

STEAM

The Story of

George & Robert Stephenson
The early years

A short play for the stage
by David Farn

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Printed by Gilpin Press, Houghton-le-Spring

Synopsis

1825 saw the opening of the Stockton & Darlington railway – the first public line to be entirely operated by steam. The driving purpose was to make economically possible the movement of coal from the inland coalfields around Bishop Auckland to the River Tees and so onwards to London.

This was the real beginning of a transport revolution: the Age of the Train. And the geniuses behind it were father-and-son team George and Robert Stephenson – the Lennon and McCartney of the engineering world. But it was a turbulent partnership. George intended his son to be a more polished version of himself. But Robert, as he grew, strove to be his own man.

The Main Characters

George Stephenson

Aged 63 at the start, the famous engineer is still an energetic character. An uneducated man, he is a self-taught genius and proud of it.

Robert Stephenson

Aged 41 at the start, Robert is educated and well-spoken. Like his father, he is an engineering genius, but is quieter, more thoughtful. less robust, and lacks his father's arrogance.

Eleanor Stephenson

George's younger sister, a gentle, thoughtful soul and replacement mother, who tries to be protective of young Robert.

George Hudson

The Railway King, a plain-speaking Yorkshireman of mature years, who's ambition and self-confidence has made him an influential figure.

Charles Brandling

Of Gosforth Hall. One of a pair of brothers who were influential colliery-owners and part of the powerful Grand Allies.

Sir Humphrey Davy

Famous scientist and member of the Royal Institute. Discovered several elements. And very arrogant with it.

Edward Pease

Quaker businessman. Shy, polite, but intelligent and ambitious.

Mr Alderson

Solicitor for the Bridgewater Canal Company, and therefore representing the interests of the parties hostile to Stephenson and the railways.

The Suggested Doubling

George Stephenson – remains himself throughout

Robert Stephenson - ditto

George Hudson – also plays Posh Bully, Charles Brandling, a Local, Mr Alderson, Jackson, and becomes the Storm

Eleanor Stephenson – also plays the Engineman, Sir Humphrey Davy and Edward Pease

In this way, four actors (3M, 1F) will suffice, though more can be used, if desired.

The Time

It is 1844 at the start, but time is fluid in the play.

The Setting

The action begins in the Assembly Rooms in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and moves to a variety of locations, including George's cottage, Robert's school, the bottom of a coal mine, the moors, the jungle and so on.

The locations and time shifts can be achieved simply with lighting changes and sound effects. There are no set changes. In the original production, two oblong blocks became, in turn, a lectern, seats, a pumping engine, Locomotion and a witness stand. Costume changes should be minimal – sometimes just a change of hat or accent.

Steam was first produced by Durham's City Theatre (otherwise known as the DDS) in March 2025 as part of a One Act Play Festival hosted by the Royalty Theatre Sunderland, and won the New Writing Award.

The original cast and creative team were:

George Stephenson	Peter Wilson
Robert Stephenson	Martin Wallwork
George Hudson et al	Ian Tulloch
Eleanor Stephenson et al	Lesley Anderson
Director	David Farn
Assisted by	Anna Snell
Lighting & Sound	Simon Wilson
Set Design & props	David Farn

The time is 1844. The place is the Assembly Rooms in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and the occasion is a grand public dinner for 500 guests.

At rise, GEORGE HUDSON is discovered. HUDSON is the famous Railway King of the investment mania years. From lowly origins, and an inexhaustible self-confidence – not to mention some dodgy-dealing – he has become hugely wealthy and an important, larger-than-life public figure. Now he addresses the unseen assembly. Retaining his Yorkshire accent, he speaks with a kind of confident bluster:

HUDSON My Lord Mayor of Newcastle, His Lordship the Earl of Strathmore, Lord Ravensworth. My noble friends, ladies and gentlemen! Phwah.

Now, you all know me: George Hudson. Honest George. He-he-he! Started out a draper's assistant, and by dint of hard work I'm the man they now call The Railway King! Wiff-waff.

Today we have seen a dream come true, the linking of the Thames with the mighty River Tyne. We-hey! Indeed, some of you have just ridden the Grand Opening Train on the final link in that chain.

Plus, I have in my hand here, advance copies of tomorrow morning's newspapers (*holding them aloft*) which arrived by train from Euston – a distance of 303 miles - in a time of eight hours and eleven minutes, representing an average speed of *thirty-seven miles an hour*! Phufwah. A speed unimaginable just a few years ago.

And all of this thanks to my good friend here - my very good friend – Mr George Stephenson!

HUDSON leads the applause, then stands aside. GEORGE STEPHENSON appears. GEORGE, aged 63, is still a lively, energetic man, with a quick mind. But he has never gotten used to public speaking, and looks uncomfortable in these grand surroundings. He has retained his strong local accent.

