STEAM GWR Museum Tech Trip Report

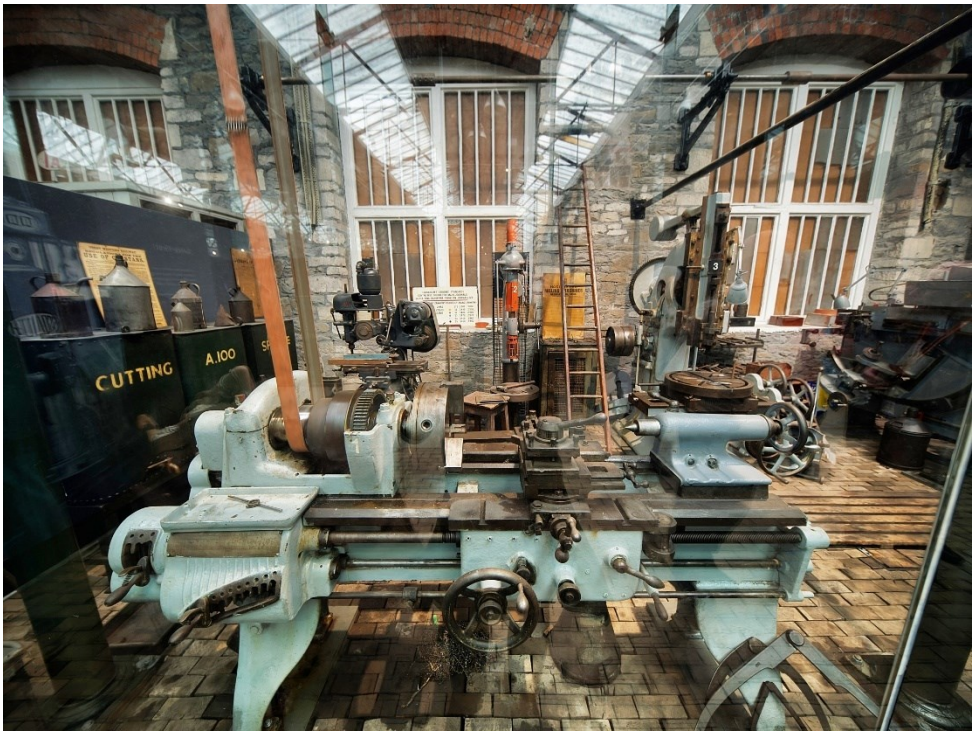


The SCSC's recent Tech Trip was to the STEAM museum of the Great Western Railway on 22nd April 2023. The trip, which was open to everyone, included a highlights guided tour of the museum's collection given by a very enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide. Mike Parsons provides a report of the trip.

Our guide had spent his early working life as an apprentice and worker on the railways. He recounted some fascinating stories about 'life on the footplate' of steam locomotives. The tour was only meant to be an hour but turned into nearly two! The difference a knowledgeable guide brings to appreciating the museum exhibits is amazing; a guide is highly recommended.

The museum is located close to Swindon mainline station, among the vast historic Swindon railways' works buildings. Some of the museum is devoted to the works themselves. In these days of contracting and outsourcing, it is hard to believe that virtually all component manufacture and assembly was done on-site.

Our tour covered the history of the Swindon works itself, the manufacturing process, the people involved, and of course plenty of steam-era locomotives and rolling stock.



Our guide explained that although the workers were paid a good wage, and the site had very good recreational facilities (for the time), total commitment was expected and any absences or deviations were dealt with harshly. Accidents in the works were commonplace but with a site hospital, these could be dealt with quickly.



The museum is spread over several connected halls and features different eras. I found it fascinating to be able to walk underneath a steam locomotive and see the many oiling points that were far underneath and presumably became very dirty.

These apparently had to be serviced before any journey and young apprentices were used to do the job.

There are locomotives, railway buildings and many other artefacts of industrial history (for instance cast-iron moldings – I still don't quite understand how these are used to make things with holes in like pipes!) There are some speed record-breaking locomotives, and plenty of information on Brunel, who was of course, the architect of the railway going west.

There is history of Brunel's broad gauge, which by all accounts was superior to standard gauge in most ways, but was dropped to conform with the rest of the country.

The conversion of the tracks from broad to standard gauge was done amazingly quickly in some cases, and of course, completely manually.



Our guide lined us up for a team photo in front of a fabulous locomotive, Caerphilly Castle:



The museum is spacious and set in an historic industrial context. The picture of the Swindon Works at its height found in the gift shop really put it in context: it was once a vast industrial complex producing two steam locomotives a week.

For some reason I liked this vintage 'bar' coach:



It was a good visit and one that is highly recommended to anyone interested in railways or industrial history.

Special mention must go to our guide who took us on the footplate of one locomotive and recounted many first-hand stories of railway lore. He said there was a 'railway family' and still very much felt he belonged!

The museum's website is: https://www.steam-museum.org.uk it has extensive information about the exhibits too.

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