



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

As the search for ambition in today's increasingly competitive world intensifies, we don't have to look far for inspiration

A few weeks ago I was in Bristol, one of my favourite places, to film a sequence for *Countryfile* on the history of the docks and their role in the city's past. Getting me out of bed to talk history is never difficult, but tell me we're getting into naval history and I'll pay you just to be there.

So it was we set off on an exciting day. Bristol used to be my home, and it's a place I've always found to be full of life, energy and people who are, by and large, very proud to be there. Bristol's history is a long and rich one, though not without its darker side. Fortunes were made on its wharfs and in the grand crescents of its more opulent neighbour, Bath, on the back of the sugar trade, fuelled as it was by slavery. But nonetheless, the docks are founded on proud traditions that today are once again on show despite the commercial decline on the quaysides.

Craft of all kinds have worked and been built here; in 1497 the *Matthew* set sail with John Cabot aboard looking for North Atlantic fisheries and a short cut to the far east. Instead he found America, an achievement commemorated in the replica *Matthew* now floating the basin. During the war, many a convoy escort was built or repaired here as the city hunkered down against the ravages of the Blitz, but it was during the 19th century that I think it really came of age.

Of the periods the past can tempt us with, for me the Industrial Revolution is hard to beat, because it still resonates through every aspect of modern society, and is easily recognisable in many of the Victorian streets, buildings, bridges and homes that many of us still use and enjoy every day. Its golden age in the mid to late 19th century was unsurpassed in output, innovation and ambition, and it's ambition that I'm getting at.

Amongst many good things to come out of Bristol, surely the biggest if not the most important was the *SS Great Britain*. Designed of course by Brunel, when she was launched in 1843 she was hailed as "The greatest experiment since creation". Her creator's innovation was boundless. She was the biggest ship ever built, and the first to be built of iron; she was powered by the biggest steam engine ever constructed, packing a huge 1000hp, and used not a paddle wheel but a revolutionary new idea: a propeller.

Brunel and his generation were, by today's standards, self-taught. No degrees, no NVQs, GCSEs, O Levels, nothing. But what they did have was imagination. They were

exploring materials and methods and solving problems that had at that time little or no precedent, and they did so without the barbed wire of regulation and compliance tearing at their overalls.

As I stood beneath the now restored ship resting in the very dry dock in which she was built, I wondered how it would've felt to have been let loose to design such a thing on a blank piece of paper, and to then try and convince the world that it could be done and should be done when nothing like it had ever set sail

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before. The *SS Great Britain* has been described as "the ship that changed the world". For the Victorians and men like Brunel, it was a world that was theirs to change. His was the can-do spirit of limitless proportions that underpinned Britain's imperial ambitions that stretched so far across the globe it was indeed an empire upon which the sun never set.

Looking back to the 1840s, I rather envied Brunel, and I wondered if perhaps we have become too obsessed with qualification. Is there a danger that we are over qualifying people to the point where none of us can have an idea about anything without some sort of certificate to back it up? For our industrial revolutionaries, their borders were those of physics not paperwork, and ambition was about aspiration, skill and pushing the boundaries of the seemingly impossible, rather than confining themselves to 'given limits'. I hope I am wrong. I hope we can still set free the imagination of a generation that will launch a new Great Britain that the future may still yet marvel at, and that it lasts as long as Brunel's.

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