



## Rolt Centenary

2010 marks the centenary of the birth of L.T.C. (“Tom”) Rolt, and various special events to commemorate this notable event are being organised by the Talylyn Railway, the Association for Industrial Archaeology and others throughout the year.

Tom Rolt had close links with the Ironbridge Gorge, and was present at Dawley Development Corporation’s meeting on industrial archaeology held at Priorslee Hall on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1967, which was the first of a series of meetings which ultimately led to the setting up of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

Rolt’s introduction to the Gorge whilst working for the Ministry of Supply during the Second World War is described brilliantly in the second of his autobiographical volumes “Landscape with Canals” (1977), and merits quoting in its entirety :-

“The furthest afield that my work took me now was a fortnightly visit to the Sentinel Waggon Works at Shrewsbury, with an occasional call in the Wellington neighbourhood on the way. As it was usually late by the time I left Sentinels and as I was due in Wolverhampton the following morning, it was obviously better on such occasions to spend a night in Shropshire instead of consuming precious petrol in returning to the boat. For this purpose I picked the “Valley Hotel” at Coalbrookdale and was thus introduced to the Severn Gorge and the ancient industrial district of Shropshire. The first time I came to the “Valley Hotel”, having picked it with the aid of an ordnance map and an A.A. guide, it was late autumn and darkness had already fallen; yet I knew at once that I had hit upon a very special place, for as soon as I walked into the bar of the hotel my eye was caught and held by three large and handsome coloured engravings of local scenes which hung on the walls. As I subsequently discovered, these were three of a set of six, engraved from originals by George Robertson and published by the brothers Boydell in 1788. One was a romantic landscape featuring the slender arc of the famous first iron bridge against a towering background of hanging woods, while the subject of the second was John Wilkinson’s Broseley Ironworks. Here the same romantic landscape of the Severn Gorge had been rudely invaded and blighted by the dragon of industrial revolution, breathing fire and foul smoke from furnace and stack. But it was the third picture that I thought the most striking. It was titled “The Inside of a Smelting-house at Broseley”. It depicted a building which might have been a tithe barn were it not for the tall wooden pivoting crane in the centre of the picture, a triangle of timbers as massive as lock-gate balance beams. The main source of light in this building came from a rectangular opening to the right of the crane which resembled the mouth of hell, so fierce was the glare that issued from it. This was the fore-part of a blast furnace from which molten iron was being tapped. Three figures, one sharply lit, the other two seen in silhouette, directed the white-hot stream through the sand of the floor and into the runners of a pig-bed in the right foreground. In telling contrast to this fiery bedlam, an open archway to the extreme left of the picture revealed a tantalizing glimpse of a night landscape of calm serenity in which a full moon had just risen above a bank of white cloud.

It seemed to me a prophetic warning of the greater desolation to come that such crude but dramatic manifestations of the second Iron Age should appear in one of the most romantically beautiful landscapes in Britain. It is a pity that the originals of these engravings have disappeared, because George Robertson was one of the first artists to grasp the significance of this violent contrast and to give expression to it in paint. He was by no means the last. Many artists who appreciated the then



unsullied beauty of the English landscape, but had hitherto taken it for granted as part of man's natural birthright, were drawn to the Severn Gorge and Coalbrookdale by a fearful fascination. They sought to express in paint and in words the strangely ambivalent feelings aroused by the dramatic contrast between the fuming, flaming clangour of the ironworks and their idyllic setting of wooded hills and streams.

