

HENRY ROBERTSON was born at Banff - on the 11th day of January, 1816, and was the youngest of a family of eight. His parents were pure Scottish and he always spoke of himself as being a Celt of the Celts.

His father held an appointment in the Inland Revenue and was a man of good education and considerable literary gifts. He was not blessed with many of this world's goods. Henry used to say that if he had not managed to win a scholarship at Aberdeen University; his father could never have afforded to give him the splendid education he got there.

An old friend, who knew the family at Banff, spoke of them as being more noted for their literary and artistic gifts than for their aptitude for business; Henry, however, turned out an exception, for besides being a brilliant scholar he proved himself to be a sound man of business.

Henry was originally intended for the Ministry, but, feeling he had no real calling in this direction, wisely decided to take up the profession for which he had a bent, namely, engineering. He was only 14 when he first went to College and took his M.A. before he was 20. About this time his father died and the family moved to Glasgow, where Henry studied further for his profession, but it seems it was a year or two before he decided what particular branch he should take up and for some time went in for mining engineering and worked down collieries in the Lanarkshire District. He used to say that for months in the year he never saw the sun except on the Sabbath.

Quickly acquiring a knowledge of coal mining, and having complete confidence in himself, he thought he would like to start a colliery of his own and tried to get leave to work the minerals belonging to the Duke of Hamilton in the Lanarkshire District, but was refused on the grounds that he was far too young to undertake the responsibility.

Whether this refusal to let him work these minerals influenced him or not, is not clear, but just at this time the first great Railway boom was taking place, and he wisely decided to take up railway engineering and to this end became a pupil of Robert Stephenson (George's brother) and Locke. These engineers were in partnership and actively engaged in developing the railway in the Edinburgh and Glasgow district and South into England, and, among other works which Mr. Robertson did for them was the actual levelling and setting out of that portion of the West Coast route which runs over Shap.

It might be interesting to note that at this time there was the first attempt to introduce road locomotion into the country and Mr Robertson, hearing that one of these early steam cars was working in the Edinburgh district, decided to go and see it for himself. Fortunately, the coach in which he was travelling was delayed and when he got to the place the steam car started from, he found that it had already gone down the road about a mile and he could not catch it up. It had gone very little further on, when the boiler exploded, killing everybody on the car. This is one of the many fortunate escapes he had during his life.

The great railway boom was followed by a setback which came over the whole railway movement and Mr Robertson, seeing that there was a probability of a slack period, decided, so as not to lose valuable time and knowledge, to take on a contract and, having made a special study of the building of skew arches, put in for,

and obtained, a contract to construct the overhead bridges on the Glasgow and Greenock railway which was then building. This contract proved a very remunerative one and Mr Robertson made his first bit of money on it, but the chief point was that he gained what he described as the most valuable experience he ever had, which proved of the greatest assistance to him afterwards in dealing with contractors on the larger works he carried out.

About this time Mr Robertson was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of a Mr Matthieson, a very successful contractor and a man of great influence in Glasgow. The story of how this acquaintance came about is worth relating. Mr Robertson was a wonderful athlete and exceedingly nimble on his feet, and, like most Scotsmen, was devoted to dancing. He danced so well at a certain party in Glasgow, at which Mr Matthieson was present that he attracted this gentleman's attention. Mr Matthieson was so struck with Mr Robertson's appearance that he asked someone to give him an introduction and there and then offered Mr Robertson a post on his staff. This was a most fortunate event, for, while with Mr Matthieson, Mr Robertson gained great and varied experience and, among other work, schemed and built the new Dundee Water Works, where for a second time he nearly lost his life, - owing to being trapped in an underground reservoir and if he had not dived out under the apron of the trap, he would have perished.

Now, it happened that one of the Scotch Banks had advanced considerable sums of money for the development of the mineral district of North Wales and, being anxious to obtain an independent report on these properties, asked Mr Matthieson if he could recommend a young engineer who would undertake the job. Mr Matthieson at once recommended Mr Robertson, who went down to Brymbo to make his report and this was Mr Robertson's first introduction to the district. In due course he sent in his report and the Directors of the Bank were so impressed with what he said and had such confidence in him, that they advanced him money that he might himself join in and develop the property.

