

George Stephenson (1781 - 1848)

George Stephenson was a mechanical engineer who developed and built the first successful railway locomotive and is known as the "Father of Railways".

George Stephenson, the son of a colliery fireman, was born at Wylam, near Newcastle and began working in a coal mine as a fireman at the age of only seven. He never went to regular school. He showed a natural gift for mending and inventing machines. George's first employment was herding cows, keeping them off the colliery's horse-drawn wagon way.

When he was fourteen he joined his father at the Dewley Colliery. George was an ambitious boy and at the age of eighteen he began attending evening classes where he learnt to read and write.

He also showed natural gifts for fighting - willing to wrestle any brawny pitman who dared to cross him. As a young man he used his wages to pay for the education, which he had never received as a child, and meanwhile invented several improvements to equipment used in the mines.

In 1802 Stephenson became a colliery engineman. Later that year he married Frances Henderson, a servant at a local farm. To earn extra money, in the evenings, he repaired clocks and watches. In 1803, his only son, Robert was born. Frances suffered from poor health and she died of consumption in 1806.

Stephenson's early efforts in locomotive design were confined to constructing locomotives to haul loads in coal mines. He devised one of the first miner's safety lamps but shared credit for this invention with the British inventor Sir Humphry Davy. Stephenson built his railway engine in 1814. It was capable of a steady six miles per hour. In 1825 he built the world's first public railway, between Stockton and Darlington in Yorkshire, although for some years horses were used to pull the carriages. In 1829 Stephenson's design of a steam engine 'Rocket' which hauled both freight and passengers at a greater speed than had any locomotive constructed up to that time and won a prize for achieving a speed of 30 mph.

Davies visited the scenes of Stephenson's boyhood and days of fame, produced much original research and created a memorable human portrait.

Stephenson's second wife died in 1845. George Stephenson married for a third time just before he died at Tapton House, Chesterfield on 12th August, 1848.

