

## The Search for Wells's Ropeways

Rose Tilly

A libel case of blasphemy brought against a publisher of an offensive poem triggered my interest in H.G. Wells. The poem was an obscene rearrangement and fabrication of certain biblical events. Extracts published in the media brought a spate of letters from outraged Christians to the London *Times*. Turning one day from reading turbulent discourses on the poem in the *Times* to *The Shape of Things to Come*, which I was then browsing through, a passage sprang out at me.

Wells wrote:

Literature, always so responsive to its audience, stood on its head and displayed its private parts. It produced a vast amount of solemn pornography, facetious pornography, sadistic incitement, resexualised religiosity and verbal gibbering in which the rich effectiveness of obscene words was abundantly exploited. It is all available for the reader to-day who cares to examine it. He will find it neither shocking, disgusting, exciting nor interesting. He will find it comically pretentious and pitifully silly. (Bk V, Ch.4)

I read and reread the passage, which comments on the mores of the twentieth century from the perspective of a more civilised future, then typed it and sent it to the *Times*. It appeared two days later with my footnote: "Am I alone in being ahead of my time for feeling those sentiments now?" Correspondence on the subject fizzled out after the publication of Wells's comments. He would have been a difficult author to cap.

My interest in Wells was fixed. I read his *Experiment in Autobiography* and noted with interest the mention of the report on the telpherage system he invented during World War One to carry supplies and ammunition to the Front. Having visited the Front, he could not forget the horrors he had witnessed there, particularly the harrowing journeys made by the action and supply parties. The conditions frequently encountered in the desolate bog-land that lay between the supply centres and the trenches included exposure to snipers' bullets, being caught in cross fire, becoming entangled in submerged barbed wire, stumbling into shell craters, stepping on land mines and being attacked by wolves. Once in the forward areas, troops had to cross duckboards linking the trenches which were often waterlogged due to continuous rain. Slipping from warped, muddy duckboards was an all too frequent disaster. Caught off balance, the weight of their packs dragged the men into mud-filled trenches. Since they were weighed down by the packs, escape was rare.

One stormy night when Wells was unable to sleep, the memory of the horrors seemed to trigger a flash of inspiration. He visualised a motorised telpherage system, comprising a series of T-shaped poles with two transporting wires running either side of the T bars. Set at intervals between the supply centres and the Front, the poles could carry rations, supplies and ammunition, relieving the ration and supply parties of their dangerous missions and cutting the shockingly high

mortality rate. He spent the remainder of the night making notes on the system and drawing diagrams. By morning the idea was formulated.

Wells found an enthusiastic supporter for his invention in Winston Churchill, who passed the matter on to Lieutenant J. A. Leeming of the Royal Engineers, Director of the Trench Warfare Department, for development. Lieutenant Leeming, with a team of engineers, perfected and patented Wells's idea and tests were carried out with three prototypes at Clapham Common, Longmoor and Richmond Park.

The third experimental line was decided on. It was cross-shaped, could be folded scissor-wise for easy portage and could be moved laterally or lain flat to allow traffic to cross the line of traction. It was found that twenty men under one officer could assemble half a mile of ropeways within one and a half hours. Aerial photography showed the system to be undetectable from the air and it could be erected as quickly as a battery could advance.

