



The Britannia Bridge was an engineering masterpiece of the world, opened to the public in 1850

Who were the men who built it? Where did they come from?

Were any of your ancestors stonemasons, brick makers, sailors, contractors, clerks, engineers, foundry workers, riveters, carpenters?

My name is Julie Stone and I am researching the workforce of the Britannia Bridge. Much has been written about the technical construction but less is known about the people who were involved in the day to day building operation. The bridge was built to carry the Chester and Holyhead Railway across the Menai Strait and provide a through route from London to Dublin.

- **the engineers**

Railtrack, on the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Bridge, placed a plaque in Bangor Station. It said that the Bridge was the concept of Robert Stephenson, the

feasibility of the project was realised by William Fairbairn, and Edwin Clark was the resident engineer.

There are many more names in the engineering field attached to its construction.

- **the stonemasons**

The masonry contractors, Nowell, Hemingway and Pearson, were from Dewsbury in Yorkshire. Stonemasons and brick makers came with their families to live and work on site.

- **the labourers**

Some Irish ‘navvies’ were employed but many of the workforce came from the local area. Unemployed farm workers and copper miners saw an opportunity to earn some money and perhaps develop their skills.

- **the ironworkers**

The iron tubes were constructed with skills learnt in the shipbuilding industry and men came from the London shipyards to work on the bridge.

- **the woodworkers**

Scaffolding was needed to build the huge towers to a height of over 200 feet. Acres of staging were built for constructing the iron tubes. J&A Greaves were the contractors working with Nowell, Hemingway and Pearson.

- **the sailors**

The stone for the masonry was brought by sea from Penmon, and from further afield at Runcorn. There were therefore many sailors involved in this process, as well as those responsible for floating out the huge iron tubes into position for lifting into place on the towers.

- **the railwaymen**

For the initial testing Robert Stephenson drove the first locomotive across the bridge accompanied by key personnel. Thereafter the C&H railway employees took the powerful engines through the tubes, with a pilot on each train.

- **the public**

People turned out in their thousands at the opening ceremony and more than 700 passengers were taken over the bridge on the first crossing. A toast was given to the ladies for their bravery!

- **the memorial**

In St Mary’s churchyard, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, there is a Memorial built by the stonemasons in commemoration of those who died during the construction of the Bridge.

Searching for the Names –

To collect the names I have searched many sources.



*In St Mary's churchyard, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, **the monument** to those who died gives some fifteen names. Most deaths were due to falling off the staging or from things falling from above – no Health and Safety then!*

Newspaper reports provide vivid pictures of the flotation of the Tubes, of the opening of the Bridge in 1850, as well as reports of the accidents which occurred.

The 1851 census, from both sides of the Strait, shows some workers still living in the area but most had moved on to other projects.

*The **church registers** of Bangor, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, and Llandysili, although there are gaps, provide details of marriages, baptisms and deaths of men living and working at Britannia Bridge.*

There is a **database** of names collected so far, which can be searched by contacting Julie Stone juliestone.butterworth00@gmail.com or Nick Holyfield nick.mbcht@gmail.com

the masonry –

The Bridge consisted of three stone towers and a land abutment on each shore of the Strait, to take the huge rectangular Tubes through which the trains would run. The masonry was contracted to BJ Nowell, Charles Pearson. They were experienced contractors who had worked on railway bridges and viaducts in various parts of the UK. Work started in April 1846 and was completed in two years nine months.

- A study of **the stonemasons and brick-makers** with details of the materials used and the jobs involved, as well as the names of some of the

800 men, who were employed, has been put together and is available to view at the Bridges Exhibition.

The stone was quarried at Penmon on Anglesey and brought by sea to the site, where it was cut and shaped. The huge blocks were then raised and fitted in to position. The masonry survived fire in the 1970s and today supports the railway and a road above.



I should welcome contact from anyone with anything to contribute, particularly on the quarrying of limestone at Penmon, brickmaking on the Strait or about the vessels used to transport the raw materials to the site.

the woodwork –

Substantial scaffolding was needed to build the Towers to a height of over 200 feet above sea level.

Acres of staging were built on the Caernarvon shore to form an industrial site for the construction of the Iron Tubes before they were floated out to be raised into position between the towers.

Many wooden cottages or ‘the huts’, as they became known, were built to house the workforce and their families.

