

Brunel's Hidden Kingdom

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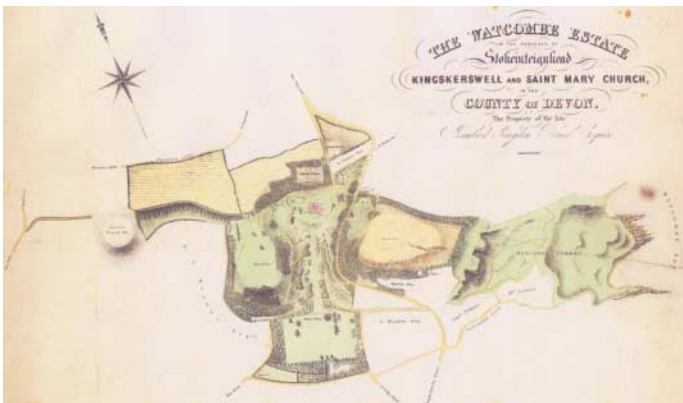
The last few years have stimulated a new interest in Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The many events of Brunel 200 commemorated his birth in 1806, while a recent television poll of 'Great Britons' placed him second in the list - next to Winston Churchill. It might seem that Brunel's life had been thoroughly explored, that all that needed to be said had already been spoken. Yet one big gap remained in the story of Brunel's life - the twelve years spent in assembling and laying out Watcombe Park near Torquay in Devon. Watcombe Park was a significant personal project for Brunel and absorbed a great deal of his time; although sadly, the house he planned was never built and much of his landscaping has been covered over or despoiled by neglect over the years. My new study, *Brunel's Hidden Kingdom* (Creative Media Publishing, Paignton 2007, ISBN 0-9546071-2-0, £19.50), describes in detail how he assembled his land, how he planned his improvements, how he planted his trees.

Relatively little is known about this 'Hidden Kingdom' and the Watcombe Adventure has not featured strongly in books and articles about Brunel. Given the multi-faceted achievement of his short life, though, it is perhaps inevitable that his landscaping venture should appear of marginal interest - L.T.C. Rolt's excellent biography of 1957, for example, acknowledges Brunel's many achievements but with so much else to be fastened upon there is only one mention of Watcombe in the index and little more than one page in the text. In that passage Watcombe was no more than the lost dream, cast aside in the urgency to complete Great Eastern. I quote:

After 1855 the notebooks contain fewer and fewer references to Watcombe, for by this time Brunel's last enterprise had become all consuming and the dream of a peaceful retirement to the West Country was driven ever further into the background of his thoughts.

From this passage it appeared that Watcombe Park had been 'written off' as one of Brunel's few failures and misjudgements; though Tom Rolt's widow assured me that her husband was conscious of Watcombe's significance and was resolved to research it. The ill-health that led to his death intervened.

In recent years Professor R.A. Buchanan, University of Bath, has become the leading authority on Brunel. In his biography, written in 2002, he set out to modify some of the misjudgements and to fill some of the gaps in Rolt's biography, whilst recording his amazement that such a 'powerful and elegant' book should have been researched and written in eighteen months. In Buchanan's *Brunel* there are no less than six references to Watcombe in a variety of contexts - he notes, for example, that Brunel resembled many other leading engineers in aspiring to 'a place in the country' as a symbol of success. The phrase 'he bought the estate at Watcombe in Devon' tends to give an impression of a place 'ready-made', but in fact it was assembled with difficulty over a number of years as Brunel sought to get roads re-aligned and purchased extra parcels of land. Eventually the estate amounted to more than a hundred acres.



1859 Watcombe Estate map, William Dawson (DRO: 337B add/ME195, with permission)

Perhaps what is most surprising has been the almost total lack of recognition by local historians. The standard work on Torquay by Percy Russell (1960) describes in detail Brunel's contribution to the town's development through bringing the railway to Torquay and on to Dartmouth. On Watcombe, however, there are only these few dismissive lines: 'he planned his retirement there, and is said to have gone so far as to construct the foundations of a large residence'. Professor Buchanan notes the 'valuable insights' and 'perceptive comments' in the works of two descendants: Celia Noble's *The Brunels, Father and Son* (1938) and Cynthia Gladwyn's *The Isambard Brunels* (1971). The earlier biography by Brunel's son Isambard, *The Life of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Civil*

Engineer, (1870) has been well described as 'an act of filial piety' and also as 'a rather pedestrian publication'. However it is here, in one or two places, that one can pick up a sense of how significant Watcombe became to Brunel himself:

There can be little doubt that the happiest hours of his life were spent in walking about in the gardens with his wife and children, and discussing the condition and prospects of his favourite trees...The improvement of his property was his chief delight...[The arrangement of his plantations] gave him unflinching pleasure.

As his estate manager Brunel employed Alexander Forsyth. Finding the time to write an urgent letter about him on Christmas Eve in 1847 for a reference ('at once if you would'), perhaps demonstrates the importance the project had acquired for Brunel. Forsyth, one of the uncelebrated heroes of Victorian gardening, was engaged at the time on the tree-planting to embellish the 'gothic wonderland' of Alton Towers, but he moved to Devon in 1848, 'to superintend the formation of a Park, where all is to be done'. Brunel's landscaping venture also brought him into contact with some better known names in Victorian gardening. He probably received advice from William Nesfield who had taken over at Kew in 1844. He would have benefited, too, from the plant-hunting prowess of William Lobb, who brought back many of the specimens to be cultivated in the famous Veitch tree nurseries at Exeter (the Rolle estate at Bicton, laid out in part by the Veitch family, was already demonstrating what could be achieved in the friendly climate of the West Country).

To create his landscape park Brunel moved earth, planted thousands of trees, and formed terraces, walks and drives. He died in 1859, aged fifty-three, with his house unbuilt but with nearly twelve years of extensive shaping and planting accomplished. The written archive material on the landscaping of Watcombe is not large (although there are, however, a large number of photographs, many of which are reproduced in the book); but Brunel's recently rediscovered *Garden Notebook* contains valuable details of his instructions for tree planting and of his water and engine requirements. His sketchbooks and letterbooks are also useful. Two quite lengthy descriptions of Watcombe appeared in *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, in 1882 and 1887, which also add considerable detail. The second article, in particular, notes the artistry with which various tree types had been assembled: 'a good illustration of what may be done in that direction when the planter knows what he is about'. Artistry also appeared in the skill by which the visitor was exposed to 'the unexpected' - an important quality in landscape design in the days of the Picturesque. 'In fact one of the features of Watcombe is that at every turn something unexpected presents itself to the eye'.

My study concludes with a brief description of Watcombe's future after Brunel's death. For a time the estate was well-maintained, especially in the hands of the Wrights, a Nottingham banking family; but misfortunes came: the eldest son was killed in the Second Afghan War, and by 1900 the bank itself was in deep trouble. The heartland of the estate has been preserved, though most outlying areas have now been built upon. In 1987 part of the original landscape was registered as an Historic Park, and the following year Torbay Council designated a more extensive area as a Watcombe Park Conservation Area. The Great Storm of 1990 caused considerable damage, to some extent mitigated through a grant from Task Force Trees. Brunel's Watcombe Park has been undervalued for years; but in my view 'it remains the most personal of all memorials of Brunel - more personal than stations and statues and stained glass windows. His Great Britain was recovered from the Falkland Isles and brought home to Bristol to be restored. Surely it should be possible to salvage Watcombe Park for posterity'.

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