

The Victorians

Victorian railways: 'Without Equal'

Written by Andrew Chater

OLD McCRAE:

A letter, from Douglas McCrae, engineer, to the curator of the Museum of Science, London, 1865. Sir, I have in my care an old steam locomotive befitting exhibition, should you so wish, in your museum of scientific curiosities. The name of this locomotive is the 'Sans Pareil', that being French for 'Without Equal'. Whether she was, in her day, 'without equal', my story will relate...

It begins, this story, in the year 1829 in the workshops of Mr Timothy Hackworth of Darlington, where my labours constructing the said 'Sans Pareil' were interrupted one day by the said Mr Hackworth, in some excitement, clutching a piece of paper:

HACKWORTH:

Douglas! Douglas!

DOUGLAS:

Aye, sir?

HACKWORTH:

It's perfect! Look at this - there's to be a public trial of locomotives, at Rainhill on the Manchester Line. Open to all comers; the best engine over 35 miles wins.

DOUGLAS:

Aye, we've a chance there. And a prize.

HACKWORTH:

Of five hundred pounds! And - look, read on...a contract to supply all the engines for the new Liverpool / Manchester railroad!





- DOUGLAS: Now what a ticket that would be!
- HACKWORTH: And we've got our 'Sans Pareil' just a whisker from completion!
- DOUGLAS: Except for the cylinders.
- HACKWORTH: The cylinders?
- DOUGLAS: We can't do the cylinders in this workshop, sir, I don't have the means, you know that. I've put in an order with Stephenson – they'll be cast at his workshop.
- HACKWORTH: Are you saying at this moment of final reckoning between us, my hopes rest with Stephenson?
- OLD McCRAE: I should explain my employer, Mr Hackworth, and Mr George Stephenson were rivals from the start, born and bred in the same colliery town, and there was no love lost between them. Which added, shall we say, a certain excitement to the proceedings, as we assembled later that year for the festivities that have since entered railway folklore as the 'Rainhill Trials'.
- VOICE 1: Who's your money on?
- VOICE 2: Five shillings on 'Perseverance'!
- HACKWORTH: It's a field of five, and two are long shots. Stephenson's here, curse him, with his 'Rocket' – and by all accounts his son Robert's made some decent improvements.
- DOUGLAS: He's a canny man, that Robert.





- HACKWORTH: I tell you the real competition – it's Mr Braithwaite, with 'Novelty'...and she is that – she's light and she's fast – twenty eight miles an hour yesterday!
- OLD McCRAE: Well, over the week that followed, the engines, one by one, were put to the test, and the crowd cheered on the favourites...
- VOICE 3: 'Novelty'!
- VOICE 4: 'Rocket'!
- OLD McCRAE: Truth be told the 'Sans Pareil' should never have been in competition – we were a clear three hundred pounds overweight, but Mr Hackworth battered the judges into submission and we were allowed our chance. And we proved ourselves to be, I would say without modesty, at least as good an engine as the 'Rocket', until, on the seventh day of the trials -
- HACKWORTH: It's good, it's good.
- DOUGLAS: Got to be seventeen, eighteen miles an hour...
- HACKWORTH: Stoke it steady...
- HACKWORTH: What's that?
- DOUGLAS: We're losing speed...
- HACKWORTH: Stoke it! Stoke it!
- DOUGLAS: It's not the boiler – she's piping! – something's with the cylinders...
- HACKWORTH: The cylinders?





DOUGLAS:

The cylinder's blown!

OLD McCRAE:

Of course, it were never proved that Mr Stephenson would stoop so low. Personally I don't believe it. Rather I believe Mr Timothy Hackworth was 'without equal' as a poor loser. And so the 'Sans Pareil' retired...and the 'Rocket' emerged triumphant and the Stephensons, father and son, won the 500 pound.

VOICES:

'Rocket'! 'Rocket'!

OLD McCRAE:

A postscript: after the trials were over, the Directors of the Liverpool and Manchester railroad bought the 'Sans Pareil'. And they set her to work for many years, alongside the 'Rocket', ferrying passengers between those two great cities. During which time the science of locomotion moved on so that tracks now criss and cross the length and breadth of this great glorious nation. So that, should I wish to see Stephenson's 'Rocket', say, I have only to make the journey south to London by railroad, to your impressive Museum. And perhaps – should you accept this offer – I should see standing beside the 'Rocket' another locomotive, 'without equal' in my affections...

Yours sincerely, Douglas McCrae.

