

EARLY PUBLIC ELECTRICITY SUPPLY AT STROUD

by

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Introduction

The town of Godalming in Surrey lays claim to being the first to combine public and private lighting in one commercial undertaking [1]. During the next decade various schemes followed in different parts of the country. One such scheme was at Wickwar in Gloucestershire where in 1886 agreement was reached between the Town Council and the local brewery. Electricity supply started in Cheltenham in 1895, Gloucester in 1900, Tewkesbury in 1909, Cirencester in 1912 and finally in 1916 at Stroud [2]. In the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th century dynamos had been installed at a number of the mills in the Stroud area. This would have significantly reduced the potential market, for any would be operator and may have been a contributory factor, to why it took so long to come to Stroud.

However, there were a number of attempts to establish an electricity supply company in the Stroud district over the period 1888 to 1914. These have been fully described by Tucker [2] and only a brief account need be given here. Tucker refers to two temporary generating stations being set up in the district but he regretted he had no information on either their location or equipment. The author was fortunate to make contact with Mr William White a former employee of the Stroud Electric Supply Company who started work in 1918 just two years after the company had commenced supplies. Much of the following account of the undertaking is based on information obtained from Mr White [3]. This includes the early operations when all the power was obtained from a local cloth mill and then at different times from the two temporary generating stations.

Early Proposals (1888 to 1914)

It was the scheme at Wickwar which prompted a Stroud ratepayer to write to the Stroud News in September 1888 suggesting that a similar enterprise ought to be tried at Stroud. [4] This was not followed up, but in November 1890 a meeting was held at the Subscription Rooms Stroud to consider a new proposal for the electric lighting of Stroud. [5] The House-to-House Electric Supply Co, had already applied for a Provisional Order. The scheme involved some £15000 of capital expenditure, and supplying about 2000 incandescent lamps initially. The meeting approved the proposal but again the scheme faded out. In July 1891 the Lighting Committee of the Stroud Local Board talked about looking into the cost of electricity compared to the present gas system, but this was not taken forward. [6]

Nine years later in July 1900 the United Electric Light and Traction Company gave notice to Stroud UDC of their intention to apply for a provisional order. The Lighting Committee countered this by announcing that they were contemplating applying for a Provisional Order themselves. [7] A report on such an undertaking was prepared for the Council by mid-1901 but it was announced that the matter was being held over. [8]

One possible reason may have been the proposals for the Gloucestershire Electric Power Company. By January 1902 a Bill had been introduced which proposed the formation of the company to provide a bulk supply to Stroud, Dursley and a number of other parishes on both sides of the River Severn. The company's capital was to be £250,000. [9] Power stations were proposed at Parkend in the Forest of Dean and at Cainscross in the angle between the Stroudwater Canal and the River Frome at SO 833047. [10] Its act obtained the Royal Assent in June 1902 and the

Gloucestershire Electric Power Company was duly set up. [11] However, the company never built the power stations it had been authorised to do and eventually its powers were formally revoked in March 1920.

A further digression in the saga of the coming of a public electricity supply to Stroud concerns the proposals in 1901 for an electric light railway linking Stroud to Painswick, Chalford, Nailsworth and Stonehouse. The company that was formed had some directors in common with the Gloucestershire Electric Power Company. Sadly the scheme was rejected by the Light Railway Commissioners in 1903. Thus a potentially large customer for the would be electricity undertaking was lost.

Returning to the activities of Stroud UDC, the Council had still not actually proceeded with applying for a Provisional Order by mid-1902. They were then again informed by the United Electric Light and Power Company of the latter's intention to apply for a Provisional Order. [12] This did stimulate the Council to apply for and actually obtain a Provisional Order by the end of 1903 but they took no action. [2]

In October 1906 the Board of Trade pointed out to the UDC that the Council had not carried out the required works stipulated by the 1903 Provisional Order. [13] The Council obtained an extension of 12 months [14] but the necessary works were still not carried out and so the order was revoked.

Nothing more of significance happened for several years and then during 1912-13 several companies gave notice of intent for applying for a Provisional Order. [2]

The Stroud Electric Supply Company and Messrs Edwards & Armstrong 1913-1932

It was the application made by Mr J Herbert Edwards on behalf of what became registered as the Stroud Electric Power Co. which was encouraged by the UDC. The Order was obtained in 1913 and the company purchased five acres at Cainscross for their station and depot. [15] This was at the house known as The Lawn (SO83550505) which had extensive grounds including a former mill pond. Edwards had formed a company known as Edwards & Armstrong which serviced the Stroud Electric Power Co.

