



DON'T SAY WATT SAY PARDON!

BY DAVID LOWE

The modern steam engine was invented by a British engineer James Watt. According to legend, Watt was sitting in his kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil while his wife was busy ironing, washing the children, darning his socks, bringing in the coal for the stove.

James Watt was rather curious by nature "Watt" is homophone with "what". Monsieur Quoi would be the French equivalent. Watt! What? Watt! What? Watt sat there and observed the boiling water, the steam futilely escaping from the kettle and his wife "unfutilely" working away in the background – on the one hand energy wasted, on the other energy spent.

Lazily, slouched in his chair, the idea of latent heat came quite naturally to Watt, a concept which enabled the steam engine to become commercially viable. In a word, without actually inventing the refrigerator, Watt removed the refrigerating effect of condensing water from the steam engine. He took the kettle out of the fridge. The British Empire was born in this kitchen. Indians would learn to play cricket and apologize when somebody steps on their toes. African tribes would, mid-afternoon, take a pause from massacring each other to have tea.

Of course the Industrial Revolution could never have started in France because the French didn't have the tradition of drinking tea – kettles didn't arrive here until (look it up... not me, you!).

When a Frenchman sees bubbles rising to the surface of a liquid, he thinks champagne and fun, not steam engines – you can't make an Industrial Revolution with grapes. You can't make a bicycle with tripes de Caen. You can't make an external combustion engine with a camembert and a baguette. A Paris-Brest won't even get you to Chartres.

The Industrial Revolution for the English was something sublime and sensual, a huge relief. The steam engine with its double rigid piston shafts sliding rhythmically in and out, spewing puffs of white smoke with a hiss of exalted relief. A frenzy of power and desire and thermodynamics. Sweaty men frantically shoveling what it takes in coal to satisfy a hole in which an ardent fire burns. When an Englishman had to choose between à voile or à vapeur, his choice was clear.

The Industrial Revolution was the climax of two thousand years of sexual repression. A burst of creative energy, that made the earth move, made us feel good, at one with ourselves and the universe.

Good, good, good, good, GOOD technology! Hitchcock – thoroughly English, repressed by his very name ("hitch cock", i.e. something you'd do to the sensitive parts of an overexcited bull in a field full of nubile cows) summed it all up when Cary Grant (another Englishman) has the consummation of his relationship with Eva Marie Saint sublimed by the last shot of the film *North by Northwest*. The train penetrates into the tunnel billowing white smoke, a sort of ethereal version of something that when shown literally is pornography. So as your TGV speeds along spare a thought for Mrs James Watt and her household chores. Mrs James Watt being just a metaphor for your wives, husbands, mothers, home helps or whatever, left at home to look after the kids, the dog, the emails, a work infinitely more difficult and stressful than sitting on your arses in a train reading *TGV magazine*. Bon voyage.

