

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE (GLENFIELD RAILWAY) TUNNEL

July 24, 2015 Helen Wells Community Archaeology, Explore Posts, Industrial, Post Medieval George Stephenson, Glenfield, Historic Environment Record, industrial archaeology, Leicester, Leicestershire, railway, Robert Stephenson, Tunnel

I'm Helen Wells, I've been the Historic Environment Record Officer at Leicestershire County Council for over 10 years. My job is basically curating what we know about buried and built archaeological remains in Leicestershire and Rutland. I don't usually get to leave the office, but I'm going to tell you about a rare trip away from my desk – into the Glenfield Railway Tunnel. The tunnel is recorded on the [Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record](#) and I'd always wanted to go inside.

So, as part of the Festival of Archaeology, I recently accompanied a group of others into the dark, damp, chilly, disused railway tunnel. Not publicly accessible, the only access to the tunnel is via special trips. A footpath runs past the portal. Since us archaeologists are in a team with ecologists at the County Council I should also say that the tunnel is a hibernation roost for bats, and it's illegal to disturb them...



Expedition into the tunnel!

The tunnel was one of the earliest railway tunnels in the world, designed by George Stephenson; its construction was supervised by his son Robert. It opened in July 1832. Due to the pioneering nature of the engineering works, there were various unexpected hitches. One of these was that the trial borings had suggested clay and stone, but running sand meant the tunnel had to be completely lined in bricks. It cost £17,326 to built instead of the budgeted £10,000 – well over a million pounds in today's money.



Glenfield Tunnel in 1969

It closed in 1966 and was bought by Leicester City Council in 1969 for £5. The east end of the tunnel was filled in by a housing company, so though you can walk through a door in the mainly blocked up tunnel portal at the west end, the east end is only accessible via a manhole and a steel ladder.

(The following two pictures were taken by a colleague in 2007. The 1969 aerial photograph higher up the page shows the railway line before it was filled in.)



Blocked eastern end of the tunnel



Metal ladder at east end of the tunnel

The tunnel is not far below the ground, and whereas it originally ran through fields, today it is covered in houses. This has led to problems! In 2007-8 strengthening works were carried out, with reinforced concrete arches inserted into the weakest areas of the tunnel. This work cost £500,000, which makes the original £1,000,000 spent to build the tunnel look rather more of a bargain! (And the £5 it cost to buy the tunnel in 1969 less of a good deal...) The reinforcements were a striking feature of the tunnel during my recent trip.



Concrete reinforcements inside the tunnel

Though a fascinating place to visit, it is very difficult to know what can be done to re-use the tunnel. The eastern end being buried does mean it's tricky to re-use as a cycle path, for example. Though it has turned into a maintenance headache, if it hadn't been bought in 1969 who knows what would have happened to it. It's a brilliant bit of early railway history. If you get the chance to visit I'd definitely recommend it!

WANT TO FIND OUT A BIT MORE?

This article at [Forgotten Relics](#) has some great pictures, one of which demonstrates the tight clearances this tunnel had.

The [Leicestershire Industrial History Society](#) have some great resources on the tunnel. Keep an eye on their events for further tunnel expeditions!

Finally, a quick mention for [Story of Leicester](#), who provided many of the facts I used here.