

Monument to the Inspirational George Parker Bidder



It was about 20 years ago when I first became aware of the civil engineering achievements of George Parker Bidder and his inspirational transition from humble beginnings to internationally famous Engineer and Advocate.

Moretonhampstead was in the process of making itself visibly more attractive to visitors with the Sparrowhawk in the Square, the flower baskets along Court Street and the mosaic at the entrance to the church grounds outside what is now Greenhill Arts Centre. The mosaic was a clever conglomeration of facts about Bidder, including several mathematical problems put to him when, as a young boy he was taken round local fairs where his father made good money (often £6 a head in today's money) from his amazing ability at mental arithmetic. He even performed in front of the Queen. Unfortunately, wear and tear took its toll on the mosaic and in 2016 the wreckage was replaced by paving slabs.

As a civil engineer myself, I realised that Moreton had lost a very important memorial to one of its most eminent 'sons'. I knew the Parish Council owned a marble bust of Bidder along with the black granite plinth on which it stood. The bust sat unloved on the floor in the corner of Greenhill foyer and the plinth resided in the entrance to the library; neither of these places seemed to be tremendously 'public' and in April 2017, I put together a discussion paper, "Reincarnating Bidder", proposing that the two parts should be erected at a much more public site. This was sent to various local organisations and individuals, including the Parish Council and the Local History Society; individuals included John Dodds, who I knew through our local singing group the Moretones.

Since then John and I have worked as a team. As an architect, John put together the planning application submitted in March 2019 and I started work on finding some financial backing. My approach to the Heritage Lottery Fund turned out to be a waste of time as they decided that they would be unable to quantify the benefits to the local community. I then approached clubs and organisations that had some connection with Bidder and his work, no matter how vague a connection and at the same time started contacting Bidder descendants. That approach was much more beneficial and resulted in sufficient funds to enable a bronze replica of the marble bust to be commissioned, having received advice that the marble version would not stand up to Dartmoor weather.

Meanwhile, we had contacted granite masonry firms for quotations for the podium. This proved very difficult with almost everyone tied up working on Castle Drogo. We finally selected F.J.Stevens & Son from Crediton. At that point we had no idea of how we would be able to pay for what was amounting to a major sum.

In September 2019 we took the marble bust to Milwyn's art foundry - recommended by a senior film-industry sculptor including for the Bond movies and in December John collected the bronze replica. It was agreed the site would be the top of Lime Street, his birthplace; the road was so wide that houses had once stood there.



In 1927 underground public toilets were excavated, but fifty years later these were filled in and a flower bed installed. Several locals had used the loos but no-one was sure exactly how they were "filled in" and we had to excavate down and span a reinforced concrete slab over to spread the load of the memorial between the supporting walls of the toilets using materials donated by Bradfords. This work could have been started in February 2020, as we had received a substantial and very welcome local donation; unfortunately, the quarries closed on account of Covid 19!!



Finally, in October John and I started removing the setts and the 'garden'. By mid-November we had poured the foundation slab and laid the first two levels of granite. To significantly reduce overall costs these layers are reclaimed Westcountry granite, which John cut and faced.

Finally, a week before Christmas, Stevens & Son installed the remainder and fixed the bronze bust. John, Liz and I erected the Interpretation Panel a few days later. All done, a Christmas present to Moreton and we just beat Lockdown No 3!!!

Memorial to George Parker Bidder 1806 to 1878, “The Calculating Boy”

Most Moretonians have vaguely heard of George Bidder and many have an idea he was born here and was an arithmetical prodigy. However, the fact that his marble bust by the illustrious Edward William Wyon with its pair in the National Portrait Gallery, was shuffled around the library entrance floor for so long before arriving on the floor of Greenhill and his darkened portrait in the library reading room was scarcely noticed, tells us that most people had no appreciation of him as a truly interesting and inspirational character.

Born in Lime Street in an artisan granite-worker family in humble circumstances, through genius, hard work and character, he ended in comfortable retirement in Devon, famous nationally and internationally.

Performing as a child mental arithmetic prodigy at fairs and in 1816 even to Queen Charlotte, Sir John Hershel and Cambridge University associates persuaded his father to let him attend school in Camberwell. Since his performances had (in today’s money) a £6 entrance fee, unsurprisingly his father terminated this arrangement. However, in 1819 Sir Henry Jardine sponsored him to study mathematics at Edinburgh University graduating aged 17.

There he met his life-long close friend and subsequent business partner Robert Stephenson. One can easily imagine how two outstandingly talented young men from backgrounds so very different from most at university at the time, would have gravitated to each other. In 1834 they joined up professionally in what became in Stephenson’s words, a “*long and satisfactory private as well as professional friendship*”.

His mental clarity, grip on detail and costs and of course arithmetical abilities saw him become the must-have advocate at the House of Lords during the railway mania stage. Supposedly on one occasion patrician opposing Counsel objected to his presence “*because nature had endowed him with particular qualities that did not place his opponents on a fair footing.*”

But what isn’t mentioned is just how did he transform himself socially in such a divided society? Did he teach himself to “speak posh”? How did he mix with well-connected landowners and infrastructure promoters? Just how difficult was it for an artisan to become accepted in professional circles – in his case even becoming President of the Institution of Civil Engineers.

His professional career spanned canals, railways, docks, sewers and the electric telegraph system, but although an associate of Stephenson and Brunel, unlike them he is scarcely remembered. Maybe his modest background predisposed him to a less flamboyant working style – certainly his schemes were known for ending on time and budget – not a familiar situation particularly for the justifiably famous Brunel!

The recently erected monument near his birthplace at the top of Lime Street is intended to redress the lack of recognition of such an illustrious son of Moretonhampstead.