

WATSOCC

The Watkin Society

Welcome to the eleventh edition
of the newsletter of the Watkin Society (June 2024)

Spreading the news about Absalom and Edward Watkin

Special 125 anniversary edition

We hope you have coped with a soggy spring and are looking forward to a warm summer – one day soon. The period since we last sent you one of our newsletters has been the busiest in the Society's history the Watkin Groups that are now up and running in three of the many areas of the country where Edward Watkin had a lasting impact.

Manchester

The chairman of the Manchester Watkin Group is Revd Andrew Bradley, the rector of the lovely St Wilfrid's Church in a corner of Northenden, south Manchester, which is little changed from when the Watkins worshipped there. The church where Edward and his father, Absalom, are buried, is less than a mile from Rose Hill house, the Watkin family home in the 19th century. Last year the Manchester Group held a terrifically successful Watkin Week. They are currently making plans for a major event in connection with the national Heritage Weeks in September.



North East Lincolnshire

This is now the home of the Grimsby and Cleethorpes Watkin Group, which is currently spreading the Watkin Story locally through a series of brilliant travelling exhibitions under the slogan of 'Mr Grimsby and Mr Cleethorpes', two towns that Edward Watkin virtually created. The exhibition has already been on display at two local sites, with plans for three more. The Group has even designed its own logo!



Photograph; Wendy Trevitt



They now have a Watkin Room (formerly the Lounge Bar) of the Number One pub next to Cleethorpes Station! It is the only remaining building of EW's original station. Its landlord is Dave Snook, a great Watkin supporter. Dave has just created a Watkin beer. This was revealed to Watkin enthusiasts at a special tasting in the new Watkin Room. Here are two of the local Watkin Group, Wendy Trevitt and Jane King, helping Geoff Scargill, Chairman of the national Watkin Society, draw the first pint.



Photograph; John Trevitt

East Midlands

The national Watkin Society's third 'target area' is Loughborough in the East Midlands, home of the reborn Great Central Railway. We are currently in talks with the General Manager of the GCR, Malcolm Holmes, on how we can explore together ways in which the Watkin Society can help promote the history of the line, which will soon be 18 miles long but is already one of the great tourist attractions in the area. The theme of our working together will be: Edward Watkin - the Man who created the GCR.

Jack's Story

To mark our success in bringing the Watkin story to life we embarked on a second edition of "Jack's Story", as we had sold out of the first one! It provided the opportunity to add a chapter about Mr Grimsby & Mr. Cleethorpes. Told in the original style and with the addition of a couple of new illustrations it is a valuable tool for the Society in getting the story out to children and younger people.



Time for Watkin celebrations

March 2024 marked the 125th anniversary of the day in 1899 when the first passenger train of Watkin's Great Central Railway left his new Marylebone station in London, bound for Manchester. The Society took part in three great celebrations of that event.

London Marylebone

At Marylebone our members were invited to the renaming of a Chiltern Railways Class 168 engine, which became 'Marylebone: 125 Years'. We then joined 100 other guests for a reception in Watkin's superb Landmark Hotel, next to the station - the last of the great Victorian railway hotels - where we ran a Watkin exhibition.



Photograph; Chiltern Railways

Manchester Central Station



Photograph; Fred Bates

To commemorate the lives
of two great Manchester reformers

Absalom Watkin (1787 – 1861)
Campaigner for the repeal of the
Corn Laws

Sir Edward Watkin MP (1819 – 1901)
Creator of the first Manchester
Parks for the People and the
Great Central Railway

Provided by The Watkin Society

Manchester Central Station

The train that left Marylebone 125 years ago ended its journey at Manchester Central Station. Beeching closed the station in 1969 but it is now the magnificent Manchester Central Convention Complex. To commemorate Watkin's involvement in the history of the building – and the key part he and his father played in the development of the city as a centre of reform in the second half of the 19th century, the Society – with the kind permission of the Chief Executive of the Centre – commissioned a blue plaque, which was unveiled at the main entrance to the Centre, by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, Cllr Yasmine Dar. The unveiling ceremony was followed by a reception in the Centre. Among those present were members of Edward Watkin's family, who had travelled specially from Edinburgh for the occasion.

At last! – the Society has established a permanent public memorial to the Watkins on an iconic building in the centre of Manchester.



