

Tunnel No. 1
at ...

Bath and Great Western Railway – An Exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, November 2013 to February 2014

Katharine Wall

Bath and the Great Western Railway may seem to be an unlikely subject for an exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery. Railways and art may not appear to be obvious or particularly happy bedfellows. However, the Great Western Railway has inspired a surprisingly large number of works of art. Among the Gallery's collection are many items that document the beginnings of Brunel's famous railway: the blasting of tunnels, laying of tracks, building of bridges and clearing of land for the railway provided artists with new and enticing subject matter and thus plenty of material for an exhibition celebrating the railway and its appearance in paintings, drawings, prints and posters.

The building of the Great Western Railway during the 1830s was the biggest and most transformative engineering project that had ever taken place in southern England. It is hardly surprising that artists were enthusiastic about recording it. As a result, alongside colourful posters from the 1930s, exhorting people to 'visit Bath - the Georgian City' the Victoria Art Gallery holds a wide variety of works of art showing Bath in the period when the railway was built. These include sketches recording the city just before construction began, drawings of works carried out to lay tracks and blast tunnels and John Cooke Bourne's monumental series of prints from the 1840s documenting the great engineering marvels of the GWR's construction. In the exhibition, alongside these works the Gallery displayed the most famous Victorian painting relating to the railways, William Powell Frith's *The Railway Station*, an iconic view of the newly-built Paddington Station with its crowd of passengers waiting to travel westwards to Bath and beyond.

Curiously, the Victoria Art Gallery occupies its site on Bridge Street thanks largely to the success of the Great Western Railway in killing off the coach trade, the previous method of mass transport. As one would expect for a major Georgian tourist destination, Bath was served by dozens of coach services every day in the decades before the railways opened. Travellers departed to and arrived from a wide variety of destinations up and down the country, including Bristol, Birmingham, London, and Plymouth. Georgian Bath was so well connected that it even had a direct coach service to Paris, which set off from the Royal York Hotel three times a week. People with enough money could go anywhere – although they did not travel in luxury. Coach journeys were tedious, time consuming and bone-shakingly uncomfortable. The non-stop mailcoach to London, for example, was the fastest and most efficient service, setting off at 11pm from Stall Street and arriving in London the following evening; an excruciating journey of almost twenty four hours, with only brief stops for refreshments and changes of horses. The passenger fare for this unpleasant journey was one pound and eight shillings, equivalent to around £70 (the price of an Off Peak Bath to London Return train ticket) in 2015. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of Bath's largest and best known coaching inns was the White Lion on the corner of Bridge Street and the High Street. One of many such inns in Bath, the White Lion was not just an hotel; it was also a transport hub, with numerous coach services departing and arriving outside. After arduous coach journeys, new arrivals in

fig. 1: Tunnel number One on the Great Western Railway, by William Dighton, pencil and charcoal drawing, 1838

Bath would often spend their first night or two at their point of arrival. The White Lion, like the rest of the city's coaching inns, had a ready-made customer base. After the Great Western Railway opened, the coaching business inevitably began to die. The White Lion entered a period of slow decline, with fewer customers, decreasing profits and an increasingly shabby appearance. The failing hotel was demolished in 1891 to make way for the Guildhall's north extension housing the Victoria Art Gallery and Bath's new Library.

The primary motivation behind the creation of the Great Western Railway was commerce rather than tourism. In the early 1830s, businessmen in Bristol began working on plans for a railway connecting the city to London, via Bath and Reading. Bristol's rival port Liverpool already had its own Liverpool to Manchester Railway. This, the first passenger railway in Britain, had opened in 1830. Bristol businessmen were worried that without improving transport links inland, their city would lose out to Liverpool on the lucrative transatlantic trade. In 1833, a company was formed to build a railway from Bristol to London. The new railway for southern England was not a public sector project - it was set up by businessmen and planned very much with their interests in mind, the transport of goods being far more important than mere tourism. There was no expectation that the masses of the population would ever need or want to travel across the country and little idea of rail travel's potential to change people's lives.

