

**SWINDON GWR RAILWAY WORKS  
AND  
SWINDON RAILWAY VILLAGE**



## **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GWR:**

I K Brunel (1806-59) was appointed as the Engineer of the Great Western Railway in 1833, at the age of 27.

In 1835, GWR was authorised by an Act of Parliament to “construct a railway from London to Bristol.”

At 118 miles this would be slightly longer than the other major trunk railway of its time, the London and Birmingham (112 miles) and considerably longer than all the other pioneering lines.

Brunel specified a 7 foot broad gauge, and the construction of the line began in 1836, using a variety of contractors and some direct labour.

The first section to be completed, from London to Maidenhead Riverside (Taplow), was opened in 1838,

Thereafter openings followed in eight phases culminating in the completion of the whole route in 1841.



## ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GWR SWINDON WORKS:

Swindon was selected as the site for the GWR Locomotive Works in 1840, by the Locomotive Superintendent, Daniel Gooch, because it was:

- At the junction of the London to Bristol main line and the Golden Valley line to Cheltenham
- A "convenient division of the Great Western line for engine working". Engines needed to be changed at Swindon, or close by, as the gradients from Swindon to Bristol were much more arduous than the relatively easy gradients between London and Swindon.
- The nearby Wilts & Berks Canal gave Swindon a direct connection with the Somerset coalfield and for drawing water for the engines from the canal. An agreement to this effect was completed in 1843.

Gooch recorded at the time: *"I was called to report upon the best situation to build these works and, on full consideration, I reported in favour of Swindon, it being the junction with the Cheltenham branch and also a convenient division of the Great Western Line for the engine working. Mr. Brunel and I went to look at the ground, then only green fields, and he agreed with me as to its being the best place."*

The Swindon Railway Works was opened by the in 1843 and served as the principal West England railway building and maintenance centre until closed in 1986.



## ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORKS:



At its peak in 1925, the workforce at Swindon numbered over 14,000. The works remained in use by GWR, and following the nationalisation of the railways, by British Rail, until it closed in 1986.

At its peak, the works was famous for producing equipment for all the GWR needs.

The first main line diesel-hydraulic locomotive was built at Swindon in 1958  
The works produced British Railway's last steam locomotive, 'Evening Star' in 1960.



## SWINDON STATION:

Swindon Railway Station, was designed by I.K. Brunel, and opened in 1842.



The original station had two island platforms, each platform with an identical two-storey building with attached timber canopies, linked together by an iron footbridge.

The 1842 Stone Building on the current island platform of the station building is part of the original design but there has been considerable alteration to the building, and the loss of its southern partner.



## THE STATION:

The Brunel design had three specific purposes:

- to act as an interchange for the line to Gloucester and Cheltenham
- to provide refreshment rooms for passengers travelling between London and Bristol whilst trains were stopped to swap locomotives
- to provide hotel accommodation for passengers

The station had refreshment rooms on the ground floor in an 'Arabesque' style. The upper floors contained a hotel: the now lost southern building contained the public rooms and the surviving northern block the bedrooms.

However, Brunel famously wrote about refreshments at Swindon station, that the coffee was inferior and tasted like it was made from roasted corn. He signed off the letter by saying: *"I have long ceased to make complaints at Swindon. I avoid taking anything there when I can help it."*

In the Steam museum there is a silver coffee pot, which it is believed served Brunel with such inferior coffee – it is in the shape of a broad gauge locomotive.



## WHAT REMAINS OF THE WORKS:

**Swindon Designer Outlet** - The outlet occupies the restored Great Western railway works and is owned by McArthurGlen. Built by Tarmac Construction and opened in March 1997

The buildings originally included:

