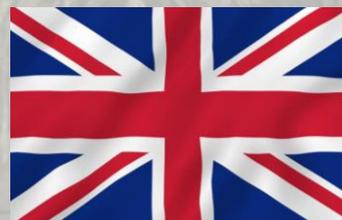


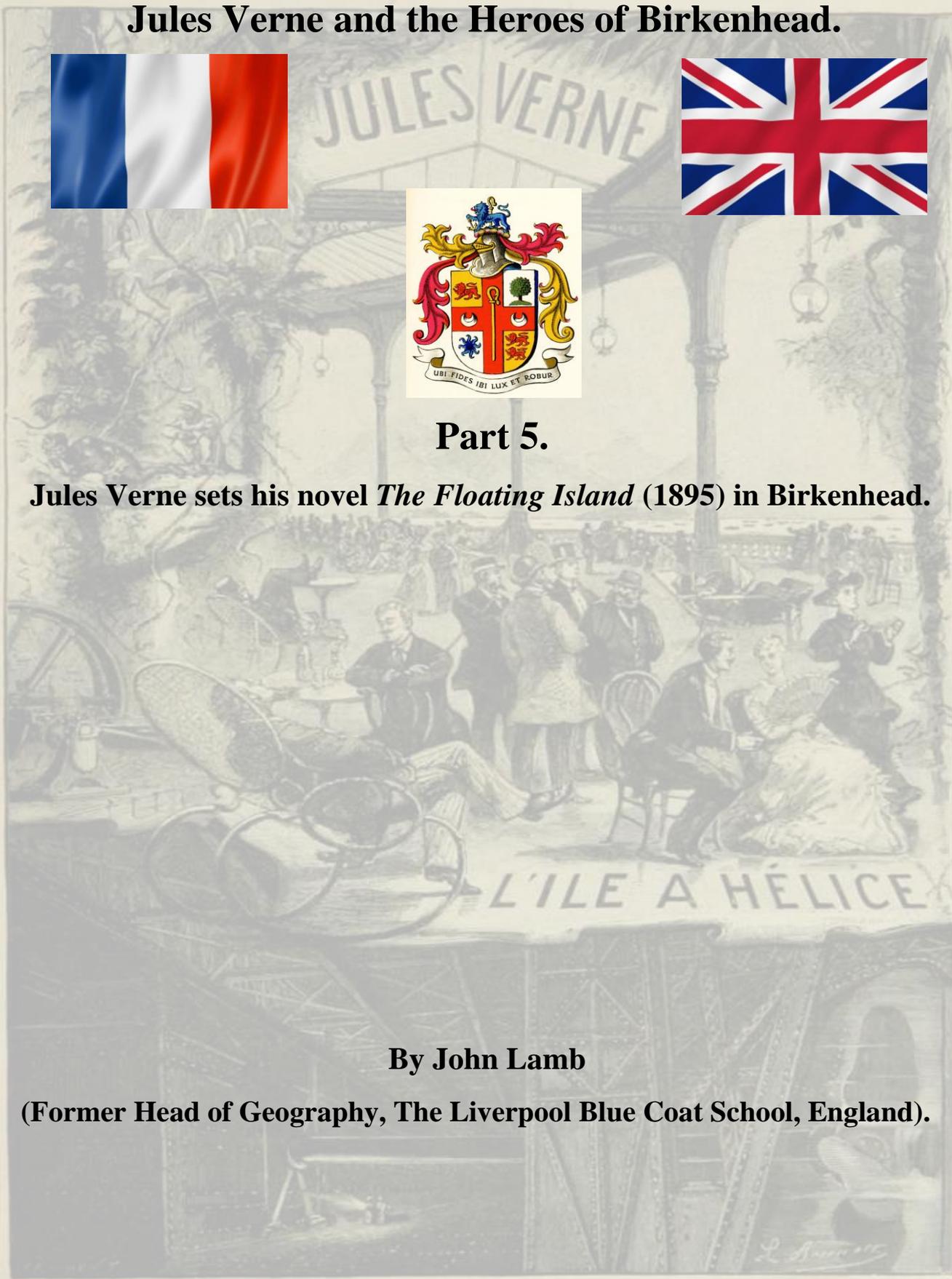
LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES
COURONNÉS PAR L'ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE

Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.



Part 5.

Jules Verne sets his novel *The Floating Island* (1895) in Birkenhead.



By John Lamb

(Former Head of Geography, The Liverpool Blue Coat School, England).

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Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

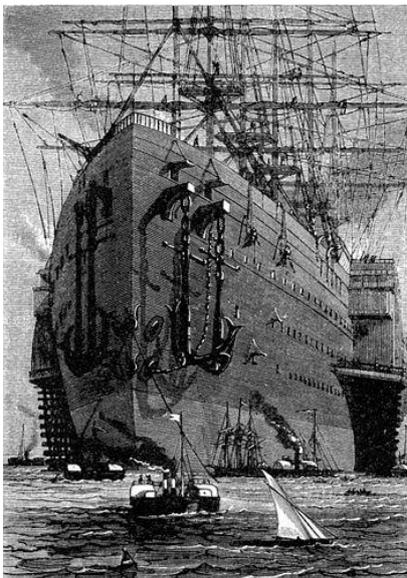
Part 5.

Jules Verne sets his novel *The Floating Island* (1895) in Birkenhead.

We know that Jules Verne visited the town of Birkenhead on at least two occasions and wrote about his experiences in *Backwards to Britain* (1859) and *A Floating City* (1871).

However, Verne's relationship with Birkenhead runs much deeper than this and indeed it begins with his very first novel.

Jules Verne's Birkenhead in c1870.



The Adventures of Captain Hatteras (1864) is the first of Verne's 54 volume series of works entitled the *Voyages Extraordinaires* and it starts in Birkenhead with Richard Shandon's ship *The Forward*.

Six other of Jules Verne's novels also have their hero's ships built in Birkenhead, including Captain Nemo in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) who commissions the double hull of his submarine *The Nautilus* from Birkenhead's Lairds shipyard.

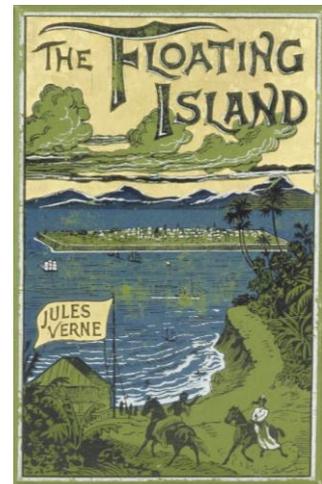
The SS *Great Eastern* at Birkenhead. Jules Verne - *A Floating City* (1871).

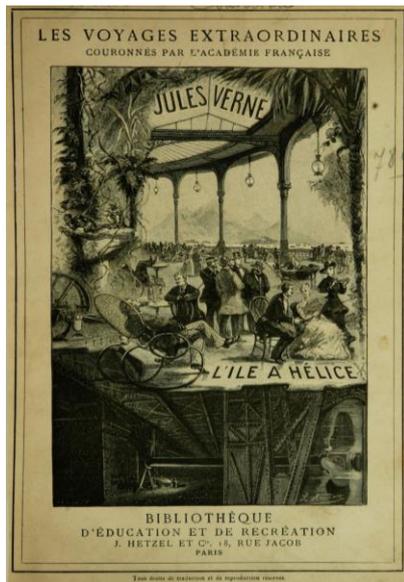
I am indebted to my brother Kenneth Lamb for first pointing out the many similarities between Verne's *The Floating Island* (1895) and the town of Birkenhead and the Wirral Peninsula.