Loughborough

The last of the trio of 125 celebrations was a whole weekend at Loughborough Central, the beautifully preserved main station at the heart of what will eventually be 18 preserved and brilliantly restored miles of Watkin's original line, still proudly carrying the name of the Great Central Railway and already recognized as one of the best tourist attractions in the East Midlands. We had a publicity table at the nearby historic Quorn Station and gave a series of talks for visitors on 'Edward Watkin - the Man who built the GCR'. The editor of the national Heritage Railway magazine did us proud with a main article, as did the local paper, the Leicester Mercury (see below), which ran a special feature. The Managing Director of the GCR, Malcolm Holmes, and the chairman of the Watkin Society, Geoff Scargill, were in Victorian costume as was a key member of the Friends of the Great Central, Debbie Gillott, who was Lady Watkin for the day. Here they are with the Mayor of the local Charnwood Council.

The climax of this, the last of three memorable events was the unveiling of a plaque commemorating Edward Watkin's amazing work in almost single-handedly creating the GCR, in the teeth of the established railways, who had had a cosy monopoly till he burst on the scene. The plaque was unveiled by Lady Nicky Morgan, former MP for the area and a great GCR enthusiast.



READERS may enjoy this picture taken at Loughborough Central Station last Saturday, as part of Great Central Railway's 125th anniversary celebrations.

The people featured in the image are, from left, Malcolm Holmes, general manager of Great Central Railway; Margaret Smidowicz, mayor of Charnwood; Geoff Scargill, chairman of The Watkin Society, dressed as Victorian railway entrepreneur Sir Edward Watkin, and Debbie Gillatt, a Friend of the GCR, dressed as Sir Edward's wife.

The Mayor told me she wasn't there in any official capacity, but was just there to support the event. Mr Scargill was there to do a couple of talks at Quorn and Woodhouse Station about The Watkin Society.

The group is posed in front of the unique 1903 electric autocar on platform 2.

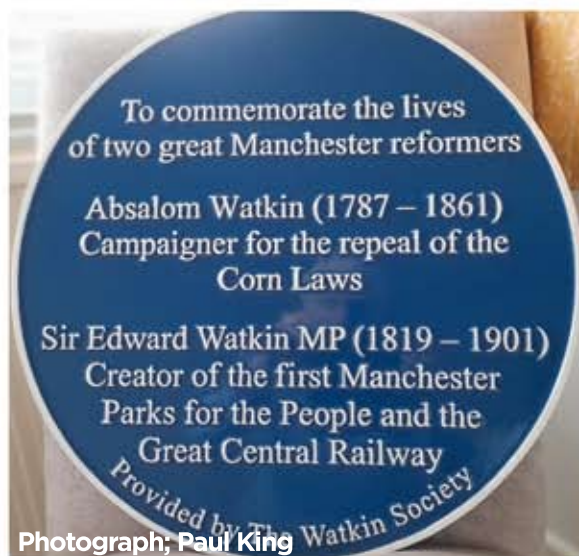
Dave Gilbert,
Nottingham

There are now three plaques commemorating Watkin's work to develop the railway system of Great Britain.

