Book review

CLIFTON SUSPENSION BRIDGE

Adrian Andrews and Michael Pascoe. Broadcast Books, Bristol, 2008, ISBN 978-1-8740-9249-0, £4.95, 52 pp.

A publication specially commissioned by the trustees of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, this fascinating guidebook is an informative little gem. It is concise, easy to read and nicely illustrated with a broad range of both historical and contemporary photographs, paintings and pictures. As such, this publication should be of interest to both the enthusiast and anyone with a passing interest in this iconic structure.

The booklet starts with an introduction by Isambard Thomas, the great-great-great-grandson of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, in which it is noted that although the latter did not live to see it finished, he called the bridge 'my first love, my darling'. Perhaps it is for this reason that Brunel pursued the commission with such passion, submitting four designs to the first competition in 1829, proposing an alternative to Telford's cautious compromise in 1830 and then persuading Davies Gilbert, chairman of the judging panel for the second competition, to reverse the decision that originally judged one of Brunel's three designs in second place. As a consequence, the structure that we see today is very different to that originally conceived. This booklet describes its development from a record-breaking span to a more cautious solution, but at the cost of a large and what was to prove to be a

surprisingly innovative abutment on the Leigh Woods side of the crossing.

The realisation of the bridge is described concisely but in detail, highlighting the obstacles encountered and explaining why it took nearly 30 years to complete. Ironically, members of the Brunel family did not attend the opening ceremony, arguing that the changes that had been made 'meant that the finished bridge was his only in form and setting'. However, this booklet is a celebration of the structure and its longevity and is a tribute to the foresight of Brunel and all those who contributed to its conception, construction and legacy.

The booklet describes in simple terms the origins of suspension bridges and the parts of this structure that are unique in that they remain in use practically unaltered or strengthened despite the greatly increased traffic load that the bridge now supports. It is noted that this is due in no small part to 'the quality of design, workmanship and maintenance', all of which are enthusiastically and captivatingly described. The links between the bridge and the 'rare and special place' that is Avon Gorge are highlighted and 'Tales from the Toll House' provide a fitting and personable footnote to this affable, but nevertheless informative, publication that is an enjoyable and easy read.

R. J. LARK