

History Group Visit to Brunel's ship 'SS Great Britain'.

Following a recent talk on the life of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, given to the History Group by Ray Sturdy, the group had the opportunity to visit the ship, berthed in Bristol. This proved to be a full and most interesting day.



SS Great Britain.



Signpost indicating distances from Bristol.



History Group at SS Great Britain.

The ship, launched in 1843 as an Atlantic liner, had been recovered from the Falkland Islands in 1970 after many substantial alterations for many different purposes. Historically she had been the first iron-hulled, screw-propelled passenger liner to cross the Atlantic to America, but had ended her seagoing life as a sailing cargo ship in 1886 in the Falkland Islands.

The ship had been in a terrible condition when it was returned to Bristol, but over the last forty plus years it has been restored to its original passenger ship state and the Group were privileged to have conducted tours and detailed explanations about the work involved in the reconstruction, and about its use as a passenger liner, the most advanced, reliable and largest ship afloat in her day.

We were shown the First Class passenger accommodation, the public rooms being extremely elegantly and expensively furnished, with a Dining Saloon, Promenade Saloon, a Weather Deck and a cosy private room for women passengers only. The public areas were spacious and light, with glass 'lanterns' in the ceilings to provide maximum daylight. First Class passengers had their own chef in his kitchen and a varied choice of meals. Entertainments included concerts, amateur theatrical performances, Bible-reading groups and language lessons.



First Class Dining Saloon.



First Class Promenade Deck.

But even this Class of passenger had cramped and uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, with bunk beds scarcely two feet wide, in a narrow four-berth cabin, where the luggage needed on the journey had also to be stowed.



First Class Sleeping accommodation.

By contrast, steerage passengers were given cramped quarters in the lower decks, with not a lot of seclusion. Many berths were placed together in bunk style, with not even a curtain to separate the passengers or provide privacy. They were not allowed access to certain parts of the ship, which were reserved for First Class passengers only. They were also expected to cook for their fellow Steerage passengers on a rota basis, with poor quality food and the ubiquitous 'Ship's Biscuit'.

We were shown the Captain's and Crew quarters and the Doctor's Rooms and watched as the engine turned in the hull of the ship. We walked on the Top Deck, admiring the rigging and having a go at 'steering' the ship. The Bridge was open to the elements, which was fine on the day that we were there, but would have been very difficult on transatlantic voyages.

Another aspect enjoyed by the Group was to visit the 'Being Brunel' exhibition, in which through interactive displays, a very helpful and interesting introductory film and Brunel's personal possessions, plans and diagrams we were able to 'explore the mind' of Brunel, the Great Engineer. The Dockyard Museum also proved to be a fascinating venue to visit, enhancing the story of the SS Great Britain.



Giant bust of Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the 'Being Brunel' exhibition.

Alongside Brunel's engineering masterpiece, the SS Great Britain, is the Brunel Institute, which houses one of the world's finest maritime collections. The Brunel Institute is a collaborative venture between the SS Great Britain Trust and the University of Bristol. The 67,000 items housed in the Brunel Institute make up one of the world's leading maritime collections. It is comprehensive and diverse, from its oldest item, a 1703 book of naval tracts, to original sketches by a young Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

The collections include library books, periodicals, ship plans and models, photographs, diaries and letters written by passengers and crew travelling on the SS Great Britain. Approximately 6,500 books and periodicals cover a wide range of maritime topics including passenger liners, naval history, naval architecture, shipbuilding, seamanship, maritime archaeology and ethnographic boats.

The collections include the complete run of Mariner's Mirror, an almost complete run of Lloyd's Register, and the logs and diaries of crew members and passengers. Most of these books were donated by distinguished maritime historian, David MacGregor, for whom the Library in the Brunel Institute is named.

Visitors to the Brunel Institute can access objects held in the archive vault and use the specialist David MacGregor Library free of charge. Some members of the Group were privileged to visit The Brunel Institute, which was open for an hour as Conservators cleaned the Institute's Library books and they were able to talk to the Conservators about many aspects of the site, the ship, Brunel and other maritime topics.

The outstanding feature of the visit to SS Great Britain was the opportunity to walk around the original iron hull of the ship, now preserved in a moisture-reduced microclimate, (dehumidification chamber), in the very Dry Dock where Brunel built her. It is only here that the visitor can appreciate the huge engineering feat that Brunel accomplished. The length of the ship at this level is breathtaking and the detail of the construction of this magnificent vessel can be grasped more fully.



SS Great Britain in her glass 'sea'.



The Rudder and Propeller of SS Great Britain.

Altogether the visit was deemed to be a great success and some members exchanged their Day Visitor tickets for an Annual Pass, in order to avail themselves of more time to explore this fascinating venue.

Thanks go to Geoff Bayley for organising the day.

Heidy Hague.