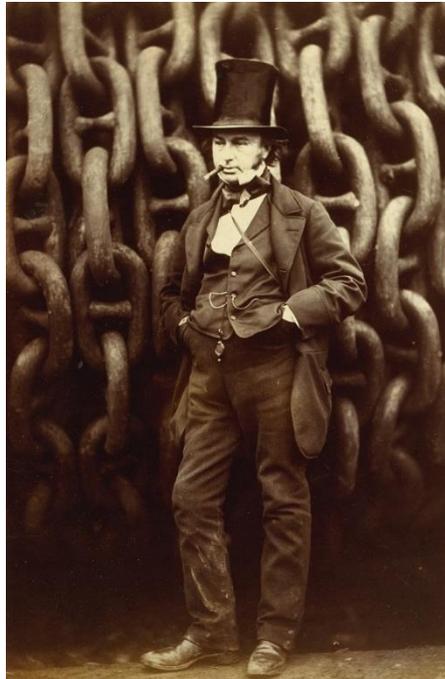




Who was Brunel?



Robert Howlett (British, 1831–1858) - [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

'The man with the greatest originality of thought and power of execution, bold in his plans but right'.

Daniel Gooch, 1859

Isambard Kingdom Brunel was born in Portsmouth, 9 April 1806. His father was Marc Isambard Brunel, a French engineer, and his English mother was Sophia Kingdom. His personal motto was 'En Avant' (Forward).

Brunel learnt a lot from his father and worked for several years on the Thames Tunnel project as an assistant engineer under his father. It was only in 1831, when Brunel was 24 years old, that he took on the first project of his own – the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

In his lifetime, Brunel constructed nearly 1,200 miles of rail; including tracks in Ireland, Italy and Bengal, with all the associated tunnels, bridges and roads. He took maritime engineering into another era and helped to create and inspire the innovative land and sea transport networks that carried the Industrial Revolution, not only around Britain but around the world, opening up global travel and communications.

At only just over 5 feet tall, Brunel was worried he would not be taken seriously because of his height and often tried to appear taller by sitting up straight (especially when riding his horse) and by wearing a very tall hat! It is estimated that the hat was 8 inches in height.

'My self-conceit and love of glory or rather approbation vie with each other which shall Govern me. The latter is so strong that even of a dark night riding home when I pass some unknown person who perhaps does not even look at me I catch myself trying to look big on my little pony...I often do the most silly useless things to appear to advantage before or attract the attention of those I shall never see again or whom I care nothing about.'

Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

We think Brunel was quite a chaotic worker – he mentions often in his diaries a strong desire to feel more organised. He was an excellent mathematician and his measurements were so detailed that his maths is probably the reason many of his projects are still standing today, like the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

He always wanted to be recognised as the best and be respected but he also wanted to influence future engineers and leave a legacy. Despite this ambition and striving for fame, he was still a man dedicated and in love with his craft. He described the Bridge as his *'First child, his darling'*.



'I remember with singular distinctiveness the first time I ever saw him, when I was a lad of fourteen....he criticised with great keenness and judgement a drawing I had with me, and at the same time gave me a lesson on paper straining. From that time till his death he was my most intimate friend. Being naturally imbued with artistic taste and perception of a very high order, his critical remarks were always of great value and were made with an amount of good humour which softened their occasionally somewhat trying pungency. He had a remarkably accurate eye for proportion, as well as taste for form, This evinced in every line to be found in his sketch books, and in the architectural features of his various works.'

Those who remember the gradual arrangement and fitting up of his house in Duke Street will want no assurance from me of your father's rare artistic feeling. He passed, I believe, the pleasantest of his leisure moments in decorating that house, and well do I remember our visits in search of rare furniture, china, bronzes etc with which he filled it, till it became one of the most remarkable and attractive houses in London'

John Callcott Horsley (brother in law to IK Brunel), 1870

As well as the Clifton Suspension Bridge there are six other sites to see in Bristol to learn a little more about Brunel and see his achievements.

1. Great Western Railway Temple Meads Terminus

The Passenger Shed, Station Approach, Bristol, BS1 6QH

Brunel's Grade I listed Victorian passenger shed and its façade now sit adjacent to Temple Meads station. They are used as a conference and venue hire space and are not regularly open to the public.

www.brunels-old-station.co.uk

2. Underfall Yard and Sluice gates

Cumberland Road, Bristol, BS16XG

Now owned by the Underfall Boatyard Trust, these Victorian works are a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The Underfall Yard is a working boatyard and can be visited by the public.

www.underfallboatyard.co.uk

3. Tubular Swivel Bridge

Cumberland Basin

No longer in use, Brunel's swivel bridge sits at the far end of the city's docks. A replica bridge is in place and work is underway to complete essential work to conserve the original bridge.

www.brunelsotherbridge.org.uk

4. Royal Western Hotel (now Brunel House)

St. George's Street, Bristol, BS99 2AW

Built as a hotel for rail passengers waiting to catch the ss Great Western to the USA, this building is now home to Bristol City Council Offices and is not open to the public. The façade has hardly changed since it was built.

5. SS Great Western

M Shed, Princes Wharf, Wapping Rd, Bristol BS1 4RN

The ss Great Western was constructed and the hull launched from Patterson's Shipyard, where the M-Shed is now situated. The Great Western was broken up in 1856 after serving as a passenger ship, steam packet post ship and a troop ship.

www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/m-shed

6. SS Great Britain and Being Brunel Museum

Great Western Dockyard, Gas Ferry Rd, Bristol BS1 6TY

The ship has been restored and conserved and is open to the public as part of an award-winning heritage site and museum.

www.ssgreatbritain.org