NEW

- A study of **the woodworkers** – the carpenters and labourers, who were employed to build the scaffolding and the staging, with details of their work, methods and designs.

John Hemingway – contractor for the masonry -

was a Yorkshireman, a stonemason by trade. Born in Dewsbury, he travelled about, working on the various railway engineering works of the time. He was honoured, he said, to work alongside Robert Stephenson and assist in working out the ideas of such a project.

He lived at Craig Owen, on Cadnant Road, in Menai Bridge with his wife and family. His daughters were married from there. Sadly both his sons died at a young age and thus the Hemingway name died with him.

- A study of the life and work of

John Hemingway
1795-1872
contractor

– with details of his family and of the various railway projects with which he was involved.



the portrait –

Through his daughters' descendants, a portrait of John Hemingway has survived. It has travelled the world and now has been presented to the Bridges Exhibition at the Telford Centre.

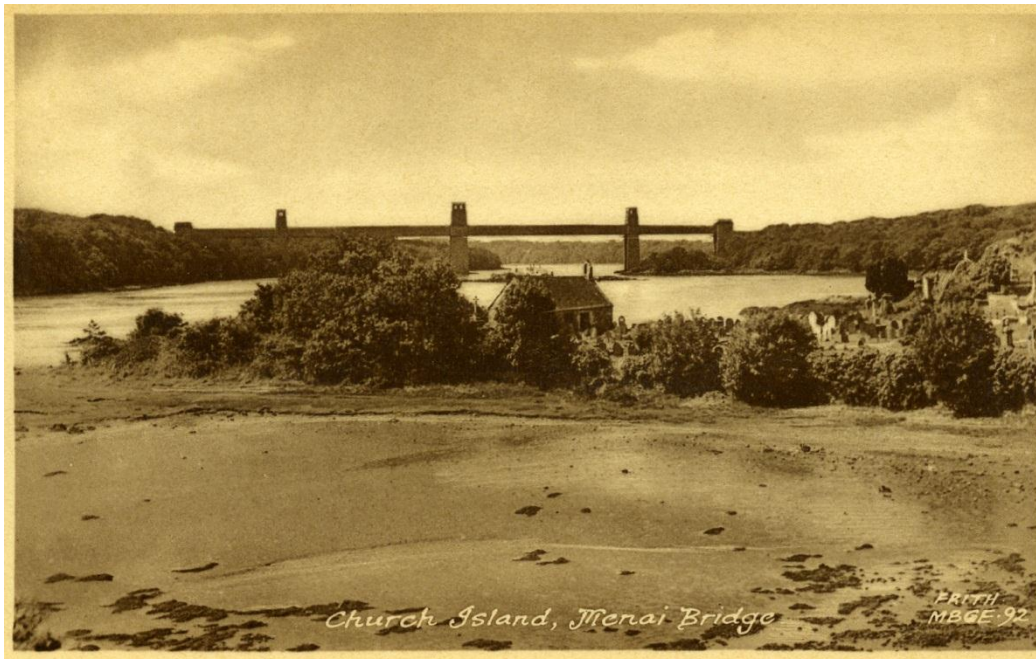
The portrait must have been painted in 1860s and shows the Britannia Bridge under construction in the background. It has been in the Hemingway family since it was painted and hung proudly on the owner's wall until the 1970s. Due to circumstances over the last 30 years it had to be stored and there is resultant damage to the canvas and the frame. To prevent further deterioration and ensure its safe future £5,000 of restoration is needed.

It is good to have the portrait in Menai Bridge where John Hemingway lived and died. He is buried on Church Island overlooking the Britannia Bridge. The oil

painting is a unique opportunity to commemorate this man. We have restorers for both the canvas and the frame. Funding is being sought for the restoration and donations are already being given.

If you would like to contribute to the **Subscription Fund** – to have your name perpetuated alongside that of John Hemingway, a contractor in the great days of ‘railway mania’ then please contact MBCHT and make your contribution

- tel: 01248 715046
- e-mail: mbcht@btconnect.com
- click on the Donations button on the front page of this website and make your donation on line
- make a visit to the Exhibition, see the portrait for real, and leave a donation at the desk (opening hours are generally school holidays and are displayed on the website)



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Any questions or information should be directed to
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