

Visit to Bridgnorth Cliff Railway by Steward Malvern Tipping

As an alternative to London-centric events, the Master of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers requested a company visit to Bridgnorth Cliff Railway in Shropshire. Bridgnorth's iconic and historic cliff railway connects Bridgnorth's Low Town and High Town, which are separated by high red sandstone cliffs at the edge of the River Severn. It is still owned and operated by the original company, The Bridgnorth Castle Hill Railway Company Limited, which was incorporated in 1891. Having been founded and engineered by Sir George Croydon Marks, Lord Marks of Woolwich, the cliff railway opened amidst public celebrations on 7th July, 1892. The company was purchased by the Tipping family in 2011 with Steward Dr. Malvern Tipping being appointed as its chairman. The maternal grandfather of Malvern's mother, Eileen, was a cousin of Marks. Since 1944 the cliff railway has been powered by electric colliery winding gear manufactured by Francis & Lane of Brierly Hill. However, prior to that date it had worked as a water-balance inclined plane. It was the hydraulic power element of the cliff railway which had been one of the influencing factors in Malvern joining the Plumbers' Company.

The WCoP visit to Shropshire had been scheduled to take place over two days. However, PM John Rae was spotted in the county a day earlier, having driven all the way from London to make a visit to the Severn Valley Railway's indoor museum at Highley. Finding that he was on the opposite bank of the River Severn with no vehicular bridges between Bewdley and Bridgnorth, PM Rae showed great resourcefulness. He found the only footbridge across the river, in a remote place, and then used this to walk a considerable distance to the museum and back. The museum at Highley features several steam locomotives and a royal sleeping car.

Most of the party assembled on the first full day at the Bridgnorth station of the Severn Valley Railway, which is a heritage line running to Kidderminster some sixteen miles away. A carriage had been reserved for the Plumbers. The stationmaster, who is also a director of the Severn Valley Railway, arrived to look in the carriage. The opportunity was taken to introduce the Master to him. At Bewdley Station the opportunity was taken to survey an unusual plumbing artefact: an old cast iron gentlemen's lavatory block which is now listed. Since only fifty minutes were available before the return journey from Kidderminster, the opportunity was taken to take tea in the most impressive railway signalling museum there. The museum had clearly been anticipating a visit from the Plumbers' Company, since it included an illuminated signalling sign referring to Cannon Street Station. A three-course evening meal was taken in the function room at The Down Inn, some three miles outside Bridgnorth, before a slideshow presentation on the history and operation of Bridgnorth Cliff Railway was given by Malvern.

On the morning of the second day all of the party, together with the Master and Clerk of the Guild of the Bridgnorth Freemen, met at the cliff railway's Low Town station. Malvern conducted the party on a tour of the cliff railway and its winding room where they met both the general manager and the engineer. Those interested were able to see some of the company's earliest records dating from its incorporation. The Master was able to peruse the company's original minute book, reading entries made in the hand of both Sir George Croydon Marks and his brother Edward.

A carvery lunch was enjoyed at The Down Inn. Official guests were the Mayor Ron Whittle OBE and his wife Cllr. Mrs. Carole Whittle. The Master and Court of the Guild of Bridgnorth Freemen also attended.

The two-day visit concluded with a tour of the town conducted by the town guide Derek Crockson. It started in the old town hall, which is in the middle of the high street and under which markets are held. It was once used as a court of law and had also served as the borough council chamber. Now it is only used once a year for the town council's annual

meeting at which the mayor is formally elected. The party was then conducted down the high street to the position of the former Postern Gate and Barbican before being shown the magnificent Georgian town houses in East Castle Street leading to St. Mary Magdalen's Church, built by Thomas Telford. This had been on the site of the castle's former chapel, which had been destroyed during the English Civil War. The castle keep proved to be of great interest, having a lean of twice that of the Tower of Pisa after having been blown up by the Cromwellian forces. The tour of the town was concluded at the entrance to the cliff railway's High Town station.

The Plumbers' visit generated much interest in the town. Prior, it had been reported in councillors' briefing notes. Subsequently, it was reported in the local press after the Master had been interviewed and photographed.