

GEORGE & ROBERT STEPHENSON

Robin Jones

The story of railway engineers George and Robert Stephenson is one of the greatest ever told. The offspring of an illiterate colliery hand and his son developed the steam locomotive concept to the point where it became universally accepted as the primary mode of land transport, and in doing so not only paved the way for the British railway network, but opened up the five continents with rapid communication and changed the world in a way that emperors and kings with all their might had never managed. Their locomotive Rocket was not the first in the world, but in terms of transport technology it was the turning point that provides the essential link between the Industrial Revolution and the modern world of today. Together with I.K. Brunel, George and Robert Stephenson were the towering giants of British – and world – engineering in the nineteenth century, inspiring generations in the years since.

In Halsgrove's new, pocket-sized hardback series of great lives, renowned railway specialist Robin Jones re-tells the story of the Stephensons – Father George whose entire family at his birth lived in one room in an obscure Northumberland village, and son Robert who left a fortune at his death and is buried in Westminster Abbey – who rose from the humblest of beginnings to dominate the engineering landscape and to become true heroes of Victorian Britain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

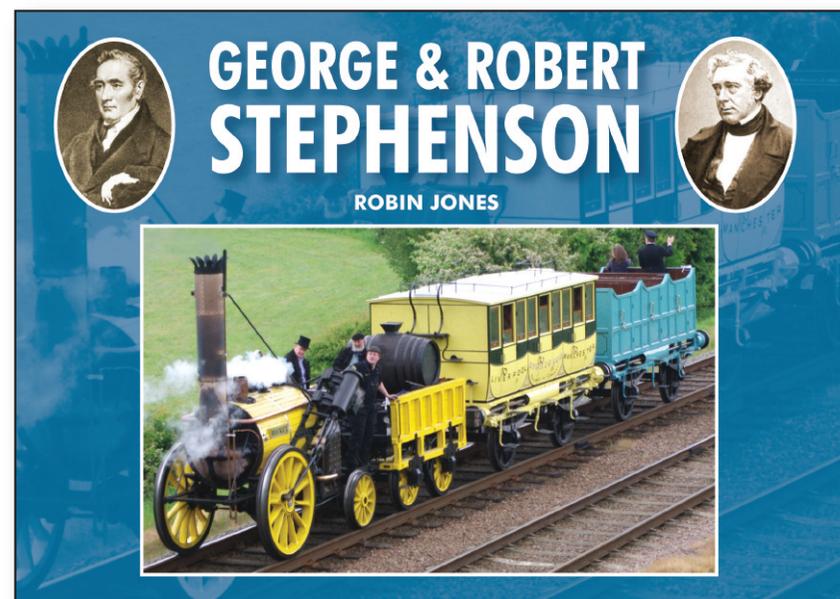
A graduate of the University of Central England, **Robin Jones**, founding editor of *Heritage Railway* magazine, was a news editor and chief investigative reporter at the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, and over the years has produced several books and special publications, along with historical features for numerous other newspapers and periodicals. He has been interested in railways from a very early age, when his elder brother Stewart took him trainspotting at Widney Manor station in Solihull at the age of four; at the end of the British Railways steam age.

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In 1822, George Stephenson and Nicholas Wood built this 0-4-0 for Hetton Colliery in County Durham. It is now displayed in the Locomotion museum at Shildon.



George Stephenson and (right) Robert Stephenson in his younger days.



The National Railway Museum's static replica of Rocket inside the Great Hall.



Beamish Museum in County Durham produced a working replica of Locomotion No. 1 in 1975.



Vintage models of Rainhills Trials competitors Rocket, Novelty and Sans Pareil at the National Railway Museum in York.



An artist's impression of the static replica of Rocket on the bridge inside the revamped National Railway Museum at York.

Most if not all visitors of the museum will have heard of *Rocket* although no doubt some will labour under the misapprehension it was built entirely by George Stephenson, as his son Robert undertook more than his fair share in its production as we shall see. What still never fails to surprise railway enthusiasts is the mistaken belief of many that it was the world's first steam locomotive.

That honour goes to Cornish mining engineer Richard Trevithick, who built a number of steam-powered locomotives firstly for road and then rail, when he found that they were too heavy for the poor quality mud-strewn pot-holed roads of the day.



Essexing presence: this statue of George Stephenson watches over all in the National Railway Museum's Great Hall.

Wentley Taffel in 1804, but while it clearly impressed the onlookers, it did not immediately spark off a transport technology revolution. Neither did his *Catch-me-who-can* locomotive, which hauled passengers in a carriage around a rain set-like circular demonstration track near the site of the present-day Euston Station in 1800.

Indeed, there were plenty of admirers, but for him commercially no takers, and a disillusioned Trevithick moved on to other fields. He died penniless in 1834, ironically the same year as the first steam line in his native Cornwall, the Bodmin & Wadebridge Railway, was opened.

Others, however, had been noting Trevithick's work from afar, even if they had not bought any of his locomotives. In that first decade of steam, the horse was