

12/08/2020



## Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

Today we're celebrating the 150th anniversary of the first underground tube railway. Tower Subway, in London, opened 150 years ago on August 2nd 1870.

This is the second oldest tunnel running under the Thames, running from Tower Hill north of the river to Vine Lane south of the river. The first tunnel was built by that famous Victorian, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and his father Marc Isambard Brunel. That tunnel was 11m wide, and 6m high, running for nearly 400m, 23m under the river. It was built on such a large scale because it was designed to be used for horse drawn carriages.

Crossing the river then, as now, was always an issue, with the bridges acting as pinch points, and even in the days of horse drawn traffic Londoners would often experience traffic jams. Building the tunnel was fraught with dangers, not least because the Thames at that time was basically an open sewer, and the water that seeped in to the tunnel as miners worked was horribly contaminated. The sewage also gave off methane gas which would ignite in the presence of the miners lamps. In 1827 the tunnel flooded, requiring emergency repairs, and it then flooded again in 1828, nearly killing Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Construction then halted for 7 years, but in 1834 was restarted, and after many further setbacks then tunnel finally opened in 1843. It became a tourist attraction, with people paying a penny to walk through the tunnel, before in 1865 being purchased by the East London Railway company, the generous size dimensions for carriages made it possible to run trains through the tunnel. It's still in use today as part of the London Overground network.

After the setback of the Thames tunnel it's not surprising that it took another 30 years for anyone to attempt to build a second tunnel under the Thames. Tower subway was on a much smaller scale, 24 year old Henry Greathead was the man behind the project, and it was built with a budget of just £9,400 (Brunel's tunnel was hugely more expensive, just to get the project finished required a loan of £247,000 from The Treasury). It was also built in just one year.

The Tower Subway tunnel was just 7 feet (2.13m) wide, and lined with cast iron rather than brick. Once dug the tunnel contained a small cable car, holding 12 passengers, which was pulled through the tunnel. At either end lift transported passengers down to the carriage, and back up to the surface. It was a commercial flop however, and after just 3 months the service stopped, and the tunnel was converted to a pedestrian walkway, with spiral stairs instead of lifts. In 1894 Tower Bridge opened, and this free-to-use bridge, rather than the halfpenny dank and dingy subway, was far more popular. It was then used for hydraulic tubes and water mains, and is still in use today carrying telecommunications cables.

In 1890 the same construction method was used to dig tunnels for the City and South London Railway. These went on to house the first of Londons electrified Tube Railways, and the London Underground, as we know it today was born.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading-

Brunel's Thames Tunnel-

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames\\_Tunnel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames_Tunnel)

Tower Subway-

<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Tower-Subway/>

<https://www.subbrit.org.uk/sites/tower-subway/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower\\_Subway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_Subway)

<https://londonist.com/london/secret/the-tower-subway-the-secret-thames-tunnel-that-s-150-years-old>

<https://www.theengineer.co.uk/march-1869-the-tower-subway/>

London Underground

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London\\_Underground](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Underground)

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