Many will dismiss these similarities as 'coincidences' and maintain that this is the end of the story.

As we shall see this is just the start of our adventure. There will be many more 'coincidences' to explore in the wonderfully imaginative world of this true genius of France.

***The Floating Island* (1895) by Jules Verne.**





In 1895 Jules Verne published his science fiction novel 'The Floating Island' also known as 'Propeller Island' (*L'Île à hélice*). The storyline traces the adventures of a French string quartet who are on a concert tour of the United States. The quartet are involved in a carriage accident while travelling from San Francisco to San Diego and are offered hotel accommodation by Calistus Munbar (a character loosely based on Phineas T Barnum the *Greatest Showman*).

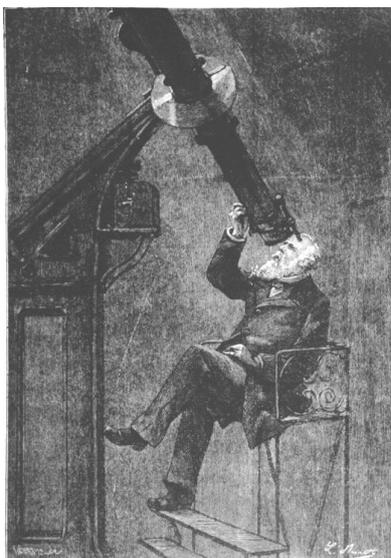
Munbar takes them to an Island called *Standard Island*, a giant artificial island that proceeds to float off across the Pacific Ocean taking the unwitting quartet with it.

Jules Verne *The Floating Island* (1895)

As befits the science fiction genre, the *Floating Island* is a millionaires' playground designed to take its inhabitants on a perpetual cruise around the Pacific Ocean. *Floating Island* was but a *Great Eastern* modernised – only several thousand times larger. The populace drives electric motor cars, Munbar has a talking watch, the boulevards have moving pavements, the hotels are air conditioned, and sprinklers keep the lawns verdant as the *Pearl of the Pacific* sails through the drier zones of the oceans.

The population, all of them millionaires, are the healthiest on the planet, the shopping streets of its main town 'Milliard City' are often deserted as the occupants shop via 'teleautograph' while two forts and 500 soldiers guard the ten thousand inhabitants from possible pirate attack. *Floating Island* is a paradise – what can possibly go wrong?

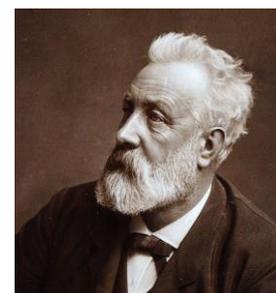
In Jules Verne's 'reality' *The Floating Island* is Birkenhead and Wallasey and its two greatest secrets will remain hidden for a very long time after we have finished this particular story.



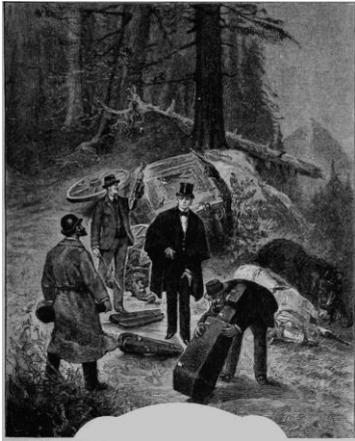
Jules Verne will want to oversee proceedings and so he will smuggle himself on board the *Floating Island* as the exiled *King of Malecarlie* (The King of Wallasey?), so setting a tradition of appearing in one's own productions – a tradition later carried on by those two other great masters of the imagination - Alfred Hitchcock and Stan Lee.

The King of Malecarlie (left) in Jules Verne's *The Floating Island* (1895).

The author himself (right) photographed about the time of the writing of the novel.



The Floating Island (1895) by Jules Verne.



It is 1895 and twenty miles from San Diego in Southern California, four French musicians lie on the ground after the carriage in which they were riding has suddenly turned over by the side of the road.

Yvernes, Frascolin, Pinchinat and Sebastien Zorn are a string quartet who have achieved great success in the United States and are great friends.

A stranger offers accommodation to the quartet in a great city just two miles way, however they have been led to believe there are no large towns in the area. The quartet accept the offer of good rooms in a fine hotel. They are then taken in an electric tram to a quayside and ferry terminal which in Jules Verne's imaginary world is based on Liverpool's Pier Head.



Probably the ferry boat was worked by electricity, for there was no steam, and in two minutes they were on the other side of the watercourse, alongside a quay...

Jules Verne *The Floating Island* (1895).

Liverpool Pier Head c1880

Verne later gives a clue to tell us where we really are;

He also noticed there was a current in the sea flowing eastward at an appreciable speed as it ran against the pierheads...

Jules Verne *The Floating Island* (1895).

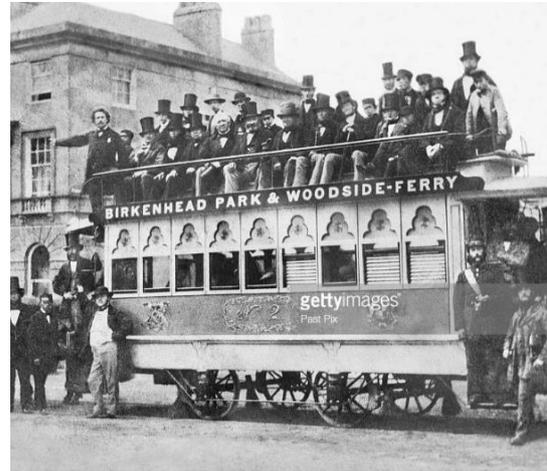
On the other side of the watercourse (Birkenhead) the electric tram takes the four musicians towards a great park.

The car resumed its course along some country roads and entered a park over which ariel appliances poured an intense light.

Here Verne is emphasising the two great social experiments that put Birkenhead at the forefront of town planning in the 19th century – Europe’s first tramway and the world’s first public park.

Verne’s tram route replicates exactly George Francis Train’s 1860 tram route from Woodside Ferry to Birkenhead Park Entrance (right).

George Francis Train (pointing) at the opening of the Birkenhead Street Railway 30th August 1860.



In 1870 George Francis Train achieved something that no one had ever done before - to great celebrations he became the first man to ever travel around the world in eighty days.

The gate of the park gave access to a wide and long road paved with sonorous flags.



Birkenhead Park gate and to the rear - a wide and long road paved with sonorous flags.

Entrance to Birkenhead Park c1900.

Five minutes later the artistes descended at the steps of a comfortable hotel, where they were received with a welcome that augured well, thanks to a word from the American.

Birkenhead Queen’s Hotel c1865.

The Queen’s Hotel is located opposite Birkenhead Park Entrance and is the terminal of George Francis Train’s (Phileas Fogg’s) tramway. The tram and its extremely patient waiting horse are easily visible (right).





Through the large windows the light was pouring into the room, and the view extended for a mile down a superb road planted with trees.

The view from the Queen's Hotel extending for a mile down Park Road North, Birkenhead. The planted trees of Birkenhead Park are on the left.

