upon him one day, and Nicholas introduced his companion as the engine-wright at Killingworth, who knew a good deal about railways and locomotives. "The Locomotive" was a new word for Mr Pease, but eventually he was to become very familiar with it. He told the strangers that their whole calculations had been based on the employment of *horse* power. But Stephenson told him that the locomotive would eventually supersede the use of horse power upon railroads. "I have been using the engine," he said, since 1814, to draw coals from the pit to the loading station on the Tyne; and I am certain that it is the power best suited to your wants. But come over to Killingworth," he concluded, "and see my locomotive at work."

After a long conversation the strangers left, to walk home through Durham to Newcastle. Mr Pease was much impressed by the interview. He took the opportunity soon after of going over to Killingworth, where he inquired for "George Stephenson, Esquire, Engineer." No one knew of such a person. At length, after much conversation among the old women and neighbours, one of them asked if it was not "Geordie the engine-wright" that he wanted. "No doubt," he answered, "it is the engineer who works the locomotive." Then George Stephenson was found, and proceeded to show off before Mr Pease the qualities of his wonderful engine. The result of the interview, first in Mr Pease's house at Darlington, and afterwards on the waggon way at Killingworth, was that George was appointed the engineer of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, and that it was eventually determined to use the locomotive on trial for working the railway

when made. Not only so, but Mr Pease was so strongly satisfied with the importance of the new invention, that when Stephenson proposed to establish a manufactory in Newcastle for the building of locomotive engines, he joined with him in the adventure, and became a partner in the undertaking, which eventually proved exceedingly prosperous.

After much interesting conversation with Mr Pease, and a walk with him through the rapidly improving town, I remained to dine with him and his daughter: and left for Newcastle, freighted with valuable information, by a late train. But I need not give the particulars here, as I have related them elsewhere.

I thought, now that I had made so fair a beginning with the early life of George Stephenson, that I would like to inform Robert Stephenson of my progress. I had seen him on the subject in March 1851. Three years and a half had passed, and still nothing appeared to be done. Would he believe that I intended to do nothing more in the matter? In answer to my letter, he wrote as follows:—

“DOVER, 26th September 1854.

“DEAR SIR,—

“I am glad to hear that you have not given up the idea of writing a memoir of my late father; and now that I have more leisure, it will afford me pleasure to assist you in many points which are only known to myself, especially in reference to the phases which the locomotive engine put on at different periods of his active and remarkable life—a life which spreads over a period comprising probably one of the most interesting pages in the history of civilisation.

“I am about to visit Newcastle, when I shall make a point of giving you my views respecting the form which the memoir, in my opinion, ought to take, and

respecting the mechanical portions I shall feel it my duty to assist.

"I hope by the end of the week to be in Newcastle.—Yours very truly,

"ROBERT STEPHENSON."

This was more satisfactory than when I had last seen Mr Stephenson. He had then warned me against undertaking the memoir, because he did not think it would be interesting, and might only cause me loss of labour and money. Now, he seemed to be of a different opinion, and wrote in a manner entirely confirmatory of my views as to the interest of the subject. I afterwards found that the field was clear, and that no one intended to write anything on the subject of George Stephenson's life. But I was aware that I had only made a beginning of the subject, and that a great deal more remained to be done.

Mr Stephenson arrived in Newcastle by the beginning of October. I dined with him occasionally at the Queen's Head, in Grey Street, where he put up. He took me over the engineering establishment in Forth Street, and told me something of its history. Since the germ of it had been started by his father, assisted by Edward Pease, it had grown to an immense affair, employing about a thousand men and boys, and paying in wages over £1000 a week.

But I derived the most interest and information from a visit to Killingworth and the neighbourhood, made in his company. One fine Sunday afternoon in October, he drove me over in an open carriage, by the road which he had so often gone over in his boyhood. "I know every foot of this road," he said. "I used to

come over it every day on my cuddy to attend Bruce's school in Newcastle." We went over the Town Moor, and, on arriving at the village of Gosforth, went up the Benton Grange Road. Arriving at Long Benton, he said, "Do you see that red-tiled house, with the outside stair?—that is the place where Rutter kept his school, and where I learnt my A B C." On reaching the ochre quarry, he observed, "There is where my father erected his first pumping-engine, which cleared the place of water in a week." Not far off, he pointed to the High Pit, where he had "sent them to the bottom,"* to the delight of the pitman.

