

## Proposed Statue for Thomas Brassey

Let me tell you from the start that Brassey was a model employer. The family go back to the Norman Conquest in the 1100's and history tells us that parcels of land were handed out so Brassey's French ancestors settled in Cheshire as farmers and were there for some hundreds of years.

After schooling Brassey obtained an apprenticeship with William Lawton and eventually took over the business as a Civil Engineering supply and Contracting Company. When he needed money he initially borrowed from his father, but as things progressed he opened an account in Chester and this enabled him to expand – from then on it appears that all his money was self generated.

He went into the Railway Contracting business in the early 1830's working with Joseph Locke and quickly established a reputation for his railways being built to a good quality, on time and built at a fair price.

Initially, the Navvies he used were British/Irish and as documented they were an unruly lot and spent their time - when not working - drinking, fighting and causing havoc in the local towns. However, under the direction of the Gangmasters they worked well and Brassey supplied them with better rations, working boots and warm clothes. He also instructed the Gangmasters as to what they should pay the men, which was above the normal navvies rate. Apparently, the men thought the world of Brassey, the work continued much more smoothly and they would do anything for him so his railway building continued in the UK.

1840 - when Brassey obtained the contract for the Paris to Le Havre railway many of the UK navvies came over to work on the project but Brassey also took on local labour, mostly farm labourers. French railway building continued for the next 8 years whilst building other projects in the UK. It is worth noting that Brassey personally instructed local hospitals to treat any of his men who were injured at his cost. Also, all his men were apparently treated fairly — wherever they came from.

1853 – Brassey opened up his Canada works base which allowed him to seek contracts around the world. The first was in Canada on the 540 mile Grand Trunk Railway. Many UK navvies travelled to Canada for this work but local labour was recruited. Agents controlled sections of the line and the Gangmasters worked with the men. All these men were recruited and paid accordingly. Railway building continued around the world with many of his men following him from job to job. Brassey built railways in every continent of the world except Africa. When building in India after the Mutiny the price of labour and building materials rose upwards of 30% but we hear that Brassey did not cut corners.

*“On the Delhi railway much less difficulty was experienced in obtaining local labour owing to the firm having become known to the natives and to their having established a reputation for fair dealing and punctual payments. Besides the local labour of the Punjab, a great number of work people from Bengal, Oudh and the North West Provinces flocked to the line so soon as it was known that the works were fairly commenced and throughout the contract a sufficient amount of labour was at all times obtainable.”*

Source: *“The Life and Labours of Thomas Brassey”* by Sir Arthur Helps, a Victorian biographer who actually knew Brassey during his lifetime.

This is the story of a man who was exemplary in the treatment of all who worked for him.

Peter Bolt  
Secretary TBS