Park Road North, Birkenhead.

The quartet are invited to a tour of this great town by Calistus Munbar.

"Calistus Munbar presents his morning civilities to each of the honourable members of the Quartette Party and begs them to descend as soon as they are ready to the dining room of the Excelsior Hotel where their first breakfast awaits them."

I am yours, gentlemen.

Jules Verne then describes the city;



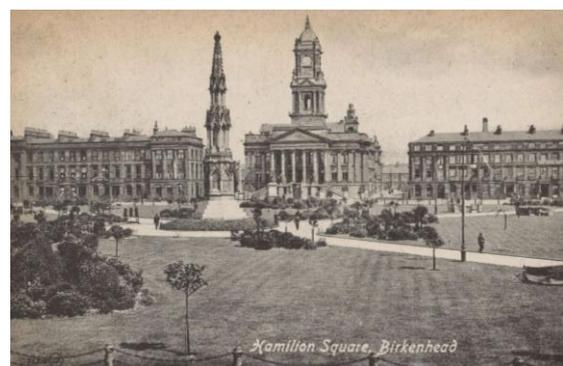
The city was built on a regular plan. The avenues and roads, provided with verandahs above the footways, crossed each other at right angles, forming a sort of chessboard.

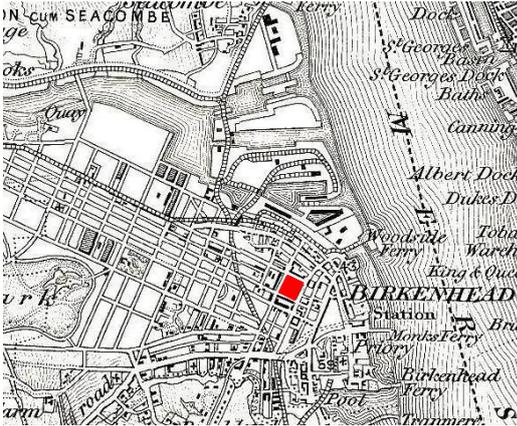
Birkenhead's chessboard pattern of streets dates back to the 1820's and is a copy of New York's pattern of streets inaugurated in 1811.

Birkenhead's Regular Plan.

It was remarkable that the trees, of recent planting, no doubt, were none of them fully grown. So, it was with the squares at the intersection of the chief arteries of the city, carpeted with lawns of freshness quite English.

Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.
carpeted with lawns of freshness quite English.

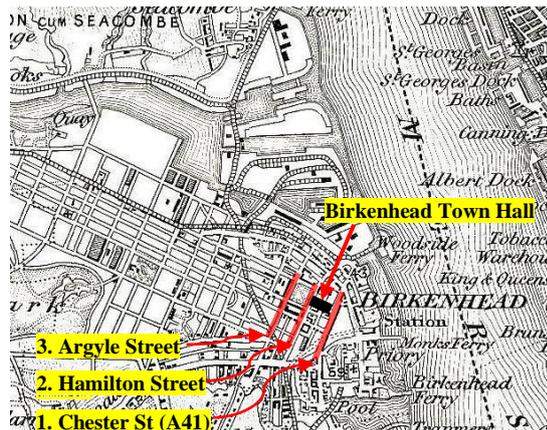




Hamilton Square is the focal point of Birkenhead's grid iron pattern of streets. The trees, of recent planting can refer to both Hamilton Square and Birkenhead Park as both were planted less than 50 years before the writing of *The Floating Island*.

The location of Birkenhead's Hamilton Square.

Calistus Munbar said, "Here we are in Third Avenue, and there are thirty in the town. This is the most business one, it is our Broadway, our Regent Street, our Boulevard des Italiens. In the stores and bazaars, you find the superfluous and the necessary, all that can be asked for by the requirements of the modern comfort."



Birkenhead's 'Broadway' - Argyle Street – The Third Main Avenue in Birkenhead.

Argyle Street is the third main avenue on Birkenhead's chess board pattern of streets. In 1887 the building of the new Birkenhead Town Hall (shown in black) blocked off Albion Street as a continuous thoroughfare, so confirming Argyle Street as Jules Verne's *Third Avenue*.

Jules Verne will show an intimate knowledge of the changing history of Birkenhead Town Hall by faithfully reproducing its image, both in *Floating Island* and in one other novel.

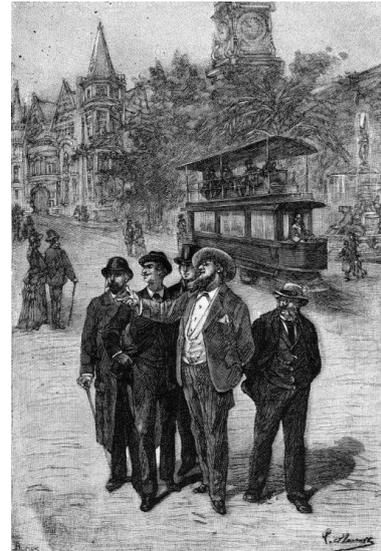
Birkenhead's Argyle Theatre on Argyle Street was opened in December 1868. It later became the first music hall to broadcast radio shows to the nation and the only British music hall to broadcast directly to the United States.

I see the shops,” observed Pinchinat, “but I don’t see the customers”...

“Perhaps it is too early in the morning?” added Yvernes.

“It is due,” said Calistus Munbar, “to most of the orders being given telephonically, or rather teleautographically.”

What does that mean?” asked Frascolin.



“Here we are in Third Avenue”

“It means we commonly use the telautograph, an instrument which sends the written as the telephone sends the spoken word, without forgetting the kinetograph, which registers the movements; being for the eye what the phonograph is for the ear, and the telephote, which reproduces the images.”

It seems Birkenhead’s Argyle Street was already suffering stiff competition from ‘internet shopping’ as far back as 1895. Jules Verne, as a one-time stockbroker would surely have been among the first to recommend buying shares in ‘Amazon Prime’.

Verne not only predicts the rise of Internet shopping, but he also correctly forecasts its effects on the local High Street.



The ‘Phonotelephote’ first appeared in Jules Verne’s novel ‘*In the Year 2889*’ (1889). This later (1910) illustration shows a husband in the United States sharing breakfast with his wife 3,000 miles away in Paris.

