

MEMBERS MEETING      3 March 2009

“John Knowles – A Forgotten North Derbyshire Railway Contractor” – Talk by Philip Cousins illustrated with a power point presentation.

Philip explained that his interest in John Knowles developed over a period of 15-20 years. During this time he examined titled deeds in a deed box and other records. He found the trail of his life absorbing.

John Knowles was mentioned in Samuel Smiles book for his work in tunnelling and iron smelting in Matlock and N. E. Derbyshire.

His obituary appeared in the Derbyshire Times in March 1869 and this stated that he was well known in Chesterfield and Brimington as an iron smelter.

No picture of John Knowles seems to have survived but evidence of his signature dated 22 April 1850 was found on articles of his partnership with John Cutts, a local solicitor, for a sum of £1600.

John Knowles was born on 21 November 1802. He came from a Matlock lead mining family and he was illegitimate.

A lithograph of 1837 by J. C. Bourne shows the West Kilsby tunnel of which Knowles was the contractor. It was part of the London to Birmingham railway line started in 1830.

From 1837-8 Knowles worked with Robert Stephenson who was then the engineer in chief on the London to Birmingham line.

The register of electors for 1832 show that John Knowles had property in the village of Glenfield, which is not far from Whitwick in Leicestershire. He married Sarah Hassall on 27 May 1832 in Whitwick. The records show that she was “of this parish” and her father was Thomas Hassall from Groby. Sadly John and Sarah did not have any children.

So what was John Knowles doing in Glenfield? A tunnel, which is still visible, was built there on the Leicester and Swannington line and opened in 1838. It was single line and over a mile in length. Robert Stephenson was the engineer in charge of this development.

An overview of a map of the area shows that Glenfield, Whitwick, Swannington and Groby were all in close proximity. John Knowles was not named as the main contractor of the tunnel but it is likely that he was a sub contractor.

An 1861 engraving of Sonning Cutting by George H. Briggs shows the tunnel that was built on the Bristol to London line. Knowles was one of three contractors. There were problems with this project. One of the contractors, Gibbs, was on strike and on 13 October 1838 Knowles was dismissed.

In 1839 John's wife Sarah inherited an estate at Calow. The solicitors dealing with the will were B. M. Lucas and John Cutts. The property was "Herne House" which can still be seen today on the A617 near Heath. John and his wife appear on the 1841 census at Herne House. Their ages are given as John 35 and Sarah 25. A picture of Herne House taken in 2005 shows that it was an impressive villa. In 1850 the couple were developing property at Matlock and in 1856/7 they were at Calow. Clearly as a railway contractor Knowles was constantly on the move.

Philip showed a picture of 2 commemorative jugs. These were made in 1847 and 1848. They are now in the Sharp pottery Museum in Swadlington. The jugs feature the names of Stephenson, Liddell, Woodhouse and Knowles who were all involved in railway construction.

John Knowles was involved in the construction of Gresley tunnel. During the course of this project a large amount of clay was discovered which led to the building of a kiln on the land and the establishment of the Mount Pleasant brick works.

There is a gap in the construction minutes for the Leicester to Swannington line and it is not clear who was awarded the contract. John Knowles did not have the contract for the whole line but had a sub contract for the "wooden box" shelves used in tunnelling the line.

In 1901 after Knowles' death research shows that fire bricks and sanitary pipes were made at Mount Pleasant. This shows that Knowles was developing his talents outside tunnelling.

A photograph of the company letter headed paper used by Knowles describes him as a "Railway Contractor" and in 1871 after his death his wife ran the company with no fewer than 28 partners including John Hassall a relative of Sarah's.

Another member of the Knowles family was Henry Knowles who formed the Albion Clay Company. In 1965 this became Dyson Domestic Ceramics on the site of the original John Knowles building which manufactured bricks.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1877 shows that Furnace Farm on Manor Road, Brimington was at the centre of the smelting operation. A transcription of the Brimington rating survey of 1852 shows that Adam Barker Slater was the owner/occupier of Brimington Moor Iron Company. The map shows the little meadow, well, smithy and barn close. Current photographs of the site show the ruins of farm buildings.

The deed box contained various items relating to his work and life including an envelope addressed to his brother-in-law John Adcock at the Iron Works, Brimington.

In 1850/51 Knowles was involved with coal and ironstone at Wednesbury and Prior's blast furnace in Shropshire but in 1856 the partnership was dissolved and until 1852/3 the furnace was "out of blast". In 1852/3 he was an "Ironmaster" with John Coles at Matlock.

A sale notice dated August 1866 shows that the Brimington Moor Iron Works was to be sold and the old furnace was out of use. Records also show that in 1856 Knowles took out a patent with William Buxton on the "Tuyere" (Nozzles for a blast of air used inside blast furnaces).

In March 1869 after Knowles' death the Furnace Farm and stock at Brimington were advertised for sale in the Derbyshire Times. Remnants of the business can still be seen in the form of "slag" on the footpath. It is evident that the business would have failed as small smelters could not compete with the larger companies.

Knowles was involved in various tunnel projects; the Worcester to Hereford railway through the Malvern hills which experienced tunnelling problems and which is now mainly forgotten; the Colwall tunnel from Birmingham to Cardiff in 1853 where key players were Liddell, Robert Stephenson and Stephen Ballard. This had tunnelling and money problems and was replaced in 1926 by a single bore.

A picture of Stephen Ballard directing winch cutting shows what a dangerous and hard occupation it was for the navvies involved and there were many fatal accidents. Although the contractors were rigid in their discipline of the workforce on completion of the Colwell/Malvern project on 21 September 1861 they entertained over 80 workmen to a roast dinner with beer at the Horse and Groom Inn.

The Warden tunnel on the Bedford to Hitchin line was started in 1854 and finished in 1856. It was a difficult tunnel because of the heavy clay. It was

closed in 1962 but has a claim to fame as it featured in the film “Those magnificent men in their flying machines” starring Terry Thomas.

Knowles last contract was in April 1865 for the Amptill tunnel to Manchester. His tender for this was £144,391. 5s. 0d. An entry (in shorthand) in a diary for the period shows the cost as £45 for each yard of tunnel. The tunnel opened in 1867.

John Knowles owned various properties in Matlock , London and Sheffield. Members may recognise Knowleston Place in Tansley (with Riber Castle in the background). This block was built between 1857/58 and consisted of 4 properties. Knowles and his wife Sarah lived in the property known as “Glendon” which had 8 bedrooms. The properties were described as beautiful villas with ornamental and rock gardens opposite laid out by Joseph Paxton at a cost of £6000. There is a bridge over the river into Knowleston Gardens. The gardens were sold to the local council in 1899 and include a lamp-post, a gift from Knowles to the parish in 1867.

Knowles was a church warden at St. Giles Parish Church in Matlock. In 1859 he contributed to the re-building of the church and after his death his wife paid one quarter of the cost which was completed in 1870. In 1882 a three light window was placed in the church in his memory. His grave is in Matlock within sight of “Knowleston Place” and describes him as “A known railway contractor”.

So what type of man was John Knowles? He was humble, had been born illegitimate but not into poverty. He was a hard but generous man. He was rigid in the discipline of the navvies who worked for him but gave them hot drinks and food when the weather was harsh. He opened his gardens to the locals and was involved in local activities.

Although John Knowles may have been forgotten by many Philip hoped that his talk had resurrected him.

A vote of thanks was given by Jill Cox.