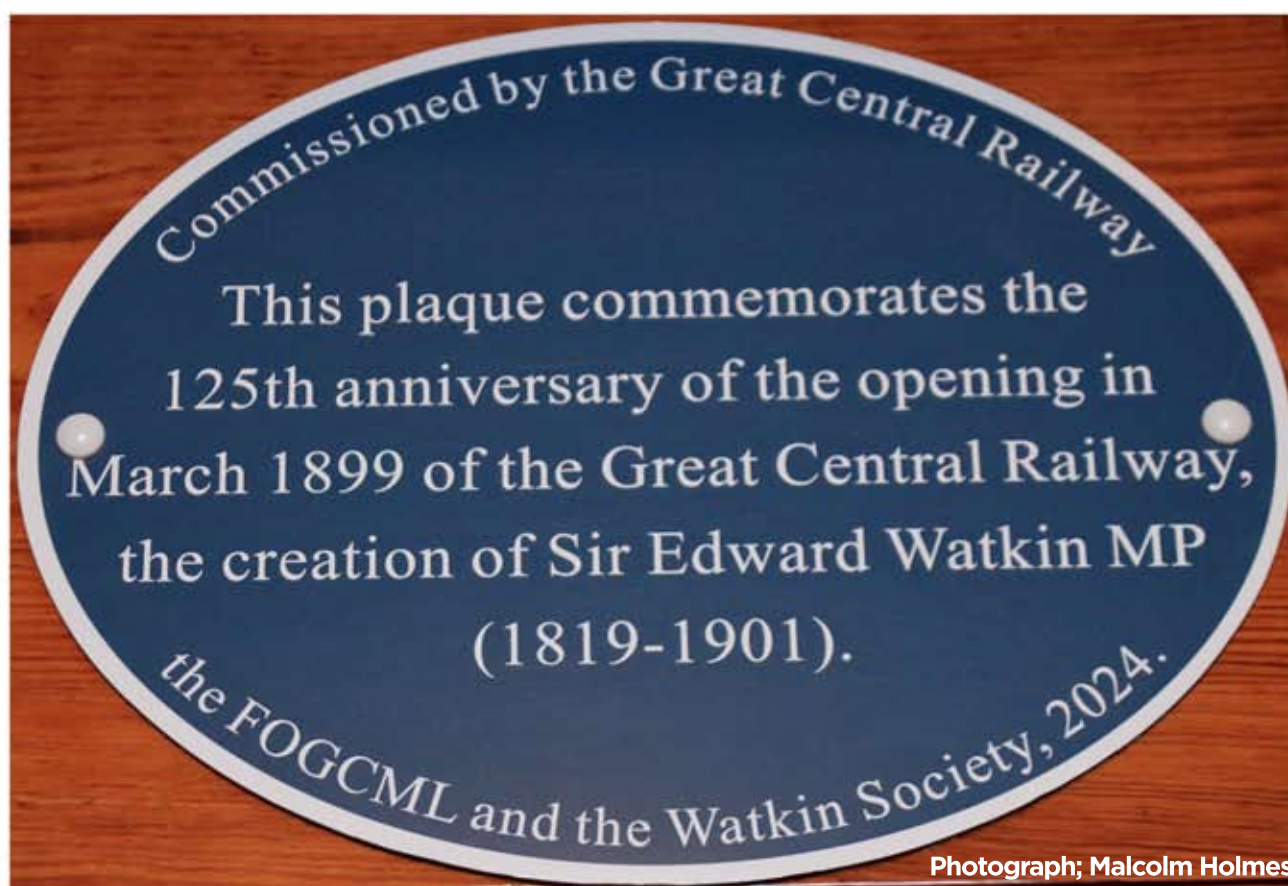
Just for the record, here they are:



Photograph; Geoff Scargill



Photograph; Paul King



Photograph; Malcolm Holmes

A wonderful year, but we are not resting on our laurels.

Recently, we were asked to give a talk on Edward Watkin to a meeting of the Cambridge Railway Circle. (If you know of a group who might be interested in hearing about the Watkin Story, please contact gscargill@gmail.com)

And finally, here are some bullet points to show the range of the Watkin Society's activities and plans for the future.....

- The Society's recent formal activities have not been restricted to those three great public celebrations. On 30 April we held our Annual General Meeting to report on another great year.
- We are looking into a possible plaque at the Manchester Art Gallery, to mark Edward's achievement in rescuing the original building from bankruptcy in 1844.
- Two members are planning to write a new book to celebrate EW's amazing achievements in Grimsby, where he created the vast docks, and Cleethorpes, which he rescued from erosion by the North Sea and transformed into a national holiday resort.
- A visitor to the Society's display at the Loughborough 125 celebration weekend is getting in touch with friends in Canada, to see if we can set up links there to explore EW's key role in the creation of the Dominion, for which the British government knighted him.
- We are preparing a bid for Lottery funding to create a schools package which could help hard-pressed teachers explore with their classes the fascinating lives of two great Victorians, Edward and Absalom Watkin.

And finally, a photo sent to us from a correspondent, who spotted this beautiful locomotive at a miniature rail gala at Castle Hedingham, Essex. EW's fame is spreading!



Photograph; Richard Tremaine

If you have any news or suggestions about the Watkin Society's work, please contact us at our website:

www.watkinsociety.org.uk

We'd love to hear from you.