

Supplement to the **HISTELECT NEWS** No. S67b

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With the successful Weekend in the Cotswold organised by David Peacock, member Roger Hennessey sent his interesting electricity research of the area, for the benefit of members who joined the weekend away. It has been decided to give it further coverage.

STROUD AND ELECTRICITY

by **Roger Hennessey**

The relationship between the Stroud area and electricity is a long one, summarised perhaps in the short phrase, 'From rear-guard to vanguard'.

Although early developments seemed promising, Stroud took a long time to receive public supplies of electric power, even by the UK's notorious standards in the field. For example, the first English scientist to verify Benjamin Franklin's theory that lightning and electricity were the same was the Stroud-born John Canton, FRS (1718-72). In Victorian times one of the earliest enthusiasts for public electricity was a local textile magnate, Alfred Apperly, who installed electricity in his mansion (Rodborough Court) in the late 1880s.

The story of electric power for the people of Stroud was, however, very different. Some of the district's many textile mills generated their own power, but repeated attempts to set up an undertaking for public supply ran into difficulties. As early as 1888 'A Ratepayer' was reported in the press suggesting the establishment of electricity undertaking for the town; soon afterwards the House-to-House Electric Supply Co supported the idea and applied for a Provisional Order [PO], but the initiative fizzled out. Another proposal in 1900 was opposed by the local Urban District Council which claimed that it was considering a PO itself.

Then, a proposed regional power company (Gloucestershire Electric Power Co) had a go, strongly opposed by the Council once more, in spite of which GEP obtained its Act - only to fade away in the fated manner that seemed to blight Stroud's electrical ambitions. There were further examples of this delaying tactic, whereby local government asserted it was seeking its own PO, suspected by some as a ploy to protect the gas undertaking.

Eventually the Stroud UDC relaxed its obstructionism and backed *the* application of a new Stroud Electric Supply Co Ltd for a PO, 1913, in which the Apperly family (see above) had an interest. The Great War prevented more than a few minor public applications, drawing power from a textile mill and a small generating station (mainly accumulators, however) at Cainscross. The company was one of a regional consortium owned and managed by a Stroud firm, Edwards & Armstrong Ltd, which ran other undertakings including Tewkesbury, Leominster and Cirencester; it was taken over by Edmundsons in 1932.

The breakthrough came with the foundation of the West Gloucestershire Power Co Ltd (1922) which, with the blessing of the Electricity Commissioners built a central power station (10 MW capacity) at Norchard near Lydney in the Forest of Dean. From 1924 the Stroud E S Co Ltd purchased bulk power from the West Gloucestershire concern, 3-phase AC, 50 Hz sent over the River Severn and thence to Stroud where the local company now converted its 2-wire, 230V dc supply to ac. It had taken a mighty long time, a microcosm of a more general UK issue.

Fast forward to 1954 and we learn from a paper delivered by Walter Lewis, Chairman of the MEB, that by the time of nationalisation (1948) 150 local farms had access to electric power, by 1954 this had risen to 436; industrial consumption had risen from 17MW to 25MW and an all time high of public consumption had been struck (for Stroud, up to then) of 17,600 kVA on 5th February that year.

Local electrical enterprise has come in other forms: the proposed (but unfulfilled) electric trolleybus route from Stroud-Cheltenham (1903) and, in our own times, the location in the town of the HQ of Ecotricity, an undertaking at the cutting edge of generating sustainable power, like the lesser-known but commendable hydro-electric installation at Dudbridge Locks on the Stroudwater Navigation. Hence, rear-guard to vanguard.