

Travel and Adventure: The second-greatest Briton of all time

by Joan Scobey

Recently, the BBC conducted a TV poll for the "100 Greatest Britons in History." The winner, no surprise, was Winston Churchill. The runner-up was Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Who?

CITY ICON - The Clifton Suspension Bridge's main 702-foot span links the steep cliff sides of the Avon Gorge, 250 feet above the Avon River. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey.

OLD BRISTOL STATION - The free-standing, vaulted Passenger Shed in the Old Bristol Station was the biggest single span of its time. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey.

MUSEUM PIECE - The liner Great Britain sits on a 'glass sea' at the Great Western Dockyard. CNS Photo courtesy of the Great Britain.

UNDER THE GLASS - The massive propeller of the liner Great Britain is open for view under the 'glass sea' at the Great Western Dockyard. CNS Photo courtesy of the Great Britain. Yes, Isambard Kingdom Brunel of the unforgettable name, an engineer who built railways, bridges, ships and other key links in the United Kingdom's transportation network. A visionary who beat out Princess Diana, Charles Darwin, William Shakespeare, Sir Isaac Newton, Queen Elizabeth I, John Lennon, Adm. Horatio Nelson and Oliver Cromwell - and that's just the top 10.

It took a lot of Brits by surprise, too.

My grandfather was also a bridge engineer, so I'm easily drawn to the romance of bridges and their colorful builders, which is what brought me to Bristol in southwest England, home of Brunel's greatest triumphs, as it celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth last year.

Actually, aside from a small exhibit or two, the city didn't have to lay on anything special to celebrate the master. Many of his greatest works are in plain view.

The city icon, for instance, is the Clifton Suspension Bridge, a daring 702-foot span across the steep cliffs of the Avon Gorge, 250 feet above the Avon River.

The bridge was more than 100 years in the making, from 1754 when a Bristol wine merchant left a legacy to build it, through disputed design contests, to its eventual opening in 1864. In 1830, one of the four designs the 24-year-old Brunel submitted won the final competition, his first major commission. He called the bridge "My first child, my darling."

Unhappily, he died five years before the project, delayed by political and financial problems, was completed. Brunel's genius was that the bridge, designed for 19th century light horse-drawn traffic, still handles 12,000 motor vehicle crossings a day.

To the rest of Britain, Brunel is best known for the Great Western Railway that runs from Paddington Station in London west to Bristol. Brunel designed all the stations along the line, as well as soaring viaducts and vast tunnels, but the centerpiece was the baronial Edwardian Old Bristol Station with its crenellated towers. Completed in 1841, it was designed for passenger flow, where people entered through one of the two arches that flank the building, and exited through the other. The tracks were suspended on the second floor - no mean trick - so passengers could pass underneath them to board trains in either direction. Underground vaults below the track level held it all up. Travelers waited in the vast Passenger Shed, with its vaulted ceiling hung from interior iron arches without support columns; at 72 by 220 feet, it was the biggest single span of its time.

It was a brilliant engineering feat that combined in one building a passenger hall, engine shed, goods areas, engineering shops and stabling for hundreds of horses. No wonder it's been called the world's first great railway station.

The Old Bristol Station was closed in 1965. Now The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum occupies the former Engine and Carriage Shed, where locomotives filled their tanks with water from a massive water tower, and public and private events are held in the Passenger Shed.

Not satisfied with bringing the railway to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, Brunel's grand vision was to join the Old and New Worlds, to go straight on to America. His dream was to move passengers and goods from London to New York, so at Bristol, he turned to ship building.

The first ship he designed was the Great Western, a wooden paddle-wheeler with auxiliary sails, and at 236 feet, the largest steamship in the world at the time. Its first return trip to New York City in 1837 took 29 days, twice as fast as other sailing ships.

His second, and most famous, was the even bigger Great Britain, the first iron-hulled, propeller-driven ship to cross the Atlantic. Launched in 1843, it made its maiden voyage to New York in an amazing 14 days. Its heyday was in the 1850s when it carried thousands of British and Irish to the newly discovered gold mines of Australia.

