

Trevithick treasure 'is a fake'

THE oldest railway drawing in the world has been dismissed as a 20th century fake.

The illustration, by Thomas Rowlandson, depicts Richard Trevithick's *Catch Me Who Can* locomotive of 1808 and had always been thought of as being of similar antiquity.

But in this, the 200th anniversary year of the loco's operation, Science Museum official John Liffen has conducted a painstaking analysis of the drawing and proved it cannot be as old as claimed.

Not only that, but, by an amazing coincidence, Liffen unearthed during his research another illustration, which he is convinced dates from 1808 and shows the original Trevithick boiler!

His findings, made public on June 24, have shocked the world of railway history and, although there is no doubt at all that the railway existed at that time, historians' exact understanding of its nature and location may now have to be re-assessed.

The Rowlandson document has been held by the National Museum of Science & Industry for many years and has long been classified as one of the treasures of the British museum world. It shows Trevithick's engine hauling coaches on a circular track in central London, somewhere close to what is now University College, near Euston Square. Because fares were charged to ride on the train, it became the world's first passenger railway ... a full 17 years before the

opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway.

However, some historians have always been uncomfortable with the drawing because it shows buildings that are not thought to have existed in 1808 and the paper used seems to contain traces of woodpulp, which would suggest a later date. It also bears the date 1809.

To solve the problem, Liffen, the Science Museum's curator of communications, decided to consult estate maps and land ownership records from the early 19th century as well as searching little-known local archives for a more reliable source. His conclusion is that the drawing is a forgery, dating from the first decade of the 20th century and based on an imagination of the scene.

John's discovery of the hitherto unknown boiler drawing came as he was trawling through the archives, in the City of London Guildhall Library. It is a pen-and-wash illustration by J.C. Nattes, which experts say is a genuine, contemporary 1808 view. What is still not known is whether it shows the boiler before Trevithick's railway was built, or after it was dismantled.

Commented Jim Raes, curator of rail vehicles at the National Railway Museum: "John Liffen has not only confirmed the falsehood of the Rowlandson print but has helped to pinpoint the location of the circular railway. Now we know more about the world's first passenger locomotive than ever before."

The two pictures at the centre of the controversy. The 'fake' one (below) and the newly-discovered one (right).

