

Maggie Shapland, *The ups and downs of the Clifton Rocks Railway and the Clifton Spa* (Bristol, Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society 2017). 317pp., 425 ill. Hardback, £15.00 [ISBN: 9781908905055]. **Reviewed 04.2018**

The Clifton Rocks Railway was a funicular in a tunnel through the limestone cliff between Clifton and Hotwells. The upper station was next to the present Avon Gorge Hotel; the lower opposite the steamer landing stages on the A4 Portway. Construction of the railway was funded by the publisher George Newnes, who also owned the Lynton and Lynmouth Cliff Railway; the engineer for both was George Croydon Marks. It opened in 1893. Although it carried more than 6,000 passengers on its first day, and over 425,000 in its first year, it was not a financial success. Sold in 1912 to Bristol Tramways, it closed in 1934. During the Second World War blast walls and other constructions were built in the tunnel, which was used as offices by BOAC, as a relay station by the BBC (which installed an emergency studio there), for barrage balloon storage, and as an air-raid shelter. The BBC used parts of the tunnel until 1960. A charitable trust, in which the author of this book is active, and to which profits from this book will be devoted, has been formed to preserve and conserve the railway; the spa buildings are now part of a hotel.

Chapters explain the Sion Hill spring and the Society of Merchant Venturers' (SMV) plans to revive the spa; the proposal for a funicular railway by George Newnes and his involvement of Marks and the architect Philip Munro; how the railway was constructed; how it operated, failed to pay its way, was taken over, failed again and was closed; the railway's links to other forms of transport; how it was maintained; railway artefacts, generously illustrated; people's reminiscences about the railway; how the pump room and spa was developed and failed; negotiations over the wartime use of the tunnel by the BBC and others; its use for barrage balloons; its use as an air raid shelter; its use by the BBC; its neglect from 1960 to 2004 and its planning history; its subsequent conservation, restoration and preservation, in which the author has played a leading and energetic part; and a discussion of what should be preserved and why. There is a glossary, welcome because of the engineering and broadcasting technicalities – *Discworld* enthusiasts will be delighted to read that a clack valve (illustrated) was recovered from the reservoir – followed by detailed endnote references and a comprehensive index. The design is excellent.

For reasons stated in the introduction, for which readers will extend sympathy and good wishes to the author, this weighty book was produced in a hurry. That shows in the text, which contains typographical, spelling and stylistic shortcomings which a careful edit would have eliminated. A few factual errors have crept in; for example, the author may possibly have attributed to a modern firm in Surrey pumps that were from a firm long based in Cornwall. That however is small criticism in the context of a compendium of narrative and source material. It is as if the author has tried to include everything that is known and can be said about the railway and its associated spa: description, narrative, accounts, statistics, engineering details, measurements. It contains and often reproduces original documents, photographs, advertisements, oral memories, newspaper reports (most quoted in full),

comment, the author's personal reminiscences, argument and explanation. It deals not only with the spa hotel and the railway, but also with their post-closure uses and the work of the volunteers who have conserved, preserved and now present it for public view. The author has done well to avoid an indigestible farrago, and has structured the text, with a helpful analytical contents list, into understandable sections.

Although it was Newnes who promoted and implemented the railway proposal, the book brings out that the project was dogged throughout by the SMV's insistence that it serve an upper-class spa and hotel which it wanted established at the Sion Hill spring. As major landowner the SMV controlled land transactions and development, and did so in order to protect and enhance the value of its investment, which it perceived to involve maintaining the social exclusivity of the area. The SMV's misjudgement of the viability of the spa – Clifton was never going to rival Baden Baden – and the way it sought to control the development of spa and railway, hampered the railway at every stage, and contributed to the demise of both railway and spa. But for the SMV the railway would not have happened; but for the SMV, it might have succeeded.

The last chapter is historiographically the most interesting. It discusses whether the trust that looks after the railway should aim to restore it to its original condition in working order. The author concludes that it should not. The huge cost and the construction of the A4 Portway make that impossible, but she also points out that restoration could not be done without removing most of the traces of the railway's post-1934 history, including its use by the BBC, and as an air-raid shelter and for other war-related purposes. Those traces, and the vast amount of work done by the volunteers, are as much part of the history of the site as the railway itself. That has not always been the attitude of archaeologists or pressure groups, who have often contended that old buildings should be restored as far as possible to their original condition, and that more recent buildings should be removed to uncover earlier remains beneath. In Rome, in the area of the ancient forum, at least three baroque churches of historical and architectural interest and importance and aesthetic value were demolished in order to expose what little was beneath: in two cases the outline and foundations of temples dated to republican and imperial times. Knowledge of the earlier buildings thus obtained was considered to outweigh the loss of the baroque structures, even though the latter were just as much a part of the forum's past as the earlier temples. The question arises everywhere, and will not go away.

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