



Chippenham Museum

Chippenham Town Council

Digging Deep

The opening of Box Tunnel in 1841, meant the Bristol to London railway line was complete.

Many had said that Box Tunnel could not be built and even if it could, those who travelled through it would be deafened or suffocated. Brunel was confident in his design and construction began in 1836. When it was completed Box Tunnel was the longest railway tunnel in the world at nearly 2 miles long. The cost of building the tunnel, however, was high with over 100 navvies (the name given to workers who built the railways) losing their lives.

Despite Brunel's confidence a large number of passengers on the early railway were frightened to travel through the tunnel. Many would leave the train at its entrance and travel by road to join the train again on the other side.

For those that did brave the tunnel the journey was not pleasant. Francis Kilvert, who lived in Langley Burrell, gives a vivid account of what travelling through Box Tunnel was like:

18th May 1870, Went from Chippenham to the Bath Flower Show in Sydney Gardens. The carriage was nearly full. In the Box tunnel as there was no lamp, the people began to strike foul brimstone matches and hand them to each other all down the carriage. All the time we were in the tunnel these lighted matches were travelling from hand to hand in the darkness. Each match lasted the length of the carriage and the red ember was thrown out of the opposite window, by which time another lighted match was seen travelling down the carriage. The carriage was chock full of brimstone fumes, the windows both nearly shut, and by the time we got out of the tunnel I was almost suffocated.

Imagine you are a passenger on an early steam train passing through Box Tunnel.

Write your own diary entry. How do you feel before you enter the tunnel, are you nervous or excited? What happens when you travel through the tunnel? Use lots of descriptive words and write in the first person and don't forget to give your diary entry a date!

