

JOHN COOKE BOURNE: RAILWAY ARTIST AND VISIONARY

Matt Thompson

In 1836 John Britton, a London publisher, spotted a talented young artist drawing the building of the London & Birmingham Railway (L&BR) as it made its way into central London. The artist, John Cooke Bourne, was sketching the spectacle out of passion for the subject. His drawings captured the upheaval, the chaos and the scale of the engineering works required to build what was to become the first truly main-line railway in the world.



Building a Retaining Wall, Park Street, London, lithograph by J. C. Bourne, 1838. Revealing the upheaval that the railway brought to the capital.

Courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

Charles Dickens, who lived near Euston station, later described the scene in his novel *Dombey and Son* (1848):

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up... fragments of unfinished walls and arches and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks... In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement.

Bourne's Drawings of the London & Birmingham Railway

Britton encouraged Bourne to work his drawings up into a series of lithographs (prints) which he subsequently published, at first in a series of part works, and then, in 1839, in a single edition entitled *Drawings of the London & Birmingham Railway*. The drawings are full of energy and dynamism and they give a first-hand impression of what it was like to experience the first ever flush of railway building and the power of the Industrial Revolution.

Bourne reveals the lived experience of the times; the breaking down and rebuilding of whole sections of towns and cities; the transformation of the English landscape and the shrinking of distance to a degree previously incomprehensible. He reminds us is that the Industrial Revolution was as much achieved through the brute strength of the navigators, their

horses and the hand tools with which they worked as it was by the fireside in Soho House.

The Artist

John Cooke Bourne was born on 1 September 1814 at 19 Lamb's Conduit Street, London, to Edward Cooke Bourne, a hatter, and Mary Ann. The Bourne household had strong links to the world of engraving and printmaking. Living with them were George and William Cooke (no immediate relations as far as is known) who were well-known engravers and had reproduced works by artists including J.W.M. Turner.

In 1828, at the age of 14, John was apprenticed to another well-known engraver John Pye. Like the Cooke brothers, Pye had also engraved many works by Turner. Bourne's early sketches show a great deal of Pye's influence but also demonstrate the eye for detail that



Birmingham Station, lithograph by J. C. Bourne, 1838. Curzon Street Station was designed by architect Philip Hardwick in a similar style to Euston Station, London.

would mark out his later railway lithographs as being exceptional.

The topographical tradition that portrayed landscapes, picturesque ruins and sublime castles and crags suffused Bourne's early work. These were aesthetic traditions, established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the artists Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorrain, which were still popular in the early nineteenth century. The coming of the railways transformed his world and provided new inspiration for his art.

The Coming of the Railways

Railways had developed to meet the need to transport heavy, bulky objects, such as coal and limestone, from collieries and quarries to a place where they could be transhipped onto waterborne vessels such as barges. As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace there was an ever increasing demand for coal in greater quantities.

There was also a need to move raw materials such as cotton from ports to mills and factories, as well as to move finished goods from their place of manufacture to the client or marketplace. The eighteenth-century canal system had been created to meet this demand, but by the early 1800s it was under strain.

Steam had been used for generations in winding engines and pumps and by 1802 the first experiments were undertaken to develop a steam-powered locomotive to replace the horse. After much trial and error, workable railway locomotives were produced. In 1814, the year of Bourne's birth, the engineer George Stephenson demonstrated that a steam locomotive with smooth, flanged wheels could gain enough traction to haul a train on smooth iron rails.

In 1825, when Bourne was eleven years old, the Stockton & Darlington railway opened, and when Bourne was sixteen in

1830, the first intercity railway opened – the Liverpool & Manchester Railway.

Bourne grew up in a time of innovation, speculation and invention. Throughout his early years the railways were constructed by engineers that are household names: Blenkinsop, Stephenson and Hackworth. As the need to move more fuel, materials and goods grew, railways expanded. Locomotives became more powerful, track became more robust and longer routes served collieries, quarries, ports, towns and cities.