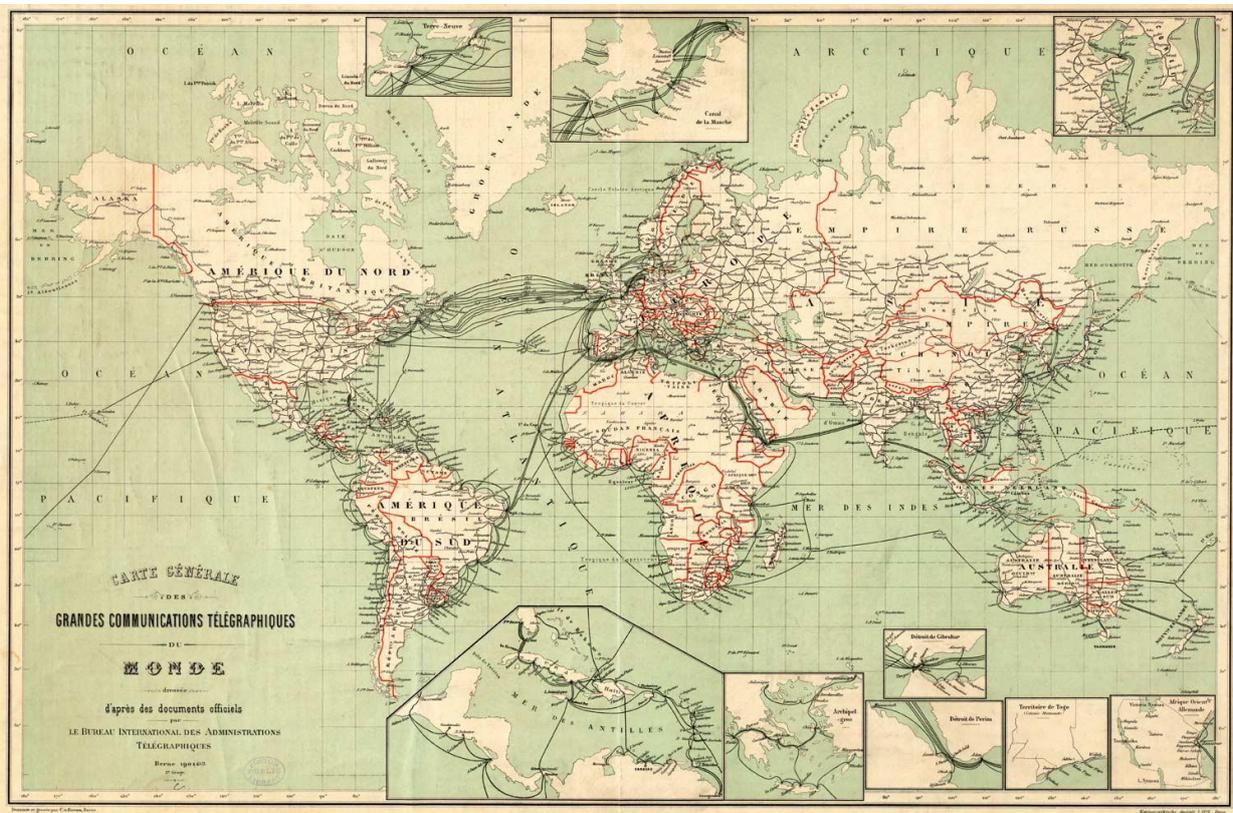
In the Year 2889 (1889)

Today, 95% of modern Internet communications are carried via submarine cables that owe much of their historical origin to the entrepreneurs and scientists of Birkenhead. Jules Verne will soon reveal that Floating Island is connected to the American mainland by submarine cables and so the island’s shopping is very much ‘online’ as early as 1895.

A brief ‘Interlude’ will give context and explain Birkenhead’s contribution to what is now widely known as the ‘Victorian Internet’.

INTERLUDE

Birkenhead's Contribution to the 'Victorian Internet'



The World Network of Submarine and Terrestrial Cables at the End of the Victorian Era (1901)

UBI FIDES IBI LUX ET ROBUR

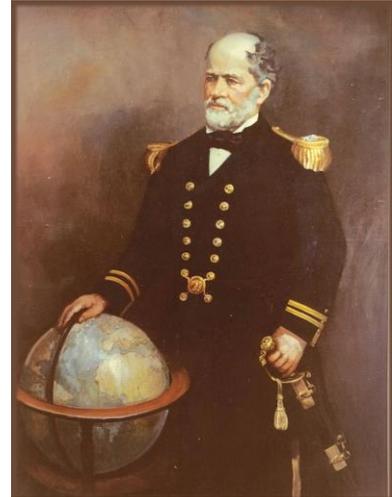
- the Greatest Technological Achievement of the Nineteenth Century -

Birkenhead's Contribution to the 'Victorian Internet'.

In 1853 the American Mathew Fontaine Maury, the 'Father of Modern Oceanography' conducted the first deep sea survey of the Atlantic Sea floor and established the existence of a 'telegraphic plateau' at a depth of some 10,000 feet.

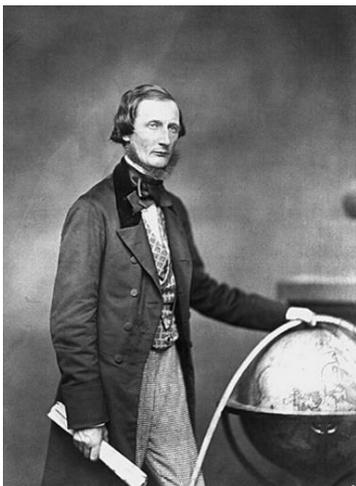
Maury was a great friend of the Birkenhead shipbuilder John Laird, and for a time Maury's wife and children lived in Birkenhead.

John Laird, the fictional builder of Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* was a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at Tranmere, Birkenhead.



Mathew Fontaine Maury (1806-73)

Maury's work raised interest in the idea of laying a submarine telegraphic cable across the Atlantic Ocean to unite both the American and European continents.



In 1857 the American entrepreneur Cyrus West Field (1818-92) came to Birkenhead to pursue his great dream of laying the first submarine telegraphic cable across the Atlantic.

In 1856 Field's first attempt to raise money had failed as both the American and British governments had refused financial aid. Despite his best efforts Cyrus Field could not find an alternative private investor confident enough to finance his new cable project.

Cyrus West Field (1818-92)

Field was preparing to sail home when he was invited to dinner at the home of Charles William Harrison Pickering at Montebello, St Georges Mount, New Brighton Wirral.

Charles William Harrison Pickering was a partner in the private bank of Pickering and Schroder in Liverpool.

Montebello, St Georges Mount, New Brighton



Charles's son Henry gave this interview in the Salina Journal of Kansas, USA on August 2, 1935, and it is recorded in the Pickering Family website.

"In 1857 Cyrus Field made his third trip to England to raise money for laying a cable across the Atlantic. As before both the American and British governments turned a deaf ear to him. The evening before he was to have sailed back to America he dined at our house near Birkenhead. At that dinner my father said 'If I can induce you to stay another week here we will go to London and raise the money to carry out this project.' This, they did.

Charles William Harrison Pickering was instrumental in attracting the wire rope company RS Newall of Gateshead to set up a cable making manufactory at Birkenhead – Pickering was appointed as the Managing Director of the new company.

Pickering was also a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at Tranmere, Birkenhead.

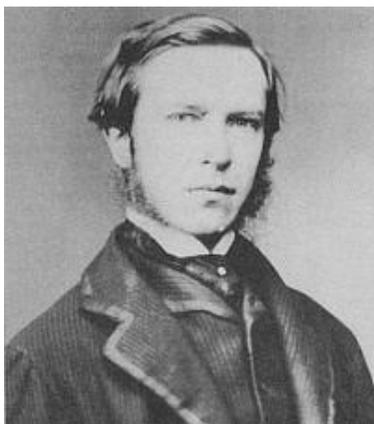
R.S. Newall and Co.



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Will be found far superior to single wire for Fencing, Railway Signal Cord, etc., and may be obtained,
Galvanized or Varished, OF ANY LENGTH IN ONE PIECE. This is admirably suited for Riprakers
Trawling, Snow, General Garden and Ornamental Work. It requires no paint, and will never corrode.
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OFFICES AND WAREHOUSES,
130, STRAND, LONDON. 69, ARNHEIM QUAY, GLASGOW. 36, WATERLOO ROAD LIVERPOOL.