We then walked along the waggon way to Killingworth, and, reaching a little clay-floored cottage by the roadside, he said, "There is where my grandfather lived! He was quite blind in his old age, and my father kept him in comfort. I remember well, how I used to ride into his cottage on my cuddy, and he would examine the creature, feel him all over, and pronounce him to be a 'real blood' donkey." Then he told me of the trick he played to the swearing bully, Straker—how he, with another boy, attacked him on a dark night, and made him "stand and deliver!"

We reached Glebe Farm, once inhabited by John Wigham. "There," he said, "was the scene of some of my best education in boyhood; for Wigham was a superior man, and I then thought him a very clever fellow. But now we are at Killingworth! This was my father's cottage, and see, there is the dial over it, still numbering the hours while the sun shines. Many a sore head I had while making the necessary

* After clearing the pit of water. See *Lives of the Engineers*, 20th impression, p. 43.—ED.

calculations to adapt the dial face to the latitude of Killingworth."

We went into the cottage, and he pointed out the arrangements. "There's where the tame blackie* used to sit. There is still the old oven, in which my father put in the pitman's watch, and made it go, simply by melting the oil." And thus the afternoon wore away, and a number of recollections were told in a homely, pleasant, and kindly manner. Robert Stephenson had nothing of the snob in him. He was not ashamed of his father having been a working man; on the contrary, he was proud of his having worked his way up from a low condition by dint of his inherent genius, perseverance, and industry. I spent the evening with him, and made many notes, which I afterwards duly recorded.

During my stay at Newcastle, I called upon Thomas Hindmarsh, the brother of George Stephenson's second wife. I wished to know something of the accuracy of the story which I had heard from Mr Bourne, about George having first courted Miss Hindmarsh, and then, because he was refused, having made love to Fanny Henderson, her servant. He told me the story was "all nonsense." Fanny had never been their servant; and besides, George, after remaining a widower for fourteen years, had been introduced to his sister by himself, at his earnest solicitation. Thus I was able to correct this portion of the personal history.

I was desirous of obtaining some information from Nicholas Wood, who knew George Stephenson well, and had not only been his master, but his fellow-worker during many years. I saw Mr Wood several times at his office on Quayside and at other places.

* Blackbird.—ED.

He said he would be glad to help me ; but although I made many applications, I never obtained any information. I used to think that he was a little jealous of his former servant's reputation.

One day, hanging about the station, I met George Hudson the deposed "Railway King." He had been to the Board for the purpose of imploring their mercy. I had some conversation with the poor fellow. He was almost in tears, and said the directors were disposed to be very hard on him, and wished to wrench from him the last farthing he possessed. He referred to his property at Whitby, which the North-Eastern Company wished to obtain. I believe they eventually got it, and towards the end of his life, Hudson was maintained principally by a subscription raised amongst a few of his friends. The man was perhaps more foolish than reckless. Had he been utterly unprincipled, and acted with sufficient cunning, he might have become as rich as Cræsus. But he was nothing like so clever as he was represented to be by the toadies who surrounded and influenced him, and he ended his days in comparative poverty.

Before I left Newcastle I had the pleasure of running down to Darlington again one Saturday afternoon, for the purpose of having an interview with John Dixon, the engineer of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. When a young man, he had been employed with Robert Stephenson in "taking the sights" on that line, while George Stephenson was laying it out afresh. He was afterwards employed on Chat Moss as assistant engineer for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, and had a great deal of interesting information to communicate. Indeed, he was of the greatest possible use to me—

not only by what he related as to the beginnings of the Stockton and Darlington line, but as to the means taken to lay out the railway over Chat Moss—supposed to be an almost impossible proceeding before George Stephenson took the work in hand. Mr Dixon afterwards wrote out for me, in full detail, an account of his proceedings on Chat Moss, and the means taken by the leading engineer to master and conquer his difficulties.