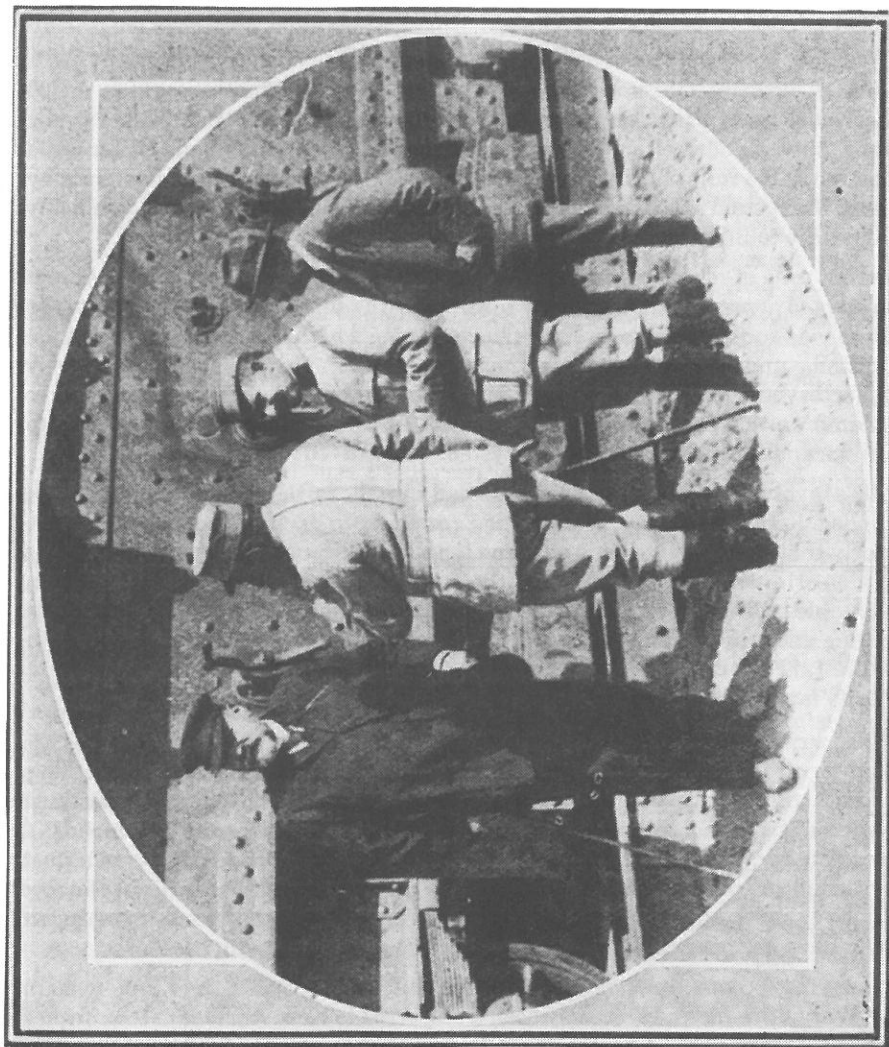
The first mile of ropeway was despatched to the front in December 1917, where it was erected across rough country by the Forward Transportation department. The system was subjected to severe tests to determine whether it could withstand the conditions under which it would have to operate. The tests proved entirely satisfactory and the ropeways were then passed to the Canadian railway troops to feed ammunition to a battery at the Front. A further mile of ropeway was sent to Salonica and fifty-seven miles of the system was ordered for the Western Front.

Wells's involvement with the ropeway ended with the initial tests, some of which he attended. Recalling his invention in the *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells wrote bitterly that the "tin hats" (his mocking term for military 'brass hats') did not like his idea. He was not to know that the tests had proved the ropeway to be an invaluable military device, which had later operated successfully at the Front. This seeming anomaly can be explained by the fact that, once the invention had gone to the military for development, it would have been subject to the same stringent security measures that governed all War Office inventions.

Whilst writing his autobiography and remembering his invention, Wells had his daughter-in-law write and telephone many War Office sources on his behalf, trying to locate the report prepared on the ropeways in 1917, but without success. I wondered if any more recent search had been made for this report, of which H.G. was co-author (with G. S. Coleman of the Trench Warfare Department — a fact not mentioned in his autobiography). The general view of various military history sources I contacted, culminating in the Ministry of Defence, was that the report would have been destroyed in a fire at the War Office during the 1944 blitz.

Undeterred, I contacted the Public Records Office in Portugal Street, only to learn that War Office files had recently been transferred to Kew. A phone call confirmed that War Office files were being catalogued and would be available there next month. Meanwhile letters describing the ropeways were sent to local and evening newspapers in the hope that a World War One veteran might recall them. Although the letters drew some interesting correspondence about the War, no information about the ropeways arrived.

The following month I wrote to the PRO Kew, describing the ropeways and giving



Mr. H. G. Wells on the Western Front

the title of the report, mentioning that the report was believed to have been destroyed in a fire at the War Office. Fortunately my letter fell into the hands of Dr Christopher Kitching, a keeper who had been involved in cataloguing War Office reports (he has since become Assistant Secretary of the Historical Manuscript Commission in London) and he located it in a short space of time. A letter from Dr Kitching, describing the report he found, sent me winging my way to the PRO office. There was the very report described by H.G., complete with sixteen monochrome prints showing the three experimental lines. It was a copy of the original which had lain undetected at the PRO Portugal Street because someone at some time in the past, seeing the word 'aerial' on the report, had filed it under airforce files!

