

## “A Flash in the Pan – West Coast Main Line”

An article by **Bob Stevens**

The next time you zap down the West Coast Main Line to London on one of Mr Branson’s Virgin trains give a thought to Kilsby Tunnel and the Blisworth Cutting just south of Rugby. As you slide through both at around 100 mph, bear in mind that they are virtually untouched since Robert Stephenson completed the building of them in 1837 after taking over after the death of the original contractor.

Kilsby Tunnel, almost two and a half miles long and one hundred and sixty feet deep, took almost five years to complete and killed its original contractor. It was built with the aid of 1300 men, 200 horses and required 30 million blue engineering bricks to line. An average of 2000 gallons of water per minute was pumped out in one 19 month period during construction by 19 steam pumps.

A monumental “p\*\*s” up celebrated it’s completion at the Dun Cow Inn (Dunchurch) on the A45 with both George (father) and Robert Stephenson in attendance. Robert left the table at 2am but his Dad kept going till 4am.

Blisworth Cutting, also almost two and a half miles long, defeated its contractor after a year and a half of Herculean effort. Once again, Robert Stephenson had to complete. Twenty seven million cubic feet of earth, clay and rock were excavated of which one third was rock and required the use of *three thousand barrels of Black Powder*. (Imagine the Health and Safety forms you would have to fill in for that lot! I’ll bet they got a discount for *bulk buying* though). Again, millions of blue engineering bricks were required for the construction of massive retaining walls.

Masterpieces of 19<sup>th</sup> century civil engineering they are still there today, performing the role they were built for and apart from minor maintenance virtually as built and without preservation orders.

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