GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S HISTORY

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Staughton Manor Railway Station

John Edwards Presgrave Howey had a fortunate start in life. The family's history began in Goulburn, New South Wales, Australia, in 1838, when Henry Howey, a sheep farmer, travelled to Melbourne to purchase various parcels of farmland, which he subsequently sold on for a decent profit. However, he had also purchased for £128 three parcels of scrubland situated on the banks of the Yarra river; clearing them for agriculture would have drained the Howey finances, so Henry could do little more than sit on his purchase and hope for an upturn in land values. The following year, he decided to move with his wife and six children to start a new life in Melbourne.

On 21 June 1838, Henry, his wife and their six children boarded the schooner *Sarah*; neither they nor the schooner were ever seen again. The land he had purchased was passed down to various relatives. Then Fortune took a hand. The city of Melbourne was expanding rapidly and Howey's unenticing piece of scrubland became part of the business area of the city and was sold for a princely sum, thus making the Howey fortune. It was said that the scrub was the most valuable tract of land in Australia still in private hands. Howey Place, a fashionable shopping centre and the Presgrave Building still stand as memorials to the family. The land was bequeathed to various members of the Howey family in England until it was eventually inherited by John Howey, who attained his majority in 1907.

John Howey was born on 17 November 1886 and educated at Eton where he first became enthusiastic about trains and speed. On leaving school, he was keen to further his knowledge of engineering and joined Vickers as an apprentice, but the family's disapproval of John's choice of profession led to him reluctantly following in his father's footsteps by enlisting in the army. However, his enthusiasm for things mechanical and especially locomotives did not leave him and was further kindled when he visited the Rhyl Miniature Railway in Wales. He spent the day indulging his passion for speed by driving the locomotive, which came from the workshop of Bassett-Lowke, the celebrated Northampton-based engineering company that specialised in supplying miniature locomotives to enthusiastic wealthy amateurs. It was a day that would transform Howey's life. He began to conceive of building his own private miniature railway.

In 1907 Henry Howey's bad luck became John Howey's good fortune. In 1911 he set out on the search for a suitable residence with sufficient land to accommodate his ambitious plans for a narrow-gauge railway. He eventually settled on Staughton Manor, which he rented in that year from its owner, Harry Pickersgill-Cunliffe. The land on which the manor stood was ideal for the construction of an ambitious ¾-mile line (which could be extended to 1½ miles; it never was). Howey wasted no time in purchasing a 9½-inch gauge locomotive from Bassett-Lowke. It did not long satisfy him. Having driven the 15-inch locomotive in Rhyl, he was unable to resist the temptation to follow suit.

Howey spared no expense in creating his railway. He was not alone in his enthusiasm for speed and miniature railways, which at the time were the fastest machines on land. The model railway pioneer, Sir Arthur Heywood, had created a three-mile line at Eaton Hall, near Chester, in 1896. Howey was fortunate in finding the ideal partner for his scheme – a brilliant engineer and enthusiast for miniature locomotives. His name was Henry Greenly and in 1901, Bassett-Lowke saw the potential in this 25-year-old engineer and hired him to design the company's range of model locomotives.

By 1910 the company was an acknowledged leader in the design and manufacture of model railways, catering to an ever-growing market. Greenly's ambition matched Howey's own, and it was he, with Bassett-Lowke, who created the 15-inch gauge locomotive, named Little Giant, which powered the Rhyl railway. Howey promptly ordered a locomotive in the same class. It would cost him the not inconsiderable sum of £400. The work to lay the infrastructure for the railway occupied the winter of 1911. The design included an impressive 20-foot model of the Forth Railway Bridge and fully kitted-out station, which was quickly christened Staughton Manor Railway Station. Local builders Smith and Son were on hand to provide the timber and iron work involved in the construction of the line and by summer 1912, the locomotive, called *John Anthony* after Howey's son, was ready for its maiden journey.

Local legend has it that the railway was principally used for leisure purposes by Howey, in particular to fetch his vegetables from his kitchen garden to the manor. Another story has it that, if children were well-behaved and had regularly attended Sunday school, they might be rewarded with a ride on the railway, which could carry upwards of forty people, with room to spare for Howey's impressive collection of dogs.

Over the next year, Howey continued to enjoy the life of a member of the moneyed classes: shooting in Scotland, theatre-going in London and visits to his properties in Australia. The idyll was not to last, neither for Howey nor the country. At the insistence of his father, Howey had joined the Dorsetshire Yeomanry when war broke out, before transferring to the Bedfordshire Yeomanry, where he held a commission and it was with this regiment that Howey went to the front in 1914. The prospect of long years in the trenches cannot have been enticing for the young, speed-obsessed Howey and he soon enlisted in the fledgling Royal Flying Corps. The *John Anthony* was left at Eaton Hall, where it had been put through its paces on the three-mile line. Howey was not to see it in action again at Staughton Manor.