In the course of subsequent visits when, in the long summer evenings, I explored "the Dale" and the Ironbridge Gorge on foot, I came fully to share the feelings of those bygone artists. Although the famous bridge still spans the Severn and men still cast iron in the foundry at Coalbrookdale, the blast furnaces are dead; Wilkinson's Bedlam Furnace is no more than a cold ruin of crumbling, blackened brick beneath a kindly veil of creeper. Yet the whole area seemed to me to be haunted. Everywhere I was reminded of the fierce activity of former days, and every stick and stone of the place seemed to have absorbed something of its white hot violence. It was here that Abraham Darby the First succeeded in smelting iron with coke instead of charcoal; here that the first iron hull was made and launched, the first iron steam engine cylinders and the first iron rails were cast; here that the first steam locomotive was built to the design of Richard Trevithick. Yet I needed no such recital of historical facts to tell me that it was here that it had all begun. I could feel it on my pulses; and, if I needed any reminder, the great black semi-circle of Darby's iron bridge, springing over Severn, spoke to me more eloquently than any history book.

At that time there were still some astonishing survivals to be seen in this part of Shropshire. I once had occasion to visit the Horsehay Ironworks which stands high up under the Wrekin. In the open works yards I saw men busy making steel invasion barges in preparation for "D" Day. This sight was remarkable enough in such an improbable situation, but to make it the more extraordinary these barge builders were kept supplied with materials by a horse-drawn plate tramway – waggons with flangeless wheels running on cast-iron flanged rails, or "ginny rails" as they still call them in Shropshire. Nor was this all. When I left Horsehay, I took the road towards Coalbrookdale. Imagine my astonishment when I beheld, just to the left of the road, a scene which, though familiar to me from early engravings, I never expected to see in actuality. It was a working "ginny pit". A horse, plodding round in a circle, was turning the wooden barrel of the gin to wind a corve of coal up the shaft of the pit. Some sceptical readers may think that on that particular day I was suffering from hallucinations but, improbable though it may seem, my recollection of this astonishing sight is perfectly clear.

Early one summer evening I was standing beneath the arch of the iron bridge admiring its construction when I was accosted by a most remarkable man. He was wearing buttoned cloth gaiters, a pair of cord breeches, a green cloth waistcoat trimmed with braid, a bright red neckerchief and a cap clapped flatly on the back of his head. His grey eyes were keen and deep-set, his face as weathered by exposure as a gypsy's and he had the proud profile of a Roman emperor. His name was Harry Rogers. No sooner had we introduced ourselves, it seemed, than we were on easy Christian name terms. Harry made coracles in a little wooden shed with a slip-way running down from it to the Severn within the shadow of the iron bridge. Officially, he was a rabbit catcher, but I suspect this was a cover. It did not explain those mysterious nocturnal expeditions when at nightfall he would slip away soundlessly downstream in his coracle, not to return until the small hours of the morning.

Harry's shed by the river was filled and festooned with a purposeful clutter of objects; coils of rope, bundles of netting, rabbit snares and other miscellanea less identifiable. There were also stocks of the materials from which he made his coracles: lengths of sawn ash lath, rolls of coarse canvas, pots of tar and pitch. Maybe a new coracle frame, looking rather like a huge scuttle or skep basket such as were then still made in the Forest of Wyre, was building upon the floor. Here, leaning against the workbench or sitting in the doorway in the westering sunlight, we used to talk away many a



summer's evening. He spoke in an extremely broad and somewhat harsh-sounding dialect which surprised me at first; it was so utterly unlike the soft speech of western Shropshire with which I was familiar. It seemed to me more closely akin to Black Country dialect and led me to speculate whether, when that area succeeded Shropshire as the centre of the new iron age, the men of Coalbrookdale and district had migrated thither. We talked of many things. He told me that the secret of the iron hardness of old oak timbers was that the trees were never allowed to lie in the bark when felled but were stripped of that bark for the tanneries while they were still green. He told me why his cottage behind the shed was called "The Victory". The local council had placed a demolition order on it and had crassly offered him a new council house at Madeley on the top of the Hill. "I to'd 'em", he said "that afore I'd leave Siven they'd 'ave t' carry me feet form'st." So battle had been joined. Finally he and his son had set to work to rebuild their cottage completely, and its new name celebrated the defeat of local bureaucracy. He also told me the sad story of the last trading barge to be seen on the Severn north of Bewdley. She had loaded a cargo of earthenware pipes at Jackfield, but had come to grief at Bridgnorth where her cargo had to be taken off. She was then bought by a man in Shrewsbury for conversion into a stationary houseboat. Harry's father, with the assistance of his young son and a couple of horses, had then undertaken delivery to her new owner. Upstream to Shrewsbury, the river had long been disused for navigation, and Harry recalled with a wicked chuckle that the local landowners were not amused when they broke down their hedges to make way for the horses, claiming the ancient right to navigate "the King's high stream of Severn" without let or hindrance.

