

Bridge to your heart...

Benjamin Baker

By Kate Bielby

Whoooooooooooo? I hear you cry, and you are not alone. Nobody's heard of Benjamin Baker, designer of one of the most famous and astonishing engineering feats of all time - the Forth Bridge. Brunel, yes...but Baker? Nopes.

Actually, if you've so much as glanced at this year's Festival brochure you'll already know that Sir Benjamin Baker was born

in Frome (where the fire station is now) and that there's a really exciting programme of events planned to celebrate his life and work.

So why the obscurity? Given his achievements, it is nothing short of a little bit of a scandal that we do not have a national Benjamin Baker day and are not obliged to name at least one of our children 'Sir Benjamin

Baker'. Pippa Goldfinger, engineer and part of the team dedicated to bringing Benjy back home, tells me that this is typical of engineers as opposed to 'starchitects'. Brunel by contrast "was a great self-publicist and all his projects were in Britain whereas Baker's were all over the world". As well as designing an elevated railway in New York and the casket used to transport Cleopatra's Needle from Alexandria to London's Embankment, Baker was consulting engineer for the construction of the Aswan Dam. "He was famous in his time," explains Pippa, "...he used that human cantilever thing

that we recreated (photo overleaf) as a glass lantern slide that he used in public lectures – a bit like the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. He was a great educator and promoter of engineering. You'll be able to try the cantilever experiment for yourself at the Rook Lane exhibition if you're prepared to take the strain.

Pippa and fellow Project Co-Ordinator Sue Bucklow are evangelical about the great BB and their enthusiasm is infectious. Along with Mike Gray and Jo Plimmer, they have organised a six week celebration spanning the Festival which will appeal not just to engineering geeks and trainspotters (though seriously, you'll love it) but also to anyone interested in photography, art, the universe and everything. Honestly, I'm totally into it now. In fact if I wasn't old, tired and heinously underqualified, I'd definitely sign up for an engineering course. Apparently there'd be plenty of elbow room in lectures as engineering is not

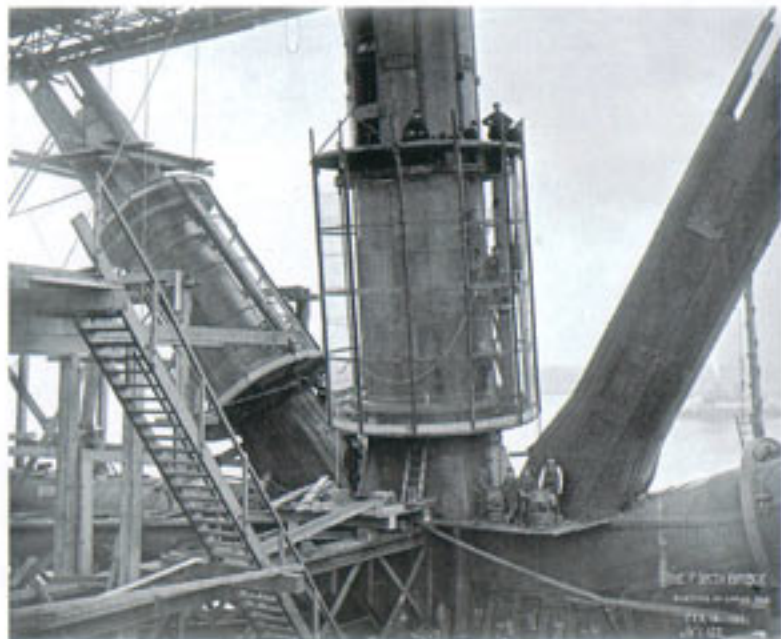


Photo by Evelyn Carey. Copyright National Archives of Scotland



Benjamin Baker
Cut out & Wear
**Barmy
Bangers**



Stick your tash onto some card. An old cereal packet will do, then get some scissors (adults, find a child if you need help with any cutting) and cut out your soup strainer. Attach string through holes and hey presto! You're Benjy Baker!

Benjamin Baker Continued

His second bridge. Nah! Just kidding!. It was his Forth.



Image courtesy of Getty Images

a popular career choice for young people. Bit too much like hard work for you young 'uns, eh?

Some of the money for 'Bridging the World' comes from engineering firms who feel that theirs is an undervalued profession and who feel passionate about getting the engineering word across in true Baker style.

Given how genuinely awesome this programme of events is set to be, I hesitated to ask whether Sir Benjamin Baker ever returned to Frome or did he get out as fast as he could and never return? It turns out that he didn't return to Frome but had no remaining family here and had no reason to.

Maybe he didn't like travelling on Brunel's GWR? Can we really claim any credit for this genius? Sue and Pippa think we can (well a bit)... "Frome was an industrial town. It had the conditions – it had the railway, the water, the coalmines nearby. I think he was born out of that really. His dad had come to work in a Foundry in Frome (possibly the Butts Hill ironworks)".

Apart from the exhibition which runs at Rook Lane from 13 June to 24 July (and lots of other stuff – get the Festival brochure), about 2,200 schoolchildren and young people will be getting stuck in and building bridges and towers in workshops in and around Frome in an attempt to interest the next generation of visionaries. If you are in any doubt as to whether Benjamin Baker was himself a visionary, get yourself to Rook Lane and look at these spectacular images of the Forth Bridge. With its engineering worn proudly on its sleeve it apparently gave William Morris the vapours. He thought it was ugly. He was wrong. It's functional and it's beautiful. **KB**



Sue, Bee & Pippa. Pic by Mike Gray

The Furball's TOP 5 Bridges!

No.1 Jeff

Self explanatory really. He is of course, The Dude and a whole host of other characters as well. Here he is, No1 in our list of favourite bridges



No.2 The Bridge

Captain Kirk's favourite place and the nerve centre of the starship Enterprise. Watch out, Sontarans!



No.3 Like a...

This album was one of those ones I used to find when rooting around in my mum and dad's record collection. Great song. If you're a bridge fan



No.4 One of those

Think of all those songs that would never have been written without one of these. Er...Come on Eileen? That was a violin, wasn't it?



No.5 Just Bridge

It's a card game as well, you know! I don't know how to play it though. I'm sure it has it's exciting moments. Probably.