The premises in Cathcart Street Birkenhead was set up to manufacture half the length (1,400 miles) of the Atlantic cable, the other half of the cable was manufactured by Glass Elliot and company of Greenwich.

The Birkenhead factory remained open until at least 1861 as further cable contracts followed.



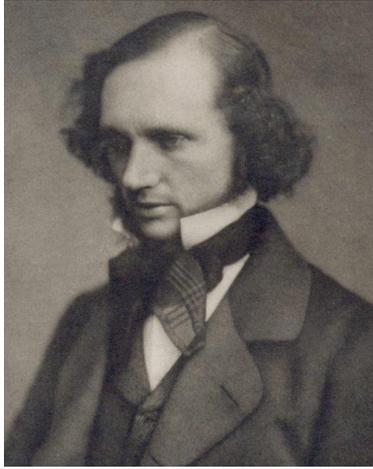
The cable works were situated in a warehouse next to the Great Float (Wallasey Pool) where the cable was produced at a rate of over one hundred miles a week.

The Birkenhead factory was also at the forefront of telegraphic research into the electrical resistance of telegraphic cables under their gifted research engineer Fleeming Jenkin (1833-85).

Fleeming Jenkin (1833-85)

Newall and Company were so impressed with the work of the 24-year-old Fleeming Jenkin that Jenkin was introduced to fellow scientist William Thomson 'as a young man of remarkable ability' engaged at their Birkenhead works. Thomson and Jenkin would become lifelong friends and business partners.

Together, Fleeming Jenkin and William Thompson would become two of the great pioneers of submarine telegraphic cables, the first medium of intercontinental communication. William Thompson is better known today by his later title – Lord Kelvin.



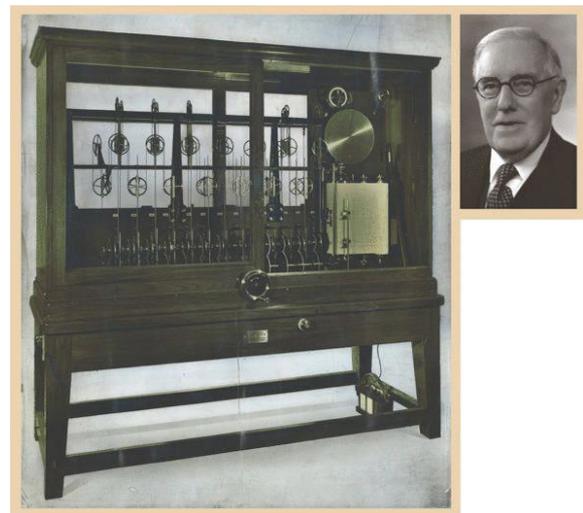
Throughout the 1870's Lord Kelvin would take his annual Christmas break with Lord Derby at Knowsley Hall near Liverpool.

Lord Derby was the Commodore of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at Tranmere, Birkenhead.

Lord Kelvin (1824 – 1907) – friend and lifelong business partner of Fleeming Jenkin.

Lord Kelvin had one other major link with Birkenhead.

In 1872 Kelvin devised a mechanical tide prediction machine (an early version of an analogue computer) and some time after this date the device was installed at Bidston Observatory on Bidston Hill, Birkenhead.



Lord Kelvin's Tide Predicting Machine and Arthur Doodson (1890-1968) of Bidston Observatory.



This apparatus was one of the two machines used by the oceanographer Arthur Doodson to calculate the optimum tides for the D-Day landings in Normandy as falling on the 5th, 6th and 7th of June 1944.

The historic date of the 6th June 1944 - the day that gave the modern world its freedom - was thus decided at Bidston Observatory on Bidston Hill, Birkenhead, England.

Low tide on the D-Day Landings - June 6th, 1944

As we shall see, Bidston Hill, together with its lighthouse (at the time possessing the most powerful light beam of any lighthouse in the world), together with its telegraph station and its observatory will all be major influences on the writings of Jules Verne.



Bidston Lighthouse (built 1873) and observatory (built 1866)



At Birkenhead, Fleeming Jenkin began conducting experiments in tandem with the Edinburgh based Thompson. They measured the resistance of both copper and gutta percha used in submarine cables. Gutta Percha is a natural rubber latex like substance applied to the outside of the cable as an electrical insulator before being further encased in steel rope.

A cross section of the 1858 cable.

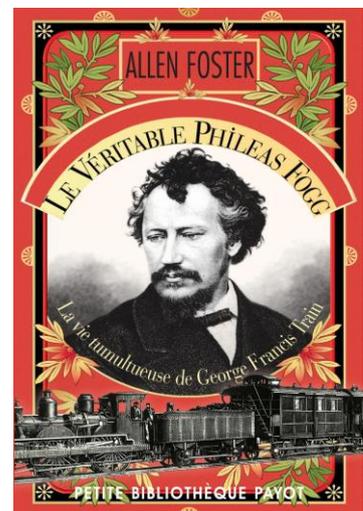
Jenkin, Thompson and others would also eventually agree the international standard unit for electrical resistance now known as the ‘ohm’ – by early 1858 the revolutionary new cable was ready.

The American Government duly converted the then largest ship in the world, the ‘*Niagara*’ into a cable layer, and in the spring of 1858 the *Niagara* arrived at Birkenhead Docks to load the American half of the cable.

An eyewitness wrote;

I was in Liverpool at the time the Niagara arrived there for the purpose of laying the Atlantic cable, and suggested giving a banquet to Captain Hudson and Commander Pennock, who was my cousin, and to the other officers, at Lynn's Waterloo Hotel.

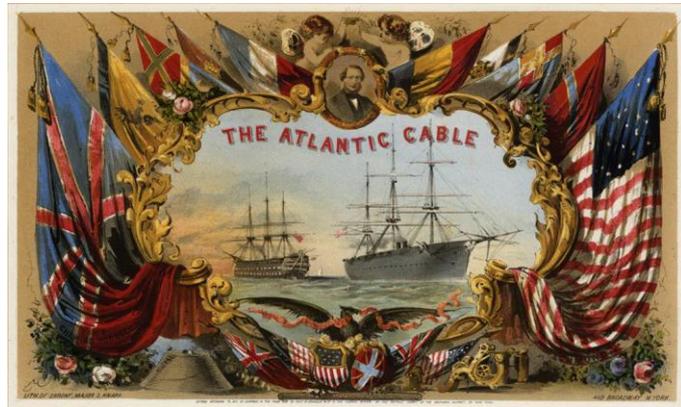
The eyewitness who wrote these words and subsequently gave a banquet for the Captain of the *Niagara* was George Francis Train – the first man to ever travel around the world in eighty days.



