

## BRASSEY

Today, perhaps, it is only architects whose names live with their creations. Those who build bridges, roads and railways are hidden within the corporations responsible, but in the nineteenth century they could be national heroes. They could certainly amass considerable wealth, even if they faced remarkable risks in obtaining it.

The first Thomas Brassey was

probably the most successful of the contractors, was called a European power, through whose accounts more flowed in a year than through the treasuries of a dozen duchies and principalities, but he was such a power only with his navvies.

Brassey's work took him and his railway business across the world, from France to Spain, Italy, Norway, what is now Poland, the Crimea, Canada, Australia, India and South America, quite apart from major works in the UK. His non-railway work was also impressive: docks, factories and part of Bazalgette's colossal sewerage and embankment project in London.

When he died at the (Royal) Victoria Hotel at St Leonards on 8 December 1870 Brassey left close to £3,200,000, a quite enormous sum that in today's terms would probably have been over a thousand million. He had been through some serious scares when his contracts had not yielded what he had expected, and in the bank crisis of 1866, but he had survived to build the colossal country house of Normanhurst Court in the parish of Catsfield. He is buried in the parish church there, and there is a stained glass window in his memory.



The family ran out of male heirs in 1919, as will be seen below, and the female side was already so well-supplied with country houses that Normanhurst was no longer required. It lived on as a school for a while and then as a prisoner of war camp in the second world war. It was a large estate and the house had eighty rooms. The post-war climate was far from kind to such properties, even if in good condition. By the end it was owned by Captain Tom Egerton of Mountfield Court, who tried for three years to sell it, but without success. The alternative was demolition, which took place in 1951. A caravan park now occupies part of the site.

Railway contracting was very risky. Conditions on the ground were not always what the surveyors had forecast, particularly in tunnelling; harsh weather could delay the works; the navvies and the various categories of skilled men had to be properly paid and well-treated or they might just drop their picks and shovels and go elsewhere. Bidding was an uncertain process. At best it could make one a fortune. One case, in Dorset, was of a man who thought at first that he could build the line from Dorchester to Maiden Newton for £18000. He consulted his wife and adjusted it to £20000. Having

thought it over, he decided on £40000. Further consultation with his wife produced the final tender of £80000. It was the lowest bid and he became a rich man. On the other hand Brassey, despite profits elsewhere, lost half a million when he built the Grand Trunk line in Canada, a major undertaking of some 539 miles for which much of his workforce had to be brought out from Britain and was paid much more than at home.

Very careful calculations were needed if the railway were to be built on time and within budget. Digging in stone was harder than in clay, and damp – not wet – conditions were better than prolonged drought or heavy rain. Digging had to be supervised to avoid men getting buried under spoil. Removing spoil from cuttings had to be carefully arranged through temporary rail lines, and the excess had to be taken elsewhere – somewhere useful if possible, like a new embankment. Bridges had to have firm foundations, sometimes hard to find. Tunnels had unexpected habits of falling in or of releasing unsuspected springs. Crossing even flat land could lead to difficulties: the Liverpool and Manchester line, opened in 1830, for example, still runs over Chat Moss, which the contractor found almost bottomless. Brassey met the same problem when building part of the Great Northern line through Huntingdonshire.

The right men had to be recruited in the right numbers. There were managing and assistant contractors, surveyors, stonemasons, brickmakers and bricklayers, and large numbers of navvies. The last were prone to drink, and there were many instances of violence between them, notoriously when Irish and Scots were on the same works. Then there was equipment: the lines themselves, wagons, horses or steam engines, picks and shovels, pitprops, bricks or brick clay, sometimes explosives. The men had to have somewhere to live: the sudden arrival of (say) 500 men, some with women, on a country village would overwhelm it. Finally the trackbed would need ballasting and the points and signals wired.

Brassey managed all this with great success and indeed with a measure of popularity. He was a hands-on contractor where he could be, engaging directly with his navvies. He would recognise them on later works and greet them. They in turn remembered him with what seems to have been some affection. When he was dying of a brain haemorrhage

his men remembered him and many of them came, some from abroad, to see their old master. ... They did not intrude upon his illness, but asked to be allowed to wait in the hall of his house, hoping to see him as he was helped out to his carriage, and to shake his hand once again.

His eldest son, also Thomas, said 'A small manifestation of kindness like this, how little it costs, how much it is valued.'

Brassey was a Cheshire man, born at Buerton, a small village south of Nantwich, on 7 November 1805, and educated at the King's School at Chester, which was then part of the cathedral complex. His father was a farmer. He and his wife Maria (who was talented in her own right, interpreting for him in his French contracts) had three sons who survived infancy, the first two of whom are described in further detail below:

Thomas (1836-1918), who became the first Earl Brassey.  
Henry (1840-1891), and  
Albert (1844-1918), who became a Conservative MP.