The new Great Western Railway Company, as it was called, appointed the young and exceptionally talented Isambard Kingdom Brunel to the post of engineer. Well-known in Bristol, Brunel had in 1831 designed the (then still unbuilt) Clifton Suspension Bridge and worked on improvements to the city's harbour. The Company provided the investment funds, but it was Brunel's responsibility to plan the railway's route from London to Bristol in detail, design the station buildings, the bridges, viaducts and tunnels needed to make a level route and to appoint contractors to carry out the work. Brunel and his colleagues were not always welcomed by landowners as they surveyed the countryside for possible routes – more than once they were threatened by angry farmers waving shotguns. An Act of Parliament passed in 1834 enabled compulsory purchase of land for the railway and many landowners were understandably suspicious and wary of the potential disruption and upheaval to their livelihoods. Nowadays we take the Great Western Railway so much for granted as a necessary amenity that it is hard to appreciate just how controversial it was at the time of its construction – a new and untried technology which would change the physical and social landscape forever. To many people it was unwanted and seen as unnecessary, but to artists it provided a fascinating new subject matter.

The project to build the railway faced many other problems apart from patchy public support. Building a railway through Bath and the surrounding countryside presented Brunel with numerous geographical challenges. The route had to be squeezed around the edge of the city centre, avoiding the best of Bath's Georgian architecture. The obstacles of the River Avon, the Kennet and Avon Canal and the hilly, undulating landscape meant that numerous bridges had to be built, together with long viaducts, embankments and cuttings and eight tunnels. Brunel's biggest problem in Bath was perhaps not so much the landscape and topography, but space itself: where to site the railway line and build the station. There was no obvious place to put it. The city's showpiece Georgian architecture had already occupied the limited amount of flat land in Bath, allowing little flexibility for the major building works needed by a railway. There was simply very little empty space for the Great Western Railway in and around the city centre. It was clear that major demolitions would be needed to make room for the railway. Several of Bath's artists rushed to record the areas that would be most affected, for example William Noble Hardwick in *The Old Bridge, Bath* shows an area that was about to be transformed by the railway. This had long been one of the major routes into Bath, adjacent to the Old Bridge

and leading towards Southgate Street. This was to be changed beyond recognition by the railway. Many of the houses shown in Hardwick's watercolour were demolished to make way for the viaduct just east of the new station. Residents of Widcombe were horrified by the proposed demolitions but their opinions were not listened to, simply because they were the wrong sort of people. By the early nineteenth century, Holloway and the streets in Widcombe close to the Old Bridge were regarded as undesirable areas. Holloway had a bad reputation, notorious for poverty, prostitution and crime. The people who lived there were regarded as a problem, rather than citizens whose opinion mattered. Brunel claimed that in demolishing this area he was doing Bath a favour by getting rid of places where the poorest people lived and replacing them with a railway that would bring new money and more prosperity to the city.

In other parts of Bath the building of the railway line was more sensitively handled, with far more consideration for the impact that it would have on residents. In Bathwick, tunnels and cuttings were carefully fitted in to slice seamlessly past the streets where Bath's wealthier residents lived. Brunel knew that it was important not just to leave Bath's best architecture untouched by the railway, but also to win the hearts and minds of influential people. He took such care not to offend the residents of Bathwick that when it became necessary to demolish a house in Raby Place, near the bottom of Bathwick Hill, to accommodate the railway line it was quickly rebuilt, at considerable expense to the Great Western Railway Company. Trees were planted along the railway embankment alongside Pulteney Road to obscure the view, and so nowadays the railway line through the residential parts of Bathwick is barely visible and, in contrast to the Widcombe area, easy to ignore.

From London to Swindon Brunel's proposed route for the Great Western Railway was ideal for railway construction, being relatively level and with few problematic geographical features. Further west, gradients rose and fell. Box Hill was a particularly daunting obstacle, requiring the construction of a tunnel almost two miles long. Although we nowadays take tunnels for granted, to the Victorians they were a relatively new and untried technology with a very patchy safety record. Brunel could have taken an easier but longer option and taken the railway line close to the route of the Kennet and Avon Canal instead of building Box Tunnel. His apparent enthusiasm for tunnel building is particularly surprising because for Brunel personally, tunnels had horrific associations. In 1828 he was trapped in a flood during construction of the Thames Tunnel, a project that Brunel was working on with his father. Six of Brunel's colleagues died; he was seriously injured and only narrowly escaped death. This and other tunnel accidents were widely reported in the press, spreading a degree of apprehension among the Victorian public about the safety of tunnels. Once Box Tunnel was in operation, ladies were given the option of alighting at Box and avoiding the stress of this risky new mode of travel by going over the hill in a carriage before getting back on the train at Corsham. The real danger of Box Tunnel was of course not to the passengers but to those who built it. Working deep underground, with candlelight the only illumination, thousands of navvies used tons of explosives to blast the tunnel through the hillside. In such dangerous working conditions, it is hardly surprising that over a hundred lives were lost in the building of Box Tunnel.