Mr Robertson now went south and persuaded other young Scotsmen to join him, among them being Robert Roy, John Ross, Alexander Reid and Theodore Martin.

This must have been about 1840 to 1841. He at once began to sink new shafts-and resuscitate the old Iron Works and generally to develop the property and, seeing that it was absolutely essential to have a railway up into the district, he and his friends promoted and eventually carried through the North Wales Mineral Railway.

When Mr Robertson first came to Brymbo, he soon saw he could not hope to carry on the pits and ironworks and at the same time go on with his railway schemes and he persuaded Messrs. Darby to go in with him and take over the actual management of the pits and ironworks. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship which still continues.

Space is too short to tell of the various troubles and vicissitudes of the Brymbo Company, but the early days were very eventful and old Brymbo men can tell many stories of those exciting times and of the various long and costly lawsuits. Mr Robertson, Mr W.H. Darby and Mr Charles Darby eventually took over the Brymbo side, while Mr Roy and others took over the Westminster side of the property.

When Mr Robertson came to Brymbo, he found the men were very rarely paid their wages in money, but in hats, coats, boots and such commodities. He saw the villainy of the system and abolished it long before the Truck Act came in.

When Mr Robertson had secured the help of the Messrs. Darby, he was able to devote more of his time to railway development, and in 1846 moved to Chester. This year was a memorable one in his life, as he was fortunate enough to meet Miss Dean, daughter of Mr J.W. Dean, a London solicitor and married her in the summer of that year.

With Chester as his headquarters, Mr Robertson now worked away at the North Wales Mineral Railway and its extension to Ruabon. The Act for the construction of this section was obtained in 1844 and the Act for the line south of the Dee, called the 'Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Chester Junction Railway', was obtained in 1845 and the Act amalgamating these two sections was passed in 1846.

These two lengths of railway were the most troublesome of any Mr Robertson undertook, not only were the engineering problems most difficult, as the crossing of the Dee had to be made, but the opposition to the Act of Parliament was most determined and bitter and great difficulty was experienced in getting the surveys completed, every obstruction being put in the way of the surveyors. Some of the work had to be surveyed by night. Much of this opposition arose from the fear of Wrexham coal being brought over and competing with coal raised South side of the Dee. One gentleman wrote to another on whose land the surveys were being made loudly beseeching him to "throw Robertson and his damned theodolite into the canal". This gentleman lived to become one of Mr Robertson's best friends and the railway, instead of harming him, put many thousands of pounds into his pocket.

Eventually, despite all opposition, the Acts were obtained and the railway was opened to Ruabon in 1846. Then came the problem of the Dee crossings. Mr Robertson had completed his plans for the viaduct, but no contractor could be found who would undertake the job and it looked as if the through route would be held up indefinitely, but fortune again favoured Mr Robertson. One day he was standing on Wrexham platform talking to the station master waiting for the train to start to Chester, when he noticed a stranger getting into the train. He asked the station master who it was, the reply being, "Oh, that is Mr Brassey the great Railway Contractor." "Hold on to the train" said Mr Robertson and darted into the booking office where he had the plans of the viaduct. Having got them, he jumped into the same compartment that Mr Brassey was in, introduced himself and, before the train had got to Chester, had got Mr Brassey to promise to build the viaduct. This not only meant that the viaduct would now be built, but it marked the beginning of a life-long friendship between these two men, during which they made many and many a mile of railway together, Mr Robertson doing the engineering and Mr Brassey the contracting. The viaduct took about 2 years to build and the through line was opened to the public on the 14th October, 1848.

It must not be thought that all Landowners were opposed to the railways; there were many broadminded men who saw the advantage Railways would be to the country and did all they could to promote them, e.g., Mr Ormsby Gore, who became the first Lord Harlech and was Chairman of the Shrewsbury and Chester Railway and the late Sir Watkin Wynn both worked hard for the Railways. Mr

Robertson now moved to Shrewsbury and from that centre made the lines from Shrewsbury to Birmingham, the Severn Valley, Shrewsbury and Hereford and Central Wales, as well as other smaller lines, but all this time, with the help of Messrs. W.H. and Charles Darby, he was working away at the Collieries and Ironworks at Brymbo and the Minera Lime Works.

