



Isambard Kingdom Brunel

Engineering modern Britain

31 August–5 September 2025

(ML 765)

6 days • £2,510

Lecturer: Anthony Lambert

Examines the life and work of one of the greatest engineers and inventors of all time.

Visits most of Brunel's major surviving structures in London and the Southwest.

Special arrangements include a private tour of the Brunel Institute.

Stays in two former Great Western Railway hotels.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel is the most famous and arguably the greatest engineer of Victorian Britain, an era when the achievements of the profession were often hailed, quite justifiably, as 'heroic'. None of his contemporaries was as versatile, and none was entrusted with projects on such a scale at so young an age – he was just 27 when he was made engineer of the Great Western Railway (GWR).

Trained under his French father, Marc, Brunel designed dockyards, a prefabricated hospital for Florence Nightingale, tunnels, bridges, viaducts and railway stations. One of his ocean-going steamships was the first to be propeller-driven (his design being only 20% less efficient than modern ones). He was the Leonardo of his age, devising innovative solutions in different fields. Incomparably ingenious, yes, but his achievements were also founded on force of personality, limitless energy and unrelenting determination.

His creations have largely survived the test of time. His bridges carry trains at a speed – and of a weight – that even he had not envisaged. His stations are revered as architectural triumphs, and even one of his three vast ocean-going vessels was saved by the most remarkable rescue in maritime history.

The tour encompasses every aspect of his life and work, beginning with his time in London working under his father on the Thames Tunnel, during which Brunel nearly lost his life. (Trains now pass through every few minutes.) The graceful arches of Maidenhead Bridge remain the widest brick spans in the world. The Swindon Railway Village reveals a remarkably unaltered area of New Swindon, laid out and designed by Brunel with facilities ahead of the time. Besides Brunel's station, Bristol boasts the Clifton Suspension Bridge, the resurrected



Clifton Suspension Bridge, near Bristol, wood engraving c. 1880.

steamship *Great Britain*, displayed at the dock in which she was built in 1843, and the fine archive of Brunel material in the adjacent multi-award-winning Being Brunel museum. One of the former broad-gauge railways in Devon is now a steam-worked heritage railway, and the tour concludes with Brunel's last great work, the Royal Albert Bridge over the Tamar, across which he travelled as an invalid on a special train shortly before its formal opening and his early death aged just 53.

Itinerary

Day 1: London. Begin with an early afternoon lecture at the hotel before travelling by train to Wharcliffe Viaduct, the first major structure designed by Brunel and the first contract to be let for the GWR. First of two nights in the station hotel at Brunel's Paddington.

Day 2: London. Begin with a walk around Paddington Station, little altered from its opening in 1854. The Brunel Museum at Rotherhithe tells the story of two of Brunel's London projects, the Thames Tunnel and the *SS Great Eastern*. The access shaft to the former, has been made accessible to visitors. We visit the launch site of the *Great Eastern* by taking a train through the Tunnel before returning to central London by river, passing three Brunel bridges and stopping to see his statue in Embankment Gardens.

Day 3: Maidenhead, Swindon, Bristol. The journey to Bristol is by coach, enabling us to stop at key Brunel creations along the route. See Maidenhead Bridge, numerous GWR and broad gauge artefacts at STEAM – Museum of the Great Western Railway, and the original Temple Meads Station, now disused. First of two nights in Bristol.

Day 4: Bristol. The majestically sited Clifton Suspension Bridge was not completed exactly to Brunel's design as it was adapted to reuse the chains from his Hungerford Bridge in London. Visit the *SS Great Britain*, which launched in 1843 for transatlantic journeys but ended its days as a hulk in the Falkland Islands. Rescued in 1970, the 322-foot vessel has been brilliantly restored. Next, Being Brunel, an award-winning museum, and a private tour of the Brunel Institute, by special arrangement.

Day 5: Buckfastleigh, Totnes. The South Devon Railway's museum contains the only surviving broad-gauge locomotive; *Tiny* was built for the company in 1868. A journey over the railway to Totnes allows us to see one of the surviving engine houses of the failed 'atmospheric caper'. Cruise on the paddle steamer *Kingswear Castle*, (boat to be confirmed) the last remaining coal-fired paddle steamer in operation in the UK, with engines dating from 1904, though she was built in 1924 in Dartmouth. Overnight Bovey Castle.

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continued

Day 6: Saltash, Plymouth. Brunel's great bowstring girder bridge across the Tamar was opened by and given the name of Prince Albert in 1859 and will be appreciated from various vantage points before taking the train back to London over Brunel's railway. The section beside the sea between Newton Abbot and Dawlish is one of the loveliest stretches of railway in Britain. The tour ends at Paddington station in the late afternoon.

Lecturer

Anthony Lambert. A history graduate who has written or contributed to over twenty books on railway history and travel and was consultant editor to the nine-volume partwork *The World of Trains*. He is a trustee of two railway museums, one rebuilding and operating steam locomotives over the main line, and a judge for the National Railway Heritage Awards.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,510.
Single occupancy: £2,960.

Included: hotel accommodation; private coach throughout; tube, train and boat travel (including first class rail travel from Plymouth to London Paddington); breakfasts, 3 lunches and 3 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions and donations; all tips; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. The Hilton, Paddington (hilton.com): planned by Brunel as the start of a journey to New York, it was built by the GWR and opened in 1854. It is now a functional business hotel. **Hotel Du Vin, Bristol Avon Gorge** (hotelduvin.com): 4-star, in a recently refurbished historic building with an excellent view of the Clifton Suspension Bridge. **Bovey Castle** (boveycastle.com): 5-star hotel in a Grade II* building that was bought in the 1920s by the GWR to become one of its hotels. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour is not for you. Average distance by coach per day: there are two days without any coach travel, but there is an average on the remaining four days of 78 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.