

The Brunel Collection

The Brunel Collection has been described as the finest collection of original Brunel source material held anywhere in the world, and it is appropriate that it is housed in the city where this extraordinary engineer began his career. Widely used, it is consulted by scholars from all over the world, and the fact that virtually nothing is said, written or published about Brunel without reference to it is a lasting tribute to the generosity of Lady Noble and other benefactors: the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Dulverton Trust, the Friends of the National Libraries, the Elton Memorial Fund, the J. Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust, the National Heritage Lottery Fund, the Pilgrim Trust, Science Museum Prism Grant Fund, the Trustees of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, the University of Bristol Alumni Fund, and the Wolfson Foundation. This brief guide is intended to do no more than give a flavour of the material it contains.



History of the Brunel Collection

The original collection was given to the University Library by Brunel's grand-daughter, Lady Celia Noble, in 1950. It comprises letter books, sketchbooks, calculation books, documents and drawing instruments of Isambard Kingdom Brunel 1830-1866, certain papers of Isambard Brunel, Jr. and Sir Marc Brunel, and also the letterbooks of Henry Marc Brunel.

Additions are made to the collection whenever possible, both by gift and by purchase. In 1961 A.P. Bolland gave fifty-six original letters from Brunel to Daniel Gooch and Charles Alexander Saunders together with other documents concerning the Great Western Railway from 1837 to 1857. In 1972 the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust deposited on permanent loan their records and plans from 1830 to 1953. Other notable acquisitions have been funded by the Elton Memorial Fund, the Science Museum Purchase Fund and the University of Bristol Alumni Foundation, as well as the Library's own resources.

In 1987 the British Library generously made a grant of £25,000 over three years from funds made available by the Wolfson Foundation for the restoration and preservation of the collection, and further conservation work has been supported by the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust.

In 1990, with the aid of generous grants from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the J. Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust, the Wolfson Foundation, the Pilgrim Trust and the Dulverton Trust, the University purchased most of that material which had hitherto remained in the possession of the family. In addition to some further sketchbooks, diaries and gatherings of original letters, this accession to the Brunel Collection contains important series of papers on the Thames Tunnel, the Chepstow Bridge and the Great Eastern steamship.

In 1996, the University Library acquired at auction another part of the family papers relating to I.K. Brunel and his work. The most spectacular acquisition is formed by the drawings submitted by Brunel for the competition to design a bridge across the Avon Gorge. They were long thought to have been lost, and their return is an exciting event for the City of Bristol.

The Library has also succeeded in buying a large collection of Brunel's diaries (29 v), pocket notebooks (20 v) and bank passbooks (13). Together these will provide a great deal of information not previously available to researchers about Brunel's journeys, meetings, observations, income and expenditure during his busiest and most creative years. They take up the story at the point where his private diaries (already owned by the Library) leave off.

These acquisitions have been supported by generous help from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Friends of the National Libraries, the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust, and University of Bristol Campaign for Resource. We are grateful for this support, which ensures that a significant resource for research on the life and work of a great engineer remains in the public domain.

A fuller account of the origin and development of the Brunel Collection at the University of Bristol, written by Nick Lee, appears in *Brunel: in love with the impossible*, edited by Andrew Kelly and Melanie Kelly (Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, 2006), pp.192-203.

A Brief Brunel Chronology

- 1769** 25 April - Marc Isambard Brunel born at Hacqueville, Normandy
- 1799** 13 March - Marc Isambard Brunel arrives in England
1 November - Marc Isambard Brunel marries Sophia Kingdom
- 1806** 9 April - Isambard Kingdom Brunel born in Portsmouth
- 1824** 20 July - Marc Isambard Brunel appointed Engineer to Thames Tunnel
- 1826** 7 August - Thames Tunnel works under the direction of Isambard Kingdom Brunel
- 1828** 28 January - Second major accident halts work on Tunnel for 7 years
- 1830** 10 June - Isambard Kingdom Brunel elected fellow of the Royal Society
- 1831** 31 March - Isambard Kingdom Brunel appointed Engineer to Clifton Bridge
- 1833** 7 March - Isambard Kingdom Brunel appointed Engineer to Great Western Railway
- 1836** 5 July - Isambard Kingdom Brunel marries Mary Horsley
27 August - Foundation stone for Leigh abutment of Clifton Bridge laid
- 1837** 19 July - SS Great Western launched
- 1838** 4 June - First section of GWR opened
- 1841** 30 June - GWR completed between London and Bristol
- 1842** 1 July - First section of Bristol & Exeter Railway opened
- 1843** 25 March - Thames Tunnel opened
19 July - SS Great Britain launched
- 1847** 13 September - First atmospheric trains run between Exeter and Teignmouth
- 1849** 12 December - Marc Isambard Brunel dies
- 1854** 16 January - Paddington New Station opened

- 1858** 31 January - SS Great Eastern launched
- 1859** 11 April - Royal Albert Bridge, Saltash, completed.
15 September - Isambard Kingdom Brunel dies
- 1864** 8 December - Clifton Bridge opened

The Brunel Institute

In November 2010 the Brunel Collection moved to the Brunel Institute at the SS Great Britain, a collaborative venture of the University of Bristol and the SS Great Britain Trust, at the Great Western Dockyard, site of the SS Great Britain. The Special Collections staff continues to support the cataloguing and exploitation of the Collection. The Collection continues to belong to the University of Bristol, and access will be provided in conjunction with Brunel Institute and the University of Bristol.

In order to make an appointment to view the Collection, please contact the Brunel Institute: SS Great Britain, Great Western Dockyard, Bristol, BS1 6TY, 0117 926 0680. For further information, see the Brunel Institute website at <http://www.ssgreatbritain.org/brunel-institute> .

Catalogues of the Brunel Collection are available on the Special Collections Online Archive Catalogue at <http://oac.lib.bris.ac.uk/DServe/> .