Origins of the London & Birmingham Railway

In the 1820s, the need to improve the link between London and Birmingham was recognised. Manufacturers had to turn down work because they could not move goods to the capital quickly enough by canal. Usually a three-day journey, it could take weeks if the canals froze in winter.



View from above the Kilsby Tunnel, lithograph by J. C. Bourne, 1838. The Kilsby Tunnel was the largest single piece of engineering along the whole line. The picturesque landscape above the tunnel appears to be undisturbed by the huge endeavours below.

Courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust



Navvies at work, London, sketch by J. C. Bourne, 1837. The sketch captures the people who physically built the railways.

Ensuring a more effective link between the heartland of industry and the commercial centre of the country was essential for economic growth.

By 1830 a line was proposed that ran between the two cities via Coventry, with George and Robert Stephenson appointed as surveyors. Their survey established the route and estimated the construction cost at £2.5 million for 112½ miles of double track, while the potential profits for the railway once completed were calculated to be more than £670,000 per year.

An Act of Parliament was necessary to permit construction. This was difficult to achieve as many landowners were against

the building of railways and the associated compulsory purchase of necessary land. They feared that the railway would ruin productive agricultural estates, frighten cattle and other livestock and have a negative impact on fox and stag hunting.

As many of the major landowners were also MPs, their personal misgivings about the railways could be brought to bear in Parliament. After being initially thrown out in 1832, the plans for the railway received royal assent on 6 May 1833. Undoubtedly the £250,000 the L&BR paid in compensation to landowners eased its passage through Parliament the second time.

Constructing the Railway

Work began almost immediately: land was purchased, contracts let and detailed surveys made. Thousands of people were required to build the embankments, excavate the cuttings and construct the buildings. These men, the navvies, became part of British folklore because of their prodigious strength, stamina and appetite for drinking and fighting.

It would be almost impossible to imagine the sheer scale of the undertaking and the impact that the building of the railway had on the landscape, had John Cooke Bourne not recorded the process of construction in intimate detail. His work

captured a period that was infused with excitement, possibility and potential.

Bourne's Artistic Achievement

Bourne's drawings are suffused with the picturesque aesthetic of his apprenticeship where the hard lines of the engineering are softened by the rough shapes of trees and vegetation. He was, of course, not the first artist to be drawn to the railways as a subject, but he was among the first to contextualise the railway within the English countryside in a way that suggested stability, solidity and a sense of permanence.

Many of the artists who had produced images of the other great undertaking of the period, the Liverpool and Manchester Railway (L&MR), had struggled with perspective, scale or the technical details of how the railway was actually constructed. This led to their images being somewhat naive and stiff.

Bourne's drawings have the clarity and detail of a photograph at a time when photography was in its infancy. They are,

by turns, pin sharp in their eye for detail contrasted with a fluidity which communicates the landscape in a loose, almost impressionistic style.

At a time when there was much anxiety surrounding the building of railways, Bourne was able to demonstrate that a railway could not only sit comfortably in the landscape but also, in certain cases, complement it. He produced images that create an idealised railway, which had a profound influence for years to come.

Pro-Railway propaganda

It was this combination of the industrial with the aesthetic that attracted John Britton to Bourne's work. While researching the text that he would include in the publication of Bourne's lithographs, he wrote to the secretary of the L&BR asking for information on the railway. In his letter in The National Archives, he gave one of the motivations for publishing the drawings:

Fully aware that we have jealous &

fastidious critics to deal with both in the houses of parliament & out of them, I wish to remove, or at least to check, the tide of prejudice against us, and display our powers, capabilities and effects.

In this sense, Bourne's drawings can be seen as having a political subtext. Not only were they beautiful, they carried a message. They were published by a man who was keen to change the minds of those both inside and outside of government who were against the railway. What better way to do that than by picturing them as a spectacle, to wonder over and marvel at and not to be afraid of.

Originally published as a series of part-works before the complete edition of 1839, Bourne's drawings were well received by the press. The quality of his draughtsmanship was highly praised and one reviewer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* went so far as to suggest that he might 'speedily rank among the first landscape painters of our age.'



