

Howlett's images allowed Brunel to view progress from 250 miles away



# Saltash Bridge BY ROBERT HOWLETT

Rose Teanby ARPS salutes a pioneer of 'Victorian virtual reality'

**IN THE SPRING OF** 1858, 26-year-old professional photographer Robert Howlett arrived at the River Tamar between Saltash in Cornwall and St Budeaux in Devon.

His 500-mile round trip from London was at the request of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the civil engineer he had immortalised standing in front of the launching chains of his revolutionary steamship Great Eastern.

From as early as 1847, Brunel had been one of the first engineers to monitor work in progress using the

new art of photography. It was especially useful where supervision of a project was challenged by distance or, in Brunel's case in 1858, illness.

Howlett visited Saltash each month throughout the spring, summer and autumn, charting steady progress as a second span was floated into position, then raised upwards until reaching the summit to almost complete Brunel's bowstring suspension bridge.

This image captured the landscape beyond the future site of Saltash Station.

Howlett took full-format and 3D stereoscopic images which

enabled the ailing Brunel to stand in Howlett's shoes, viewing his unfinished bridge 250 miles away in Victorian virtual reality.

Robert Howlett never took a photograph of the finished bridge. He died as December arrived, leaving this image as part of his brief but extraordinary photographic legacy.

Until 2011 it was attributed to Roger Fenton until John Hannavy discovered it to be a gift to Fenton from Howlett.

Brunel died nine months after Howlett and photographs of his 1859 London office show a large picture of the completed structure, renamed the Royal Albert Bridge at its opening in May 1859.

But hanging above Brunel's office door is a smaller framed photograph, impossible to ignore due to its position.

It is this image, Robert Howlett's half-built Saltash Bridge.

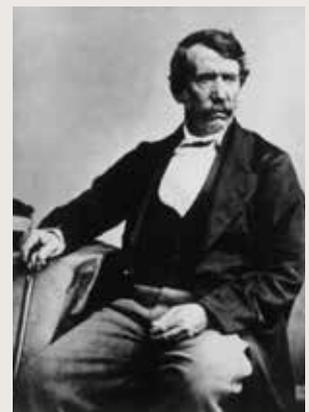
**VISIT**  
The RPS Collection is at the V&A Photography Centre, London. Visit [vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk)

## IN THIS YEAR 1858



- 1** Minnesota becomes the 32nd US state
- 2** Fingerprints are first used as a means of identification by William James Herschel of the Indian Civil Service
- 3** Robert Howlett, renowned for his image of Isambard

- Kingdom Brunel, left, dies at the age of 27
- 4** Brunel's SS Great Eastern, the largest ship of its time, launches after a failed attempt in late 1857
- 5** Explorer David Livingstone, right, and his party leave Liverpool for their six-year Zambezi expedition



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