

Canada Works, Birkenhead

When driving along Beaufort Road in Birkenhead people could be forgiven for not knowing that, just 300 yards from the Park and Ride, this was the site of the great 'Canada Works'. These were built in 1853 by Thomas Brassey, considered the greatest railway builder in the world. At that time Brassey had both a national and international reputation for railway building having completed three quarters of the railway system in France as well as many contracts in the UK. He teamed up with Sir Morton Peto and Edward Betts and employed 1,600 workers in Birkenhead and was paymaster for upwards of 75,000 men worldwide.

This site was chosen as he already had a thriving engineering contracting business in Birkenhead and he wanted access to the Great Float with rail sidings where he could focus on supplying the world with a full complement of railway materials including locomotives, track and bridges. The main workshop was 900 ft long and fitted out with a variety of machine tools including an iron and brass foundry and was designed to produce over 40 locomotives a year.

One of the largest contracts undertaken in Canada Works was the 540 mile Grand Trunk Railway in Canada which required a 2 mile bridge across the St Lawrence River, the Victoria Bridge. Brassey employed over 3,000 men on the contract with the majority being sent out from Birkenhead. The steel tubular bridge, designed by Robert Stephenson, was manufactured like a 'Meccano' kit at the Canada Works and shipped to Canada. It was then erected on 25 piers during one of the worst winters the region had experienced with temperatures going down to minus 40 degrees (C/F). Following this contract Brassey went on to build one in twenty miles of the world's railways. For further information about Canada Works see our Useful Links page on the Thomas Brassey Society website. <http://www.thomasbrasseysociety.org/links.html>

In June 2019 Wirral Council awarded Thomas Brassey a Blue Plaque at the old Canada Works site which was long overdue. During the unveiling it was said that the contribution of Thomas Brassey to the world's railways cannot be overestimated. He is up there along with Stephenson and Brunel.

The unveiling of the plaque was done by the Lord Lieutenant of Merseyside, Mr Mark Blundell accompanied by the Mayor of Wirral, Cllr Tony Smith and, as the Vice Chairman of Conservation Areas Wirral, David Allan, said: *"To erect this Blue Plaque on the wall adjacent to the great Birkenhead based Canada Works is more than an honour, it is a privilege."*