His commercial energies were not confined to Brymbo for he became an original partner, with Mr Beyer and Mr Peacock, in founding the well known Locomotive Works of Messrs. Beyer, Peacock and Co. and the history of his joining these gentlemen shows how quickly he made up his mind. Mr Robertson had known Mr Beyer for some years when he bought engines for his various railways from Sharp-Roberts, of Manchester, for whom Mr. Beyer was chief designer. One day Mr Beyer came to Mr Robertson saying that he and Mr Peacock, who was a locomotive superintendent, on the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincoln Railway, had decided to start a Locomotive Shop and had taken an order for a large number of engines, but had only enough Capital to buy the land at Gorton. Could Mr Robertson help them? Mr Robertson replied saying that he himself had no money to spare, but if Mr Beyer liked he would go with him to Mr Brassey and see if he would find the money.

So off they went, to Mr Brassey and Mr Robertson explained the position to him. Mr Brassey could not find the money, but strongly advised Mr Robertson to do so, even if he had to mortgage all his securities. Mr Robertson thought for a moment and then said he would take Mr Brassey's advice. So he went away and borrowed as much money as he could and handed it to Mr Beyer, thus becoming an original partner. This business was successful from the start and soon became the largest locomotive firm in England. About this time, Mr Robertson had a very fortunate escape from a bad investment, namely, the steamship 'Great Eastern', which his friend, Mr Scott Russell, wanted him to join in. Mr Scott Russell, who was really the most active promoter in this unfortunate venture, asked Mr Robertson to meet him to explain the scheme to him, which was to construct a ship big enough to be able to carry enough coal to take her out to Australia and back again. They were to dine together at Chester. Mr Robertson had had a very hard day's work and came in dead beat. After dinner they drew up their chairs to the fire and Mr Scott Russell began to unfold his great scheme; Mr Robertson began to nod and finally went fast asleep, Mr Scott Russell, who was a very hot tempered man, was highly indignant and told Mr Robertson that as he had not had the manners to keep awake, he should not have the chance of a share in the 'Great Eastern'.

Mr Robertson went on working away at Railways and was in great demand as a witness before the Parliamentary Committees. The late Mr David Davies, of Llandinam, used to say that Mr Robertson was the best witness of his time before the Parliamentary Committees. He had an extraordinary knowledge of Parliamentary procedure, which, coupled with his business ability, made him an excellent witness either for promotion or opposition and there were very few Railway Bills for Wales and the Border Counties that Mr Robertson was not briefed for by one side or the other.

Apart from his profession, Mr Robertson was a keen politician, being a Liberal and a great admirer of Gladstone. He fought and won Shrewsbury 3 times, first in 1862 and in 1885 fought and won Merioneth after a long and bitter fight.

Mr Robertson having practically developed all the railways radiating from Shrewsbury, now started to make the lines down the Dee valley, first the Vale of Llangollen, then Llangollen to Corwen and then to Corwen and Bala, which was followed by the Bala to Festiniog line in the early eighties. He had all along been busily developing fresh collieries in the Brymbo and Wrexham district; the Old Broughton Pits, then the Broughton and Plas Power Pits and Gatewen and in the early eighties, together with the late Mr W.H. Darby began to discuss the possibility of starting steel works at Brymbo. Unfortunately, Mr W.H. Darby died in 1882. This was a great blow to Mr Robertson, but Mr J.H. Darby, Mr W.H. Darby's eldest son, who was now growing up, took up and made a special study of steel making and Mr Robertson sent him to various works to pick up all the knowledge he could. Mr Robertson also sent the late Mr P. Williams on the same errand to Russia, where they were working the Basic Open Hearth process, the result being that in 1884, Mr Robertson instructed Mr J.H. Darby and Mr P. Williams to erect a small experimental furnace, which stood not far from where the Mixer now is. The results of this furnace were so satisfactory, and the steel produced was of such good quality, that Mr Robertson at once decided to put down a steel plant and founded the Brymbo Steel Co., Ltd., which started operations in 1885.

