

# WATSOC

*Spreading the news about Absalom and Edward Watkin*

**Welcome to WatSoc News for January 2022 - the sixth edition of the newsletter of the Watkin Society**



*The committee of The Watkin Society wish you a Happy and Healthy 2022*

**In the fifth issue of the WatSoc Newsletter in June 2021, we stated optimistically: “The country is starting to sniff the wind after months of Covid lockdown and anxiety - and so is the Watkin Society!” Well, anxieties about the different strains of the pandemic are, sadly, still with us. But the Society is still sniffing the wind. We hope you enjoy reading our New Year’s ‘bulletin’, which is full of optimistic news.**

**Just before Christmas we submitted an application for a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It is a strong bid but we have been told that recently there has been a considerable increase in applications as societies like ours begin to come to terms with Covid and make plans for the new year. We have to join the queue but we have been promised a result by the beginning of March. We are not going to wait around though. The committee is meeting at**

**the end of this month to draw up detailed plans and will work on the assumption that our bid will be successful. If it fails, then it's back to the drawing-board!**

### **Progress in 2021**

**In spite of all the current difficulties we have a great deal of progress to report to you.....**

**Top of the list are the strong links we have built with the towns of Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Both were virtually created by Edward Watkin. He turned the small port of Grimsby into what became the biggest fishing port in the world - and a major passenger hub**



**He spotted the potential of a little village called Cleethorpes, just along the coast. It was really just a stretch of sand and safe bathing but he extended 'his' railway line and built a**

**new station 50 yards from the sea, and a defence wall against coastal erosion.**



**With the foreshore safe he built a promenade, a pier, ornamental gardens (with electricity!) and even a mock ancient monument, Ross Castle. The tourists came in their thousands, buying tickets on his Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway. Cleethorpes went on to become a national holiday resort. On one Saturday at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 30,000 visitors came to 'Sheffield-on-Sea'.**



**The aim of the Heritage Lincolnshire organisation is to publicise the historical attractions of this often overlooked area of Britain. They were delighted when we contacted them. The outcome is that they have been awarded a lottery**

grant for a project built round EW's key role in creating the heritage of their local area. They have asked us to become involved as consultants. The project starts this month in local schools.

We have made our extended work in the area one of the two key features of our own lottery bid. The other is our intention to start collecting all the material we have and details of sources of Watkin information into a single digital online library. A mammoth task, which will mean that any organisation (including schools, who on past evidence are fascinated by the Watkin Story) or individuals who want to find out more about the Watkins will be able to access the library free from the comfort of their homes. At a stroke this ambitious project will also mean that people who cannot get out easily or live some way away from a 'Watkin area', will be able to enjoy reading about the Watkins and perhaps add their own contribution to the library.

Grimsby/Cleethorpes is one of four 'outreach areas' where EW made a lasting mark. The others are north of Leicester (see below), Brent in London (the site of EW's 'Eiffel' Tower) and Folkestone (where he was MP for 15 years and started his Channel Tunnel in 1880). At our coming committee meeting we will be planning how best to build on our Manchester successes in these other areas.

## **Great Central Railway**

Watkin's dream to build a main railway line from Central Station in Manchester through the middle of England to London then on through his Channel Tunnel to Paris (and beyond), never became reality. But his Great Central Railway from Manchester to a new station at London Marylebone opened in 1899. It fell to the Beeching Axe in 1969 but 17 miles is still open as a tourist railway – with steam trains. The new GCR is a thriving enterprise, great for a day out with the family and with its vast engine shed collection of venerable locomotives it's also a nostalgic treasure trove for anyone who remembers the steam era with affection. The locos, the shop, the café and the extensive bookstall at the main station in Loughborough, a time warp, do a roaring trade all the year round, particularly at weekends.



**The Watkin Society has now established a great link with the GCR. The company - it's a registered charity - ordered 50 copies of our book about EW: 'Victoria's Railway King' just before Christmas, and sold half of them within two weeks. There are plans to open an Audio-Visual suite at one of the stations. This will feature the life of the father of the line, one Edward Watkin. The head of the GCR's education section is particularly interested in our success with young people in Northenden schools. We are hoping to work with him in 2022 to capture the interest of local schools.**