V Shop - Boiler Shop

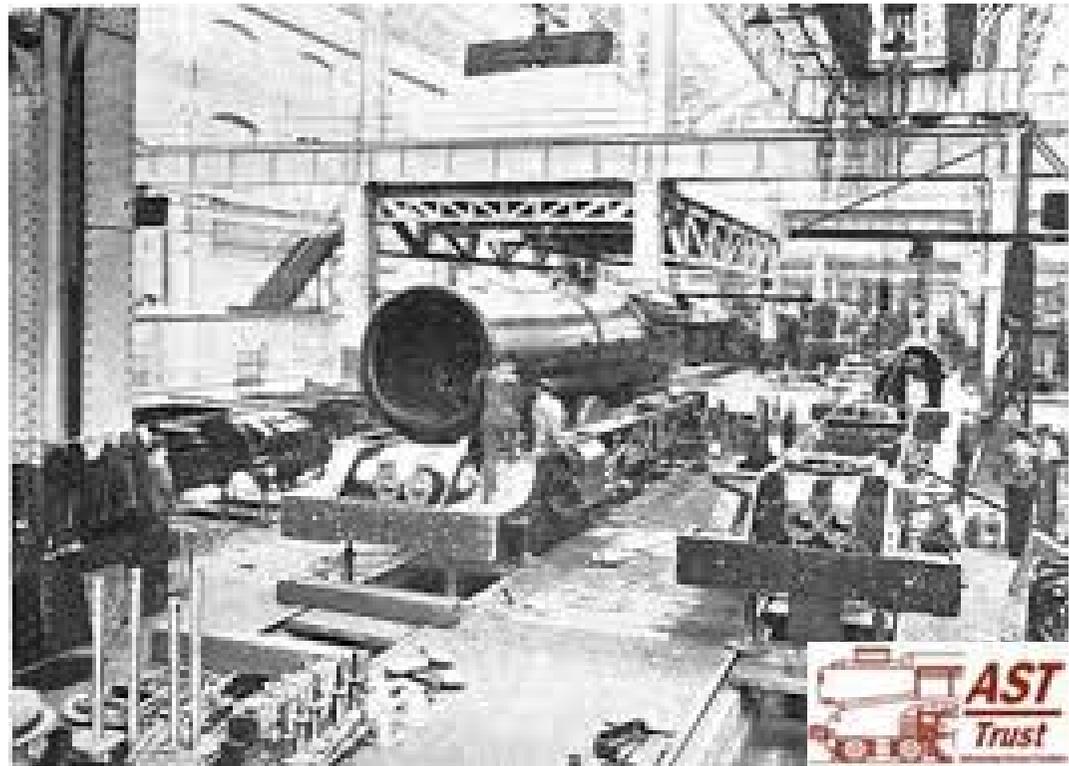
O Shop – Toolroom

J Shop – Foundry

J2 Shop – Chair foundry

In the eating area, a number of steam locomotives that were built at Swindon Works have been on display:

- 3440 City of Truro until 1999
- 4930 Hagley Hall 1999 - 2007
- 7819 Hinton Manor 2007 -2018
- 7821 Ditcheat Manor since August 2018



## **WHAT REMAINS OF THE WORKS:**

**STEAM Museum** – Originally the Smithy  
Locomotives on display:

No. 6000 King George V

No. 4073 Caerphilly Castle

No. 3440 City of Truro

No. 2818 Churchward Heavy Freight

No. 2516 Dean Goods

No. 9400 Hawksworth Pannier Tank

Replica of broad gauge 2-2-2 North Star

**The Engine House** - 1840s was built as the GWR Chief Mechanical Engineers and Drawing Office. It is now occupied by the Historic England Archive.

**Carriage Works** - 1876

**The Pattern Shop** – 1897 – Now owned by the Church



## **LOCOMOTIVE SUPERINTENDENTS AT GWR SWINDON:**

1835–1837 - Isambard Kingdom Brunel

1837–1864 - Daniel Gooch

1864–1877 - Joseph Armstrong (also Superintendent at GWR Wolverhampton 1854 - 1864)

1877–1902 - William Dean

1902–1922 - George Jackson Churchward

1922-1941 - Charles Collett

1941-1949 - Frederick Hawksworth

William Stanier was Locomotive Works Manager from 1923 to 1932 before moving on to become CME of the LMS at Crewe and Derby



## **THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:**

In 1840, Swindon was a small market town with a population of about 2,500. The Swindon area was mainly agricultural, and the GWR needed to attract workers from established industrial regions.

Since the works location was open farmland, about two miles to the north of the town, the GWR planned to build locally accessible housing and services for the workers.

The railway village was developed on the on the lines of similar Victorian-era socially-encompassing lifestyle concepts, such as those at Bournville, Saltaire and Port Sunlight.

The architect/builder, JD & C Rigby were given license to create both a model community and a commercially viable development

Construction started in 1842, with most of the buildings completed by 1855. Houses and cottages of different types were built, as well as lodging houses.



## THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:

**The Cottages** - The terraced two-storey cottages were built on two blocks of four parallel streets. The new roads were named after the destinations on the GWR. Number 34 Faringdon Road is now preserved as a museum.

Brunel himself designed only the first block of 1842 (4-25 Bristol Street); as it was visible from the railway line, it is in a more decorative style than the others.

The cottages to the west of Emlyn Square were built first (1842-1843), followed by those on the east side (1845-1847).

The contractors undertook to build 300 cottages but due to financial difficulties only completed 130, this delayed the actual completion of the village until the 1850s.

**Emlyn Square** – The Village is centered around Emlyn Square, named after GWR director Viscount Emlyn (later known as John Campbell, 1st Earl Cawdor)

The end blocks towards Emlyn Square, included the pubs and corner shops on the ground floor.



## THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:

**The Glue Pot** – Of the 3 original Village pubs in Emlyn Square, only the Glue Pot remains. The others were; The Bakers 1846 and The Cricketers.

**St Mark's Church** - 1845 was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott – who also designed the Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras Station, the Albert Memorial, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

**The Mechanics Institute** – In Emlyn Square, completed in 1855

The GWR had set up a separate company, the New Swindon Improvement Co., as a workers' welfare venture, to build an institute, shops and market stalls. Originally to be paid for via subscription by the workers and would contain the UK's first lending library, as well as providing health services to workers.

