

KYRLE PROBUS 6 APRIL 2017

Paul Barnett decided to take action and launched 19 years of research when he discovered there was nothing in place to mark the 'Severn Railway Bridge Disaster' which had taken five lives on 25 October 1960.



Paul told Kyrle Probus Club members on Thursday 6 April that his research also made him aware that the story had 'become quite embellished' 57 years after the tragedy.

He also cast some doubt about several of the 'myths' that had circulated over a period of more than five decades.

Paul described how two vessels, Arkendale H and Wastdale H, both carrying a four-man crew and explosive material in opposite directions on the River Severn, ran into the Victorian bridge during the fog-bound conditions.

The two boats, one loaded with 91 tons of oil and the other with 250 tons of petroleum, lost control on the 13 knot tidal stream.

Two men were rescued from the river and both captains survived. A rescuer was later awarded a Silver Lifesaving Medal by the Royal Naval Lifeboat Institute.

“I became intrigued,” said Paul. “Five men had died that evening and there was nothing to mark the event.”

His search of local archives revealed unique photographs which showed a single-track railway bridge with a hole in it. The bridge structure collapsed into the river.

A decision was taken by British Rail, bridge owners at the time of the disaster, to dismantle the structure after further damage was caused by a collision in 1961.

A Board of Trade inquiry recommended new legislation: compulsory VHF radios and non-inflammable life-preserving equipment on board.

Fog was a contributory factor and neither captain was blamed.

Paul said that in his view reports suggesting that the boats were tied together and were hit by a gas explosion were ‘myths’.

Two memorials were erected, at Purton and Lydney, as a tribute to those who died, and unveiled on the 50th anniversary on 17 October 2010, before 150 family members and friends.