All the way to the end of the line at Bristol construction of the Great Western Railway was hampered by rising and falling gradients and the twists of the Avon river valley. A wonderfully atmospheric pencil drawing from 1838, 'Tunnel Number One on the Great Western Railway' by William Dighton featured in the exhibition gives us a good idea of the complexities of tunnel construction. It depicts the first tunnel on the line, travelling east from Temple Meads. The artist was clearly awestruck by the grandeur and mysterious atmosphere of the tunnel and also interested in the challenge faced by the navvies in tunnelling through rock. He shows an impressively effective but rather Heath-Robinsonesque jumble of props

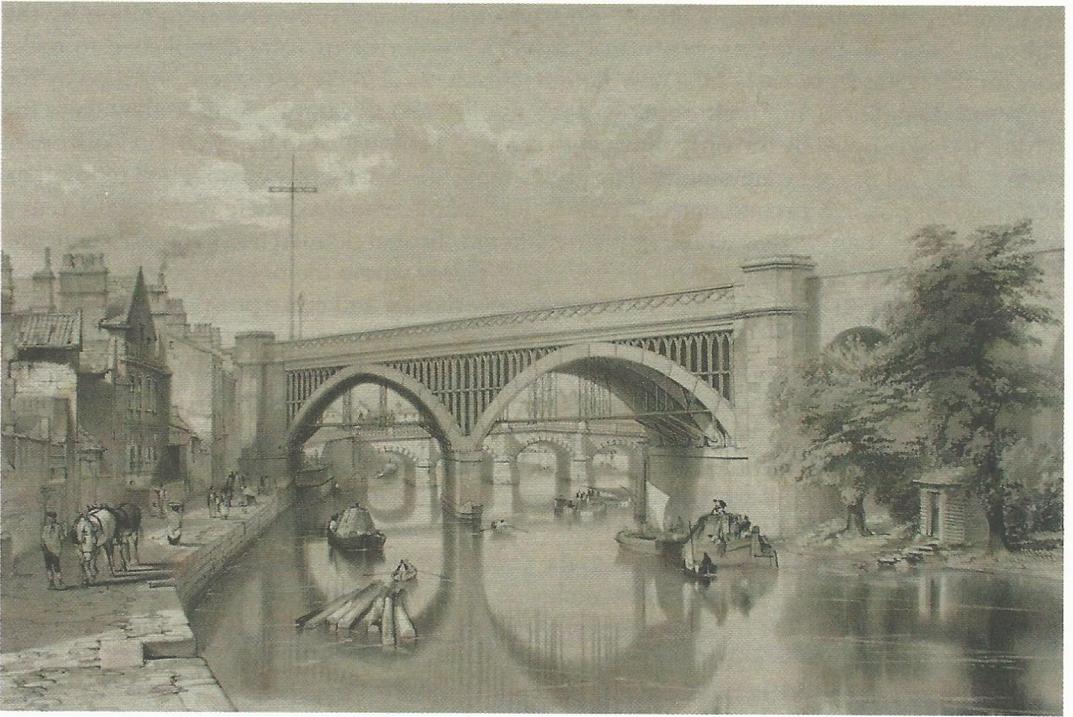


fig. 2: Skew Bridge, by John Cooke Bourne, lithograph, 1846.

and struts holding up the tunnel roof. Dighton was clearly impressed by the grandeur of the unfinished tunnel but there is a frisson of danger about the image, with the possibility of the tunnel's collapse clearly felt.

Either side of Bath and right through the city, huge teams of navvies laboured to make the tunnels, viaducts, embankments and cuttings needed to create a relatively level route for the railway. Some of the proposed railway bridges over the Avon were unusually long and Brunel's designs so innovative that critics doubted that they were sufficiently structurally sound. The Skew Bridge, just to the west of Bath station, was particularly controversial and fascinating to both Brunel's supporters and critics. He insisted on using wood as one of the main materials for its construction in spite of critics' claims that the material was unsuitable, that the bridge was too long and too weak to support the enormous loads of track, locomotives, carriages and passengers. Characteristically, Brunel dismissed this criticism, but among the general population there was a degree of unease about the safety of the Skew Bridge and many of the other long and innovative bridge designs along the line.

