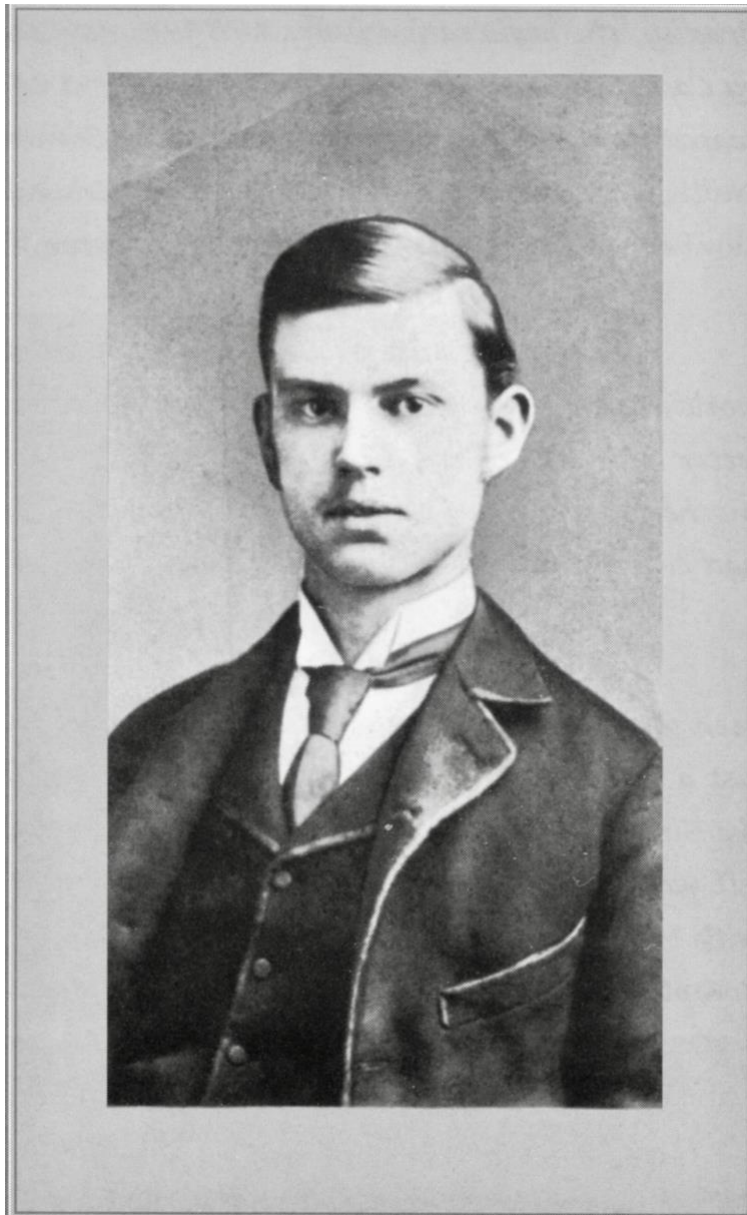


IN THE  
REAR-VIEW MIRROR

SIR HENRY ROYCE  
THE EARLY YEARS 1863-1877



*Frederick Henry Royce pictured here in about 1880 during or just after his days as a railway apprentice.*

Neville Minchin, a friend of Henry Royce, wrote the story of Rolls-Royce from the point of view of a Silver Ghost in 'The Silver Lady', published in 1961.

"Once upon a time there lived a flour miller in Peterborough. His name was Royce and he had a son called Henry.... The fortunes of the mill declined steadily and on the death of his father, young Henry, aged ten, was obliged to go out into the world in the hope of earning a living...."

Minchin's account of young Henry's early years is told with the quaintness of a folk-tale for his literary purposes. In fact, Royce experienced abject hardship as a youth. The very title, 'The hardest of times: Royce's early years', by Tom Clarke and Maurice Richardson in 'The Roycean', 2012, points to the calamities young Henry and his family faced.

"James and Mary Royce had five children....The fifth, Frederick Henry Royce, was born on 27 March 1863 at the mill house in Alwalton.... The agricultural depression took hold from the 1870s, small-scale milling had become less viable and James Royce's indebted milling and cereal trading business finally collapsed in late 1866, not long after his own father's bankruptcy.... The serious illness that James also suffered from (believed to be Hodgkin's) could have played a part in James not being able to cope.... The 'London Gazette' for 26 February 1867 gave details of the bankruptcy case... against James Royce.... The family now fell on very hard times and had to leave the mill and their home near it, forced to live apart to make ends meet. Young Henry's mother and his three older sisters went into lodgings in Alwalton."

