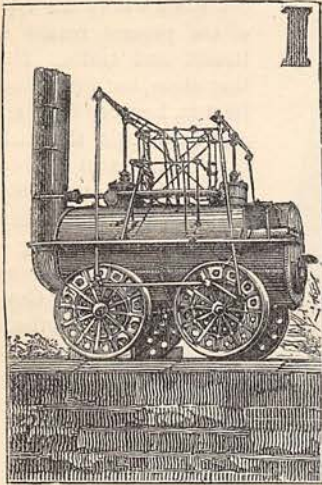




THE CENTENARY OF STEPHENSON'S BIRTH.



INTERESTING as the celebration of the centenary of the birth of George Stephenson is to the railway traveller all the world over, and to the nation he primarily benefited, it is of especial interest to that part of the north of England which is on and near the banks of the river Tyne. Close to this river he was born, in the collieries near it he

"began life," on its banks at Willington he married, and there his son was born; whilst, only a little later, a few miles from the Tyne he perfected his plans for the construction of the locomotive; from thence he walked those long miles to meet the "Father of Railways" at Darlington, and close to the coaly river he planted the engine works that commenced the industry of locomotive erection in the world. And though it may be that some of the great works of Stephenson were done after he left Tyneside, yet it was in the northern district that he learnt his art, and possessing his soul in patience, worked on the pit-heap, in the mine, and on the engines.

There are many memorials of George Stephenson in the Tyneside district—birthplace, residence, factory, and works—and though all around tells the tale of his triumphs, yet a grateful district has added a memorial school, statue, and other reminders of the son it is proud of. Some eight miles from Newcastle, on the 9th of June, 1781, at Wylam-on-Tyne, George Stephenson was born. At that time Wylam was a little colliery village, owing its importance to its nearness to the river and to the coal-seams below it. The great dependence of the coal-consumers of a

century ago was on the coal brought over sea, and the Tyne possessed even a greater monopoly of that trade than it now does, though the industry was in miniature and the working in the primitive stage when "gins" were the mode of raising coal, when the "corf" or basket took the place of the cage, when safety-lamps were not, and when the depth of the mine was necessarily limited by the rudeness of the contrivances for working it. Half a mile east of the village—about that distance from the present Wylam station, on the Newcastle and Carlisle branch of the North-Eastern Railway—is the birthplace of the great railway engineer. It is a poor cottage, but a century ago and in a colliery district it would be regarded as far above the average of the homes of the colliers. It is close to the Tyne, the double line of what is now the North Wylam branch of railway passing immediately between. The house is a double cottage, the front presenting the one common door in its two halves, with a small window on each side; and above, three windows over those below, and over the door. An open fence rails off the house from the line; at the eastern end a gate, a notice warning trespassers from the fields, and a straggling tree complete the picture. The lower windows have rude shutters, and to them on the western side there depends a spout to catch the dripping water from the spoutless eaves. The roof is red-tiled, but with frequent patches of darker hue, and with slabs of stone covering the tops of the grey walls. Enter the door: the worn stairs are in front of you, whilst to right and left are the entrances of the two dwellings. That to the left—the western one—is the birthplace of Stephenson. Its floor is coldly flagged; the beams that protrude from the ceiling are thickened with the whitewash of generations; the huge fireplace has a great baulk of wood across it, and a circular oven of probably later date than the house seems old in shape. Here, then, one hundred years ago George Stephenson was born to Robert Stephenson and his wife Mabel. The father was a fireman, earning twelve shillings weekly, and George was the second son, so that when the coal was worked out at Wylam Colliery and the family

removed to Dewley Burn—not far away—George Stephenson began life as a herd-boy at one shilling weekly, from which position, to be “corfe-bitter” at the colliery, or driver of the horse that turned the “gin,” at a wage of four shillings weekly, was a promotion. To Throckley, to Black Callerton, where he became acquainted with Fanny Henderson, his wife, and at twenty-one to Willington Quay, as engineman, Stephenson successively moved, still keeping near the Tyne. Here his wedding and the birth of his son took place; but the cottage has made room for the Stephenson Memorial Schools.

But Killingworth still shows the dwelling of Stephenson. In front of the great northern line from Newcastle to Berwick, the colliery village of Killingworth stands—rows of cottages clustering near the pit comparatively close to the railway, whilst farther off a street straggles up the hill by the church to the older and disused colliery. It was to this little place that the deputations from the promoters of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway went, and here still earlier the father of the primal public railway, Edward Pease, often addressed his “esteemed friend George Stephenson.” The house where the son of the enginenter lived when he attained a salary of £100 a year is probably that in which Stephenson’s saddest and gladdest days were spent, for there his wife died, and there he returned from the triumphal success of the opening

of the first public railway: a modest, comfortable dwelling, on which the morning sun shines, and of which the traveller due north may catch a glimpse just before Killingworth station is reached. A sundial—the work of the Stephensons—is in its front; a strip of garden is railed off from the road; and here in this cosy cottage dwelt Stephenson, in the days when his factory at Newcastle was building the first four engines for the Stockton and Darlington Railway, when his safety-lamp was coming into use, and when he was probably thinking over those improvements that the “Rocket” typified.

Around the place are mementoes of the great engineer—the colliery he worked at, with the antique and disused gin, with its long wire ropes idly wound round it; the pit he descended after the alarming explosion of 1814—a descent that was the originator of the idea of his safety-lamp; and an old engine,

with works displayed, like that shown now at Darlington, with wheels plugged on with wooden plugs—“the germ, the type, the progenitor of the tens of thousands of locomotives that now ply night and day all over the civilised world.” This Tyneside district is Stephenson’s land. Chesterfield records his later triumphs and enshrines his remains, but Tyneside gives us the early days, hopes, efforts, and successes. Wylam is not only the birthplace of Stephenson, it is one of the spots where early experimental locomotives were made, and the “Puffing Billy” in the Patent Office Museum at Kensington is the proof of the efforts of Hedley; the Killingworth engine of Stephenson and Wood is a vast stride forward; “Locomotion”

born in the South Street works of the Stephensons further carries on the improvements, and the “Rocket” gives us from the same works the type of the present means of transit and traffic. Not that alone, but from Bedlington, between Morpeth and Newcastle, the early rails were sent; from West Moor or Wylam many of the earliest engine-drivers sprang—Robert Stephenson (George’s brother), Gowlan, Murray, and others. And thus Stephenson’s land, with its early engines, its first locomotive works—where the old beam-engine George Stephenson built still drives a part of the machinery—and its early associations, is on Tyneside. And having had its commerce many times multiplied, its river deepened

till it has become one of the first commercial streams in the world, its great industries generated or developed by Stephenson’s work, and its name made famous over the world, Tyneside fittingly recalls the centenary of the birth of its benefactor; and if it gives itself up on the 9th of June to rejoicing, and if marches and melody fill its streets, there is in the sights of Wylam and Killingworth ample cause for the celebration. The monument of Stephenson, placed conspicuously where—

“The city of his love is swinging
Its clamorous iron flail,”

is a reminder of the practical benefits that have been conferred on Tyneside in a hundred years, and none can grudge the honours now being paid to the chief cause of them.



GEORGE STEPHENSON.