

BRISTOL TEMPLE MEADS

by John Mosse

The first proposal for a Bristol to London Railway was made in 1824, and, under the chairmanship of Thomas Wilson, M.P. a company was promoted to build a line. This first company met with opposition. It was unable to raise its capital successfully, and it was not until 1833 that a viable Board of Directors met.

In August of that year they adopted the title of "Great Western Railway" and appointed Isambard Kingdom Brunel their Engineer. This was very much to his liking, and he entered into the work with real enthusiasm, personally surveying the route. He was also active in obtaining the necessary Act of Parliament which received the Royal Assent in 1835.

Work began on building the Bristol Terminus of the Great Western Railway at Temple Meads in 1838. The first passenger train left for Bath at 8.00 a.m. on Monday, 31st August, 1840. This section of the line, from Bristol to Bath is built in the Gothic manner, which was recommended by the Church Commissioners for the Construction of New Churches, erected under the Church Building Act of 1818. Brunel did get a classical elevation for the Bristol Depot but this was abandoned in favour of several essays in Gothic structure. Possibly his reasons were economic - as had been those of the Church Commissioners; or perhaps Brunel preferred the romantic overtures of Tudor Architecture. However, the building stands as an early example of the Gothic Revival, pre-dating the Houses of Parliament of 1840.

The Station was built in a number of stages, the offices and entrances fronting Victoria Street, then the Terminus building with servicing facilities and offices above, and finally, the great Train Shed with its hammer beam roof spanning 72 ft. completed the passenger section. Engines were serviced within the Terminus building, taking water from the tower of the office block. There was a sector for running the locomotives back to the departure side, and the broad gauge track layout included traverses and turntables for the locos and carriages. There were, later, hydraulic lifts to link the main line with a goods Depot, built at a lower level to facilitate loading from the Canal Basin. Goods Offices, Carriage Sheds and stores completed the complex.

This was the first really comprehensive transport interchange, combining rail, road, waterborne and pedestrian or horseborne traffic. In 1841, the lines were extended to Bridgwater and 1845 saw the con-

struction of the Bristol and Exeter terminus on the nearby site. In 1844 the Bristol and Gloucester line was opened and the Midland Railway took it over in the following year. In 1845, therefore, there were three railways sharing two stations, and the difficulties were exacerbated by problems of mixed gauge.

By 1865 it was clear that a new, combined, station was required and plans were obtained with Parliamentary sanction. Matthew Digby Wyatt who had assisted Brunel with the detail design of Paddington Station was employed as architect, and the new Temple Meads, started in 1871 was completed in 1878. This is the Temple Meads which we now use, with the familiar ramps and forecourt. The right hand gate of the Brunel Terminus was demolished to form the arrival ramp, and the train shed was extended, giving a total of eight platforms. All these alterations respected the original decision to build in the Gothic Manner, though they were thought to "improve" on Brunel's design.

By 1935 the increase in traffic necessitated another extension, which was built on the East side, and included widening of the approach bridges. A new canopy covered the extended platforms, whose number was increased from eight to fifteen. After this rebuilding, the old Terminus and train shed lost importance, though it was still used for LMS traffic, and the Avonmouth lines, until 1966 when it became disused.