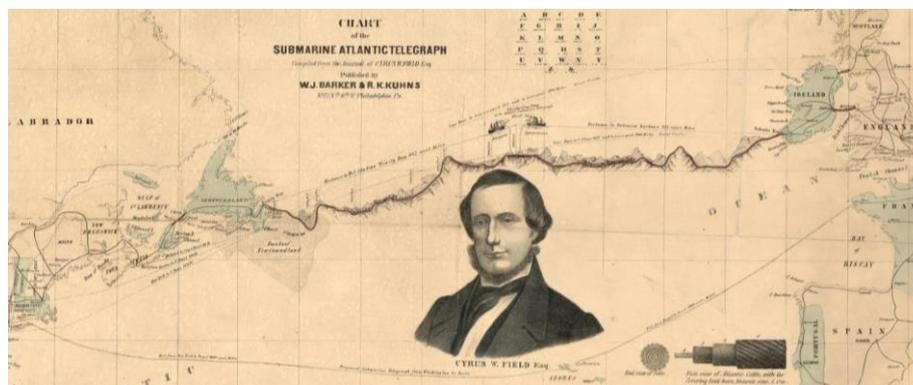
Le Veritable Phileas Fogg

In August 1858 the *Niagara* commenced laying the Birkenhead half of the cable from the settlement of Hearts Content, Newfoundland to the middle of the Atlantic. The British Government used the ship 'Agamemnon' starting at Valentia, Ireland.

The two ships met in mid ocean and after overcoming the initial shock of realising the two cables twisted in different directions, they were joined together and lowered to the bottom of the Atlantic on August 5th, 1858.



Souvenir commemorating Cyrus Field and the laying of the world's first Atlantic Cable (1858)

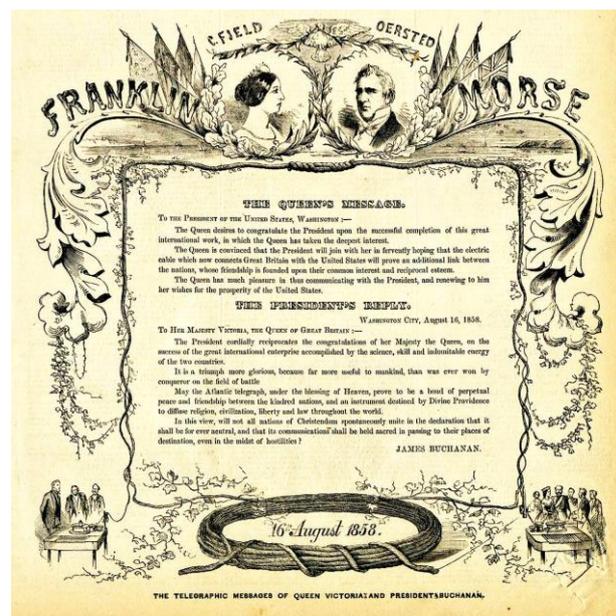


The Route of the 1858 Atlantic Cable across Maury's 'Telegraphic Plateau'

The cable was seen as a great sign of friendship between the United States and Britain, two countries who just 43 years earlier had been in a state of war.

On the 16th August Queen Victoria sent a 93-word congratulatory telegram to President Buchanan. It took sixteen and a half hours to transmit. Buchanan's reply took a little over ten hours. Nevertheless, a new era in global communication had been established.

Queen Victoria's first transatlantic Telegram to President Buchanan and Buchanan's reply.



Queen Victoria was the Patron of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at Tranmere, Birkenhead.

There were great celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic, none more so than in the United States where every major city held 'Cable Carnival Processions' – the largest was in New York with up to a million spectators lining the streets.



The Atlantic Telegraph Procession on Broadway, New York September 1st 1858.

And then disaster struck....

it stopped working after transmitting about 400 telegrams.

Jules Verne *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869).



The mystery explained – Father Neptune had sabotaged the 1858 Cable.

The blame was perhaps unfairly placed on the Liverpool engineer, the aptly named Wildman Whitehouse (1816-90). Whitehouse was the appointed electrician to the Atlantic Telegraph Company and his insistence on using higher voltages was said to have resulted in the failure of the cable and he was promptly sacked.

Cyrus Field's first attempt had thus ended in failure and the start of the American Civil War (1861-65) put paid to any more thoughts of a great cable across the Atlantic. Field would not give up and again he looked towards another man from Birkenhead.

Thomas Brassey of Birkenhead (1805-70).

- THE GREATEST CIVIL ENGINEER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY–
- BUILDER OF THREE QUARTERS OF FRANCE’S RAILWAYS–
- CONSTRUCTED A RAILWAY TO SUPPLY THE SIEGE OF SEBASTOPOL–
- AWARDED LEGION D’HONNEUR BY NAPOLEON III–
- FINANCED THE COMPLETION OF BRUNEL’S SS GREAT EASTERN–
- RAISED FINANCE FOR THE 1866 TRANSATLANTIC CABLE–
- FINANCED CONVERSION OF THE SS *GREAT EASTERN* TO A CABLE LAYER–
- BUSINESS PARTNER OF CYRUS FIELD–

Thomas Brassey (1805-1870) was the greatest civil engineer and railway builder of the Victorian Age. He was born in Buerton, Cheshire and came to live in Birkenhead in 1826. In the 1830’s Brassey built a brickworks and lime kilns at an inlet of the Mersey known as Wallasey Pool.

In 1829 Brassey completed his first ever construction contract - a new bridge across the Arrow Brook, a tributary of the River Birket.

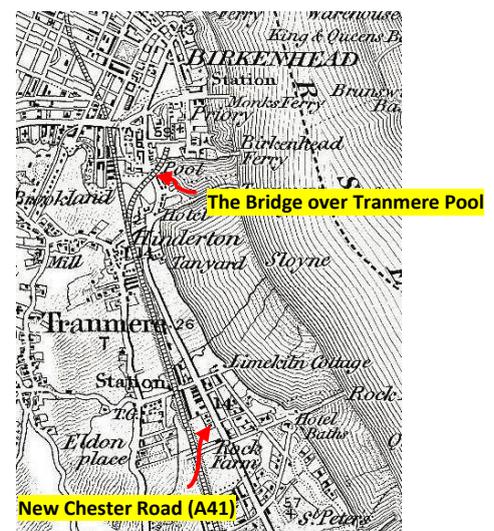
Thomas Brassey (1805-1870)



After training as a surveyor, Brassey’s first major engineering scheme was the construction in 1833 of a four mile stretch of the ‘New Chester Road’ (A41) from Birkenhead to Bromborough Pool, the scheme included building a new road bridge over Tranmere Pool (a tidal inlet to the south of Birkenhead).

Brassey’s modern methods of surveying and construction allowed the road to be built in a dead straight line (right).

Brassey’s ‘New Chester Road’ running south of Birkenhead.





In 1828 the celebrated railway engineer George Stephenson had visited Brassey at his quarry at Storeton, near Birkenhead. Stephenson suggested that Brassey involve himself in building railways and his first venture was the building of the Penkrige Viaduct, Staffordshire in 1837.

The Penkrige viaduct

Closer to home, Brassey used a gravity tramway through Storeton Woods, near Birkenhead to transport sandstone from Storeton quarry to the quayside at Bromborough Pool on the River Mersey. Storeton stone was later said to have cladded part of the Empire State building in New York.

Remains of Brassey's tramway at Storeton Woods near Birkenhead.