Now Mr Robertson had for some time seen that it would be greatly to the advantage of the Companies he was interested in and other Companies in the district, to have a second railway access and, to this end, in conjunction with Mr Benjamin Piercy, he promoted and obtained the Bills for various extensions to the Wrexham, Mold and Connah's Quay Railway and by this means got a fresh outlet on to the L. & N. W. R. and Cheshire Lines, the ultimate scheme being to have an independent railway from the Wrexham district down over the W. M. & C. Q. R. and the Hawarden Branch, then by a new line through Wirral to the Wirral Railway and thus get access to the Birkenhead Docks.

Neither Mr Robertson nor Mr Piercy lived long enough to complete this scheme, which was subsequently carried through by the G.C.R. In 1862, Mr Robertson gave up his house in Shrewsbury, living in London when the house was sitting and the rest of the year at Crogen, a place on the Dee between Corwen and Bala and gradually acquired a considerable estate in that locality. In 1869, he started to rebuild Pale, and moved there when it was completed in 1871. Mr Robertson often said that the happiest days of his life were spent at Crogen. He loved the river and mountains, being devoted from early boyhood to fishing and shooting and being out in-the fresh air.

He was now getting on in years, but worked away as hard as ever, never knowing what an idle moment was. At last, however, the human machine broke down and Mr Robertson died on the 22nd March, 1888; the following day Mr Piercy passed away.

The Foregoing is a short history of a most remarkable man who started life without either money or influence, but with those best of all capital assets, an honest and clear brain, a kind heart and an absolutely sound and healthy body; these, coupled with a passion for hard work, indomitable pluck and energy and a good education were the secrets of his success in life. Often he used the motto "What is worth doing is worth doing well" and no man acted up to it better than he did both in business and pleasure. It might be thought that Mr Robertson was wrapped up entirely in business and never enjoyed any

relaxation. Far from it however, no man could enjoy himself better than he did. Being brought up in the country he naturally acquired a love of all forms of sport and out-door life and in after life he was never so happy as when he could snatch a day's shooting or fishing. As has already been mentioned, Mr Robertson was a wonderfully athletic man. He himself told the writer that he was so keen on dancing and such a good walker that he had walked 30 miles to a dance and walked back again after the dance was over. When Dickens' 'Pickwick Papers' was coming out Mr Robertson was so keen to get each monthly number that he had to walk 30 miles into the Town and back again to get them; this was confirmed to the writer by the late Sir Theodore Marcin, who knew Mr Robertson from boyhood and who himself was a great walker.

It was the love of the river and mountains and the sport he got among them that first induced Mr Robertson to go up the Dee valley and as a young man one of his hopes was that one day he might himself own some of the land himself.

Although he had little time for reading, he managed to keep up his knowledge of literature and could read Latin almost as quickly as he could English, one of his favourite writers being Tacitus. He was full of poetry and could reel off poem after poem of Burns and Byron. Always cheerful even in the most depressing circumstances, he liked to look on the bright side of things and enjoy life and what was more he liked to see other people enjoy themselves and help them to do so. Mr Robertson not only did well for himself, but at the same time helped on others and literally hundreds of people owed their improved circumstances to being connected with him and his enterprises, and many a lame dog did he help over the stile. Mr Robertson was like a boy to the very end. Two things he especially loved were birds nesting and playing in the snow. He knew every nest round his house, and woe betides anyone who stole an egg or pulled a nest. A heavy fall of snow was his great delight. He would spend all day with his children, or any friend he could induce to join him, making snow men or building snow huts and then have terrific snowball battles for them.

The first warning he had of his end was in May, 1887, when after spending a long day in the broiling sun fishing in a Mountain Lake, he came home in the evening and could not sign his letters. The doctor was sent for and told him he must keep quiet. The next day when the doctor came, Mr Robertson could not be found and after a bit he emerged from some bushes where he had been hunting for bird's nests; this was his idea of keeping quiet. For a time he seemed to get better and he went on working away although the doctor forbade him to do any work, but that autumn and winter, troubles came on him in battalions, the final blows being the bursting of the flywheel at Brymbo and a nasty accident on the Wirral Railway. One side now became paralyzed and the end came on the 22nd March, 1888. Only a few days before he died there was a very heavy fall of snow and, game to the last nothing would satisfy him but that he must go out and help to make snow men and roll them down the bank.

Thus passed away a man who had done perhaps more good than any other man of his time for the development and betterment of North Wales, beloved by all that knew him, he left not a single enemy.

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