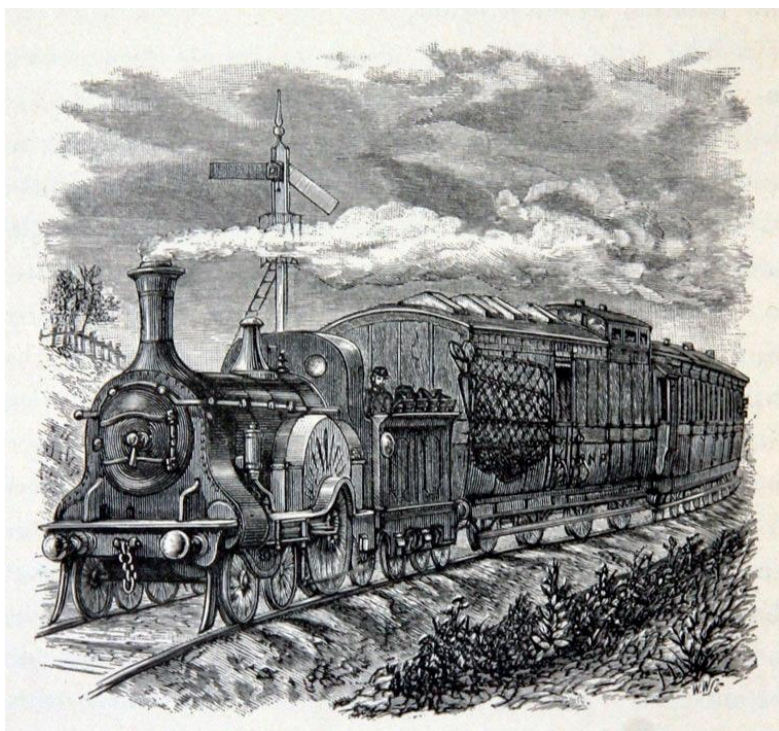
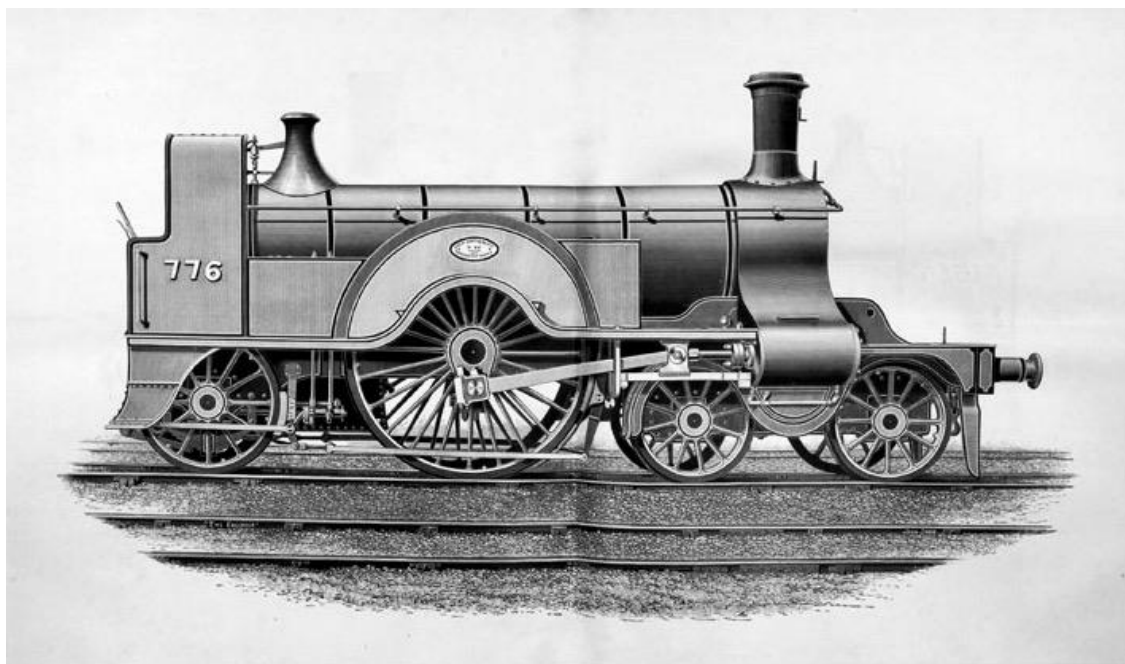
"Meanwhile, James Royce had taken his eldest son James Allen, and young Henry, to London to begin work for London Flour. What the boys, now 10 and 4, did whilst James worked is not clear and it is unlikely education could be afforded.... [James's] final misfortunes began. The 'Morning Post' for 15 January 1868 revealed that 'James Royce' had been arrested on the charge of fraud.... He was charged with obtaining under false pretences a suit of boy's clothes... and cash, from the Commercial Clothing emporium.... There was a strong recommendation for mercy from the jury, but the judge sentenced him to four months hard labour.... Visits to their father in prison would have been a daunting experience for the pair."

"Sadly, and unexpectedly, on 22 July 1872 he [James] died.... The newly widowed Mary came to London and placed Henry as a lodger with a London cowman and his wife.... In 1873 young Henry had work selling newspapers for W. H. Smith & Sons at Clapham and Bishopsgate railway stations not far from the City of London. At the age of 11 in 1874, presumably now living near his mother in Croydon, he was able to have a further year of education.... Young Henry had lost his father about three years earlier, had periods without his mother whilst she was working in other people's houses, and he was alone a lot of the time whilst James Jr. was fully involved with work as a servant or waiter. All of these misfortunes must have weighed heavily on such young shoulders."

“During 1876-77, with his mother now in Kent, work revived young Henry’s spirits and he began a new job delivering telegrams from the Mayfair post office in central London, aged only 13-14, but how or where he lived is not known.... With only a year of education in between jobs his total school years came to three!”

“He told a friend in later life that his aim in these early years had been to become a mechanic. This period ended with young Henry lodged in Peterborough.... It was by being in the great railway town of Peterborough that young Henry found a new opportunity on the doorstep.”

“Royce’s true lucky break came when he began work at the Great Northern Railway’s ‘New England’ locomotive works in September 1877, aged 14.”



*This Great Northern Railway Express Locomotive above and the Great Northern Mail on the left would have been familiar to young Henry Royce.*

*[Grace’s Guide to British Industrial History]*

Postscript: Harold Nockolds in 'The Magic of a Name' noted a narrow escape for the infant Henry and a wry assessment of his father that we can now appreciate in context, "At an early age of two he gave an indication of his interest in mechanics by displaying an overwhelming desire to see how the wheels of the mill went round. The result was a fall into the boiling waters of the mill-race and a narrow escape from death by drowning. His father fished him out before he went down for the third time, thereby performing one of the most useful acts of a somewhat unsuccessful life."

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