The initial building was designed and constructed Edward Roberts of London, with a library and reading room, coffee room, mess room, baths and, at the rear, an octagonal market hall. It was considerably enlarged 1892-1893 by Brightwen Binyon, in Jacobethan style. The central theatre fly tower was built in 1930 following a fire.

An extensive range of classes and lectures were provided for both men and women, with technical education particularly important, this being harmonised with the progress of apprentices and students through the railway works.



## **THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:**

**The Barracks** - Former model lodging house for workers on the Great Western Railway.

Construction began in 1847, but owing to the recession in 1847-1849, building was delayed until 1853-1855. The Gothic style design, was intended to match the nearby shop blocks within the railway village.

The lodgings provided over 100 sleeping rooms, each with a bed, chest of drawers and a chair; other facilities included kitchens, a bakery and day rooms. The building was overseen by day and night porters.

The hostel proved unpopular with lodgers, who found the institutional nature less attractive than the more homely option of lodging with local families.

The building appears to have remained largely empty for many years, and by 1866, had been condemned as living space, and sold to the Wesleyan Chapel Trustees, to be converted to a Methodist chapel.

In 1959 it was converted again to house the Great Western Railway Museum, 1962-2000; currently used for education and performance.



## **THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:**

**Central Community Centre** - Part of the buildings making up the present Central Community Centre were constructed in 1862 as the drill hall and armoury for the XI Wiltshire Volunteer Rifle Corps. The corps had been formed from among the workers at the GWR railway works, in response to the threat of potential invasion from France by Napoleon III.

In the 1860s, a number of serious accidents were suffered by GWR workers, including three deaths in a single month in 1869, where workers were struck by trains as they crossed the railway line.

Accident victims were usually taken to an inn or other makeshift location where they awaited a doctor's visit. There was criticism of the GWR company for not addressing more seriously the prevention of accidents.

Joseph Armstrong, then Superintendent at the works, petitioned the directors in February 1871, suggesting that the armoury should be converted to a hospital. The directors approved the plan, and the building was converted to a cottage hospital, with a five-bed ward, and operating room.



## **THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:**

### **Central Community Centre,**

The hospital was opened in December 1871, the work having been funded by an endowment from Sir Daniel Gooch, and a rise in workers' subscriptions to the GWR Medical Fund.

The Great Western Railway Medical Fund Society (MFS) had been founded in 1847, initially known as the Sick Club, later the MFS, with money raised by direct deductions from the wages of workers at the GWR works in Swindon. It was used to provide a wide range of health and welfare facilities for the workers and their families.

### **The Health Hydro (former GWR Medical Fund Baths and Dispensary)**

The dispensary and swimming baths, now the health hydro, was designed by JJ Smith of Swindon and opened in 1891 for the GWR Medical Fund Society. Washing baths were added in 1898-9; Turkish and Russian baths added in 1904-5; and additions made in 1911.

The GWR Medical Fund Baths and Dispensary included; two swimming baths, Turkish, Russian and washing baths, doctors surgeries, a dispensary, dental surgeries plus dental laboratory; and ophthalmology, chiropody, psychology and physiotherapy departments



## **THE GWR RAILWAY VILLAGE:**

### **The Health Hydro (former GWR Medical Fund Baths and Dispensary)**

The Health Hydro dated from some 50 years before the NHS.

Nye Bevan, Health Minister in Clement Attlee's Labour government of 1945, said of the National Health Service "There was a complete health service in Swindon. All we had to do was expand it to the country."

**GWR Park**, Faringdon Road - GWR Park was established in the 1840's initially as a cricket pitch for GWR employees and then as a formal park in the 1870's when formal beds and glasshouses were laid out. Since that time the park has played a key role in the sporting and social life of Swindon, hosting many social events such as the annual Children's Fete which would attract crowds of over 30,000 people.

In 1844, land to the west of the new Railway Village, between Faringdon Road and the church was purchased by the GWR, for use as a cricket and recreation ground. A pavilion was built on the north side of the site and the New Swindon cricket team played there from 1847.



## **GWR Park,**

Cricket was a popular sport amongst the railwaymen and in addition to intershop matches, the New Swindon side played matches against other local towns and villages. Dr W. G. Grace – considered one of the greatest English cricketers – played here several times in the 1890's. He was bowled out (twice!) for a 'double duck' by a local man, the only time he is recorded to have suffered such a defeat.

In 1871, the grounds were landscaped to become a 'Pleasure Garden'. A path for 'promenading' was installed, along with a park keeper's lodge, beautiful flower beds and glass houses for displaying plants all along the Eastern side.

For a while, a small bandstand stood in the park and an ornamental drinking fountain with metal drinking cups on chains attached to railings was located near to the lodge. These features were sadly all lost after the Second World War.

In addition to cricket, the GWR Park played a big part in the social life of the Railway Villagers, not least for hosting the annual 'Juvenile Fete', and occupies a special place in the history of Swindon.

