



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

As the creation of a new bridge across the Menai Strait is announced, Jules wonders if the new structure can live up to the triumphs of engineering that went before it

Amidst the frenzy of excitement and growing harvest of British medals being gathered at the Olympics in Rio this August, an announcement was made in Wales that might give us something else to cheer about.

After many years of the usual political chat and dithering, it seems that at last there's a realistic hope that a new bridge may be cast over the Menai Strait, linking for a third time the Isle of Anglesey with the mainland.

It's no secret that I have a real soft spot for this ancient and unique island, and the bridges that currently connect it with the rest of the world are in their own right worthy of some marvel. The first, built by Thomas Telford, was brought about by the Act of Union 1800 with Ireland. Traffic to Holyhead, connecting Ireland to London along what we now know as the A5, increased to such an extent that Telford set about not just improving the road, but solving the problem of how to best cross the hazardous straits with their notorious eight-knot current, whilst still allowing tall sailing ships to pass through them.

The result, opened in 1826, was the Menai Bridge. With a groundbreaking design, its cast iron chains suspended a timber roadway 100 feet above the turbulent waters below. At 579 feet from end to end, it was then the biggest and longest suspension bridge in the world.

The Menai Bridge was a triumph of engineering and a milestone in the course of the Industrial Revolution. The material and technical challenges he overcame have rightly helped secure for Telford a well-deserved place in the history books. At a stroke, its opening cut the travel time from London to Holyhead from 36 to 27 hours, saving virtually a day in terms of early 19th century travel.

Just three years later, Robert Stephenson lit the firebox that would power the world's first viable steam locomotive, his famous Rocket, at the Rainhill Trials of 1829 in nearby Merseyside. The pace of change brought about by the Industrial Revolution has to me always been one of the most remarkable features of our more recent history. It was fitting then that his son, George Stephenson, should have secured the job of building the second bridge over the Menai Strait, with the specific task of carrying the new railway to Holyhead.

His creation, the Britannia Bridge, opened in 1850 and, with its tubular box section, once again pioneered the use of a radical design and spanned the Strait until it was destroyed by fire in 1970. Since being rebuilt to carry not just the railway but also the main A5, it's still a triumph of engineering and one that both Stephenson and its more recent re-inventors can be proud of.

What's all the more remarkable about these feats is that, having survived well into the 21st century,

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they both still do what they were built for; and in the case of Telford's bridge, long before the cars and lorries it now bears were even dreamt of.

When the new bridge design and its proposed location is revealed, there'll of course be some critics, but I hope the bridge's engineers will be able to head off most of the disparagement by producing something as inventive and inspiring as the two that preceded it.

When projects like this are developed these days, there's often a tendency to go for what is cheapest, and very often the least beautiful. I'm not sure that either Telford or Stephenson were as concerned about cost as they were about marrying good design with cutting-edge technology to overcome the seemingly impossible. The result has been two crossings that we've marvelled at for nearly 200 years. Let's hope that in 2021, when work on the latest of these structures is scheduled to start, it's something else that we and future generations can marvel at once again. ♪

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the Countryfile team, but is best-known as the leading face of Escape To The Country. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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