West side of Viaduct over the River Blythe, lithograph by J. C. Bourne, 1838. The juxtaposition of the old bridge alongside the new rail bridge reflects the desire to show that the railway could be an integral part of the landscape.

Shortly after their publication, Bourne was commissioned by another publisher to produce a series of drawings of the Great Western Railway. By the time these were published in 1846 the railways had lost something of their appeal in the public eye.

The Railway Mania of 1845, a speculative investment bubble that saw many thousands lose considerable sums of money on unworkable and sometimes ridiculous schemes, took the shine off the railways. In the later 1840s they began, once again, to be viewed with suspicion and wariness. Bourne, without realising it, had captured an entrepreneurial spirit that existed perhaps only for fifteen years from the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester in 1830 to the bursting of the railway bubble in 1845.

Bourne's Influence

When asked to draw a train, a child will almost always draw a steam locomotive; a colourful crayon-scrrawl of an engine with a chimney and smoke trailing behind. Very

rarely will they picture a diesel or electric engine. The railway of the nineteenth century is embedded in our collective imagination and this seeps out into the public eye though the watercolours of Eric Ravillious, Edward Thomas' 'Adlestrop', Hornby train sets, Thomas the Tank Engine and repeats of the Titchfield Thunderbolt.

There seems nothing more quintessentially English than a rural landscape with a small steam engine hauling a short mixed train of carriages and wagons. One writer, Ian Carter, has even described how the railway dragon was quickly 'domesticated' and soon 'nestled in [the] English countryside'.

Today we can travel the route of the London & Birmingham Railway from Euston to the heart of the Midlands. The impact of the line, built in the 1830s, is still being felt more than 175 years after it opened. Bourne's drawings, however, are not limited to the 11½ miles of track – they exist as part of our shared industrial past and our understanding of what a

railway can be; a thing that transforms not only the landscape through which it passes but those who view it and travel on it.

Bourne may well be considered a relatively obscure artist but his influence, whether we realise it or not, has been profound. His idealised, picturesque railway is still very much with us today. ●

Dr Matt Thompson is Director of Collections & Learning at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

Further Reading

F. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, revised by A. Elton (Paladin, 1968).

J. van Laun, 'John Cooke Bourne (1814–1896), lithographer: Drawings of the London & Birmingham Railway (1836–1838)', *The Journal of the Railway and Canal Historical Society*, 2014–15.

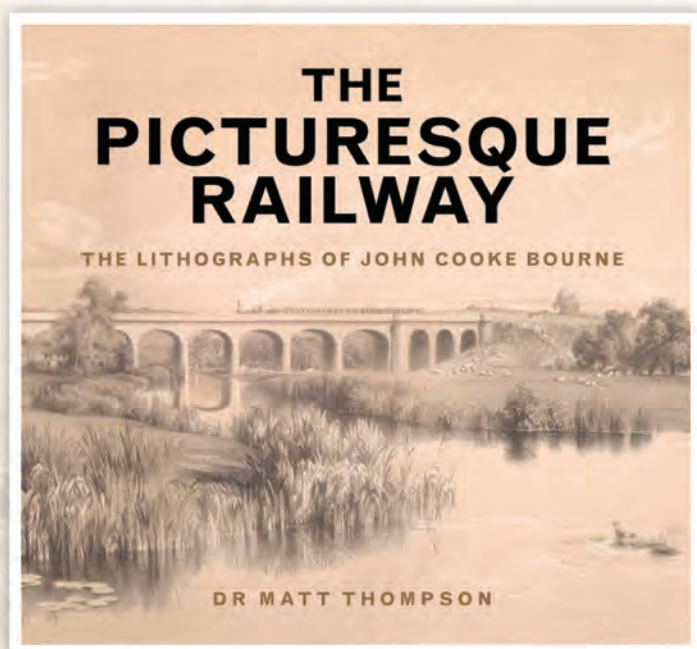
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