I liked best Harry's story of the would-be suicide. He was returning late at night in his coracle from some nefarious expedition when he saw, dimly outlined against the stars, a figure standing behind the high railings on top of the iron bridge. In a loud voice he was proclaiming his intention to do away with himself. Harry landed noiselessly at his slip, crept up behind the unsuspecting suicide and suddenly in a stern voice called out "Hey, stop tha' 'ollerin', I'll gie thee a leg oop". "Ee didn't arf run", commented Harry. "Reckon 'ee thought it was Owd Nick 'isself as'd come fer 'im".

While we talked, his keen eyes strayed constantly towards the river, ever on the look-out for a likely piece of flotsam. After a flood his slipway would be littered with the objects he had salvaged; a substantial tree trunk; a couple of stout fencing posts; part of a landing stage; an old punt. He used to boast that Severn supplied him with all his winter fuel. In a time of high flood, when the gorge brimmed with an angry torrent of swirling brown waters, I have watched admiringly as he manoeuvred his frail coracle with supremely confident skill to capture with a line a large floating log and bring it in to his slip. He was a man who had adapted himself to Severn as naturally and as perfectly as any otter or salmon.

I finally persuaded Harry to build a coracle for me and when it was finished, I bore it proudly home to Tardebigge on the roof of the Austin. On summer evenings in the still waters of the canal, I mastered the difficult art of propelling it with a single paddle in the direction in which I wanted to go instead of spinning round like a teetotum, providing the locals with much innocent entertainment in the process. Like riding a bicycle it was all a question of balance. Once you lost that balance, the coracle instantly turned turtle and its occupant found himself struggling in the water, his head trapped beneath it in the large bubble of air it held as in some dark diving bell. I still have that coracle. It is a constant reminder of Ironbridge and of one of the most remarkable characters I have ever been lucky enough to know. I cherish his memory dearly. For me, Harry Rogers seemed to incarnate the very spirit of Severn, a spirit infinitely more ancient than the ironworks that once flamed upon its banks.

I sometimes used to feel guilty about my work for the Ministry of Supply. It was the first "white collar" job I had ever had and it was also the best paid. I was conscientious and knew that I was achieving as good results as most of my colleagues, and probably better than some. Yet after my

experience on the shop floor it did seem to me to be what my workmates would have called a cushy job. There was no doubt in my mind that the work I had been doing at Aldbourne Foundry, because it had called for a far greater expenditure of creative effort and skill, was the more intrinsically valuable. That it was so meagrely rewarded seemed contrary to common sense. Nevertheless, these years with the Ministry were not wasted; they yielded their quota of valuable experiences. I should never have visited Coalbrookdale and met Harry Rogers for one thing, for with petrol supplies restricted to essential purposes, I was luckier than most people in the extent to which I was able to travel about the Midland shires.”



Detail of the 1788 Robertson engraving “The Inside of a Smelting House at Broseley” which Rolt said “resembled the mouth of hell”. (IGMT. AE185.762)



Primitive plateway at the Horsehay Works, which so surprised Rolt when he saw it still in use in the 1940s for building “D” Day barges. (IGMT. 1993.2254)



Ironbridge coracle maker and rabbit catcher Harry Rogers, who became a close friend of Rolt. (Photo : Angela Rolt).