

WATSOC

Welcome to Watsoc News for June 2021 - the fifth edition of the newsletter of the Watkin Society



**The country is starting to sniff the wind after months of Covid lockdown and anxiety
- and so is the Watkin Society!**

This is a good time to send you our latest newsletter with an update on the Society's activities - and our plans for the future.

We hope you enjoy all the news.

Parks for the People

This year marks the 175th anniversary of the opening of Manchester's first public parks, which provided the only green space for ordinary families to relax in at a time when the town was a hellhole of dirt and noise for its poorest citizens. Edward Watkin led the campaign to raise enough money to buy the land for what are now Queen's and Philips Parks. He called them 'Parks for the People'.



On the 200th anniversary of Edward's birthday in September 2019, four members of the Watkin family unveiled a plaque in Philips Park to commemorate EW's pioneering work.

The Parks Team of the City Council are planning a series of events to celebrate this year's anniversary, which comes at a time when the key role of parks and open spaces (including Rose Hill Woods, Absalom Watkin's creation in front of the former Watkin family home) in promoting physical and mental health is being recognised. It's been great to see parks so popular during the pandemic period. We are delighted to have been asked to be involved in Manchester's plans. Watch the media for the details.



Queen's Park in 1850 – one of Edward's first Parks for the People

EW's vision of the importance of open-air recreation 175 years ago makes him bang up-to-date. Remember that girl in one of the Northenden schools who dubbed him 'Manchester's First Eco- Warrior'?

By the way, The Watkin Society and our sister group, The Friends of Rose Hill, were nominated for the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service

this year. Although we were not successful, it was good to be recognised.

Reaching Out

Manchester will always be our base but now we are planning to reach out to the many areas of the country (and eventually abroad!) where EW made his impact.

Grimsby

Watkin turned Grimsby into the biggest fishing port in the whole world and was made a Freeman of the City. To celebrate his achievements the Grimsby Heritage Centre have invited us to put on a Watkin exhibition and presentation in the magnificent Town Hall of the city on Tuesday 5 October. The aim is to move on to working with local schools and eventually for us to join in a great celebration to mark the 175th anniversary of the coming of the railway to Grimsby in 2023. Watkin will be there!

The Great Central Railway lives on!

EW's Great Central Railway – the last mainline into London till HS1 – is thriving as a highly successful tourist line in the Leicester area. It has preserved the old GCR slogan: 'Forward'.



The company has a full calendar of events throughout the year, including Santa Specials and World War II Nostalgia Days (“We’ll meet again....”). But the highlight of their year is the three-day Steam Gala over the first weekend in October. Visitor numbers are expected to top four figures.

We’ve been invited to organise a Watkin stall on the Saturday. The GCR plans to open an audio-visual centre publicising the history of the line. A full-length Edward Watkin will greet visitors as they enter and a display will set out the crucial part he played in the creation of the line. A further boost for the Society is that we have been asked to submit a 1500 word article about EW to appear in the autumn issue of the GCR’s 100 page full colour magazine ‘Mainline’.



On the stocks but still at the ‘What about?’ stage in our plans, are links with Wembley (the site of Watkin’s ‘Eiffel Tower’ and his enormous Park), Folkestone (the English end of his great Channel Tunnel project and the town where he was MP for fifteen years) and North Wales (where he constructed Britain’s first purpose-built public footpath – The Watkin Path up Snowdon – and the great bridge over the Dee Estuary).

Plenty to look forward to – to say nothing of exploring the amazing role EW played in the creation of the Dominion of Canada!

Our Northenden Base

We shall be building on our great successes in Northenden, the family home of the Watkins. We have kept up our links with the two local schools, Northenden Community and St Wilfrid’s, where we started to work in 2019 and are delighted that they want us to continue to work with them. The Manchester Health Academy High School has now joined the Watkin family with their own imaginative integration into their curriculum of the man the school’s principal, Kevin Green, always calls ‘Ned Watkin’ (after Edward’s nickname in his lifetime: ‘Nimble Ned’).

Our vice-chair, Andrew Bradley, the rector of St Wilfrid’s in Northenden (the church which Absalom and Edward attended and where they are buried) is leading the ‘Northenden Connections’ discussion group of the Society. The Covid crisis interrupted its programme but it is good to report that it has picked up its work in the past month with two very successful Zoom meetings. Its focus is to look at the links between Absalom and Edward and their home village of Northenden. There are rich pickings there. If you would like to join this very friendly and informal group, please contact Andrew at stwilfridspic@gmail.com.

The Friends of Rose Hill Woods



Bluebells in Rose Hill

Woods

The good news about Manchester's parks gives us a chance to update you on the progress of The Friends of Rose Hill Woods. Discussions are underway for additional funding from the Council for improvements to the surfaces of the paths in the woods, which are showing their age after two winters. Watch out also for intriguing news of the 'new but very old' Absalom's Bridge. The Woods have been entered again for an award from 'Britain in Bloom'. Judging will be at 10am on 21 July. If you live nearby, why not come along to meet the judge and say something about what the Woods mean to you?

Appeal Appeal Appeal Appeal Appeal Appeal Appeal Appeal

The publication of our book 'Victoria's Railway King' was a great boost for the Society at the end of a dreadful winter for everybody. A hard-headed commercial company giving the thumbs-up to the Watkin Story has just come at the right time for the Society to move ahead. (Have you got your copy? It's available from all booksellers with the best offer – still post free – at Amazon for £15.31.)

