A short history of Thomas Brassey by David Hooley

The Norman Conquest of England, in 1066, added many new elements to an already existing vibrant culture. Among these were thousands of new families. Prior their emigration in the 11th Century to settle in Cheshire, the Brassey name was originally associated with the town of Brecy in the Caen region of France. The Cheshire family had many branches, from one of which descend the Brasseys, still existing and Thomas Brassey the eminent engineer.

During his life as a railway builder, Thomas Brassey built one third of all the miles of railway in this country, and one twentieth of all the railways built in the whole of the rest of the world. He built in almost all of the continents of the world and a high proportion of the countries. He built in excess of half a mile of railway, with the stations and bridges that were involved, for every day of his railway building life of 36 years. He worked with all the great engineers of his age, particularly with George and Robert Stephenson, with Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Joseph Locke. At his peak he employed over 80,000 men.

The interesting thing is that – nowadays - not many have ever have heard of him.

Thomas Brassey was born on 7th November 1805, at Manor Farm, Buerton, in the parish of Aldford, about six miles due south of Chester. His business branched out into a whole range of different areas from one of predominantly working on land surveying. He owned and managed brick works and sand and stone quarries in the Wirral and much of his business growth was in this Birkenhead area. He supplied many of the bricks for the emerging Liverpool. He was innovative in the way in which he handled the materials and he palatted', (to use a modern term), his bricks so as to avoid the damage and breakages caused by the tipping of wagon loads of them. He also designed a 'gravity train' that ran from the brick works and stone quarry site (at Storeton on the Wirral) down to the port and the empty carriages were then horse drawn back to the works, thus saving considerable time and effort. His first venture into the realm of civil engineering involved the building of a four mile stretch of the New Chester Road at Branborough, (recorded by that name but in reality Bromborough!) in the Wirral in 1834 and it was during this stage of his life that he first met another of the great engineers of the day, George Stephenson, who was looking for stone for the construction of the Sankey viaduct on the Manchester to Liverpool railway. This was to be the first railway for passenger traffic that was ever constructed in the world. George Stephenson met Thomas Brassey at his Stourton (Storeton) Quarry and it would appear that from this meeting Thomas Brassey was encouraged to enter into the emerging world of railway building.

His first attempt to enter the railway building world was unsuccessful. He tendered to build the Dutton Viaduct, near Warrington, but his bid was too high by some £5,000. (this viaduct was completed in 1837 with the first train, engine number 576 crossing in July of that year). It was shortly afterwards that he successfully took the first step that was to end in him becoming the greatest railway builder the world has ever known.

In 1835, he tendered for and won the contract to build a ten mile stretch of the Grand Junction Railway including the Penkridge viaduct in Staffordshire. He completed this task on time and within price, one of only a few such contractors to complete their sections successfully. This was the first step on the road to his outstanding success as a railway builder. Incidentally, it was this Grand Junction Railway that was to result in a little village called Crewe growing into the major railway centre that it very quickly became. Initially the engineer for this Grand Junction Railway was the

great man George Stephenson himself, but during the construction period he handed the responsibilities to his pupil and assistant, Joseph Locke and it was this Joseph Locke who was to have such a great bearing on Thomas Brassey's railway building career. Such was Brassey's success, and such the reputation that he quickly attained, that within a very short period of time he had railway building contracts on hand around the country, from the south of England to Scotland, with an estimated total value of some £3.5m at that time. It is estimated that in current terms this represents in the region of one third of a billion pounds!. Despite the scale of activities Brassey carried all his own financial commitments and was in no way subject to 'limited liability'. (It is said that the amount of money passing through Brassey's bank account in Chester exceeded that of many of the smaller European countries of the day).

Until 1841 all his contracts were in this country, but in that year he started working in France. For these French contracts, particularly in the early years, he did much of his work in partnership with the McKenzie brothers, William and Edward. (It was this McKenzie Partnership that had outbid him for the Dutton Viaduct contract in the 1830s).
The French had started rather later than Britain on the railway building programme and in the early 1840s, in an attempt to catch up, the French Government put out very large schemes for tender. Very few contractors were of sufficient size to take on such projects. Thomas Brassey and the McKenzie Brothers turned out to be the only ones who tendered competitively, and when they realised this, they agreed to work together rather than in competition with each other. Their first French contract was for the Paris and Rouen railway of 82 miles in 1841. In 1842 they were working on the Orleans and Bordeaux line of 304 miles, and in 1843 the Rouen and le Havre Railway of 58 miles. All of these lines included many major viaducts and similar works. During this period he and they built some 75% of all the miles of track in France.

In the early 1850s, Thomas Brassey took on the largest contract of his railway building career when he started on the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada, (1854/60). His, and his partners part in this massive venture involved the building of 539 miles of railway along the valley of the Saint Lawrence River from Quebec to Toronto. This included the Victoria Bridge over the river at Montreal, which was designed by Robert Stephenson. This was the longest bridge in the world at that time, some one and three quarter miles in length. It is still one of the longest overall and still the longest of its type. The contract also included all the materials and rolling stock, the manufacture and fabrication of which was achieved by opening his own works in Birkenhead, appropriately called 'The Canada Works', and shipping out all the materials, steelwork, and rolling stock for the contract.

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There is not enough space to describe all of Brassey's contracts in most of the continents and a very high proportion of the countries of the world, but a brief summary of the major undertakings can be given. In total, one estimate concludes, he was responsible for over 8,500 miles of railway track throughout the world.

