

Colin J Kirkland OBE, FREng, FICE 1936-2004

Colin Kirkland was not only Chairman of the Board, he was our longest serving trustee, arriving when the Brunel Engine House was a roofless ruin. He was an inspiring and energetic Chairman. During an eventful period Colin saw the site designated an International Landmark, the Thames Tunnel listed as Grade II*, the Engine House registered as a Museum, and the number of visitors multiply tenfold. The Museum, at first open once a month, is now open four times a week. Throughout this period the charity has benefited from Colin's clear-sighted common sense and advice, but most of all from his enthusiasm and determination.

Perhaps Colin's greatest gift to the charity was steering through a successful bid for revenue funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Museum now has valuable partners in the London Borough of Southwark, and in the museum & heritage agencies, to deliver a range of education and community programmes. As a pre-eminent engineer, but also someone aware of the heartbeat of community, Colin understood the Museum's importance to local people as well as engineers and tunnellers. Brunel was not only a Great Briton; he was also a local hero. Colin set a specialist Museum on a new and exciting path, as an educational resource and agency for regeneration in one of the poorer parts of London. He was passionate about involving local people in the Museum, passionate about running events for local children, and passionate about opening up the building and Brunel's story to the Museum's neighbours. People knew Colin as a professional tunneller, but mostly we saw him building bridges...

Colin had a mischievous sense of humour and told wonderful stories. He was a big man with a big laugh. He was never pompous, never precious...

Fielding questions at a EuroTunnel public relations event in America, he was asked if he felt any connection with Sir Marc Brunel who also fundraised for an exciting Tunnel project. He said he did, but added there was no vainglory when he remembered Sir Marc was also imprisoned for debt! His friend, the late Sir Alistair Morton, sitting by him, tugged his jacket with a stage whisper 'Sit down, you damn fool!'

At the Brunel Engine House last May, Colin hosted an event as part of the celebrations for the anniversary of the entente cordial. Among his guests were members of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the French Cultural Attache and other European visitors. The Museum, in commemorating a famous Franco-British engineering project, also remembered the terrible day in 1827 when water first irrupted into the Thames Tunnel. Colin warmly thanked his guests for coming, some of whom had travelled from France, but harkening back to his EuroTunnel days, dryly remarked he was the only person to have dug his way there.

It seems appropriate that, having successfully saved a tunnel between Britain and France, he should have worked so hard and to such good effect on a French Tunnel in London. It is hard to properly acknowledge the Museum's debt to its ground-breaking chairman and generous friend, who so modestly performed such valuable things for the people of Rotherhithe, south east London.

Below are milestones in the history of the little Museum he loved so much and where he was so generous with his time and energy...

- 1973 Registered as a charity
- 1979 Restoration of building complete
- 1980 Museum opened to public
- 1993 Celebrations for 150th Anniversary of Opening of Tunnel in 1843 including designation as International Landmark Site with plaque in tube station, high chimney restored and inaugurated by Duke of Wellington, Banquet in a tube train under the River Thames
- 1995 First pilot schools programme
- 2000 Loan of Tunnel models from National Museum of Science & Industry
- 2001 Provisionally Registered as a Museum
- 2001 First grant from National Art Collection Art Fund to buy Brunel watercolour. At the reception Sir Nicholas Goodison describes the Museum as a place where art & science embrace
- 2002 Yates watercolour loaned by South London Gallery
- 2002 Grants from Archives Libraries & Museums London to monitor atmospheric conditions & adapt museum cases
- 2002 First summer Playscheme starts environmental improvements to garden
- 2002 Museum earns the Freedom of the Ancient Metropolitan Borough of Bermondsey, a Civic Award for services to the community
- 2003 Loan of Sir William McAlpine's collection of Thames Tunnel memorabilia
- 2003 Second grant from National Art Collection Art Fund to buy Tunnel Peepshow
- 2003 Awarded Blue Plaque for IKB
- 2003 Thames Tunnel Walk re-instated at Open House Weekend
- 2004 Awarded Heritage Lottery Fund grant to develop education & outreach programme
- 2004 Reception for entente cordiale on anniversary of first flood in May
- 2004 Reception for entente cordiale on anniversary of Tunnel Banquet in November Original 1827 music by Southwark Children's Foundation Primary Brass Band