



## WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

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### WATCHET and I.K. BRUNEL (1806– 1859)



**Brunel in his trademark stovepipe hat.**

Brunel was key to Britain's process of industrialisation in the 19th century and came second to Sir Winston Churchill in the 2002 BBC opinion poll of the 100 greatest Britons. He was project engineer on the Clifton Suspension Bridge and from 1833 he was chief engineer of the Great Western Railway. He was the pioneer of the broad gauge railway with rails 70.5cms wider than the standard gauge track, now the norm of 4ft 8½ins.

It is less well-known that Brunel played a part in Watchet's development in the 1850s, an important decade for Watchet. In 1852 iron ore mines opened in the Brendon Hills and a railway was needed to transport the ore to the port of Watchet. This mineral railway was built and opened by 1857 and its engineer, Rice Hopkins, drew up plans for the enlargement of Watchet harbour which at that time had only a west quay. In 1857 the bill to allow the WSR was passed by Parliament, permitting the building of a railway from the main line at Taunton to the port of Watchet. Brunel was appointed chief engineer and probably undertook some early survey work before handing over to Brereton, his assistant. There was a proposal to link the new railway along the Esplanade to the mineral railway but this was dropped after opposition from

the West Somerset Mineral railway.

The harbour commissioners were set up in 1859 to explore methods of enlarging the harbour, an urgent need after a severe storm in October that year damaged the west pier and wrecked four ships. Brunel submitted a plan for harbour enlargement. A third submission was made by Abernathy, another engineer.

Brunel and Hopkins estimated a cost of £20,000. They would have built a west and east quay beyond the current line, enlarging the harbour. Abernathy's more modest plan, cheaper at £15,250, was chosen and finished by 1863.

Brunel's railway did not open until 1862, after his death from a stroke at 53. The formal opening was a gala affair with bands and feasting. The station entrance with a triumphal arch proclaimed "Welcome to all Strangers to Watchet for by your Aid shall our Commerce develop".

Watchet boasted two stations, two passenger services and an enlarged harbour by 1865. Watchet was the end of the line until 1874 when an extension to Minehead was opened.

#### **Fact File on Brunel's achievements**

- 1806 Brunel born.
- 1826 Appointed engineer to GWR and in charge of Thames Tunnel at Rotherhithe.
- 1830 Wins second Clifton Bridge competition.
- 1837 SS Great Western launched.
- 1841 London-Bristol Railway Line opened.
- 1843 SS Great Britain launched.
- 1852 Chepstow Bridge opened.
- 1855 Prefabricated hospital and drainage system used in Crimean war.
- 1859 Saltash Bridge opened.
- 1859 Brunel dies, by which time he had engineered 1,200 miles of railway, including lines in Ireland, Italy and Bengal.

This sets in context Brunel's work in Watchet with his place as a national figure in Britain's Industrial Revolution and his place in the transport network which gave predominance to Britain in the 19th century industrial world.

#### **Don't Miss Off the Rails**

**From Martyn Snell** Commercial Manager of the West Somerset Railway

Martyn will give a broad-based talk about the WSR, its initial development and value to local society in the past and today.

**Tuesday August 25th 7.30 pm**

Methodist Church Hall, Harbour Road, Watchet

Martyn is a retired police officer who has worked on the West Somerset Railway for 12 years, first as a volunteer and then within the Commercial Department since 2001. As Commercial Manager his main responsibility is to lead a small team which promotes and markets the railway, one of the biggest tourist attractions in Somerset.

**Admission free but donations welcome.**