

*Submitted by:- Jim Robson*

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## [The Great Train Robbery](#)

The subject for the December General Meeting was a talk by ex-DI Clifford Wrate, entitled 'The Great Train Robbery'. Had I have been appraised in advance that a write-up was required of me I would have taken some notes, or better still, a tape recorder. As it is I am rather hazy on details, I know that I thoroughly enjoyed it, and laughed like a drain at intervals, but can't remember specifically. To generalise, the title was a bit of a misnomer since Mr. Wrate gave us, initially, a potted history of his time in the police, starting on the beat and rising to the C.I.D., interspersed with anecdotes. He gave us a resume of the robbery, which, although he was not connected directly with the investigation, brought up some interesting points, particularly since he is a keen railway enthusiast.

He is a polished speaker, with the ability to go from the amusing to the dramatic with startling speed. One thing was clear, he does not like criminals, and has done his part in putting more than a few behind bars. He was particularly scathing of the system which, in many cases, lets them out again all too soon.

The train robbery saga started when a postman and a bank robber were banged up together in Maidstone prison. In the course of their evening chats the postman was telling his cellmate about his duties on the mail train, and some of the things they carried, which at that time, included large quantities of banknotes which were considered too dirty for further circulation, and once a week were sent to London to be burned. This, not unnaturally, interested the bank robber greatly, and when he was released he began to research the operation. Although the train ran into Euston in the early hours of the morning, the station was anything but quiet, no chance of offloading several bags of money without attracting, to say the least, some attention. Likewise there was no convenient point on the outskirts of London to stop a train and get a vehicle close enough to get the bags away. So they decided on Lechlade, bought a nearby farm, to which they hoped to flee until the heat was off. The rest is history, I expect most of you are familiar with the story. One or two interesting little sidetracks as to why the perfect crime wasn't, were brought to light. When the chap who came out of Maidstone with the germ of a brilliant coup returned to his "firm," or group of people with an interest in acquiring other peoples money, they were interested, but since it was a large enterprise other people had to be brought in with special 'skills', some of whom did their part well, others did not.

Finance was needed to purchase vehicles, pay people to provide alibis', etc. One well educated gent spent a lot of time chatting to drivers, under the pretence of being a railway buff, so successfully that he not only got some early morning footplate rides, but was allowed to drive! On the basis of this expertise he and the gang assumed that he would be able to drive the train forward after it had been stopped, the short distance to the overbridge where the transport was waiting. Having brutally disabled the driver with a blow to the head with a pickaxe handle, the gang then discovered that the "apprentice" had been driving an 08 shunter and the technique of handling a mainline Class 40 was beyond him. So they forced the unfortunate driver, despite his injury, to drive to the bridge. The second part was that although the normal consignment was in the order of £ 300k, on this occasion, due to the bank holiday on the previous week, this time it was £ 2.3M! Which should have been a considerable bonus, but contributed to their downfall in two ways, 1) it took longer to offload, and 2) greed. When they got back to the farm they started squabbling about shares. Had they stuck their original plan of laying low until things quietened down they might have got away with it, or at least postponed the inevitable, but a series of blunders messed this up. I can't remember all of them but one of the major contributions was that a nearby RAF group were carrying out training flights which

included circling low over the farm and convinced the inhabitants that they had been spotted. A bunch of Londoners in rural Bucks stood out like a sore thumb, one who took off on a bicycle with his share of loot in the saddle-bag was stopped for not having lights. There was a whole chapter of incompetent events which nobbled the gang in various ways and gave them their come-uppance, some in quite amusing circumstances. Sadly, the man who had given his life to the railway, the driver of the postal train, never recovered from the injury received, and the accompanying trauma, and died within a year.

Mr. Wrate works for a travel company and travels to various parts of the world as a passenger so that he can observe things like service received and other passenger/holiday-maker comments. This involves him, amongst other trips, in having to ride on the "Orient Express." Such dedication, still, someone has to do it.

I apologise for a rather disjointed report and any facts I may have got wrong. The bottom line is that I had a thoroughly enjoyable evening and I hope that we can persuade Mr. Wrate to visit us again.

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*Jim Robson*