The great war intervened and they were unable to proceed immediately. However, in 1916 it was possible to obtain a small supply of electricity using surplus power from Dudbridge Mill, owned by the woollen cloth manufacturers Apperley Curtis & Co. Cables were laid between the mill and the Lawn, a distance of about half a mile. These fed direct current to a large bank of rechargeable batteries in the basement of the Lawn. The output voltage was 220 volts DC. Sometimes generation at the mill stopped at about 8pm and the battery was hard pressed to supply the required current for the evening. [3] At other times generation continued overnight and it was the job of the Edwards & Armstrong apprentices to mind the plant. [16].

The problem was alleviated by the installation of an engine and generator actually at The Lawn. These were located in an outbuilding to the west of the house. The house and all buildings were cleared in the 1960's as part of a road widening scheme. The site of the house and outbuildings is now occupied by the east side of the present day Cainscross roundabout, and nothing remains of them.

After about two years a new generating station was set up nearer Stroud town centre. This was at the site known as Eagle Mill on the London Road (SO857044). [2] Again the site has been cleared, this time for residential development. Unfortunately, it is not known where the generator and engine were. The site had variety of uses this century including a brewery and a caravan works. Mr White thought that it was a Sisson steam engine. [3] Interestingly, a history of Sisson's compiled by the retiring managing director in 1958 refers to orders for "steam

dynamos" in about 1919. [17] One of these was a "250 kW set for power plant for Stroud to supply lighting and power in that district". It would seem likely that this was the set installed at Eagle Mill.

This supply may have been augmented but it remained scarcely adequate until bulk supply became available from the West Gloucestershire Power Co in 1924.

J H Edwards became a well known figure in the area and served for many years as chairman of the governors of Wycliffe College at Stonehouse. He lived for many years at Woodside in Cranham. There was a branch of Edwards & Armstrong in Bristol in 1914 [18] but the company made its base in Stroud. They closed their head office at the Lawn in about 1930 but had an office in Bedford Street, Stroud. The company eventually owned, managed or serviced a large number of supply companies. In 1927 their letter heading listed branches at Chippenham, Trowbridge, Melksham, Leominster, Cirencester, Abingdon, Ledbury, Ruthin, Stroud, Warminster, Malmsbury, Wantage, Tetbury, Devizes and Andover. [19] The company was then taken over by Edmundson Electrical Corporation of Westminster in about 1932.

West Gloucestershire Power Company 1923-1948

The company was set up in 1922 with the stated object of constructing a power station at Norchard near Lydney (SO629043) and to supply electricity over a large part of west Gloucestershire. The project was sanctioned in August of that year and the station completed in mid 1923. [20] Initially, the station had two generator sets with a combined output of 10 MW. This was increased to 17.5 MW when a third generator was installed in 1928. In just five years the area served increased from 300 to 679 square miles. The supply was 230V AC at 50 Hz. [20] The Stroud Electric Supply Co. agreed at an early stage [2] to buy their electricity in bulk, and this necessitated the changeover of many fittings and equipment from DC to AC. The inconvenience was probably worth it because at long last, in 1924, Stroud had a satisfactory and adequate public electricity supply.

Concluding Remarks

In 1948 the electricity supply industry was nationalised and the West Gloucestershire Power Company was taken over by the British Energy Authority (BEA). At the same time the local distribution side of the industry in this area became the responsibility of the Midlands Electricity Board. Familiarly known as the M.E.B., this organisation does the same in 1996, albeit now in its privatised form.

Today we take electricity so much for granted, that it is almost impossible for most people alive today, to imagine how we would live without it. Its importance to industry was demonstrated by its use in mills in the Stroud area long before a public supply was available. It is hoped that, sometime in the future, a study of the introduction of electricity privately into the mills and its effect on things like working hours and conditions will be carried out. Equally, it is hoped that even after more than 70 years, it may be possible to discover more about the tiny generating stations used in the Stroud area for the early public supply. Though much overlooked they have an important place in the development of the town this century.

Acknowledgements

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Sadly, Mr W White died on 17 March 1996 aged 92 years.

References

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