The difficulties involved in building the railway were fascinating to artists. Many of the pictures in the exhibition record the huge amount of effort that went into the process, showing teams of navvies laying tracks and digging viaducts and engineers using explosives to blast tunnels. Some of the best images that featured in the exhibition are from John Cooke Bourne's monumental volume of prints documenting the construction of the Great Western Railway, published in 1846. Entitled *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway; including its Geology and the Antiquities of the District through which it passes, accompanied by a Plan and Section of the Railway, a Geological Map, and by numerous Views of its principal Viaducts, Tunnels, Stations, and of the Scenery and Antiquities in its Vicinity, from Drawings taken expressly for this work* it celebrated Brunel's engineering achievements.

By the time Bourne's book was published the Great Western Railway had been open for several years. None of the predicted disasters had occurred around Bath; the Skew Bridge, and all of the other bridges, viaducts and tunnels had stood the test of time and were well established as successful structures. Bourne's book was a vindication of Brunel's designs and a riposte to his critics, as it triumphantly depicts the Great Western Railway's bridges and viaducts as engineering marvels; solid and dependable but beautiful and brilliantly designed.

William Powell Frith's monumental 1862 oil painting *The Railway Station* was borrowed from Royal Holloway College for the exhibition. In character and technique this is quite a different work of art from the prints and watercolours recording the construction of the railway. It celebrates another one of the Great Western Railway's achievements; making transport available to all and the bringing together of social classes in the shared experience of railway journeys. Frith was famous for huge panoramic paintings crowded with figures representative of all walks of life; rich, poor and all social classes in between. His previous major painting, *Derby Day*, was so phenomenally successful in attracting crowds that it had required a police guard and protective rail when displayed at the Royal Academy in 1858. Paddington Station, a place frequented by all sections of society, was the perfect subject for Frith. *The Railway Station* is full of the drama and narrative loved by Victorian audiences. It was not painted on a whim by Frith, but commissioned by Louis Flatow, a picture dealer who recognised that a painting of crowds at Paddington would have great appeal and could provide an opportunity to produce huge numbers of prints of the painting and thus turn a very good profit. Flatow was well aware of the public's fascination with the railways in the nineteenth century; the way in which travel, previously the preserve of the wealthy and leisured, became open and accessible to anyone with a modest amount of spare time and money. The democratising aspect of the railways is what makes Frith's painting so successful and enduringly interesting. All human life is present; among almost one hundred figures we see children on their way to boarding school, newlyweds off on honeymoon and a criminal being arrested by Scotland Yard detectives. Old and young, rich and poor, virtuous and criminal, servant and master are all present. Paddington Station was the perfect subject with which to include the whole of society. Once on the train the social hierarchies of Victorian Britain were respected by the division of passengers into first, second and third class carriages, but on the platform at Paddington it was inevitable that all sections of society would be jumbled up in close proximity when waiting for the train.

Bringing the exhibition in to the twentieth century, *Bath and the Great Western Railway* included a selection of railway posters. Dating from the 1920s through to the beginning of the 1960s, these were produced to encourage people to travel for leisure by train – not at all the kind of thing envisaged by the GWR's founders back in the 1830s. In its early days the railway created no publicity material apart from timetables and basic leaflets giving information on services, but from the 1920s onwards the Great Western Railway became more aware of marketing and began to produce posters encouraging train travel for tourist visits. The posters promoting holidays in Cornwall and Devon are perhaps the GWR's most famous, but the company also publicised the delights of Bath. Whereas in Georgian times the practicalities of coach travel meant that visitors to Bath had to make long stays, in the age of the railways, daytrips became feasible. This meant that a wider section of society – including people with relatively little time or money – was able to come to Bath. For hundreds of years tourism to Bath had been based on the health-giving possibilities of our hot springs, but the GWR's posters were an important part of the reinvention of Bath as a heritage destination, tempting potential passengers with images of the city's Roman remains and elegant Georgian architecture.