

Brunel's Great Western railway given preservation head of steam

English Heritage lists or upgrades status of dozens of bridges, tunnels and other structures along 'God's wonderful railway'

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Box tunnel was, according to railway legend, deliberately aligned by Brunel so the rising sun would shine through it every year on 9 April, his birthday. Photograph: Barry Batchelor/PA

Dozens of bridges, tunnels, viaducts and station buildings that were part of the original Great Western Railway are being listed or upgraded to ensure their preservation. Begun in 1836 and dubbed "God's wonderful railway", the structures are testament to the genius of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Victorian engineer played by Kenneth Branagh in Friday's Olympic opening ceremony.

One of the newly listed structures is Box tunnel in Wiltshire, which was, according to legend, aligned by Brunel so the rising sun would shine through it every year on 9 April, his birthday. In the 20th century the tunnel was linked by secret lines and tunnels to a complex of military stores and shelters, burrowed into a hill already honeycombed with old quarry works.

The line, which brought trains thundering across England from London to Bristol and later into Wales – originally on the huge wheels of Brunel's broad gauge, which gave a smoother ride but was more expensive and was eventually abandoned – was regarded as a marvel from the start. Brunel, typically, had a hand in everything from surveying the route to designing decorative ironwork for the stations.

Turner's 1844 painting *Rain, Steam and Speed* shows a locomotive crossing the Thames over Brunel's Maidenhead bridge, which is believed to have the longest and flattest brick arches ever built, and is being upgraded to the highest Grade I listing, an honour shared by only 5% of listed buildings.

The portals to other tunnels, as grand as entrances to mansions or the Roman arches

Brunel sometimes consciously evoked – Fox's Wood, Saltford, Chipping Sodbury and the Severn tunnel – are also being listed. So are the ventilation shafts at Chipping Sodbury – essential in the age of steam in a two and a half mile tunnel, and topped with battlements to make them look prettier from the nearby Badminton estate - all become listed structures.

The modest footbridge at Sydney Gardens in Bath, recently identified as the last of Brunel's cast-iron bridges on the railway, is upgraded to Grade II*, along with the tunnel portals at St Anne's in Bristol and the Twerton Wood near Bath.

"It is just such a masterpiece by the mighty Isambard Kingdom Brunel, a railway project of international importance," said Emily Gee, head of listing at English Heritage. "It is highly engineered, and yet he maintains such a respect for the landscape and history of the places he takes it to."

The heritage minister, John Penrose, said: "Our railways and the historic buildings that go along with them are a wonderful and emotive part of our national heritage, symbolising for many of us a sense of romance, history and adventure. And nowhere more so, perhaps, than on the Great Western railway."

The listings and upgrades of one station – the modest stone building on the island platform at Swindon – four viaducts 12 tunnel structures and 26 bridges including the wonderfully named triple arched Silly bridge in Oxfordshire, almost double the number of listed structures on the line. Railway history enthusiasts hope the entire Great Western railway will eventually become a world heritage site, but so far the government has not formally proposed it to Unesco.

Those listed were chosen from more than 500 buildings and structures considered in extensive consultations between English Heritage, Network Rail, local authorities, and railway and engineering history groups. The decision was taken against listing three stations – Maidenhead, Taplow and Newbury – and four bridges because they have been extensively altered or rebuilt.

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