Despite his intense efforts, Howey did not qualify as a pilot and had to be content with the role of observer in the two-seater FE2 biplane. His squadron was based at Abeele in Belgium. An ambitious operation was proposed for 11 November 1915, in which aeroplanes from the 4th, 8th and 13th squadrons would take part in a mass raid on the important German aerodrome of Bellenglise.

The portents were not good. The plan was for the squadrons to assemble above the airfield and then proceed towards the target. Whilst the raid was in progress, cover would be given by 11 Squadron and their Vickers FB5s, which would patrol the St Quentin area warding off any German attempts to intercept the raiders. Lieutenant Howey and his pilot Claude Herschel Kelway-Bamber took off in their FE2c, flying with a half-load of bombs and duly arrived at the rendezvous with the other squadrons. Bad weather then took a hand; strong winds and heavy cloud caused many pilots to lose their way.

The plan fell apart. Kelway-Bamber's FE2c was attacked but his observer, Lieutenant Howey, with the machine gun, managed to shoot down the German fighter. The FE2c started to behave erratically and when Howey turned to Kelway-Bamber he noticed to his horror that a piece of shrapnel from the German fighter had inflicted a fatal wound on the pilot. There was only one thing for it and in an act that reads like something out of a Boy's Own adventure story, Howey clambered over the fuselage and took his place in the pilot's seat, squatting uncomfortably on the body of Kelway-Bamber.

He managed to bring the plane down safely, although wounded, and found himself behind enemy lines where he was quickly taken prisoner. Howey provided a remarkably phlegmatic account of what happened:

"Poor Bamber, I was sorry that he was killed. He was such a nice boy and only 19. I had a fight with two German aeroplanes and then a shell burst very close to us and I heard a large piece whizz past my head. The aeroplane then started to come down head first, spinning all the time. We must have dropped about 5,000 feet in about 20 seconds. I looked around at once and saw poor Bamber with a terrible wound in his head, quite dead. I then realised that the only chance of saving my life was to step over into his seat and sit on his lap where I could reach the controls. I managed to get the machine out of that terrible death plunge – switched off the engine – and made a good landing on terra firma. We were at 10,000 feet when Bamber was killed and luckily it was this tremendous height that gave me time to think and act. I met one of the pilots of the German machines that attacked us. He could speak English quite well and shook hands after a most thrilling fight. I brought down his machine with my machine gun and he had to land quite close to where I had landed. He had a bullet through his radiator but neither he or his observer were touched."

In a letter home in January 1916, Howey wrote warmly of his captors:

"I met two German Officers there who knew several English people that I knew, and they were most awfully kind to me. They gave me a very good dinner of champagne, oysters, etc, and I was treated like an honoured guest. I then came by train the next day to Mainz, where I was confined in a room by myself for two days. I have now been moved into a general room with eight other English Officers where we sleep and eat. We are treated very well and play hockey and tennis in the prison yard. I shall never forget it as long as I live. The shock was so great that I could hardly remember a single thing in my former life for two days. Now I am getting better and my mind is practically normal again."

Howey's pilot, 2nd Lieutenant Claude Herschel Kelway-Bamber, is buried in the Harlebeke New British Cemetery II. A. 10, near Ypres, Belgium. His grave is inscribed: GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS. Lieutenant Kelway-Bamber was the son of Herbert and Eliza Kelway-Bamber.

The Germans wasted no time in discovering Howey's back history; an English millionaire now in enemy hands was a considerable trophy for the German propaganda machine and they did not hesitate to exploit its potential to the full. Howey spent two humiliating years being paraded around various German prisoner of war camps before relief arrived in 1917, when he was declared unfit for active service and released on parole to the safe haven of Switzerland, bound to remain there until the end of the war. He was well cared for in the Swiss hospital, particularly by the wife of the doctor who had pronounced him unfit for duty. Gladys, Howey's wife, joined her husband shortly after his arrival and quickly appraising that the care he was receiving may have gone beyond normal nursing duties, allegedly lost no time in having the nurse transferred.

After the war, Howey was persuaded to sell the *John Anthony* to the Eskdale and Ravenglass Railway, where it was renamed the *Colossus*. The Staughton Manor railway fell victim to benign neglect. The track was torn up, the Forth Bridge dismantled and Staughton Manor Railway Station reputedly became a house for hens, a function that it maintained, according to local legend, for several decades.