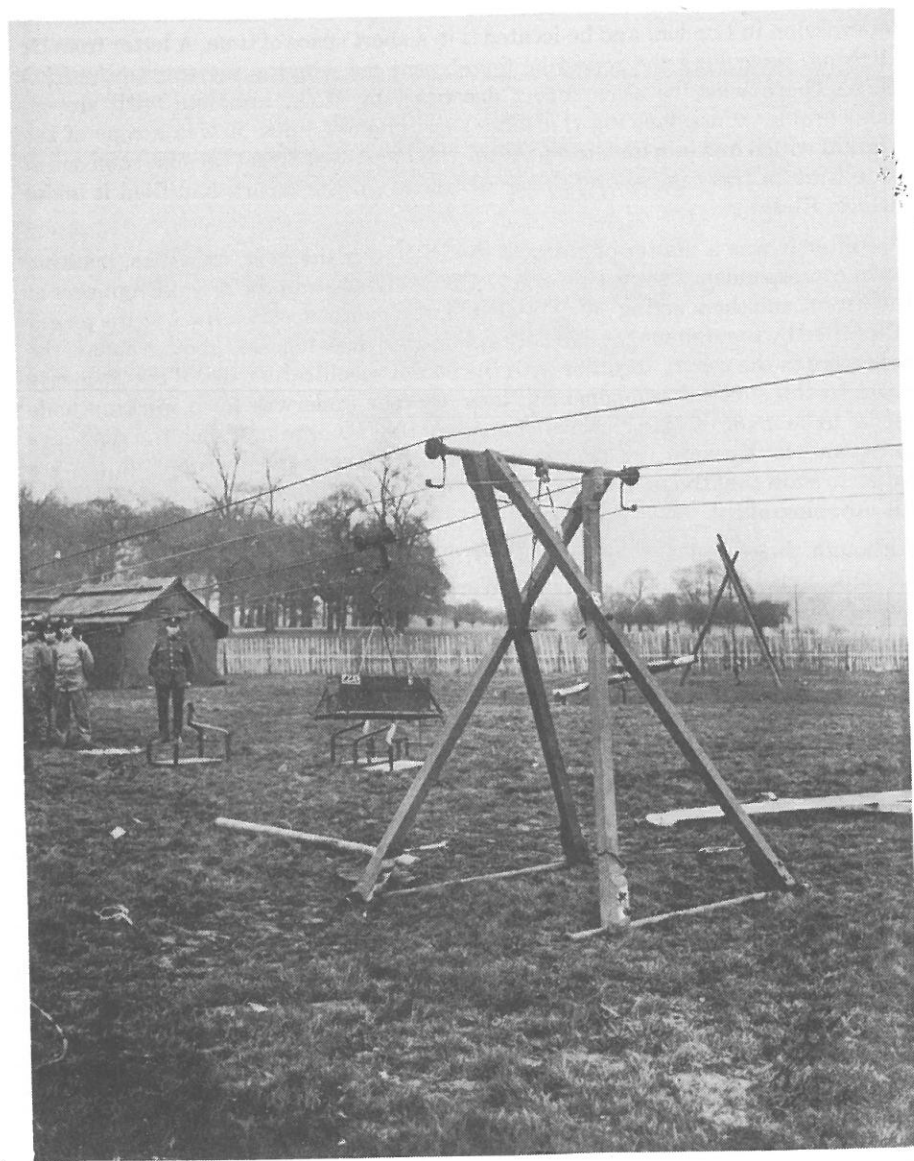
Thereafter it was a matter of going to the PRO over the next six weeks, tracking down correspondence between the War Office London and the Royal Engineers at the Front, and then, acting on a hunch, I found several specifications at the patent office filed by Lieutenant Leeming. The diagrams, drawings and photographs of the ropeways in the report, together with the patent specification, detail the ropeways down to the smallest component. (Plans are now underway for a working scale model to be made of the ropeways.) I am sure that other material on the ropeways exists and, time permitting, I hope to track down the aerial photographs which were taken to show that the ropeways were not visible from the air, mentioned by H.G. in his autobiography.

Although I located the report in 1978, information continues to crop up. Commissioned to take photographs of World War One veterans at a reunion at the Tower of London last September, I took along my set of photographs of the ropeways just in case! By chance the oldest veteran, ninety-two year old William Tilley (a coincidence, but no relation), recalled seeing the ropeways being operated by the Royal Engineers at Neuport on the Franco-Belgian border.

Had H.G. had access to the War Office report, he would have learned that the ropeways had been operated successfully at the Front by the Foreway (Tramway) organisation, the Forward Transportation department and by British and Canadian troops to bring back wounded from the forward areas. The ropeways were also employed to salvage reusable materials from the trenches and dumps, and for dug-out work and the removal of spoils. The report concludes:

it is possible to supply as much ammunition to the forward trenches during the hours of darkness with fifteen men as against 1,500-2,000 men carrying the same, to say nothing of the saving of life.

The statement stands as a fitting tribute to the extraordinary abilities of H.G. Wells, author and inventor.



*Second experimental line. Strong back and general view of line, reproduced with the assistance of the Public Record Office, Kew (document MUN 5†198†1660†13).*