

Great Eastern

Lead: In November, 1857, Isambard Kingdom Brunel tried to launch his magnificent creation. *Great Eastern*, the heaviest object anyone had ever attempted to move, got stuck.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Brunel was one of the most successful engineers of his day. He constructed what was at that time, the world's longest tunnel, several unusual railroad bridges, and finally, *Great Eastern*. Conceived as the first luxury liner, the ship was designed to carry 4,000 passengers in complete comfort, haul enough coal for a non-stop round-trip from England to Australia, and earn her inventors' money back in a couple of years. No such luck. No profit was ever made with *Great Eastern*.

The 12,000 ton iron-hulled vessel was powered by huge steam-engines and driven by an underwater propeller, two-massive side paddle-wheels, and sails. *Great Eastern* spent most of her thirty years of life in the shop. When Brunel finally got her into the water after three months, it took another year or so to fit out the ship for her first voyage. The ship's maiden voyage ended in disaster when a steam valve exploded, killing several passengers and blowing up the grand saloon. Multiple attempts to make her pay by various investor syndicates went nowhere. The ship seemed to be cursed. They could never get her speed up to the 20 knots an hour Brunel had promised. The vast engines were just not enough to push her bulk through the water. Mid-nineteenth century technology had not caught up with the engineer's vision.

Great Eastern's moment in the sun finally came almost as an after-thought. Led by the American industrialist Cyrus Field, a group of investors bought the ship in 1864 and fitted it to lay the

first underwater transatlantic cable. Even this task proved tougher than expected when in mid-Atlantic the cable broke and the ship had to go home having failed again. The next summer, trailing a stronger cable, *Great Eastern* succeeded and linked two continents with the telegraph.

The ship ended its career as a floating amusement park in Liverpool. Where cable had once lay coiled ready to play out into the ocean, "Bob, The Missing Link," entertained gullible customers. Eventually *Great Eastern* was sold for scrap, a miserable end to Brunel's great dream which historian George Emmerson described as a grotesque link between grandeur and the ridiculous.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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Resources

Stewart, Doug. "The Curse of the Great Eastern," *Smithsonian*, Volume 25, Number 8 (November, 1994), 62-77.