On 6th October I was awakened about midnight by two tremendous explosions. I went to sleep again, but next morning I was informed that the town had almost been “blewn up.” It was at first thought that the explosions had occurred through design, but it was ascertained that they were merely the result of accident. A warehouse at Gateshead, full of sulphur and saltpetre, took fire, and a great mass of water running into it, the water was vaporised, and, uniting with the combustible materials, formed a tremendously explosive mixture. Such, at all events, was the explanation given at the time of the terrific explosion. However this may be, the windows of every house in the neighbourhood were shattered into a thousand atoms, and the mass of burning stuff was shot across the Tyne upon ships and warehouses, which at once burst into flame. A large number of persons were killed and injured, and about half a million’s worth of property was lost. Next morning, when I went down to see the place, it looked as if it had been subjected to a bombardment. The whole shore, on both sides of the river, seemed to be a mass of ruins.

But I was myself personally the subject of another explosion. I was now waiting the result of my removal to Newcastle. To use the words of

Bacon, I had "given hostages to fortune" in the shape of five sons and daughters; and I had no wish to change. I had been nine years with the Company; and the concern had become so large that I thought some room might be made for me. I should have been willing to take any reasonable position, with a moderate salary. But none was offered. Places were found for all the old officers, excepting myself. Mr Duncan Maclaren of Edinburgh was "determined to have his man in." My friends, who were few in number, were not so determined as Duncan. Accordingly he "had his man in"—a very proper person, from his "own romantic town"—and I prepared to look about me for another position, and I was certainly not to blame for *this* change.

As the Scottish proverb has it, "As ae door steeks, anither opens." The South-Eastern Railway Company happened at this time to advertise for a secretary. I had no end of strong recommendations, especially from Leeds, where I was well known—from Mr Henry Cowper Marshall, my former chairman, Mr William Beckett, banker, Sir George Goodman, member for Leeds, and other gentlemen. Besides, I had the advantage of being known to experienced men of railway reputation, possessed of more than local fame, such as Henry Booth, of Liverpool, John (afterwards Sir John) Hawkshaw, of Manchester, Sir William Cubitt, of London, and many other distinguished gentlemen. I did not know a single person at the Board of the South-Eastern Company, and therefore I suppose these recommendations had their proper effect. A large number of applications were made for the position. Out of the applicants, four were selected to meet

the Board, of whom I was one. After a satisfactory interview, I returned to Newcastle, and on the morning of the 11th of November 1854 (after a wonderful shower of meteors the evening before), I received a letter from Captain Barlow, the general manager of the South-Eastern Railway, informing me that I had been appointed to the vacant office.

I then sent in my resignation to the North-Eastern directors, and received a minute of the Board "expressing their entire satisfaction at the manner in which Mr Smiles had always discharged his duties, and more especially when engaged in forwarding the arrangement between the three companies, arising out of the union of their interests," and so on. This was the net result; though it was better than nothing. I shook hands pleasantly with everybody when parting, and took leave of my old friend, John Bourne, the engineer, with much regret. I went up to London at once, and my wife, family, and household goods followed me a month later. Before I had settled down in my place, I received the following letter from Robert Stephenson:—

"24 GREAT GEORGE STREET, WESTMINSTER,
"29th November 1854.

"MY DEAR SIR,—

"I am very glad to hear of your success, and I trust sincerely it may be permanent; for I fear you will find the South-Eastern a very difficult concern to keep in train satisfactorily. More of this when I have the pleasure of seeing you.

"I am delighted that you saw Dixon before leaving the North; no man knew my father better. I will not fail to send a missive to Nicholas Wood, which I have no doubt he will respond to. I had little or no hope in your succeeding in appointments with him.—Yours faithfully,

"ROBERT STEPHENSON."

Such was the position of affairs when I entered on my office. I began to doubt whether I could ever find time enough to write out the Life of George Stephenson, and a history of the new branch of national enterprise. For, after all, I had only made a beginning.