He started as a surveyor, moving to building roads. His first railway contract was for part of the London and Southampton railway in 1841. The Basingstoke/Winchester section of about 17 miles involved moving some 3,250,000 cubic yards of material, for which he employed about 100 men. Like all such contracts this was a major project, and he completed it successfully. He then contracted to keep the whole line in repair for ten years, at £24000 p a. This was a good bargain for him: when the contract ended the owners found that the actual cost was much less. From then his work expanded enormously. He had the reputation of bringing works in on time, within budget and without the disputes that occasionally disfigured the building process. His works also stood the test of time. His first overseas contract began in the same year, between Paris and Rouen. This involved the large Barentin viaduct that the French insisted had to be built in a particular way; it collapsed. Brassey then rebuilt it, at his own cost, in the way he preferred – and it carries trains today.

He also knew how to get the money owed to him. There is a story that another contractor, Richard Potter, having provided huts for the French army in the Crimea, wanted payment from the French

government but met continued delays. Brassey happened to be in Paris and advised him to slip some money to the minister. He knew the ropes: his advice worked.

As with so many of his kind, Brassey's sons did not follow him into the business. They were comfortably off and preferred public service. Thomas, the eldest, became a barrister and amassed all kinds of honours, being Deputy Lieutenant for Sussex, and later Governor of Victoria for five years. He was also Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. He was an MP twice, latterly for eighteen years until his barony was awarded in 1886 (followed by being raised to Earl Brassey and Viscount Hythe in 1911). He found time to spend on his yacht in distant travels in his yacht. That of 1876 has thus been described:

They travelled in style with an entourage which included their children, a small selection of friends, a professional crew, domestic staff, a dog, 3 birds and a kitten. Their eleven month voyage took them via the Pacific, through Tahiti, Japan and even allowed them to travel over land to visit the pyramids in Cairo. Annie wrote about their adventures in *A Voyage in the Sunbeam* (1878).

On another voyage, in 1887, his first wife Anna died of malaria in the south Pacific; she was buried at sea and has a memorial at Catsfield. His yachting got him into a little more trouble: in the summer of 1914 he sailed to the Kiel Regatta in Germany, only to be arrested for having insufficient proof of identity. His yacht *Sunbeam* was used as a hospital ship in the Mediterranean in the first world war, before being given to the Government of India for the same purpose. Brassey sailed it there to hand it over. When he died he was buried at Catsfield like his father, his coffin carried by a farm waggon.

The earl had five children who survived childhood, by his two wives. The eldest, again Thomas, served in the South African War, where he joined the Imperial Yeomanry and ended as the first Civil Commissioner in Pretoria after its capture in 1900. He had the misfortune of being struck by a taxi in Parliament Square on 7 November 1919, only a year after his father's death. Despite an operation he died of his injuries on 12 November at the London residence of his sister Mabelle (Egerton) at 32 Ashley Gardens, close by Westminster Cathedral. The driver, Edward Peacock, bore no guilt for the accident.

There being no son, his titles died with him. His wife Idina, daughter of the Marquess of Abergavenny, gave conspicuous service as a nurse in the first world war when Normanhurst provided a military hospital, and lived to 1951; she died at Park Gate just north of Catsfield village. The local connection continued through Mabelle, who became châtelaine of Mountfield Court. Muriel married Earl de la Warr, who engaged in a notorious affair with an actress for which she divorced him in 1902. She became a strong supporter of women's rights and a member of the Labour Party. Their son Herbrand became the ninth earl in 1915. Having swiftly left Eton, he joined the Royal Navy and served on minesweepers to the end of the war; he was said to have been the only man ever to have stood on the steps of the throne in the uniform of an able-bodied seaman. He was the first peer to join the Labour Party but followed Ramsay Macdonald in the great split of 1931. He joined the Cabinet in 1937 and was a minister in Churchill's 1951 Conservative Government. As a major property owner in Bexhill and as mayor there (like his Brassey father and grandfather before him) he was instrumental in creating the modernist pavilion that bears his name. He lived to 1976.

Marie married a rising Liberal politician named Freeman Freeman-Thomas, who later became Governor-General of Canada and later still Viceroy of India. He was created Marquess of Willington, the last creation of that rank outside the royal family. She died in 1960.

The first Brassey's second son Henry, like the third, became an MP: for Sandwich between 1868 and 1885. In line with his father's calling, he married a woman from George Stephenson's family line. Henry's son, also Henry, bought Apethorpe Hall in north Northamptonshire and became a Conservative MP, being made Lord Brassey of Apethorpe in 1938.

All of the first Thomas's surviving descendants made what would be called 'good marriages', even if Muriel's turned out in the end to be bad.

As to Brassey himself, the name is well-known locally, even if only in street names.

#### Sources

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