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Richard Tames

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The famous son of a famous father, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was acknowledged in his own lifetime as the greatest engineer in an era of engineering titans. He helped drive the first tunnel under a navigable river, built the first all iron ship, bridged the Tamar and Avon, constructed the first railway to run express services and launched the world's first true luxury liner - a vessel five times bigger than any previously attempted. Success was often bought at a high price - in money and men's lives. Brunel himself was nearly drowned in his father's Thames Tunnel. Over a hundred laborers were killed excavating Box Tunnel on the Great Western Railway. The Great Eastern bankrupted its backers. Brunel's experimental 'gaz engine' and atmospheric railway both proved costly failures. He died knowing only that the maiden voyage of the Great Eastern had ended in disaster and that the Clifton suspension bridge, his first major triumph was still uncompleted. In 2002 Brunel was voted second in a BBC poll of the ten greatest Britons of all time. This is his story.

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