200 NOT OUT

Some Highlights of the Murray History

In this school and to a lesser extent in the Leeds area the prowess of our great engineering pioneer is known and his praises sung. We may ask with some justification why Matthew Murray has never been accorded the national honour so often paid to Brunel, Watt, Telford and the Stephensons. When we find that in an 1890 history of Leeds, Charles Brandling is mentioned but once and Murray, Blenkinsop and their colleagues not at all, we are driven to ask why - and why again. How is it that the attempts in 1928 and other years to build a memorial plaque failed as also did the attempt to build a memorial on the 1958 closure of Middleton Rly?

Perhaps it is that Murray was an engineer or artisan of quality, but had little commercial knowledge. He was intent on designing and building machinery that worked rather than blowing a well deserved trumpet. We must remember Richard Trevithick who died unhonoured, unsung and penniless, despite his own engineering prowess. Then again, Watt and his kettle, Stephenson and his Rocket evoke instant reaction, Murray's Salamanca does not.

Yet, as we scan the scientific records we find that all too often the praise has gone, or has been credited, to the wrong person. The French scientist Lavoisier took the credit for discovering oxygen as the active constituent of air, although Priestley of Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, found it two years before. Stephenson got the credit for inventing steam engines and railways -- which he did not! Stephenson DID invent the miner's safety lamp yet the scientist Humphrey Davy (discoverer of sodium) pinched the credit! The Stockton & Darlington and Liverpool & Manchester occupy the history books as "first railways", usurping the credit of early plateways, wagonways, Middleton, Swansea & Mumbles, the Surrey Iron and other railways. We find that the idea of a standard screw thread was not Whitworth's, although it bears his name, but was that of Maudsley, of whom Whitworth was a pupil.

So we find that popular imagination and the truth are not always the same thing. We will draw a veil over the statement that "the Stockton & Darlington was the world's first railway" - appearing in the Yorkshire Post, published in Leeds! Perhaps Stephenson's Public Relations Officer is still alive!

Murray - the Railway pioneer

To put down in black and white the priority of the Murray - Blenkinsop school in locomotive design, we may say that:-

1) Murray locomotives were the first that went from the experimental stage to the long-lasting practical stage. So many of his machines of all types had a very long life.
2) Murray was the first to make double cylinder locomotives, which could start at any position of the pistons on full load.

3) Safety spring valves, slide valves, feed pumps, rack traction and flanged wheels with edge rails were all pioneered by Murray and colleagues.

4) Among his pupils were many whose subsequent work is recognised in railway and general engineering -- Richard Peacock, engineer to the Leeds & Selby Railway, later founder of Beyer Peacocks: Fenton, Murray & Wood's works at Leeds, later becoming Smith, Beacock and Tanner, machine tool makers.

Murray - the Engineer

All too often forgotten are the facts that Murray was as brilliant in other engineering fields. The Torridon Wool Industries Research Association pay tribute to the textile machinery which owes its origin to Murray: woollen spinning machinery, flax making machinery, the use of steam or water power on textile processing of many kinds. Murray was one of the first to make hydraulic presses and pioneered steam central heating. We can only glimpse now the wide scope of his work and give passing mention to some things like the 1820 band knife machine for cloth cutting (jointly with Kendall of London), the 1821 furnace design for smokeless coal burning, the cylinder boring machine, steam paddle boats for the Yare river in Suffolk and the Mississipi in the New World, the inverted beam engine of 1805 and many other ideas.

Why then are Watt, Trevithick and the Stephensons honoured with their graves or memorials at Westminster Abbey, while Murray rests in the grimy industrial atmosphere at Holbeck church yard ? Perhaps his only fault was to be intent only on his work to aid his fellow men. We remember how the rivals of Bolton & Watt were supposed to have spied on him and on a technical fault wiped out Murray's patent rights on his steam engines. May we hope that 200 years from his birth and 139 years after his death, Matthew Murray School members determine to see that this engineering pioneer gets the fame that he deserves. May we dare hope to see his statue in City Square or the Science Museum? May we dare hope that there may one day be a Matthew Murray Scholarship to read Mechanical Engineering at Leeds University? There within a short walk of the cast iron tombstone lies his railway line, grimy as ever, but protected by the National Trust as a monument for as long as steel wheels turn on rails.

At a centenary service in Holbeck Church on 21st February 1926 with the Lord Mayor and engineers of all types present, the Vicar Rev. R. J. Wood, started his tribute: "Seeest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings: he shall not stand before mean men" (Proverbs xxii,29) and finished "...and we Holbeck folk and you, his fellow craftsmen, do well to thank God for Matthew Murray's labours and to share our Father's joy in his achievements."

May we therefore take this 200th anniversary year as the right time to make more widely known and appreciated the life and work of the engineer whom our school commemorates.