

THOMAS BRASSEY'S FIRST SUCCESSFUL RAILWAY CONTRACT

It is popularly thought by followers of Thomas Brassey that after the unsuccessful railway tender for the Dutton Viaduct over the River Weaver and the Weaver Navigation in Cheshire his next tender for the Penkridge Viaduct over the River Penk in Staffordshire, in 1835, was his first successful railway tender. I am sorry to disappoint you reader, but this is not true. Let me explain.

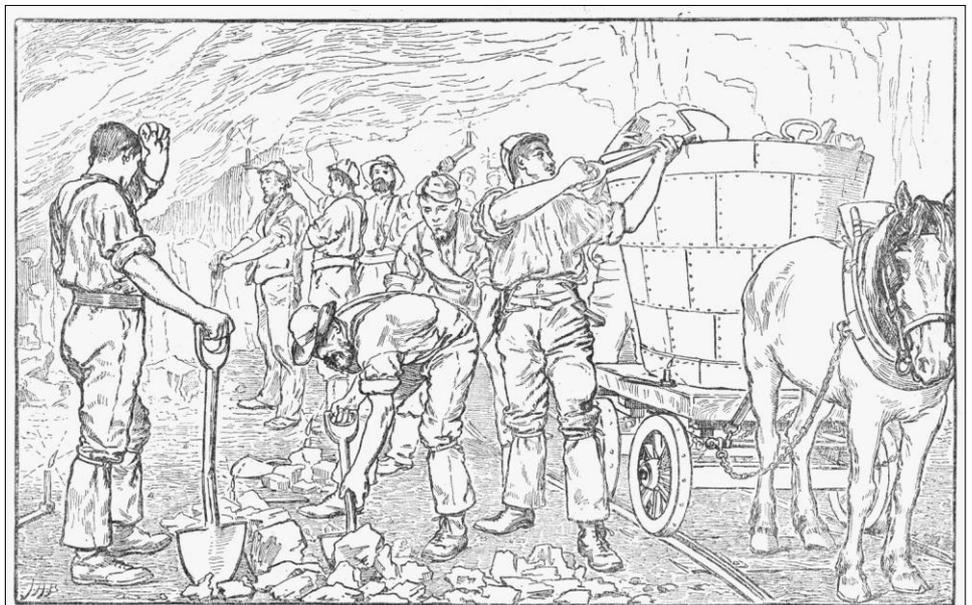
After leaving school Thomas Brassey went to work for William Lawton who was a surveyor and land agent in and around the Chester area. Brassey's first job in his apprenticeship as a trainee surveyor was to work with a surveyor named Penson, under the direction of Thomas Telford, on the London to Holyhead road from Shrewsbury to Holyhead, now known as the A5.

The work Thomas Brassey undertook after he had left his first task with his employer, William Lawton, proves to us what a remarkable man he was. Not only did Lawton put Brassey in charge of his Birkenhead Office but he also made him a director of his company. At the same time Brassey worked for the Stanley family, managing their commercially developing Stourton (Storeton) Quarries on their estate. It was there that he first met George Stephenson who was looking for stone for the Sankey Viaduct. Brassey envisaged the expansion of the Birkenhead the area and so built himself a brick works and lime kilns, borrowing the funds for this from his father. He thus had many "balls in the air" as a comparatively young man, which proves that he was very capable and had the ability to do well.

Another task he undertook was to successfully tender and build a railway in 1830/31 to carry heavy loads of salt from the Cheshire salt mines in and around Marston near where the Lion Salt Works Museum now stands.

Lion Salt Works began working in 1894 but the mining of rock salt in Cheshire began before 1720. The early mines were in the top bed of rock salt which was 120 feet down in the Northwich area. Thomas Brassey, at the age of 25, aware of the track at Flaybrick Cemetery in Birkenhead, (running since 1819) and its ability to move heavy quantities of materials, was contracted to build the necessary railroad to move the heavy loads of salt.

On 14th August 1830 Thomas Brassey settled a contract between himself and the salt mines' owners to build a railroad. The railroad, named the "Marston Rock Salt Railroad", carried the rock salt and had five branches. It collected salt from various mines in the area and took it down to the quays on Witton Brook, a navigable tributary of the



River Weaver, for further transportation. Including the branches from the various mine heads, the track laid for the railroad was a length of about 1300 yards. In January 1831 Thomas Brassey was given £1000 up front to prepare the track. A further amount of £1706 was paid to John Brassey, his father, who doubtless provided the early finance to assist Thomas to fulfil his duty in completing the contract. The track was completed and running by late 1831. Thus his first successful railway building contract had been completed, not at Penkridge but at Marston.

Click here to see the 1848 Tithe Map showing the area which is held in the Cheshire Archives. When the map appears, search for Marston and Wincham to find Witton Brook and the sites of the old Salt Works.

<https://maps.cheshireeast.gov.uk/tithemaps/>

Space here precludes much detail about the track itself but it clearly was a successful venture and ran for several years without problems. Occasional references describe the hire of horses at 6d. per day so one can assume that the wagons were, at least, part hauled by them. Towards the end of the 1830s the land upon which the rail road ran suffered from subsidence due to the flooding of the mines, which led to the dissolving of the roof support pillars and subsequent collapse. This subsidence caused the land to distort the track, which consequently twisted and thus needed much attention. In 1844 the following extract from an undated estimate just before closure says it all;

“pulling up and raising 3 stages, raising 3 points, supplying 600 loads of cinder to raise and ballast the whole length, to pull up and relay over 1017 yards from office to the works, to strengthen rails, and to supply timber, kays, pins and chairs”.

By December 1844 the railroad closed due to all the mines being flooded. During its 12 years of operation the railroad served the mines well carrying in excess of 200,000 tons. If a wagon carried about one and a half tons, this would average about 40 wagons a day over this period, although it was probably considerably busier than this at times.

There is much more detail to relate but perhaps that can wait until another time.

The details about the salt mines and the railroad have been drawn from research by Colin Edmondson and a report first published in the *“Journal of the Railway and Canal Historical Society”*.

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