READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MODEL TRACTION ENGINE H189/A

This is a model of a traction engine. A traction engine is an early piece of machinery that runs on steam power. They were used to move heavy loads or to provide power. The earliest moving steam engine is thought to have been invented in Paris by Nicolas Cugnot. He demonstrated a steam-powered engine that could be used to move heavy equipment in 1769. However, it was not until the 1840s that the use of steam engines became popular.

One of their main uses was in farming. Previously farmers had been reliant on animals such as horses, oxen and mules to transport things, work the land and power machinery. However, farming with animals required a lot of work. Animals had to be looked after, fed, and provided with rest, otherwise they would be no good at carrying out tasks. These machines reduced some of the workload and replaced some of the horsepower. They could be used in place of horses to transport heavy goods and equipment and their engines could also be used to power farming machinery, such as threshers, which separated the wheat from the chaff and stalks. However, steam traction engines were very expensive and most farmers did not own their own machine, instead they were often jointly owned by a group of farmers. They could also be dangerous, sometimes the sparks from the engines could set fire to the straw, and there were also incidents of boilers exploding.

Another common use of traction engines was hauling loads along the highways. Goods such as timber were sometimes transported in this way on 'road trains', groups of several wagons attached to and pulled by the traction engine. Travelling showmen also used the engines to tow their fairground equipment and power it up. They would have made slow progress however, as the engines often only travelled at a few miles an hour.

Steam lorries and diesel powered engines later replaced traction. However, some enthusiasts continue to preserve these vehicles and exhibit them at agricultural shows and steam fairs.



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