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Blank lined writing area for practice.

Steam Day

A few weeks ago we went to a Steam Rally held in the park at Dartford in Kent. The event is held in honour of Richard Trevithick, an inventor and mining engineer from Cornwall, who in his later years worked in Dartford, and who died and is buried there. He was a brilliant engineer, with a fertile mind for the development of steam powered engines. He built the first practical and working high-pressure steam engine, and his improvements enabled him to create an engine that was smaller and lighter, and so could carry its own weight and also pull wagons or carriages. In 1801 his first demonstration of a full size steam road locomotive took place in Camborne in Cornwall, carrying six passengers along Fore Street, up Camborne Hill and on to the village of Beacon. In 1802 he mounted one of his engines on an iron track and it pulled 10 tons of iron, 5 carriages and 70 men along a distance of 9.75 miles.

On the day of the Steam Rally, the weather forecast had threatened increasing rain towards the end of the morning, so we made an early start to get there in good time. The park is very spacious with two large fields beyond the ornamental gardens and bandstand area. The river Darent flows to one side, from which the town of Dartford and the village of Darenth are named, joining the Thames a short distance away. As we passed through the fairground we were reminded that even those amusements were originally steam powered. We made straight for the vehicles, the largest around 4 metres high and humming and clicking as it idled. Around the perimeter were smaller engines, miniature versions made by enthusiasts and some giving rides in small trailers.

Further along were stationary engines, some just running and others doing various tasks such as pumping water, filling and emptying containers and running a flour grinding mill. This part of the display was rather smoky with occasional oily smells as well, as there were so many of them in the long row under the trees and behind a rope fence for safety. The last engine in the row was endlessly pumping water, sucking it up from the big bucket and sending it cascading over a chute and back down again. In the centre of the field were more steam engines and some old vehicles and buses. We climbed to the upper deck of the open-topped omnibus, which was more like just standing on the roof, with sides enclosing and seats bolted on top, rather than a purpose built upper level like our modern buses. Omnibus is the Latin word for "to all" i.e. to all places, from which we get the abbreviation "bus".

The second field was full of classic cars, row after row of gleaming and perfectly spotless vehicles, many with their bonnets (hoods) open revealing an equally spotless engine. Each particular make of vehicle seemed to have its own enthusiasts club, and no doubt they have many more outings throughout the year where they can share their enthusiasm with others around the country. I am not into classic cars but I do like to see things that have been restored and are well looked after and appreciated.

Steam Day

I thought the first steam engine we saw was a giant until we came to the agricultural tractors. First in line was an enormous modern tractor with wheels taller than me. I did wonder what sort of work it was designed to do, as that did seem rather over the top for pulling hay carts. Maybe I should have asked the driver who was sitting in the cab, but even if I had thought to do so, he was too far up in the air to hold a conversation with. Later on all the tractors were started up and went on a circuit of the area. In the long marquee were displays of old photographs of all the machinery and farm horses in action, showing everything from ploughing to harvesting and every type of farm work and village life in the Dartford and north Kent area. Behind the tent classic motorbikes were gathered, more rows of shiny paintwork, polished chrome and multiple headlamps and mirrors. Although the owners were all happily surveying the scene, a stationary motorbike is not the ideal, as after the admiration comes the real business of the day, which is motion, noise and speed.

Over in one corner, away from the main crowds, was a large truck with two heavy horses standing to the rear. These were Alfie and Arthur. They were well groomed with smooth black coats and enjoying being the centre of attention from groups of admiring and excited children. They are used to public life and give demonstrations of ploughing around the country, but no doubt their life is a little more relaxed and comfortable than that of their forebears. Back at the main display area was a mobile forge making items for sale. Most of these seemed to be decorative iron items for the garden, as being the easiest and quickest for a public demonstration and for the visitors to be able to carry them home.

Richard Trevithick's memorial plaque in Holy Trinity Church in Dartford reads: "To the glory of God and in memory of Richard Trevithick, one of the pioneers of the great mechanical developments of the XIX century and amongst the first inventors of the locomotive engine, of screw and paddle wheel propulsion for steamships, of the agricultural engine and of many other appliances whereby the forces of nature have been utilised in the service of mankind. He died in poverty and was carried to his grave in the churchyard of Saint Edmund, King and Martyr, by the mechanics of Hall's Engineering Works where he was then employed. This tablet was erected to perpetuate the memory of one whose splendid gifts shed lustre on this town, although he was not permitted to enjoy the fruits of his labour here. Born 1771 Died 1833." Next time you are sitting in a railway carriage, even though the engine may be electric or diesel powered, please spare a minute to be grateful for the genius of Richard Trevithick and his brilliant idea of adding wheels to his high-pressure steam engine. (1056 words)