

# RICHARD TREVITHICK AND COALBROOKDALE'S FIRST LOCOMOTIVE

Matt Thompson

A remarkable full-scale operating replica of the 1802 Coalbrookdale locomotive, designed by Richard Trevithick (1771-1833), can be seen at Blists Hill Victorian Town, Telford, Shropshire. Built by young apprentices, it provides a working example of an important local contribution to the history of the steam locomotive.

**R**ichard Trevithick was a Cornish mining engineer by profession. In 1801, he built a steam-powered road carriage called *Puffing Devil* which exploded while stuck in a ditch when Trevithick and crew retired to a local pub. Most famously he built what is widely accepted to be the world's first steam-railway locomotive in 1804, which ran on the Pen-y-Darren tramway near Merthyr Tydfil, Wales.

## Trevithick at Coalbrookdale

There was another locomotive, built two years earlier, about which less is known. In 1802 Trevithick was working with the Coalbrookdale Company, Shropshire, on high-pressure stationary steam engines – and, it seems, experimenting with steam-powered locomotives. The historical sources are patchy, but it seems as though this locomotive was built at Coalbrookdale, possibly by the Quaker industrialist William



Trevithick locomotive, Blists Hill Victorian Town, Telford, Shropshire.

Reynolds (1758–1803) of the nearby Ketley ironworks, to the designs, and perhaps under the supervision, of Trevithick.

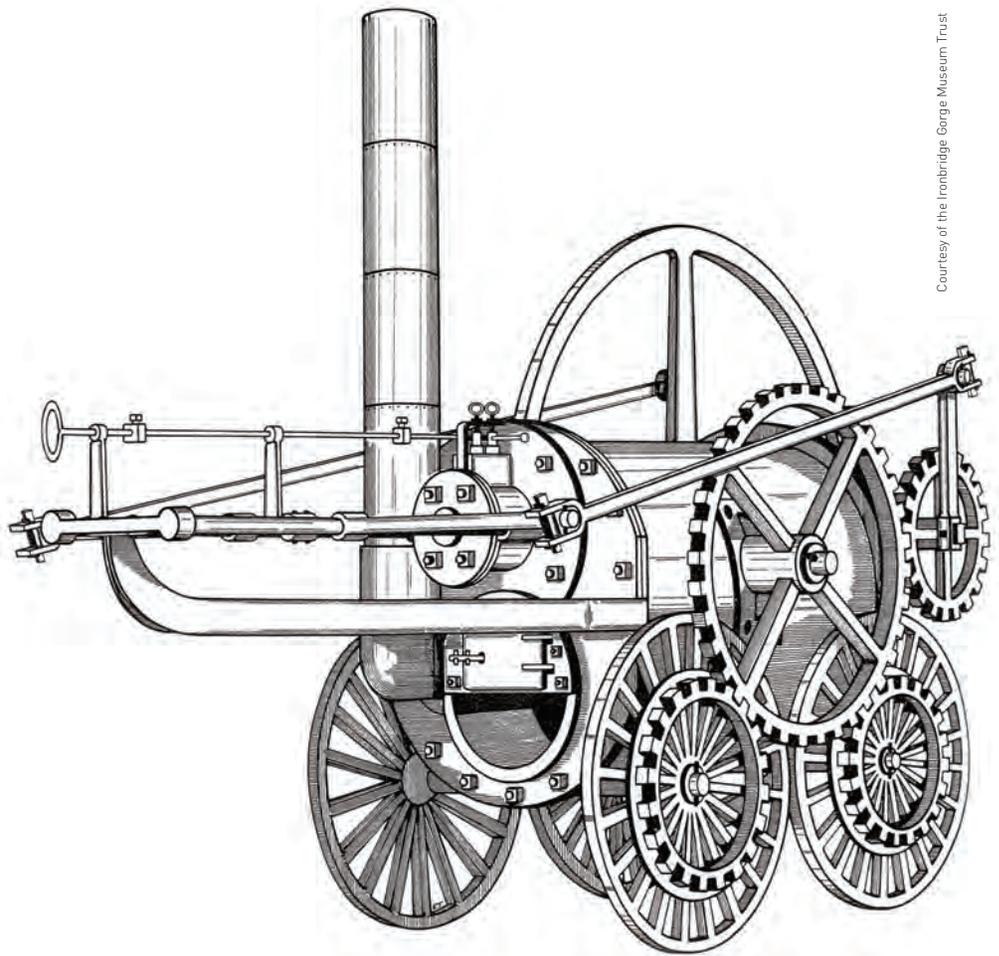
Trevithick noted in a letter of 22 August 1802 that ‘The Dale Company [Coalbrookdale] have begun a carriage at their own cost for the railroads and are forcing it with all expedition’: a ‘carriage’ is taken to mean locomotive as opposed to an unpowered waggon. A drawing (the ‘Llewellyn’ drawing) thought to be of this engine survives in the Science Museum and shows a three-foot gauge locomotive with a large flywheel and a large cog providing power to the wheels.

Archaeological excavation has shown that the Coalbrookdale Company had built and were operating a three-foot gauge railway from their works to the River Severn at the time. M.J.T. Lewis has suggested that the locomotive in the Llewellyn drawing and the 1804 Pen-y-Darren locomotive bear a ‘family resemblance’ to each other.

This implies that Trevithick was closely involved, but for some reason the Coalbrookdale locomotive was never completed. Perhaps this was due to the death of William Reynolds in 1803 or a fatal boiler explosion during testing. Whatever the reason, while the Coalbrookdale and Pen-y-Darren locomotives were very similar in design, Trevithick never claimed the Coalbrookdale locomotive as his own and always declared his first was built in 1804.

Survival? What happened to this locomotive? William Reynold’s nephew, William Anstice Reynolds, exhibited photographs to the Iron & Steel Institute when they visited Coalbrookdale in 1871 and among these were images of parts of a steam engine that he claimed were from the original Reynolds/Trevithick engine of 1802.

Sadly, these have disappeared despite tantalising references to them in the archives. Similarly, there was mention of a small wooden model of the 1802 locomotive but that was broken apart by Reynold’s nephew when he was a child; an act he repented of ‘as if it were a sin’.



A conjectural drawing of the 1802 Coalbrookdale locomotive.

Courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

Shropshire can lay at least a partial claim to the invention of the steam locomotive. Admittedly, it was not completed, but a locomotive was undoubtedly built in Coalbrookdale in 1802. While its design suggests that Trevithick was the man behind it, the man who drove its construction forward was probably Reynolds.

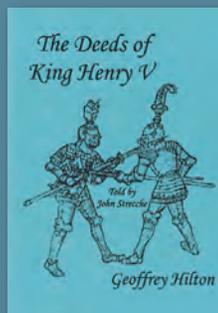
The replica locomotive at Blists Hill is a tribute to the vision and skills of Reynolds and Trevithick as well as the expertise of the GKN apprentices who created the engine in the late-twentieth century. ●

**Dr Matt Thompson** is Director of Collections & Learning at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

#### Further Reading

A. Burton, *Richard Trevithick, Giant of Steam* (Aurum Press, 2000).

### ‘The Deeds of King Henry V’ *The first biography of the King*



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