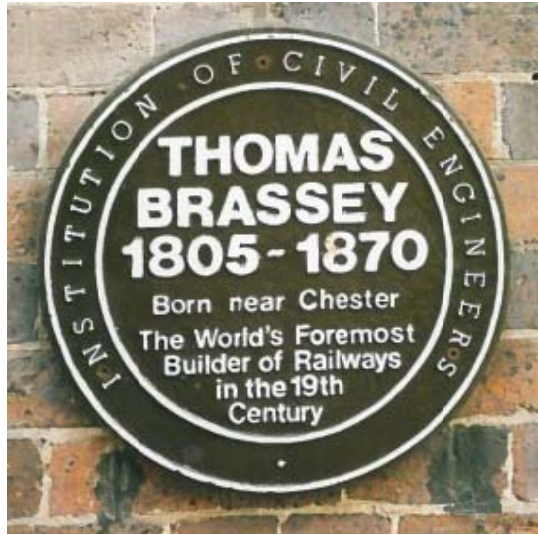


# THOMAS BRASSEY



## *The unsung hero of railway engineering*



*Thomas Brassey 1805-1870*

Thomas Brassey was born in Buerton on the outskirts of Chester in 1805. After a school education in Chester he commenced training as a surveyor with a Mr Lawton in 1821, and gained practical experience whilst assisting in the surveying of Telford's Shrewsbury to Holyhead road, now known as the A5.

Lawton was a Land Agent and Surveyor for several wealthy landowners including Francis Richard Price of Overton, near Wrexham, whose estates included the small township of Birkenhead which, at that time, consisted of a few straggling houses close to Birkenhead Priory on a rather bleak headland facing Liverpool across the Mersey. Lawton, though, like others, felt that Birkenhead had development potential and in 1826, after taking Brassey into partnership, opened an office there which Brassey was to supervise. Sadly, Lawton was to die very soon afterwards without achieving his ambition.

As well as managing the affairs of the Price family, young Thomas had the responsibility for running the Storeton Hill Quarries on behalf of the Stanley family. Realising the growing need for building materials, Brassey borrowed money from his father to set up a brick and lime works in Birkenhead's dock area.

One of his first large contracts was the supply of millions of bricks for the new Customs House then being built over the river in Liverpool. Stone for the same building came from the Storeton Quarries which he was managing. In 1839 he won the contract to build the New Chester Road from Tranmere to Bromborough which included a large stone bridge to span the Bromborough Pool.

Thomas married a Birkenhead girl, Maria Harrison, and they lived first in Whetstone Lane, then in a house, built by Thomas of course, in Park Road South, Cloughton. The owner of the Birkenhead Brewery Company, Henry Kelsall Aspinall, knew Thomas Brassey very well and described him thus: "*A gentleman in the fullest sense of the word; quiet, simply living and simple hearted, amiable and kind to a degree*". In 1827 George Stephenson, the famous Victorian railway engineer, was building the world's first passenger railway between Liverpool and Manchester. He went to see Brassey at his Storeton Quarries. They got on so well that Stephenson suggested that Brassey should try his hand at railway building.

As a result, Brassey tendered, unsuccessfully, for the Ditton viaduct on the Grand Junction Railway. However, in 1834, his first job was the Penkridge Viaduct on the same railway between Stafford and Wolverhampton and such was the workmanship that it still stands today.

By 1841 Brassey's name was becoming widely known and he started building railways abroad – the first being the 82 mile Paris to Rouen railway – the first in France. By 1848 Brassey had built three quarters of the entire French railway system!

When the Paris to Rouen railway was opened in May 1843 Brassey gave an open air banquet where 600 of his workmen sat down. A whole ox was roasted by three French chefs and the French became so agitated at the prospect of 600 British navvies going on the rampage that they ringed the field with their cavalry. In the same year he built the Station at Chester and in addition to building the railway lines, he also built the trains!

By 1853 he had moved into new premises – the Canada Works in Birkenhead. At the peak of their success he employed over 85,000 workers across the world and built thousands of miles of railways in Britain, France, Spain, Norway, Austria, Germany, Denmark, Italy, India, Mauritius, Australia, Canada, Poland, Russia and even South America! In fact, one mile in every twenty of the total World network of railways was built by Brassey's workers.

To carry these great railways, Thomas Brassey also built great bridges and viaducts, including the two mile Victorian Bridge across the St Lawrence River in Canada, the longest bridge in the World at the time.

During the Crimea War in 1854 he went out and built a 39 mile long railway at Balaclava in just six weeks and provided a supply chain to the front until Sebastopol fell to the victorious British Army and their allies. He did this out of the goodness of his heart and took no profit from the enterprise. He was also a true Victorian philanthropist – looking after his employees, paying excellent wages and even providing a free library for them at Canada Works, one of the first in the country.

Thomas Brassey died of cancer in 1870. He had amassed a considerable fortune during his lifetime but his achievements had been equally significant. He had helped to open up continents and changed social patterns by enabling people to travel all over the World.

He was honoured by many other countries – receiving Legion of Honour from France, the Order of St Maurice & St Lazarus from Italy but, being a modest man, he would not accept any honours offered in this country. He only accepted the foreign honours so as not to give any offence. He has been termed 'One of the great unsung heroes of the railway age'.

**Peter Bolt**