<u>These main contracts were in</u>:
The Argentine. The Central Argentine Railway of 247 miles, as well as contracts in other parts of South America,
Austria. The Kronprinz-Rudolfsbahn in 1867 of 272 miles, the Czernitz-Suczawa line of 60 miles in 1866, and the Suczawa to Jassy railway in 1870 of 135 miles.
Australia. The Nepean Bridge and the Queensland Railway of 78 miles in 1863.
Denmark. The Jutland Railway of 270 miles.
East Bengal. The Eastern Bengal Railway of 112 miles in 1858),

Canada. (as already described).
India. The Delhi Railway of 247 miles in 1864 which involved the transporting of about 100,000 tons of equipment and rolling stock imported from England some 1,000 miles inland; and the Cord Line, in 1865 of 147 miles.
Italy. The Maremma-leghorn Railway of 138 miles, built in 1860, and the Meridionale Railway of 160 miles in 1863.
To this should be added the other countries from around the world of;
Belgium, Bohemia, Crimea, Holland, Hungary, Prussia, Nepal, Norway, Spain, Moldavia, Saxony, France, Transylvania, Syria, Persia, Russia, apart from all the building that he did in Britain.

Needless to say, Brassey didn't simply build railways and the associated equipment. He built docks, such as the Victoria docks in London in 1852, of over 100 acres, along with all the associated warehousing. He built the Birkenhead docks in 1850, the Barrow Docks in 1863, as well as the Callao Docks in 1870. He built his own engineering works, one in France, (at Sotteville, Nr. Rouen) very early on to supply the contracts in France. For this he took over a Mr William Buddicom, who had previously been the Superintendent at Crewe for the Grand Junction Railway. He built, as well, the Canada Works at Birkenhead, which was initially built to supply all the equipment for the major contract in Canada. He built harbours around the world such as that at Greenock. He built major tunnels such as the Hauenstein Tunnel in Switzerland, on the line from Basle to Olten, (of one and a half miles length) in 1853, the Bellegarde Tunnel in France of two and a half miles in 1854. He built hundreds of stations, but of particular interest to us, that at Chester, which had the longest platforms in the country at the time of its opening on 1st August 1848. He built Shrewsbury Station, opened 1st October in the same year, as part of the Chester- Shrewsbury line. This line included the beautiful viaduct known as 'Cefn Maur', (opened 14th August 1848). This is close to the Telford's aqueduct across the River Dee at Llangollen, known as 'Pontcysyllte', and he built the station at Nantwich. His company was also supplying the stonework for the Runcorn Bridge at the time of his death. He built housing estates such as that at Southend. There appears to be no end to what he did in his busy life.

Thomas Brassey was directly and closely involved in two projects featured in a television series entitled 'The Seven Wonders of the Industrial World'. The first of these was as a major shareholder in '*The Leviathan'*, as it was originally called, but which is better known as '*The Great Eastern'*. This was by far the largest ship in the world at the time, built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and launched shortly before Brunel's death in 1859. It was Thomas Brassey who was instrumental in this ship being used to lay the first transatlantic telegraphic cable across the North Atlantic in 1864, linking Europe and America electronically. This was the only ship large enough to carry the weight of cable needed to stretch across the north Atlantic. The second 'Wonder of the Industrial World' with which he was involved was the London Sewer. In 1861 he built the twelve mile stretch of the Metropolitan Mid Level Sewer, for Joseph Bazalgette. Joseph William Bazalgette, (1819-1891), was Chief Engineer to the Metropolitan Board of Works and responsible for solving London's cholera epidemics of the mid 1800s, by the improvement and redesign of the London sewerage system. The section that Thomas Brassey built started at Kensall Green, went under Bayswater Road, Oxford Street and Clerkenwell, to the River Lea. This was considered by some to have been part of the greatest piece of civil engineering work ever undertaken in this country, and certainly changed for ever the health and the quality of life of Londoners. This sewer is still operational to this day, a true testament to both Bazalgette and Brassey.

*Brassey is said by some to have had a greater influence on the world at large than Alexander the Great.

*He was involved in the building of one in three of all the miles of UK railways built during his life, and one in twenty of all the miles of track built in the whole of the rest of the world.
*He was highly respected by everybody with whom he came into contact, whether King or Queen, Emperor or President, Engineer or navvy.
*As a side line he is said by some to have acquired more self made wealth than any other person of this country in the Nineteenth Century.

Thomas Brassey died on 8th December 1870, in Hastings, and was buried in the churchyard at Catsfield, in Sussex, where his memorial stone can still be seen.
There are busts in the Grosvenor museum at Chester and Chester Cathedral, plaques at the station in Chester and a tree called the 'Brassey Oak' to the rear of the mill in Bulkeley, near Malpas, on land formerly owned by the Brassey family. This tree was planted and surrounded with four inscribed sandstone pillars to celebrate Thomas Brassey's fortieth birthday in 1845. By then of course he was already a great international figure. These pillars were tied together by iron rails, but as the tree has grown, these have proved too short and have burst causing the stones to fall. They have now been relocated to an adjacent site near the road with an interpretation panel, explaining their significance.

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There is very little else anywhere to record or celebrate the life of this great Cheshire man other than the magnificent railway structures that he created.
His was a remarkable career, the son of a Cheshire yeoman farmer, of whom most of us have never even heard.