Howey and his wife were now regulars on the London social scene, having bought a Mayfair residence. Meanwhile, like Mr Toad, Howey was consumed by a new passion, still involving speed

and mechanical engineering. In 1923, he took delivery of a powerful 7-litre Leyland motor car. He took up motor racing, much more hazardous than the locomotive, but cheaper and faster. For two years, he was a regular feature at Brooklands along with his friend, Parry Thomas, who was later killed attempting the land speed record. In 1921, Howey found another speed and racing fanatic, a man who was even richer than he was, Count Louis Zborowski, whose family properties included much of Fifth Avenue and Manhattan. Zborowski's car was a 23-litre Mercedes, which covered the Brooklands course at an incredible (for that time) speed of 100 mph. His car achieved worldwide fame later, when its nickname, Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang was profitably appropriated by Ian Fleming and Hollywood. Zborowski achieved more lasting recognition as one of the founders of the Aston Martin Company. He and Howey struck up a close friendship in which locomotives and railways were a frequent topic of conversation. Before they could collaborate on any project, however, Zborowski was killed in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza, on 19 October 1924.

In 1925 Howey, still hankering for a really giant model railway, set in motion his plan for a completely new railway and commissioned Henry Greenly to come up with ideas for its location. The line would have to be at least seven miles long, thus eclipsing the Eskdale and Ravenglass, and it must be straight and level to allow the locomotives to achieve a decent speed. Laying such a track, even if a suitable location could be found, was not straightforward; local authority and planning permission needed to be sought. If, however, the line could be promoted as providing a public benefit, permission was much more likely to be granted. After various proposals came to nought, a line from Romney to Hythe presented itself as a likely candidate that would serve the public purpose whilst also bringing tourist income to an otherwise neglected area of England.

After two years' work, the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch 15-inch gauge railway was officially opened on 16th July 1927. The line ran originally for eight miles from the Port of Hythe, one of the original Cinque Ports, to the terminus at New Romney, but Howey quickly saw the potential for extending the line for a further five miles, and this new extension was completed in 1928. There are stops at Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and New Romney. The line proved enormously popular, attracting thousands of visitors during the season, as well as providing an efficient transport system for local people. The locomotive fleet comprised nine locomotives pulling luxurious coaches capable of carrying passengers in sixteen- and twenty-seat carriages.

For a decade the RH&D railway enjoyed popular success but political realities were already intruding in the late 1930s. The line was requisitioned by the War Office and during the war the locomotives pulled armoured carriages laden with equipment and materials for the construction of the Pipe Line under the Ocean (PLUTO) project. After the war, the RH&D was re-opened in 1946 at a lavish opening ceremony performed by the comedy duo Laurel and Hardy, an event that attracted thousands of visitors.

JEP Howey died on 8 September 1963, at the age of seventy-six. He was survived by his wife, Gladys Mary née Hewitt, whom he had married in 1912, at the time he was living in the Manor at Great Staughton. There were two children of the marriage, Richard, killed in the Second World War and Gloria, who pre-deceased her parents. Howey's obituary appeared in *The Times* of Tuesday 10 September 1963. Appropriately, his ashes were buried in the station yard of New Romney. At the time of his death, the future of the railway looked uncertain. Happily, the RH&D railway, under new and dynamic management, has weathered the turbulent economic storms of the past fifty years and Howey would be gratified to learn that his dream continues to carry tens of thousands of visitors every year. Currently, the RH&D fleet consists of thirteen locomotives.

The Howey estate in Australia, which included Howey Court in the heart of the Melbourne Central Business District, was eventually liquidated and the value of the Australian holdings was put at £6m. Howey had not been as assiduous in managing the impact of death duties on his estate as he had on the well-being of his beloved locomotives and the proceeds of the estate eventually passed to the Australian and British governments.

There is a modern postscript to the Howey story. In 2014, lot 338 came up for auction at the Bonham auction house. It was a 1924 Hispano-Suiza H6C 8.0-Litre Short Chassis Sports, chassis no. 11024, engine no. 320098. The auction house's description: 'offered with restoration invoices, the *11024* represents a rare opportunity to acquire a legendary model from one of the world's most prestigious makes, fully restored and possessing the additional cachet of in-period Brooklands history'. It was thought that the car had originally belonged to Jack Howey but further investigation revealed that it was purchased by another member of the Howey family. Jack Howey did purchase, for £400, a similar vehicle and he drove the car in a West Kent MC meeting at Brooklands on 11th July 1925, winning the race. This was not his only racing venture. He took the car to Australia to attempt the Sydney to Melbourne record. The venture did not prove successful; a series of punctures impeded his progress, but the final straw was to be stopped by the police and informed that if he had continued, he would be prosecuted. Howey later sold the car for £800, thus making a decent profit on the deal.