

Unveiling of Charles Richardson Plaque at 10 Berkeley Square 8 August 2015

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It is indeed an honour and privilege to be invited to unveil this plaque to Charles Richardson, M.I.C.E. One of the Victorian civil engineers to whom we are indebted for the railway infrastructure we all take for granted today, over 150 years after the majority were built Charles Richardson was a man, who despite his achievements as an engineer, geologist, businessman, co-founder of The Bristol Naturalist Society and in his youth a reputable sportsman and cricketer did not receive in his lifetime the recognition he so richly deserved.

Charles was a tunnel man, Box, Sapperton, Patchway, Redcliffe and of course The Severn are all in some way associated with him either in implementing others design from the setting out to the completed construction or in the design and implementation of his own projects. He was a renowned geologist and acknowledged as an authority on the subject of land slips of which he had no equal.

His career began as a 20 year old pupil of Brunel gaining his initial experience underground with Marc Brunel on the Thames only to reject the offer of a permanent position with him in favour of employment with Isambard on the southern end of the G.W.R. Isambard soon recognised the talented Charles Richardson and at the age of 24 years appointed him as his resident engineer on the Stroud -Swindon railway. An enormous responsibility to place on the shoulders of such a young man. Please remember that in 1838 the resident engineer was entrusted with everything associated with the successful completion of the project from negotiation with land owner to payroll of the workforce.

In 1858 after completing the Hereford - Gloucester line for Brunel he was appointed by him to be engineer for the Bristol- South Wales Union Railway which included construction of the tunnel at Patchway, from his discoveries during **excavation** on the qualities of the material arising he founded the Cattybrook Brick Works. Mid way through the project in 1858 was the untimely death of LK.Brunel and as a result Charles Richardson was appointed with Brereton to be Joint Engineers for the B.S.W. U.R.

It was whilst excavations were taking place for the pier foundations on the banks of the Severn at Portskewett that Charles Richardson conceived the idea that it would be possible to build a tunnel under the river Severn.

In the ensuing years that it took for the idea to become a reality Richardson was appointed engineer for the design and construction of the Bristol Harbour Railway, a rather short but complicated section of line from Temple Meads to Bristol Dock including a bascule bridge and tunnel through Redcliffe, encroaching on the boundaries of St Mary Redcliffe Church. When the Act of Parliament was finally passed for the Severn Tunnel, Charles Richardson was appointed Chief Engineer by the G.W.R. for the design and execution of the work.

Despite the fact that for 7 years Richardson had overcome countless problems and difficulties it was the unforeseen break in of The Great Spring that was to signal his downfall and the future marginalisation of his contribution to the project.

The chairman of the G.W.R. replaced Charles Richardson as Chief Engineer with Sir John Hawkshaw who immediately set about redesigning Richardson's original scheme. Charles Richardson was demoted to be his deputy. As he recorded some years after the tunnel was built "I could advise but not decide"

Upon completion of the tunnel and due to its success, Charles Richardson was appointed engineer for the doubling of the line from Pill to Temple Meads. Never the less it was left to others to claim success for the construction of The Severn Tunnel. with no mention in published papers of the contribution to the success of the project made by Charles Richardson. Perhaps the unveiling of the plaque will in some small way go towards redressing the balance. Charles Richardson passed away in this house on the 10th February 1896 The following obituaries were published after his death on the 10th February 1896

From his obituary published in the Institute of Civil Engineers

"In temperament he was benevolent, genial, peaceful and contemplative, while straightforwardness and honour were such as are rarely met with & modest disposition prevented his being known to fame and it is only those who were intimately acquainted with him to realise the nobility of his character."

From the Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers:

"A wealthy background meant that engineering was something of a hobby, and a natural modesty meant that his undoubted engineering talent was not known widely beyond those working with him. Better known contemporaries achieved more with less ability"