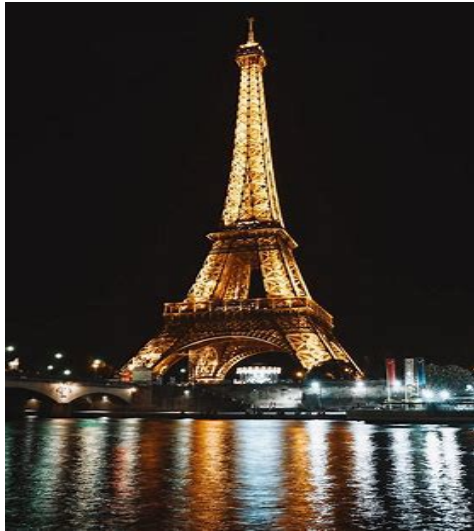
**The GCR website ([www.gcrailway.co.uk](http://www.gcrailway.co.uk)) is a mine of information and events and if you click on the official GCR Official Friends YouTube site you will find a piece about EW: "Sir Edward Watkin".**

## **EW in France next year?**



**A few weeks ago we received an email from Paris:**

*Dear Geoff, Writer and director (and incidentally a direct descendant of Gustave Eiffel), I'm currently writing (with Mathieu Schwartz) a 90 minute documentary entitled "War of the Towers". The aim is to look at the construction of the Eiffel tower under a different perspective, especially in regards to the other competing projects of giant towers that took place before it and right after. The project has been greenlighted by the French TV station ARTE and we're currently writing the script. We'd be very interested in discussing it with you and hearing your thoughts, especially regarding Watkin's tower and Sir Edward's connections with Eiffel. Would you have a moment to talk with us via Zoom in the near future? Kind regards, Savin Yeatman-Eiffel*



**superimposed on  
Wembley Stadium**

**The Eiffel Tower in Paris  
Artist's impression of Watkin's  
dream of Wembley Park**

**Watkin's Tower  
the current**

**After several emails and phone calls it looks as though The Watkin Society might figure in a programme on French TV. That contact just goes to show the potential of the Watkin Story. But it raises again the issue of how we can attract the interest of the media in Britain about EW in particular. So many people who have been to hear a talk about EW or have read 'Victoria's Railway King' have said his story would make a great programme. After all, he was one of the most newsworthy characters in Victorian society and had so many exciting strings to his bow.**

**It is true that our fame is spreading. We have been booked for talks in Grimsby (the Civic Society), Northampton, Settle and London in the coming year. These add to over a dozen bookings which were made for 2021 but had to be postponed because of Covid. But we haven't yet made the breakthrough. Do you have any TV, radio or press contacts that we could get in touch with, to bang the Watkin Drum? Or are you involved with any societies that would welcome a Watkin presentation?**

**Can we reassure those of you who live in the Manchester area that you haven't been forgotten? We are determined to establish the Society nationally – and in view of Edward's great work in Canada – ultimately internationally. But we will not neglect our roots. Our vice-chair, Revd Andrew Bradley has re-established after Covid the 'Northenden Connection', his informal discussion group exploring the links between the 'village' and Absalom and Edward. (Andrew is always glad to welcome new members and can be contacted on [stwilfridsrector@gmail.com](mailto:stwilfridsrector@gmail.com)) We were delighted to be the first 'act' in the recent new Northenden Arts Festival with a talk about Absalom and Edward Watkin – 'Northenden's Most Eminent Citizens'. Our contacts with St Wilfrid's CE Primary School, the Northenden Community School and the Manchester Health Academy High School remain strong and we are planning to explore links with other Manchester schools in the coming year. We keep in close touch with our sister group, The Friends of Rose Hill Woods, who are continuing to do great work preserving that lovely local asset planted by Edward's father, Absalom, nearly 200 hundred years ago. They have just been given a grant by the Council**



to improve the main paths in the woods and to establish a new secret feature. Watch that space!

Thanks to all of you who joined in our recent successful Zoom AGM. We are always keen to welcome new members of the committee. If you live in the Manchester area and would like to come to committee meetings (when they start up again as face-to-face) as an observer, without committing yourself further, do let us know. And for those of you who don't live in Manchester or can't get to meetings but would like to know more about what's going on, would you be interested in a new idea: 'Zoom Members'? The chair, Geoff Scargill, would be happy to set up a Zoom chat session after committee meetings or other special occasions.

Would you like more information about these ideas? Please contact Geoff at [gscargill@gmail.com](mailto:gscargill@gmail.com)

Thanks again for your interest in the Watkin Story. Please let us know if you have any comments or ideas to '*Spread the word about Absalom and Edward Watkin*', as it says at the head of each of our newsletters. Your encouragement is really appreciated.

You'll find us at <http://friendsofrosehill.org/the-watkin-society-watsoc/> and on Twitter [@WatkinRoseHill](https://twitter.com/WatkinRoseHill)

*And finally, at a dark time of the year and still in a pandemic, what better way to sign off than the with the slogan of Edward Watkin's Great Central Railway?*

