

Smeaton's Scots legacy

JOHN SMEATON'S achievements in Scotland were acclaimed by Panel for Historical Engineering Works chairman Roland Paxton in a lecture after the ICE's annual general meeting last week.

Scotland accounted for some 25-40% of Smeaton's prodigious work output said Paxton. More than 50 of his schemes have been identified, and at least 10 still give useful service two centuries after Smeaton's death.

Paxton said that Scotland is fortunate to possess both the greatest canal and largest bridge built by Smeaton – the Forth & Clyde ship canal and Perth bridge.

Paxton accompanied the lecture with some texts of the time.

One is a previously unpublished letter about the Forth & Clyde, written by Smeaton to the agent to the canal's proprietors in Edinburgh. It shows just how much communications have improved, spelling out the painstaking arrangements made by Smeaton to arrange safe delivery of bulky plans. Notices in inns called for anyone willing to take the plans to Edinburgh, for a fee.

On the other hand, much is still recognisable in excerpts from Smeaton's letters on the duties of committees and engineers on public works. 'The great difficulty is to keep committees from doing either too little, or too much; too little when any case of difficulty starts, and too much when there is none' says one part.

The greatest difficulty of all is to get a proper person for the Resident Engineer, the paper adds. 'Practical knowledge in mechanics is not the only thing wanted to equip a man fully, for this employment requires so great a number of qualifications that I look upon it as impractical to find them united in one person.'