Here are some of our plans

We aim to become a national society, without losing our roots.

We need to fund the publication of promotional videos, printed publicity materials, including school packages, tailored to fit each area, and a series of low-priced but attractively produced 20-page Watkin booklets on the Channel tunnel, the Tower, the GCR, the Watkin Path, Canada, the Manchester parks and his work as an MP.

In order to establish the Society on a firm footing we will need to pay for projects to be managed to a high standard.

We will need to pay out-of-pocket expenses for working with 'outreach' schools.

We plan to organise public meetings in all the areas which we have identified as having 'Watkin potential'.

One of our main aims is to preserve all the results of our researches into the Watkin Story in an easily accessible digital form. Planning, organising and promoting a digital library will need a professional approach.

But we can't make progress without money. We are currently preparing an application for Heritage Lottery funding but applications take up to three months before a result. What makes the immediate future more uncertain however, is that lottery grants have until recently been made only to groups devastated by the effects of the Covid pandemic. There will now be a flood of applications, which makes the chances of our bid being accepted that much harder.

The Society is still subscription-free. Will you help promote our work, either by suggesting possible alternative funding sources or more personally? Donations, large or small, can be sent to our Treasurer, George Lea at 5 St Brannocks Road, Cheadle Hulme, Stockport, SK8 7LA or direct into our bank account with Santander.

The details are: THE WATKIN SOCIETY Account number: 49739873 Sort Code 090129.

Thank you.

Finally, for this edition of the WatSoc newsletter, here's some good news about 'Victoria's Railway King'. We are still waiting for the battle over world TV rights for 'The Watkin Story' to start(!) but at least some really encouraging reviews have been sent in to Amazon, which you can find on their website.

One review to be specially proud of is from Simon Bradley, the joint editor of the famous Pevsner Architectural guides and author of one of the great railway books: 'The Railways – Nation, Network and People':

"This comes with belated thanks for EW, which I enjoyed reading. You have brought a sense of swagger and drama to the story, which it absolutely deserves and which keeps at bay any risk of getting stuck in the detail. The family story is much stranger than I had realised, the rather awful father especially. EW's early combination of political radicalism and canny networking compels respect. The story of the painting is an enjoyable bonus, and was wholly new to me.

The Great Central, Wembley tower, Channel Tunnel are what the average UK railway enthusiast already knows, with the Canadian adventure as the headline for the international side of things. So that was more familiar, but without the personal and non-railway stuff it would not come across with the same force.

I'll be recommending the book to anyone with an interest in the subject and the period. So this email ends with my best wishes for its wider reception."

And this from a reader in Arizona:

"I hardly know where to begin to thank you for such a remarkable book. The story is amazing: not just Sir Edward's life, but also the fact that he is all but unknown. That borders on the scandalous: how is it possible he is not widely known? I consider myself fairly well-read; your book makes it quite clear my reading had been deficient. On the other hand, I have had the great pleasure of discovering Sir Edward in the pages of your book.

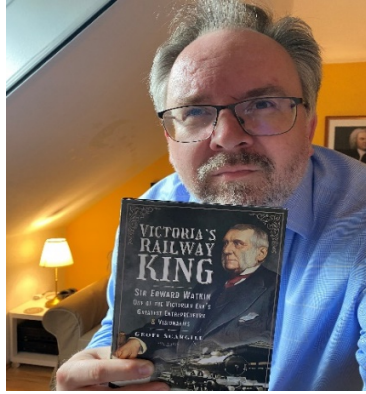
Given the scale of his activities, I am not surprised this has been a project of many years, but what an adventure. There seems little in his time he did not touch one way or another. Your book was so well organized and detailed, it enabled me to follow his exploits (for such they were) with ever-increasing admiration. You also make an excellent observation that his unsuccessful projects all had the important ingredient of vision. At the very least, they have guided subsequent efforts.

It was heartening to learn his earliest efforts were devoted to reform and parks! I think that is my favorite 'era': his hopefulness combined with practical politics for such good ends. Of course, there's the small matter of creating Canada, too: that is a flat-out miracle. Oh to have been eavesdropping on those meetings.

And, the miracle of "The Icebergs"! I like Frederic Church very much (although his teacher, Thomas Cole more), and this discovery was a delightful surprise. I am torn about its destination, though: good to have it in a fine museum where it can be enjoyed by many; better, perhaps, for it to be hanging in a similar venue, but in Manchester, near Rose Hill.

Speaking of which, bravo for the efforts of the Watkin Society to spread the word about Sir Edward. His story deserves a chapter in every child's education: he dreamed big dreams and accomplished so many of them. What a splendid model for children. What a great story for parents to tell their children as well."

And still in international mood, this is from a reader in Germany:



“The Eagle has landed. Finally, Watkin made his way to the Continent. Maybe even through a tunnel.”

We hope you have enjoyed this edition of the WatSoc newsletter. If you'd like to know more or would like to get involved with our plans to make the Watkins known not only locally but nationally and even abroad you will find us on

<http://friendsofrosehill.org/the-watkin-society-watsoc/>

We have a Facebook page dedicated to Victoria's Railway King

or you can follow our twitter feed

[@WatkinRoseHill](https://twitter.com/WatkinRoseHill)

*All the best for what remains of this
strangest of summers from
the committee of The Watkin
Society – and thanks for your*

interest and support.

Onward

and Upward!