

Stephenson's Rocket

by Jay Lake

March 17th, 1827

Mister George Stephenson

Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Northumberland

My Dear Mister Stephenson,

I hope this letter finds you well. Forgive my unaccustomed bluntness, but I am writing on a matter of some urgency to Mr. Canning the First Lord of the Treasury, as well as Mr. Richards and his colleagues at the Bank of England. More to the point, His Majesty has elected to take a particular interest in this issue.

Our men in America have found that a Colonel John Stevens of the city of Hoboken, New Jersey is working at a feverish pace to complete a prototype of an American-designed 'steam waggon.' This vessel is very similar in concept to your own Locomotion Number One so celebrated in its introduction to service these two years past on the Stockton and Darlington Railway.

Were this work under way in His Majesty's dominions, the Crown would be pleased to assist you in bringing Colonel Stevens' enterprise to a swift halt under the provisions of patent law. As it takes place in the country of our cousins, so to speak, sheer commercialism must prevail. While other, more extreme measures might in principle lie within our reach, they do not apply in this case for reasons of state.

The nub of the problem presents itself in the matter of locomotive performance. As you know, the Reverend Doctor Lardner, one of England's pre-eminent experts on steam engines, has stated unequivocally that high speeds are not possible, as the induced vacuum will deplete the breathing air of the passengers. Preliminary experiments conducted by the Royal Navy, the Greenwich Observatory and selected Fellows of the Royal Society working in confidence have initially verified the substance of the Reverend Doctor's prediction, with a speed of approximately twenty-eight miles per hour being sufficient to introduce partial vacuum in a well-enclosed railway carriage. This would lead to the asphyxiation predicted by the Reverend Doctor, as well as various unpleasant physical effects on the *corpus* of the departed.

If Colonel Stevens were to succeed in his efforts and adduce the full and correct principles of high-speed motion and concomitantly induced vacuum prior to His Majesty's government possessing that same information, there is every reason to fear that our American cousins might pass that information on to inimical foreign powers. I am therefore authorized to convey to you a purse of 5,000 pounds sterling and communicate to you His Majesty's sense of urgency in this regard. I will expect regular reports and your utmost secrecy in this matter.

Yr. Odbt. Servant in support of Dame Progress.

Josiah Grimes, Treasury Clerk

