

The Victorians

Brunel and the 'Great Babe'

Written by John Tuckey

J RUSSELL: John Scott Russell, shipbuilder. When Isambard Kingdom Brunel asked me to build his latest ship for him, he'd already designed two others: *The Great Western* and *The Great Britain*. But his new one - to be called *The Great Eastern* - was to be quite a different thing altogether. The main thing was the size. *The Great Britain* was already by far the biggest ship ever built, and the new one - his 'Great Babe' as he called it - was to be well over twice the size. And that caused problems from the start -

So, Mr Brunel, I think we should build the ramp for *The Great Eastern* here, and I'll pace out the length so you can picture it.

BRUNEL: But, Mr Russell, you're going the wrong way.

J RUSSELL: You want me to walk out into the water?

ISAMBARD: No, no! We must build the ship so she can be launched sideways.

J RUSSELL: What did you say?

ISAMBARD: The ship will have to be launched sideways.

J RUSSELL: Ships are launched longways, stern first.

BRUNEL: If you launch my 'Great Babe' long ways, she'll hit the other side of the river.





- J RUSSELL: I hold you in the highest regard, Mr Brunel, but, your knowledge of shipbuilding is – with respect - limited. You've built two ships, I've built dozens.
- BRUNEL: Aye, but look at the two I have built. *The Great Western* was the fastest across the Atlantic, *The Great Britain* was the first with a propeller.
- J RUSSELL: And how long was *The Great Britain* stuck inside the dock after she was launched - because you had not worked out she wouldn't fit through the entrance. A year was it?
- BRUNEL: Well, yes.
- J RUSSELL: But, you know, Mr Brunel was a very difficult man to beat in an argument, and, finally, I agreed to build the ship along the shore, so she could be launched sideways. And, after a lot of hard work, the day of the launch came. Mr Brunel was now a very famous man, and this was a very famous ship, so it was a great occasion.
- BRUNEL: So, Lord Derby, what do think of her?
- LORD DERBY: Mr Brunel, she's simply magnificent, a huge achievement for both you and Mr Russell.
- J RUSSELL: Thank you, my lord, she's certainly been a challenge.
- BRUNEL: It's time. My lord, are you ready for the launch?
- LORD DERBY: I am.
- BRUNEL: Tell the band to stop playing.





- WORKMAN 3: Yes, Mr Brunel.
- LORD DERBY: So this ship will be able to sail to Australia and back without refuelling?
- BRUNEL: That is so my lord.
- J RUSSELL: Or, to put it another way, all the way round the world. The largest moving object ever built!
- LORD DERBY: Ah – they're ready for me... My lords, ladies and gentlemen. It gives me the greatest of pleasure to name this ship, *The Great Eastern*. May God bless her and all who sail in her!
- Brunel – is she going to go?
- BRUNEL: I'm sure she'll go shortly, my lord, very shortly.
- J RUSSELL: But she didn't. Imagine that, everyone ready for the great launch...and the ship refusing to budge. It took another seven attempts before she finally slipped into the water. The strain was too much for Brunel, hastened him to his end most folk believe.
- But *The Great Eastern* was launched and she started sailing regularly to and fro across the Atlantic. And then, one day – 1862 it was - she had an accident as she sailed towards New York.
- CAPTAIN: Stop engines!
- BO'SUN: Stop engines it is, sir.
- CAPTAIN: What was that sound? What's happened?
- OFFICER 1: We've struck a rock, sir!





- CAPTAIN: Any damage?
- OFFICER 1: What damage there?
- OFFICER 2: A great gash down our side, must be eighty feet long!
- CAPTAIN: Tell the passengers and crew to prepare to abandon ship. How much water are we taking in?
- OFFICER 1: How much water there?
- OFFICER 2: None, sir! No water!
- OFFICER 1: No water, sir.
- CAPTAIN: None?
- J RUSSELL: I was very proud when I heard that story. Any other ship would have sunk, but not *The Great Eastern*. Mr Brunel had designed her with a double hull, that is, one hull inside the other. The rock had torn open the outer hull, but not the inner one, so the ship was perfectly safe. Brunel may not have known much about launching ships; but he certainly knew how to design them.