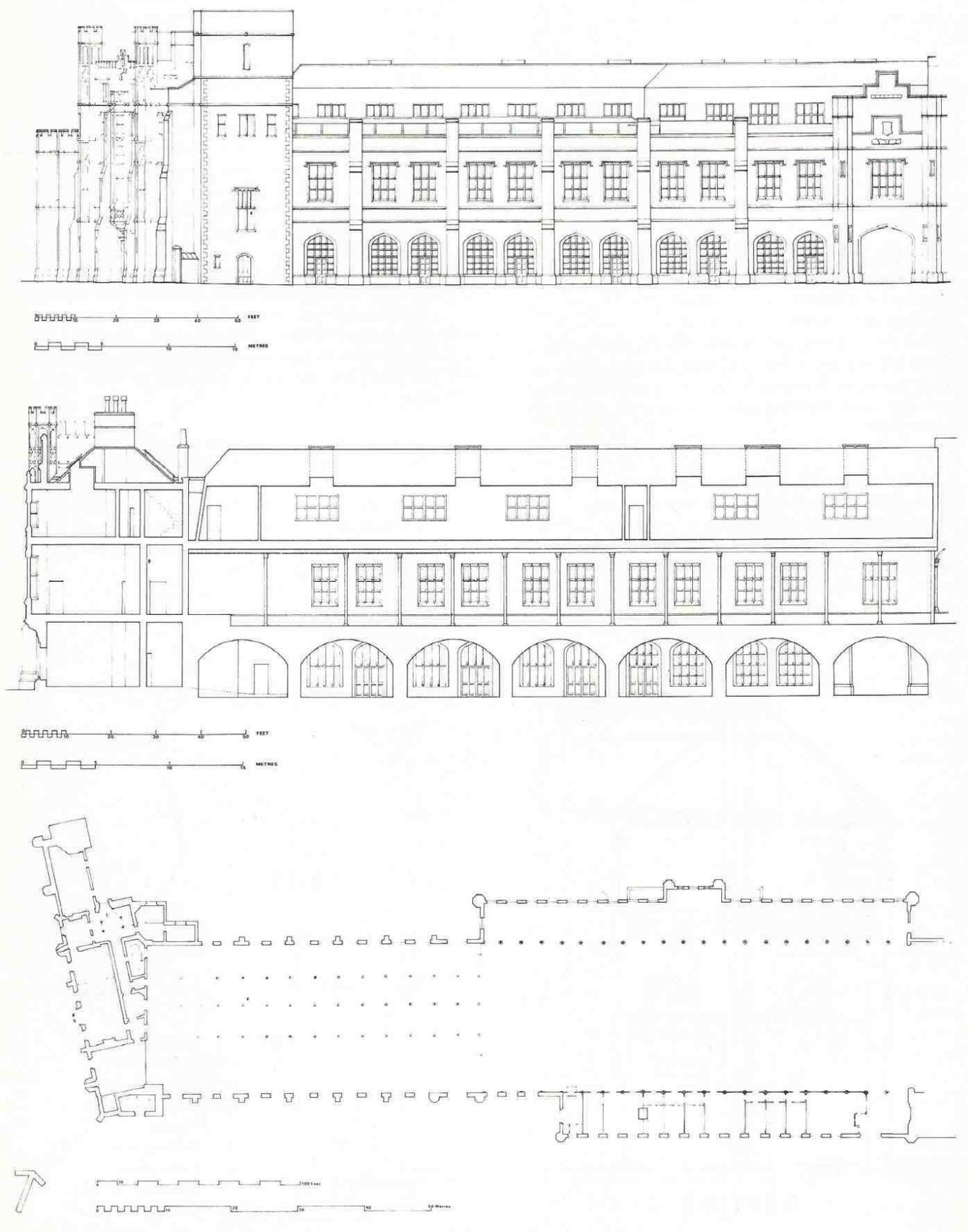
The track was taken up and the train shed used for car parking. There then followed five years of uncertainty for the Brunel buildings, by now, listed as of Architectural importance. Their destruction at one time seemed to be very likely, as the increase in road traffic demanded a better entrance to the Station and a wider road opposite.

British Rail also began to feel the need for more modern offices and wanted development of the site. In April, 1970, following an emergency meeting of the BIAS Committee, Mr. Jeffrey, the Chairman, wrote to Councillor Gervas Walker pleading for the retention of the important parts of the building, but it was not until May, 1971, following detailed consideration of all the factors involved that the Planning Committee, almost unanimously declared in favour of retention and preservation.

The problem now is to find a satisfactory use for the Brunel buildings. One suggestion is that they would serve as display space for the City Museum's collection of technical exhibits. However, British Rail may still

require the valuable space which has been in constant use since the days in 1840 when broad gauge locomotives were turned on the other side of the Board-room fireplace. Whatever the decision, Brune's work

is safe for a while longer and it is satisfying to record that BIAS members have again played a part in a positive way to defend the industrial heritage of Bristol.





OLD TEMPLE MEADS The interior of the Brunel train shed as it is at present (Photo: John Mosse)

THE COVER DRAWING

The elevation of Old Temple Meads' office frontage was made by John Mosse A.R.I.B.A. The survey drawings were prepared by Martin Watts, who is now working in John Mosse's office. The survey was commissioned in 1969 by Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery as one of a series of measured drawings of important industrial buildings in the City, and we are grateful for permission to reproduce this and the other drawings of Temple Meads in this Journal.