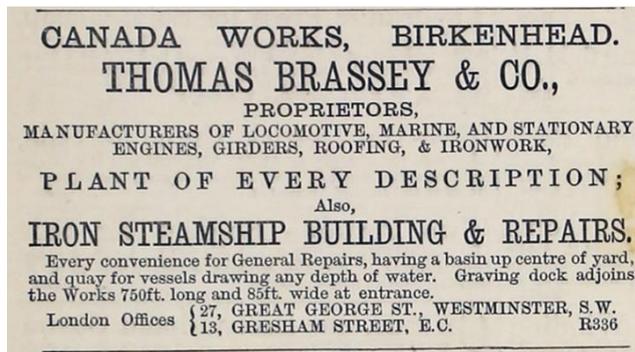
Brassey was instrumental in building another masterpiece in stone - the Great Culvert sewer at Birkenhead in 1844. The Great Culvert is the main drainage tunnel diverting the River Birket around the Birkenhead Docks system.

The entrance to the Great Culvert, just north of Woodside Ferry, Birkenhead.

The Great Culvert tunnel operated as Birkenhead's main sewer outlet until the 1990's and the sewer entrance is still visible at low tide today lying directly beneath the modern ventilation shaft of the Birkenhead Mersey Road Tunnel.

Brassey also helped finance the sophisticated new Birkenhead docks system which enclosed the tidal inlet known as Wallasey Pool behind a dock wall and gates.

Thomas Brassey's sewer expertise was by no means confined to Birkenhead, he also worked with Sir Joseph Bazalgette on the construction of London's new sewage system.

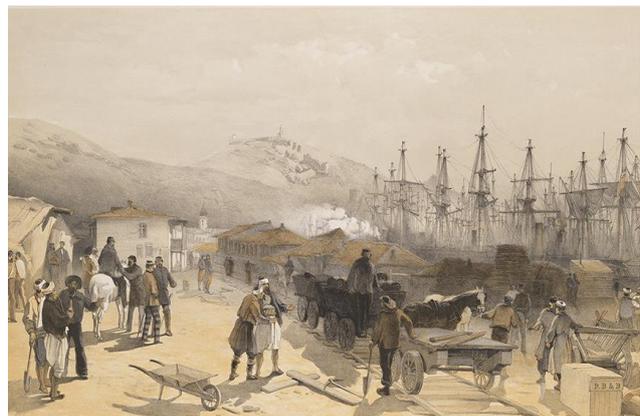


In 1853 Thomas Brassey opened up his much larger Canada Works at Wallasey Pool, to the north of Birkenhead. He built a massive factory to construct materials for the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada including the Victoria Bridge over the St. Lawrence River. Brassey's company also built 55 steam locomotives for this railway.

Thomas Brassey became a hero in France when in 1854 he came to the rescue of the British and French forces in the Crimean War. In 1854 the Black Sea Port of Sebastopol was being besieged by an Anglo-French army in danger of perishing in the harsh Russian Winter. Brassey and his partners, Peto and Betts suggested a prefabricated railway line to keep troops supplied with armaments, buildings, tents and provisions.

Brassey oversaw the shipping out of equipment to the Crimea Peninsula. Despite freezing temperatures, the 56km long line was completed in just seven weeks. The siege was maintained, and Sebastopol finally fell in September 1855 – within months Russia sued for peace.

Unloading the railway at Balaclava by Peto, Brassey and Betts (P.B&B) 1855.



Jules Verne would pay a backhanded tribute to Brassey in his book '*Backwards to Britain*' (1859), it would not be Verne's last tribute to the great engineer.

'The British are, with the Americans, the world's leading mechanics. They shrink from no hurdle and when a new idea occurs to them, think up the machine to carry it out. In short, where engineering is concerned, they can achieve anything. It is not surprising that during the Crimean War a serious company was set up, with substantial capital, to tender for the siege of Sebastopol, offering to take the town within an agreed period of time, past which it would pay millions in compensation for every day that elapsed. New machines would have been built to carry out this project, which would certainly have achieved a speedier result, with less loss of life than traditional warfare. But could there be any glory in a war reduced to a company transaction?'

Jules Verne *Backwards to Britain* (1859)



On January 12th, 1856, Thomas Brassey dined with the Emperor Napoleon III and was invested in the Legion d'honneur for his services to French railways and to the nation in the Crimean War.

Napoleon III was a friend of the Stanley family in Hooton Hall, Wirral, and had previously hunted at Claughton, Birkenhead while in exile in Britain in the 1840's.

There is no evidence that Napoleon III was ever a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere Birkenhead.

Napoleon III (1808-73)

In 1857 Thomas Brassey gave financial help to Isambard Kingdom Brunel to complete the largest ship in the world – The *Leviathan* or SS *The Great Eastern*, a ship that will be forever linked with both Jules Verne and the town of Birkenhead.



The Construction of the *Leviathan*, later known as the *Great Eastern* at Millwall in 1857.

A list of Brassey's astonishing engineering achievements include:

He built one third of all Britain's Victorian railways, three quarters of all railways in France, one twentieth of the world's Victorian railways including: Barcelona and Mataro Railway, Central Italian Railway, Central Argentine Railway, Queensland Railway, Delhi Railway and the Mauritius Railway.

Other projects included the Hausenstein Tunnel Switzerland, the Rio de Janeiro drainage works, the Calcutta Water Works and the construction of the Victoria Docks and Victoria Embankment in London.

The work of Thomas Brassey – the Victoria Embankment, London.



Having lived in France while supervising the construction of the country's railways, Brassey was in many ways a Francophile and greatly appreciated the country, its culture and its art. By 1865 he had started construction on a huge French chateau mansion on a ridge at Catsfield in Sussex.

Before 'Normanhurst Court' could be completed in 1870, Brassey was diagnosed with cancer, he continued to work and after taking to his bed, many of his most loyal navvies travelled on foot to Normanhurst to stand vigil and give thanks. Thomas Brassey died on December 8th, 1870. He is buried at Catsfield churchyard and his estate worth an astonishing £5,200,000 was divided amongst his three sons.

The partnership of Thomas Brassey and Cyrus Field was instrumental in the eventual success of laying a second submarine telegraphic cable across the Atlantic.

When Cyrus Field failed in his first attempt, Brassey was eager to renew the work despite the public having lost confidence in the scheme. In 1864 Brassey stepped in to raise the necessary capital to purchase the SS 'Great Eastern', he formed the 'Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company' (TELCON) with two other partners, Messrs Gooch and Barber.

Brassey's philanthropy encouraged Cyrus Field to give an 'Inauguration Banquet' at the Palace Hotel in London to commemorate the 'Renewal of the Atlantic Telegraph Company' on 15th April 1864 (right).

Brassey and Charles Francis Adams who was Abraham Lincoln's American Ambassador in London were both invited to give speeches.

Inauguration Banquet for the Atlantic Telegraph Company 15th April 1864.



I may have made in the course of my mission here, towards keeping in harmony two nations of the same race, when there was a good deal of danger that they might differ; but, after all, I believe that the best and most permanent plan for uniting them is to establish this Atlantic Telegraph, for that and every other thing which tends to bring those two nations closer together will have the effect, I am sure, of increasing their knowledge of each other, and thereby perpetuating a good understanding between them.

Charles Francis Adams (1807-86)

By April 1864 the American Civil War was still raging and the Birkenhead built Confederate cruiser CSS *Alabama* was still busy capturing and burning its 51st and 52nd United States merchant ships, so Charles Francis Adams speech was surprisingly conciliatory.

In the same banquet Cyrus Field would say of Thomas Brassey of Birkenhead;

The words spoken by Mr. Brassey in the latter part of January, "Let the Electric Telegraph be laid between England and America" encouraged us all and made us believe we should succeed in raising the necessary capital, and I then went to work to find nine other Thomas Brasseys

Cyrus Field 15th April 1864.

