

'The ornament of Bristol and the wonder of the age'¹: Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge and a Regional Design Heritage

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Abstract

There is perhaps no symbol of Bristol more recognisable than that of Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge, which spans the Avon Gorge and links Clifton in the city of Bristol to Leigh Woods in North Somerset. Originally proposed as a stone bridge in 1753 as a bequest in the will of merchant William Vick, the wrought-iron suspension bridge finally opened over a century later in 1864 and had, for a time, the longest span of any bridge in the world. However, though Brunel's bridge is an incredibly significant feat of Victorian engineering, it serves as more than a bridge between two sides of a body of water – it is a bridge between past and present, between design and place identity.

Designed by the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel in 1830, Clifton Suspension Bridge has become a key part of Bristol's identity. Over the last century and a half, it has become a symbol of Bristol and all that it is capable of, serving as a prime example of the city's engineering acumen and capacity for design, a bold steel structure for an industrial city. The man responsible for its design and construction has become an equally important symbol of the city – you cannot walk through Bristol without feeling the legacy of Brunel, evident in Temple Meads station, the Great Western Railway and the S.S. Great Britain. However, the impact of Brunel is also felt further afield in the region, which is especially apparent in his design for Box Tunnel outside of Bath.

These historic landmarks provide a starting point for discussions around contemporary ideas of design within the region. This paper will focus upon the design and lasting visual legacy of the Clifton Suspension Bridge as a case study for the development of a diverse design heritage in Bristol and beyond.

¹ Sir Abraham Elton, 21 June 1831. Quoted from Buchanan, R. Angus (2006) *Brunel: The Life and Times of Isambard Kingdom Brunel*. London: A. & C. Black, 49.