

Gilding Brunel's Lily . . . *continued*

Bishop's Bridge Road (Paddington Station was eventually built thirteen years after the line opened). The first architectural feature is Hanwell Viaduct, Southall, supported by Egyptian-style columns, similar to the Clifton bridge. Then Maidenhead Bridge, reminiscent of a Seine bridge, influenced no doubt by Isambard's further education at the Lycée.

And it gets even better – as the line heads westwards it starts to add a dimension of its own to the landscape. Responsibility for construction was divided between Bristol and London committees and, once in the sector controlled by the Bristol directors, the features grow even more spectacular. First, Box Tunnel, with a magnificent masonry arch forming a triumphal gateway to the Roman city of Bath. Then, at Sydney Gardens, carefully curved retaining walls, finished in Bath stone, harmonise with the spa's Georgian terraces.

Leaving Bath for Bristol a seventy-three arch viaduct supports the line and, finally Bristol: the Tudor-façaded Temple Meads station, hardly appropriate for the brave new age of broad-gauge steam, but no less so than the adjacent neo-Jacobean Bristol and Exeter Railway offices. For transatlantic travellers the Royal Western Hotel (Brunel House) offered Greek Revival splendour.

Thus we can see that Brunel did not choose a unifying design theme across his projects. For him everything was on a grand scale: his projects seem to have evolved into free-standing monuments to himself.

So, should we add sphinxes and the ornamental plaques or should we leave well alone? Design is a ticklish subject – just look at iconic cars like the VW Beetle and the Mini, and their reincarnations. Their latest versions don't seem to be a natural metamorphosis, they are a bit over-designed and their owners tend to regard them more as fashion accessories than modes of transport. Beetles even have a flower vase on the fascia! Brunel would not approve, I think . . .

The bridge occupies our consciousness as an international emblem of Bristol and we proudly show it off to visitors. As a young baby my mother let me view the Dinky toy traffic on the Portway from the walkway. My mouth gaped open and my dummy spiralled down into the gorge – I cried for hours. Approaching my teens I witnessed a darker aspect of the bridge – a suicide, and I've even had a sphinx's-eye view – I once stood on the top of the Leigh Woods pylon, relishing what must surely be one of the most spectacular, and exclusive, views of our city. Last year our elder son had wedding photographs taken at Sion Hill; Brunel competed with the bride!

The Clifton Suspension Bridge is so familiar to us we feel comfortable with it. Certainly, as engineering, I think it is a perfect example of sufficient technology – like a spoon. It just can't be improved upon.

I really can't decide, Jerry; what do others think?

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