

# Gibb, Sir George Stegmann

(1850–1925)

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/45711>

**Published in print:** 23 September 2004

**Published online:** 23 September 2004

**This version:** 03 January 2008

**Gibb, Sir George Stegmann** (1850–1925), railway company manager, was born on 30 April 1850 in Aberdeen, the youngest son in a family of seven children of Alexander Gibb (1804–1867), builder and engineer, and his wife, Margaret Smith, daughter of a Balmoral architect. Gibb's grandfather, John Gibb (1776–1850), was a civil engineer who worked with Telford and specialized in harbour construction and river engineering. His nephew Sir Alexander Gibb was the founder of a well-known firm of consulting engineers that carried his name (Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners).

Educated locally at Aberdeen grammar school and at the university of that city, Gibb chose the law as his profession and qualified as an LLB of London University. After serving as a clerk in a shipowner's office and in a maritime insurance office, he was articled to a solicitor in 1872. In 1877 he joined the Great Western Railway for three years as an assistant in the solicitor's office. He left this job to practise on his own account in London in 1880. In the following year Gibb married Dorothea Garrett Smith (1860–1949), the nineteen-year-old daughter of an artist, James William Smith, and his wife, the suffragist Louisa Garrett Smith; they had four sons and one daughter.

An election agent to the Liberal candidates for Hackney in the general election of 1880, in 1882 Gibb joined the North Eastern Railway (NER) as solicitor at an annual salary of £2000. He quickly established himself as an able assistant and adviser to the general manager, Henry Tennant, whom he succeeded in 1891 at an annual salary of £3000.

Gibb took over the reins at York at a time when diminishing returns were causing general concern in the industry, and a programme of legislation, generally considered harmful to the industry's freedom of manoeuvre in the area of railway rates, was being pushed through parliament. At the same time, railway trade unionism was expanding and the hours of work of railway labour receiving statutory attention. Over the next decade, he responded positively to the problem, changing the NER from a relatively successful if somewhat staid railway into an exemplar of advanced managerial practice, allegedly signifying

his independence of mind by wearing a tweed suit to the office. Among his early and most enduring reforms was the establishment of a traffic apprenticeship scheme involving the recruitment of bright young men from the universities and the business world, such as R. L. Wedgwood and E. C. Geddes. He promoted them quickly into responsible positions in the traffic department, where Gibb needed to break the forces of conservatism and get new methods working.

Concerned by escalating operating costs, Gibb also set in motion a detailed appraisal of operating methods, organization, and information systems, and between 1900 and 1902 radically altered the company's approach in all three areas. Officers, including himself, visited America to study how things were done. He, and the contemporary statistician Sir George Paish, also joined forces to pioneer and promulgate the use of new statistical concepts for operational measurement, control, and efficiency. A traffic statistics office was set up at York under another Gibb recruit, C. P. Mossop. The office attracted officials of nearly all the large British railways as well as others from America and India. The decline in operating efficiency, especially in the management of freight, was reversed and the NER established as the managerial pace setter of the time in the British railway world.

Under Gibb's innovating and vigorous management, the company became the first main-line railway to electrify a part of its system. It also challenged orthodoxy by developing advanced systems of collective bargaining, and turning—controversially—on several occasions to the use of independent arbitration to settle disputes and pay claims. Gibb's fame spread. He served on the War Office committee of reorganization in 1901 and on the royal commission on London's transport from 1903 to 1905, for which service he was knighted.

Gibb's outstanding period of executive service with the NER ended in December 1905, when he accepted an offer, facilitated by Sir George Paish, to become deputy chairman and managing director of the Underground Electric Railway Company of London (UERL), and chairman and managing director of one of its operating units, the Metropolitan and District Railway. The salary was £8000, an increase of £3000 on what he was being paid at York. Having lost his services as general manager, the NER elected him to its board as a non-executive director.

Gibb left the NER a profitable, efficient company well positioned to benefit from the upswing in trade of 1906–14 and superbly resourced with younger managers capable of running the railway for a generation and beyond. He joined an organization close to bankruptcy and with an unsound business strategy. His reaction was to commission a searching examination of its business. He pushed ahead with changes in pricing policy, closer integration of the activities of different operating units, and restriction of competition with other suppliers. Supported by an injection of youthful managerial talent from the NER and from the USA, the UERL companies made financial progress and bankruptcy was

avoided. His public image at this time was of a courtly official of great capacity and considerable charm, although behind the scenes he was at times depressive.

In May 1910 at the age of sixty, Gibb exchanged his onerous responsibilities for the underground, as well as his directorship of the NER, for the chairmanship of the newly formed road board, at a considerably reduced salary of £3000 per annum. However, in civil service terms the pay was high (the head of the civil service received at the time £2500), and was necessary, the Treasury was told, to get 'a good man'.

Gibb's chairmanship of the road board was controversial. Its establishment had been sanctioned in 1909 as a response to the need to develop an effective road system in an age of expanding motorized transport. It was given powers to finance improvements to existing roads and to build new ones. Over 90 per cent of the moneys disbursed in its lifetime were for the former purpose. While this solved the 'dust problem', the concentration on improvement rather than network development, and the fact that the board's chairman was a former railway magnate, led to the feeling that the railway interest had captured it and prevented the building of new roads that would compete with railways. While he was defended for 'holding back' on arterial road development until research on the structure of modern road surfaces was undertaken in depth, the board was unpopular, too, because of its lack of direct accountability to parliament and the Treasury's dislike of its financial foundations, which flew in the face of established practice. With the creation in 1919 of the Ministry of Transport, it lapsed.

Although remaining road board chairman throughout the First World War, Gibb also served on the army council and as a member (and later chairman) of the government committee on production from 1915 to 1918. He was also a member of the Pacific cable board from 1914 to 1918. By late 1918, proposals for legislative reorganization of the railways caused the NER board to appoint him an adviser on their relationships with government, and on the impending amalgamations. On 1 January 1919 he was appointed at a fee of £3000 per annum, and the relationship lasted until 1922, when the new shape of the industry emerged. A short period as chairman of the Oriental Telephone Company completed his business life.

Gibb's vigorous management of the NER and his involvement in the railway reform movement around 1900 has left him an assured place in transport history. The virile organization he built at the NER proved an excellent training ground for some outstanding young railway administrators, and the management recruitment, information, and control techniques he implemented pointed the direction in which Edwardian railways needed to move to retain their edge. An independent personality, Gibb's readiness to learn from and adapt aspects of American operating practice to the British situation, as well as to promote them in the face of contemporary scepticism, was notable.

Gibb died at his home, South Corner, Alan Road, Wimbledon, Surrey, on 17 December 1925.

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## Wealth at Death

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### See also

Gibb, John (1776–1850), civil engineer and contractor

Gibb, Sir Alexander (1872–1958), civil engineer

### More on this topic

Gibb, Sir George Stegmann, (30 April 1850–17 Dec. 1925), Chairman Oriental Telephone Co. Ltd <http://ukwhoswho.com/view/10.1093/ww/9780199540891.001.0001/ww-9780199540884-e-196842> in Who Was Who <http://ukwhoswho.com>

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Subscriber: Royal Bor.of Kensington and Chelsea; date: 29 July 2020