A luxury liner, a troop ship and a cargo vessel, it was salvaged in the Falklands in 1970 and towed back to Bristol. After a \$21.5 million restoration, the Great Britain is docked at Bristol's Great Western Dockyard, half submerged under a "glass sea" in the same dry dock where it was built and launched. There you can inspect the red iron hull and propeller beneath a sheet of glass, the recently installed, three-story-tall moving engine, and the cabins and public rooms to see what 19th century life was like on board.

In 1858, Brunel built a third ship, the Great Eastern, a luxurious, 700-foot liner for 4,000 passengers that could cruise nonstop from London to Sydney and back, a screw-driven, all-metal behemoth that until the turn of the century was the world's largest ship. Technically, it was way ahead of its time, but economically, it couldn't support transoceanic passenger travel. It ended up laying oceanic telegraph cable, and was eventually sold for scrap to ship breakers. It was probably just as well Brunel didn't live to see its downfall. Ironically, two days before its maiden voyage down the Thames, he collapsed on its deck and died 10 days later.

Brunel's achievements - 25 railway lines, more than 100 bridges, three ships and dozens of other projects - brought the inventive, cigar-chomping engineer wide fame. His flair, originality and colorful, outsized personality caught the imagination of his countrymen. No wonder they voted him the second-greatest Briton in history.

IF YOU GO

The Clifton Suspension Bridge story is displayed in an information facility next to one of the towers, open daily 10 a.m-5 p.m. For more information, visit www.clifton-suspension-bridge.org.uk.

Hourolong tours of the Old Bristol Station include the Passenger Shed, the underground vaults below the second-floor track bed, and the Gothic Great Western Railway boardroom. To book, call 011-44-0117-925-4980, or visit www.empiremuseum.co.uk and click "The Brunel Tour."

The Great Britain is docked at the Great Western Dockyard, Gas Ferry Road, 011-44-0117-929-1843, www.ssgreatbritain.org. Tickets also include the dry dock, museum, Maritime Heritage Centre and a replica of navigator John Cabot's ship Matthew, whose voyage of discovery left Bristol for North America in 1497. An open-air bus goes to all three Brunel sites in a city circuit that takes about 45 minutes, so hop off to visit and hop on a later bus. It also passes within reach of other city attractions, among them St. Nicholas Markets, Bristol Cathedral and St. Mary Redcliffe Church.

A wonderful way to get a feel for the city's port, which goes back to the 12th century, is on a bright orange Bristol Ferry. Ferries ply two routes around the city's "floating harbour," with landing stages close to most of the waterside attractions; www.bristolferry.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Brigstow Hotel, Welsh Back 5-7, 800-221-4542, visitbristol.co.uk/site/where-to-stay/the-brigstow-hotel-p401. One hundred sixteen rooms of stylish modern comfort with a great location on a harbor inlet, by a ferry stop and close to the Harbourside restaurant quarter. Doubles from about \$235.

Hotel du Vin and Bistro, The Sugar House, Narrow Lewins Mead, phone 011-7-925-5577, visitbristol.co.uk/site/hotel-du-vin-and-bistro-p61. A restored warehouse near the waterfront with 40 handsome rooms, part of a stylish boutique hotel chain. Doubles from about \$255.

Bristol Marriott Royal Hotel, College Green, phone 888-236-2427, visitbristol.co.uk/site/bristol-marriott-royal-hotel-p821. A 242-room, renovated 18th century grand building in the city center, next to cathedral. Doubles from about \$225.

WHERE TO EAT

The Harbourside restaurant district has stylish contemporary restaurants with great water views. Severnshed, The Grove, phone 011-44-0117-925-1212, housed in a 19th century boathouse built by Brunel, serves such specialties as pan-fried scallops with lentil and foie gras, and quail with creamed cabbage. Next door is Riverstation, The Grove, phone 011-44-0117-914-4434, where you can watch river traffic pass while dining on such fare as roast lamb with grilled leeks and sea bass with fresh herb risotto.

The Bistro, Hotel du Vin, The Sugar House, phone 011-44-0117-925-5577, offers classic European bistro cuisine and an interesting wine list.

A centrally located Bristol Tourist Information Centre is at Wildwalk At Bristol, Anchor Road, Harbourside.

For more information, contact Visit Britain at 800-462-2748, e-mail travelinfo@visitbritain.org, or visit www.visitbritain.com/usa and www.visitbristol.co.uk.

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