GEORGE Thank you for those kind words. Mr Hudson. Ladies and gentlemen. I have written down - a few words – er -

GEORGE takes a piece of paper from his pocket. He stares at the words but they seem to offer no comfort. Eventually he casts the paper aside.

Look, I'm no good at this sort of thing. I'm used to working with me hands, grubbing about in oily, wet engine houses. This place – the Assembly Rooms - and all you grand folk in your finery – I'd rather be grappling with a broken crankshaft at the bottom of a pit than making me mouth gan in front of you lot. *(realising this sounds ungrateful)* No disrespect, like. Erm. *(to himself)* Oh, Lord above!

(He breaks off to take a gulp of water.)

What I'm trying to say is, I've never mastered words. But give me a broken clock or a pump that's not doing its job right, and I can take it apart and more than likely fix it for you.

I've always had a – facility that way. I once built a clockwork scarecrow that stood in the garden. When you set it away it would flail its arms about like a windmill to scare the birds. *(with a chuckle)* Scared the neighbours an' all! And I fashioned another contraption – it was worked off the updraught from the fire – to rock a babby's cradle. Damn near rocked that babby into the middle of next week! He-he-he-he-he! *(pause)* Where was I?

GEORGE freezes. ROBERT STEPHENSON appears. ROBERT is 41. (Sometimes ROBERT is his mature self, and sometimes he is his earlier selves.) He has his father's intelligence, but is quieter and not so robust. Unlike his self-taught father, his grown-up self is educated, well-spoken, and doesn't have GEORGE's arrogant, combative nature.

ROBERT *(to audience)* This is my father. One of the most brilliant men who ever lived. And also one of the most awkward, pig-headed, contrary beings you could ever have the misfortune to stumble across. Come with me.

The lighting changes. We have gone back in time. It is 1815 and ROBERT is now aged twelve.

ROBERT This is our cottage, where we lived, at Wylam,
Northumberland, way back then.

ELEANOR STEPHENSON enters, GEORGE's unmarried sister, three years his junior.

ROBERT And this is my Auntie Eleanor, Dad's sister. She brought me up.

ELEANOR gives ROBERT a hug.

GEORGE Ah, Robert! How are you gettin' on at that school?

ROBERT Oh, I'm really liking it, Dad. (*shyly*) And there's this girl that sits opposite, and I think she –

GEORGE (*interrupting*) Yeah, well, never mind about that. The world's never looked up to anybody that came out of Tommy Rutter's school in Longbenton. I've got you into Dr Bruce's Academy in the Town.

ELEANOR Dr Bruce's?

GEORGE Aye, and a pretty penny it's costing us. Not that I begrudge it. You get what you pay for in this world.

ROBERT But, Dad, I'm happy where I am.

GEORGE No you're not. Dr Bruce's is where the sons of gentlemen gan to get a proper education. And just look at that prospectus!
(*producing it*)

ELEANOR (*inspecting it - impressed*) Coat of arms and everything.

GEORGE (*squinting at the text*) Yeah. I just wish I could read it meself.

ROBERT Are *you* a gentleman, Dad?

GEORGE Me? Ha-ha! Not likely.

ELEANOR But he's got a bit of money, so he figures he's halfway there.

GEORGE Hey, less of your sark.

ROBERT But, Dad. How am I gonna get there?

GEORGE (*correcting him*) I've telt you before, man. You're not *gannen*.

ROBERT (*confused*) What?

GEORGE You're not *gannen*. You are *going*. Say after me, 'I am going'. Gan on!

ROBERT I am going.

GEORGE Good lad! You're gonna have to fit in with them toffs. And diven't tak any shite off them! You're as good as anybody, and you're my son, so you're better than most.

ELEANOR George! That's no place for our Bobby.

GEORGE Yes it is! Have to get him some decent clothes, of course. Canna gan about in big hobnail byeuts among them swanky types.

ELEANOR But it's ten miles to Percy Street! It's far too far to walk. He's only twelve.

GEORGE Rubbish! At his age, I thought nowt of walking ten miles. Do you remember I walked to Scotland for a job that time?

ELEANOR (*wearily*) Yes.

GEORGE And then, when me Dad got scalded and blinded in that accident, I walked all the way back again.

ELEANOR Yes. Many times. But Robert isn't like you. He's more – delicate.

GEORGE *(reluctantly)* Yes, there's no getting away from it, I suppose.

ELEANOR So, can we please forget about Dr Bruce's?

GEORGE No! I'm going to make a gentleman of him, and that's final.
(thinking) I know! I'll get him a donkey.

ELEANOR A donkey!

GEORGE Aye. It's all extra expense, but needs must and all that. What
do you say, son? No walking for you: you'll arrive in style.
And I know someone who's sellin' a donkey!

GEORGE abruptly exits.

ELEANOR But, George -!

ELEANOR exits after him.

ROBERT *(to audience)* So, on my first day at Dr Bruce's Academy, I
arrived like Jesus, on a donkey. Only they weren't cheering
and scattering palm fronds in *my* path.

