

Imagine that you are preparing a project with your friend. You have found some interesting material for the presentation and you want to read this text to your friend. You have 1.5 minutes to read the text silently, then be ready to read it out aloud. You will not have more than 1.5 minutes to read it.

Who invented the steam engine? Heron from Egypt. Heron lived in Alexandria and is best known as a mathematician and geometer. Unfortunately for Heron, no one was able to see its practical function, so it was considered nothing more than an amusing novelty. Amazingly, had Heron but known it, the railway had already been invented 700 years earlier.

The principle of railways was then completely forgotten about for almost another 500 years, until people had the idea of using them in mines in the fourteenth century. The historian Arnold Toynbee wrote a brilliant essay speculating what would have happened if the two inventions had been combined to create a global Greek empire, based on a fast rail network. Heron also invented the vending machine — for four drachmas you got a shot of holy water — and a portable device to ensure that no one else could drink the wine you brought along to a bottle party.