

JONES (George)

The Banquet in the Thames Tunnel, 1827

Oil on board. 30.5 x 23.3 cm.

Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. Elton Collection

On the evening of 18th May 1827 the river irrupted into the tunnel and digging was suspended for several months. Repairs were successfully completed, but the project struggled with adverse publicity from its first major setback. To allay doubts and to celebrate, on 10th November a flamboyant Isambard Kingdom Brunel organised a banquet under the river. It was the first underwater banquet in the world!

In the western archway, draped in crimson, a long table was covered in white damask and elaborately set with silver and crystal for a sumptuous banquet. Fifty selected guests feasted, lit by decorative candelabra from the Portable Gas Company, whilst the uniformed band of the Coldstream guards played the National Anthem, *Rule Britannia, See the Conquering Hero Comes*. The gleam of their instruments can be faintly seen on the red dais in the background. Above the deafening noise, hoarse guests toasted, 'The King', 'The Duke of Clarence' and 'The Duke of Wellington'.

In the eastern archway, 120 miners and bricklayers enjoyed a simpler meal, toasted their tools, and presented Isambard with pickaxe and shovel as token of their esteem.

The two figures conferring in the foreground of the picture are Marc Isambard and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. This is the only painting of father and son together, but is even more remarkable because Marc was not actually there! The father absented himself so that his twenty one year old son could better enjoy the glory. Inspired public relations restored confidence in a Tunnel safe enough for dinner parties.

Eleven weeks later the Thames broke into the Tunnel once more. Young Brunel, half drowned, was sent to Clifton to convalesce, and the cash starved project closed down. Guests could not be persuaded down there. In a reference to the banquet in *The Times*, the poet Thomas Hood suggested the tunnel was now only good for wine racks.

In 1834 the project was saved once again, and by another dinner! On 25 April a group of Fellows of the Royal Society met in the upstairs room of the Spreddeagle & Crown (across the road from the tunnel workings) to entertain Marc Brunel on his 65th birthday. They vowed to meet each year to toast his health and so launched the Tunnel Club, a club that came to enjoy the reputation of powerful pressure group and lobbying force... Within a year the Duke of Wellington arranged a government loan.

The site of the banquet is now the oldest section of tunnel in the London Underground. The shaft is an International Landmark Site and part of an award-winning piece of public art. The pub still stands, but is called the Mayflower, after the Pilgrim's ship that sailed from Rotherhithe, captained by a Rotherhithe man. Each year The Friends of the Brunel Engine House meet and toast Marc Brunel's health.

Robert Hulse
Curator