

The presentation to the recent meeting of Sandbach History Society, given via Zoom, was by Peter Bolt, secretary of the Thomas Brassey Society. Mr Bolt said that, “Who is this Thomas Brassey?” was a question asked throughout history yet there were few people whose influence on world development has been so significant.

Thomas Brassey was born at Buerton, near Chester, in 1805, the eldest child of yeoman farmer, John Brassey, and his wife Elizabeth. On leaving school at 16 he was articled to a land agent by the name of Lawton who also had a stone quarrying business. In 1824 he was loaned to Thomas Telford, who was building the Shrewsbury to Holyhead road, as a surveyor. At the age of 21 he was made a partner in Lawton’s company and when Lawton died in 1827 he assumed sole management of the company. His business branched out in many different directions including sand and stone quarrying and brick-making.

Mr Bolt said that whilst constructing a stretch of the new road at Bromborough he met another great engineer, George Stephenson, who was looking for stone for the viaduct at Sankey on the Manchester to Liverpool railway. It appeared that Stephenson encouraged Brassey to become involved in the emerging world of railway building.

In 1834 Brassey tendered for work on the 10-mile stretch of the Grand Junction Railway being built between Stafford and Wolverhampton by railway engineer Joseph Locke and which included the Penkridge Viaduct. Brassey was awarded the contract and so began his railway business. A year later he was awarded a contract on the London to Southampton Railway and Locke came to admire this young man’s energy, ability, honesty and integrity and it was, said Mr Bolt, the beginning of a lasting friendship.

Brassey never had an office or a secretary. He carried his papers around with him in a case and dealt with all his orders and letters. He also adopted revolutionary working practices when employing navvies who were hard workers but had a bad reputation for behaviour. He insisted that their clothing and boots were paid for, they had good meals and their pay was increased. As a result, the men gave their all and respected him. Brassey was

so successful that within a short period of time he had railway building contracts all around the country from the south of England to Scotland.

By 1841 he had set his sights on France and put in tenders with previous rivals, William and Edward McKenzie, and was successful in obtaining the contract for the Paris and Rouen railway of 82 miles. There soon followed another contract for 294 miles of the Orleans and Bordeaux line and the Rouen and Le Havre railway of 58 miles. It was in the building of this line that a viaduct at Barentin, 100 feet in height and one third of a mile in length and costing £50,000, collapsed after completion. It was rebuilt at the expense of the contractor and opened on time with the rest of the contract. Work in France continued, as well as in Britain, and by the end of this period the company had built three quarters of the French railway system.

In 1852 Brassey teamed up with Morton Peto and Edward Betts and opened new works, called the Canada Works, at Birkenhead. Here they produced everything a railway needed including locomotives and rolling stock. In that year Brassey also took on the largest contract of his railway-building career with the construction of the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada. This involved the building of the Victoria Bridge over the St Lawrence River at Montreal, the longest bridge in the world at the time, designed by Robert Stephenson. The contract included the supply of just about everything including locomotives, rolling stock, stations, and signalling equipment. The bridge was pre-fabricated in Birkenhead and shipped out to Canada.

His contracts across the world are too numerous to list but he built in every continent apart from Africa being responsible for the construction of 1 in 20 miles of the railway network in the world. He had a workforce, at any one time, of between 60,000 and 85,000 and had the ability to handle a number of these massive undertakings at the same time.

Brassey went on to construct numerous stations, including that at Chester (and the hotel opposite), engineering works, the Thames embankment, dock systems, mines, tunnels, bridges, viaducts and water and sewage systems. If there were any problems he put them right at his own expense, said Mr Bolt.

Particular attention was drawn to Brassey's part in the Crimean War. In 1854 reports were being received about how the British troops had to endure fighting in wretched conditions. An efficient system was needed to move supplies from the docks at Balaclava to the front at Sebastopol and a railway was the answer. Brassey chartered eight ships and everything needed, including two locomotives, was taken from England. The line was completed and the necessary military supplies, food, clothing and medicines were taken to the front and the Allies were victorious. Brassey and his men became national heroes.

After failing health due to cancer, Thomas Brassey died of a brain haemorrhage in 1870 and is buried in Hastings. He had more self-made wealth than any other Englishman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century leaving £5.2 million.

The St. Erasmus Chapel in Chester Cathedral was restored at the expense of his children and it contains a bust of Thomas. There is a plaque at the station in Chester and a blue plaque was erected at the Canadian Works in Birkenhead in 2019. He was a modest man and refused all titles and medals. He has received little recognition in Britain and is considered by many to be an unsung hero, said Mr Bolt. The Thomas Brassey Society is currently raising funds to place a bronze statue outside Chester station to ensure his legacy is not forgotten.

See [thomasbrasseysociety.org](http://thomasbrasseysociety.org) for further details.