*The lighting now suggests we are outdoors. A POSH BULLY enters and
circles ROBERT threateningly.*

BULLY I say, what have we here? What's your name, boy?

ROBERT Me name's Robert.

BULLY *(mimicking)* 'Me name's Robert.' I do believe I detect the
tones of the midden and the gutter. Well, Robert, let me
welcome you to the Academy.

ROBERT Erm – thank you.

BULLY And, of course, I must stamp your passport.

ROBERT Me passport? Nebody said nowt about a passport.

BULLY But it's essential.

ROBERT Essential?

BULLY Yes, to give a flavour of the coming years before you.

BULLY gives ROBERT a punch in the face.

ROBERT Owww!

BULLY exits laughing.

ROBERT *(to audience)* And my passport got regularly stamped from then on. But eventually I learned to fit in, lose my accent and learn their ways. And I learned some Latin and a little Mathematics. But mostly I just learned how to be a gentleman.

ROBERT strikes a mock-gentlemanly pose, then drops it in disgust. The lighting now suggests we are indoors again.

ROBERT My Dad was very keen on my education. Partly for me, but also for himself.

GEORGE Robert, read that to me again.

ROBERT *(producing a book and reading)* 'The square on the hypotenuse -'

GEORGE The *what* on the *what*?

ROBERT Look at the sketch, Dad. *(pointing)* You see, *that* – and *that* – are always in relationship to *that*. For that kind of triangle.

GEORGE Really? That's amazing. Who thought of that?

ROBERT A man called Pythagoras. I think he was Greek.

GEORGE Well, I didn't suppose he was from Killingworth.

ROBERT (to audience) And our joint education came on in leaps and bounds. Especially when I started borrowing books from the Literary and Philosophical Society.

GEORGE What have you got this time?

ROBERT produces another book.

GEORGE (struggling to read the title) 'New towns -?'

ROBERT (correcting) 'Newton's. Newton's Principia.' That's Isaac Newton. It's all about the laws of motion.

GEORGE Ahh! Motion. You know I'm working on a *perpetual* motion machine, don't you? I'm having some problems, so this might be the solution.

ROBERT Mr Newton says you can't have perpetual motion. Says there's always some energy that - gets lost.

GEORGE Ah, what does he know! Bloody theorists and academics. I bet he niver got his hands mucky.

ROBERT (to audience) This was always my Dad's default attitude. He craved Education, and at the same time despised those who studied to get it, preferring to work things out for himself by trial and experiment. And he certainly wasn't afraid to get his hands mucky.

The lighting changes and ROBERT and GEORGE are now at the bottom of a gloomy, noisy pit shaft. There is the regular clanking of a pumping engine.

GEORGE See here, Bobby. This engine is supposed to be pumping watter out of the mine. But – look down there - the watter is plainly winnin'.

A weary ENGINEMAN appears, wiping his hands on an oily rag.

E/MAN It's knackered. (registering a stranger) Not that it's anything to do with *you*, like! You're not from this pit.

GEORGE You're right, I'm from West Moor. I knaw summat about engines, though.

E/MAN *(becoming aggressive)* Are you saying I don't, like?

ROBERT *(intervening)* My Dad's just – trying to be helpful.

E/MAN Oh, aye? *(turning away - muttering)* Well, he could help by pissin' off back to his arn pit.

ENGINEMAN exits.

GEORGE I'll show that clown. *(to ROBERT)* Here, get a had of that spanner.

ROBERT obediently picks up the heavy spanner as GEORGE inspects the notional engine.

GEORGE Now, as I see it, the main problem is this inlet here, which is way too small. So, if we swap this for a bigger one, and adjust this crank here – It'll have to be turned off, of course.

GEORGE pulls a lever. The machine abruptly falls silent. The now very angry ENGINEMAN reappears.

E/MAN What the hell do you think you're doing! This is *my* machine!

GEORGE Aye, and it's a right pile of shite with *you* in charge of it.

E/MAN What!? I'll knock your block off, pal!

GEORGE Oh, you will, will you?!

GEORGE and the ENGINEMAN square up to one another.

ROBERT *(to audience)* Oh dear. My father was not averse to a little – conflict. *(intervening)* Please! If you would just allow my father a day with your engine, I think we all might benefit.

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E/MAN A *day*! Do you not realise, every *minute* that thing isn't working, the Company wastes a fortune in idle men and lost production?

ROBERT Half a day, then?

GEORGE Plus, if I fail to get this working better, I'll give you a fiver out of me arn pocket.

E/MAN A fiver? Promise?

GEORGE and the ENGINEMAN shake on the deal.

E/MAN You've got half a day, starting *now*. (*to ROBERT*) Your dad's a nutter, son.

ENGINEMAN exits. GEORGE now sets about the notional engine.

ROBERT (*to audience*) I would concur with that.

END OF SAMPLE SCRIPT

Note: *Steam* is paired with *The Red Trail*.
£8.99 for the two plays.