

Tales from the Riverbank

Navvy (1870s) – Item - half brick

(Navvy is digging singing the Navigator song)

Navvy: I hope you lot aren't here looking for work, coz we've got a full gang at the moment. I don't think somehow that you'd really like to be working down here in the tunnel, looking at the state of some of you. It's hard work down here and some of you just wouldn't last. Besides, us down here we've all got experience. Oh yes I come from a long line of navigators. That's what they call us – the navigators. It sounds quite grand doesn't it until you shorten it to the navvies and its at that point that it starts to become a dirty word. I've heard you.

“Don't go in that pub, the navvies are in there.”

“Watch out the navvies are coming keep all your precious things inside.”

Thieves some people call us, drunkards others reckon but you know what we are neither we are the hard working men, 12 hours a day underground here building the tunnel for the likes of you to travel on your trains.

That's what we're building did you not know. The River Severn Tunnel. 60 feet beneath the ground and 4 and a half miles long. This will be the longest river tunnel in England, well and Wales as well of course coz that's where we're joining to. It'll be interesting that for you though won't it coz it'll mean that the River Severn this great barrier that keeps the Welsh out will have easier access to them through a tunnel.

You can of course cross the river on the bridges. My father worked on building that Severn Railway Bridge that they opened a few year back in 1879 a 1400 foot long monster that is supported on great huge cast iron cylinders. It was to be his last job. He didn't die or nothing, just returned home, but me, well I was already working down here in the tunnel. See it was a bit like a competition to see which would cross the river first and we were never going to win coz tunnelling takes time for so many reasons.

First you have to sink your shaft down, have to have a way to get into the thing don't you. They started on the other side over near, what's the name of that place, weird name, Portskewett, that's the one, in 1873, took two years to get 300 yards out under the river. The trouble is the water. There's tons of it above your head and it keeps pressing down trying to find a way in. Not only the Severn herself, the great goddess Sabrina as some do call her, no but also underground springs. You would have thought that with all their brains in coming up with the idea for the tunnel in the first place they would have known there'd be underground springs and all.

It was in 1877 that we were asked to start work over this side, the English side, the Gloucestershire side and the idea is that the two tunnels will meet in the middle. What do you reckon the chances? I tell you this sir I have worked on other tunnels and we have not failed yet!

But we have had problems. It was October 1879 and we were digging away under the river when suddenly, there was a mighty roar of water. Nothing is more worrying or fearsome than that sound. We who were working near the head, the front, we just got out as fast as we could. You don't want to be drowned in a tunnel.

They tried to dam it up using timber but it just kept coming through and after a day the tunnel was full to river level. The next day they had what's known as the "tightening ceremony" on the bridge, to show it was complete. There was all these important men standing up there watching and someone says to them, why not come and see the tunnel though it might be a little bit wet! Wet! Wet! You don't know the half of it you dozy lumox!

We couldn't do much see and were sitting around waiting for the chief engineer and the rest to make up their mind about how we should go on. What had happened, it turned out, was that an underground spring had somehow been let into the tunnel. They got these great pumps in to pump out the water and we had to build an engine house to put the great things in. Then in January next year they got some divers in. Have you ever seen those men? Twice now I have witnessed them and I have to say they are strange to survey. Big copper bowls on their heads all connected up to air pumps and that. The second time they come - see when they sealed the tunnel first time it didn't work – but second time they come they had this man from Wiltshire with them - never forget his name, Henry Fleuss. He didn't have no pipe connected to no pump. No, he had a copper tank filled with oxygen on his back. Now apparently Mr. Fleuss may be a clever inventor but he weren't no diver so they sent the diving man Alexander Lambert down with it on.

He managed to stop that flood. Imagine it will you, being under 60 feet of water and it's dark and cold. You are looking for a sluice gate which you have to close and trying to put more timber up to keep the water out. All this with a big copper kettle on your head and a water boiler on your back. Think you could do it? I know I couldn't so all praise to Mr. Lambert.

I should tell you something about the way that we do work down here. It's a brick lined tunnel and we are digging through a rock called marl. Have you heard of it? No. Well don't let on as its quite a soft rock and what some of the lads do is take a piece into the local pub and they place a bet. "Buy me a pint if I can bite through this rock." They'll say to some damn fool local. And sure enough they can. That's how soft it is. You drive a heading as it is known a square about 7 to 9 feet across close to the bottom of the tunnel and from there you open to the full size of the tunnel which is 15 feet in diameter. You always start at the bottom so as to support the roof. The more you take away from the top the more dangerous things are so start low and work upwards. You line it straight away with the bricks.

Some bright spark spotted that what we were digging out, not the marl, the mud could be made into bricks. So you know what they've done now. Set up a brick works. That brick works was making 600,000 bricks per month. Not enough mind as we needed many more than that for the tunnel. I reckon when we get finished if you go down there and start counting you'll find about 75,000,000 bricks. Not that I've counted but if you did.....

Its not only the water you have to be worried about, the clay can fall in on you and 4 of my friends were killed in an accident when a skip full of clay fell 140 feet. It crushed three men before it bounced up and killed another man who was standing nearby. Johnny Nash, the man who was in charge of the skip, well some wanted him charged with murder due to negligence. They never brought the charges but if you think poor old Johnny Nash has the guilt of their deaths on his conscience for the rest of his life.

So you still thinking you might want to work here. Well if you do, the pay is 3 pennies and ha'pence for an hour for you boys and 5 pennies for experienced labourers. If you are a ganger or a foreman then you get double that, but you also get all the responsibility as well. Me, I'm classed as skilled labour and get 8 pennies and hour. We all work the ten hour shift for 6 days a week. Sundays off coz you got to church of course.

We'll be finished I'm sure but I reckon it will have taken about 12 years to build this tunnel. Now go and see the foreman if you are after work coz I best get on.

(Starts singing again)