

Robert Howlett, 1831-1858.

Robert Howlett is buried in the churchyard of St. Peter and St. Paul, Wendling. A service of rededication was held on October 14th, 2017 after his grave was restored, more of which later.

Robert is of interest as he was one of the first professional photographers in Britain. In a short career he provided photographic services to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and William Powell Frith RA amongst others.

Robert was born in Suffolk in 1831, the son of clergyman Reverend Robert Howlett and his wife Harriett. In due course the family moved from ecclesiastical appointments in Suffolk to Norfolk. An appointment of the Reverend to West Bradenham was then followed by ministry to nearby Longham and Wendling in 1841.

An enthusiastic and energetic man, Robert Howlett moved to London circa 1854 and became a partner at the Photographic Institution. This Institution offered a wide range of photographic services, including the documentation of engineering work in progress.

Robert contributed images to publications and exhibitions, published a book, produced images of the moon, experimented with optics and chemistry and was undoubtedly a man of vision for his time.

Between 1855 and 1858 he photographed many events of unique historical importance such as portraits of Crimean war veterans for Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and perhaps most notably, he documented the delayed launching of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's SS Great Eastern, which was at the time the largest ship ever built. His portrait of Brunel, standing in front of the ship's huge launching chains is famous. He also documented other feats for Brunel including the Royal Albert Bridge construction in Saltash.

Arguably the most iconic image by Robert Howlett is that of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, standing in front of the SS Great Eastern's launching chains and which can be viewed via the following link <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283083>

Howlett died tragically young in 1858 from typhoid and was buried at the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Wendling, Norfolk on 7th December.

In time the passing of the years weathered Robert's grave and it became anonymous.

Rose Teanby, an associate of the Photographic Society, has long favoured the portrait by Howlett of Brunel in front of the launching chains of the SS Great Eastern. Wishing to pay her respects to Howlett, she discovered the anonymous grave in Wendling churchyard and started a crowdfunding project to restore it using local masons. She was helped in this project by Sue Douglas of Longham. The culmination of their efforts (assisted by others that Rose thanks in her booklet on Robert Howlett) was a service of rededication led by the Reverend Julia Hemp.

The inscription on Robert's grave reads:

Robert Howlett. Artist,
Elder Son of The Incumbent of
This Parish, Died Dec 2 1858
Aged 27 Years

Rose has compiled a comprehensive catalogue of Robert's photographic legacy as well as writing the aforementioned booklet on Robert, from which this piece is compiled with her kind permission. She also has a website with sections about Robert Howlett as well as his grave restoration project, found at <https://roseteanbyphotography.co.uk>

In a personal communication about this piece, Rose mentions the following links to Robert's work that may be of interest to the reader that has made it this far:

Images online at The George Eastman

Museum: <https://collections.eastman.org/people/76291/-/objects/list?page=1>

Copies of paintings at J P Getty

Museum: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1691/robert-howlett-british-1831-1858/>

Royal Collection - a soldier recovering from captivity following the charge of the Light Brigade: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/11/collection/2500192/john-dryden>

National Museum of Wales https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/e1f51866-46ea-3400-b8b3-c9962069f61b/Valley-of-the-Mole-photograph/?field0=string&value0=robert%20howlett&field1=with_images&value1=on&index=2