Robert William Thomson Biography

Robert William Thomson

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Contents

Robert William Thomson Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Born at Stonehaven, Kincardineshire, Scotland, in 1822, Robert Thomson was sent to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1836 to train as a merchant. Thomson's interests lay elsewhere, however, and when he returned to Scotland he began a program of self-education in engineering and science. During a stay in London in 1841, Michael Faraday encouraged young Thomson, who worked in blasting operations and as a railway engineer.

The problem of cushioning horse-drawn carriages from shock and vibration began to interest Thomson. In 1845 he patented his improvement over the steel tires of the day: a rubber tube filled with air inside a leather protective cover. This was the world's first pneumatic tire. A set of Thomson's " Aerial Wheels" was fitted to a carriage and tested very successfully, running 1,200 miles (1,930 km). Thomson's tires did not catch on, however, and the idea died until John Boyd Dunlop reinvented pneumatics in 1888.

Thomson went on to design and invent many other items. He patented a fountain pen in 1849. He greatly improved sugar-manufacturing machinery during his years in Java from 1852 to 1862, after which he resettled in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 1865 he patented improvements to steam boilers and in 1866 to steam gauges. From 1867 through 1873, Thomson was granted various patents for a very successful traction-engined road-steamer. He died in Edinburgh in 1873.