

Iconic photo of Isambard Kingdom Brunel saved for the nation

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The Brunel Museum has secured for the nation an iconic photograph of the eminent Victorian industrialist, Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Image



Taken by renowned photographer Robert Howlett, the internationally recognised image captures Brunel standing in front of the chains of Brunel's luxury steamship, SS Great Eastern in 1857.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the little man with a big hat, a big cigar and even bigger ideas, stands in front of the massive chains used to control the launch. The image has come to stand not just for the man and engineer, but for the whole industrial era.

News of the purchase comes 160 years to the day that SS Great Eastern prepared for her maiden voyage. Fitted out in extravagant style and unspeakable luxury, the ship was described as 'four 5* hotels joined together'. 10,000 people attended the first launch, but it was not auspicious, despite Brunel's heroic pose in the photograph.

The museum has secured the picture with the help of a £20,000 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). The acquisition was also supported by the Art Fund, V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of National Libraries.

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of the NHMF, said: "This iconic photograph of Isambard Kingdom Brunel is not only a defining image of him but a reminder of the might of Victorian engineering. Of outstanding importance to the nation, the National Heritage Memorial Fund felt it imperative the print's future was secured at its rightful home at the Brunel Museum."

SS Great Eastern and Robert Howlett

SS Great Eastern was Brunel's last project, and just a few hundred yards down the river from his first, the Thames Tunnel. Much of the great ship's launch ways remain intact: weathered timber ramps sit in a landscaped park on the Isle of Dogs. The photograph taken there is famous, but the site itself is little known and the ramps quite hidden away. Arguably the birthplace of modern shipbuilding, the ramps are a scheduled monument.

The print was made from the original glass negative and is likely to have been produced in 1857 at the studio of Robert Howlett. The photograph was to become one of the most important images of the era, and of Brunel himself - a towering genius of the Victorian age. His SS Great Eastern was an audacious project, a ship six times bigger than anything else afloat and carrying ten times as many passengers. Nicknamed 'Leviathan', it was not only the biggest ship in the world, but the biggest for half a century.

To document the construction of the monster ship, The Illustrated Times commissioned photographer Robert Howlett. Considered one of the most skilful photographers of his time, he was the mastermind behind the image at hand.