Cyrus Field would also praise Brassey's purchase of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's *Leviathan* the SS *Great Eastern* for a knock down £25,000.

From this day to the 31st of December 1865, we are to have the use of that magnificent vessel; and, if the cable be not successfully laid, we shall not have to pay a single shilling for the use of her.

The SS *Great Eastern* had many of her salons and rooms ripped out and replaced with large tanks to hold the new cable and in May 1865 she steamed to Sheerness, Kent to take on board over 2,500 miles length of telegraphic cable.



The converted frigate *Iris*, loading cable on to the *Great Eastern* at Sheerness, Kent.

The *Great Eastern* left Sheerness on 24 June and in July 1865 began laying the undersea cable near Valentia Island off the coast of southern Ireland and gradually working its way westwards at a speed of 6 knots. Both Cyrus Field and Thomas Brassey of Birkenhead were on board the great ship to oversee proceedings.



The effort went relatively smoothly for several weeks, but then, yet again disaster struck, and the cable end was lost overboard in mid-Atlantic, forcing the ship to return to Britain and try again the following year.

The Great Eastern Laying the First Atlantic Cable in 1865.

Jules Verne takes up the story.

On 25th May the Nautilus was at 3,836 metres' depth, and at the precise spot where the first break happened that halted the enterprise. It occurred 638 miles from the coast of Ireland. It was realized at two o'clock one afternoon that communication with Europe had been interrupted. The electricians on board decided to cut the cable before bringing it up again, and by eleven o'clock they had brought up the damaged parts. A join and splice were made; and then the cable was let down again. But a few days later it broke once more and could not be retrieved from the depths.

The Americans were not discouraged. The audacious Cyrus Field, the promoter of the enterprise, who was risking his entire fortune, launched a new subscription. It was immediately snapped up. Another cable was installed taking greater precautions. The cluster of conducting wires was insulated in an envelope of gutta percha, but also protected by a covering of textile matter, in turn contained in metal casing. The Great Eastern sailed off again on 13th July 1866.

On 23rd July the Great Eastern was only 800 kilometres off Newfoundland, when the news of the armistice between Prussia and Austria after Sadowa was telegraphed to it from Ireland. On the 27th it sighted Heart's Content through the fog. The enterprise had succeeded, and in its first telegram, young America sent old Europe wise words which are so rarely understood: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men.

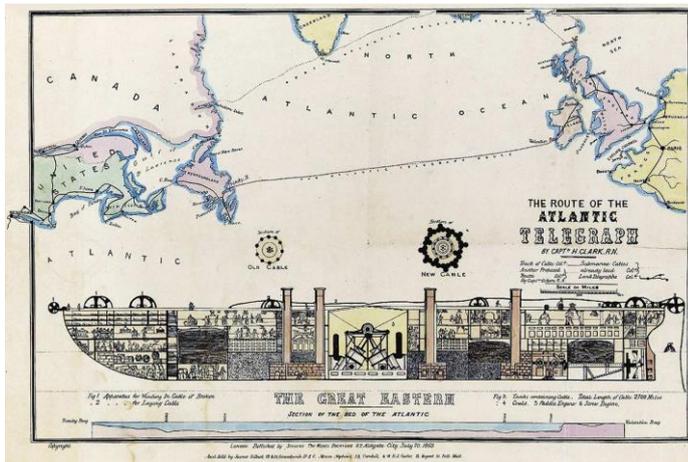
Jules Verne *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869)

The successful laying of the Atlantic cable by the SS *Great Eastern* did much to heal the rift between the United States and Great Britain after the bitterness and division of the American Civil War, most of that bitterness and division had been due to the clandestine building of Confederate warships in Birkenhead.



The 1866 Atlantic Cable marked the symbolic start of the 'Special Relationship' between Great Britain and the United States – a relationship that endures to this day.

The Eighth Wonder of The World (1866)



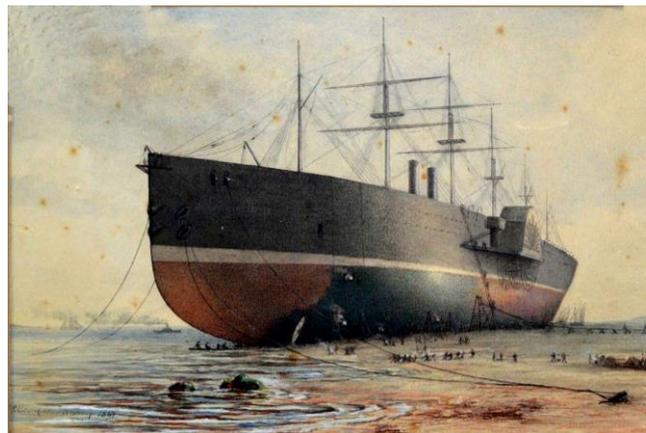
The Route of the 1866 Transatlantic Cable.

It is Thomas Brassey's historical contribution to the development of the transatlantic cable, his historical contribution to the development of Birkenhead, and indeed his historical contribution to the French nation that will rightly and understandably influence the writings of the great Jules Verne.

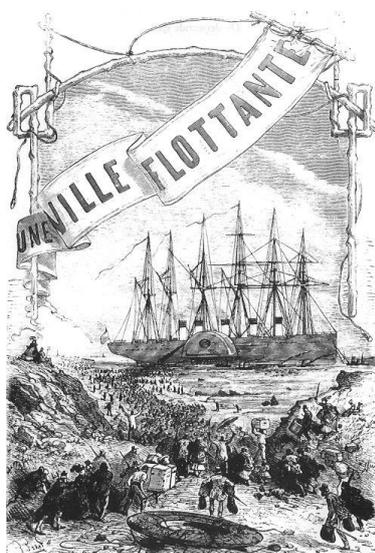
Thomas Brassey was also a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

In 1867 the *Great Eastern* was converted back into a passenger liner at New Ferry Beach, Birkenhead.

The work was carried out by Lairds shipyard for the French Government of Napoleon III in order to bring American delegates to the Great Paris Exposition of 1867.



The Great Eastern Beached at New Ferry, Birkenhead (1867)



There would be one special guest joining the engineer Cyrus Field on board the ship at Tranmere Sloyne, Birkenhead on the way to America and that would be the great French author, Jules Verne.

Verne would write about his experiences in his novel *The Floating City* (1871) and maintain correspondence with Cyrus Field for several years.

The SS *Great Eastern* as depicted at New Ferry Birkenhead. *Une Ville Flotante* (*The Floating City*) by Jules Verne (1871).

The joint venture with the French Government turned out to be a commercial disaster and the *Great Eastern* was once again converted into a submarine cable ship. The *Great Eastern* successfully laid new submarine cables between France and Canada (1869), Aden and Bombay (1870), and after a three-year layoff at Birkenhead, she laid two more cables across the Atlantic (1873 and 1874).



In 1889 the *Great Eastern* was eventually scrapped at Birkenhead, where, to this day, the remains of her keel still lie entombed in the mud of the Mersey.

Birkenhead - The last resting place of the *Leviathan*.

The end of the Great Eastern (1889)

.... and lead me in sight of the venerable Abbey of Birkenhead..

.... There Leviathan,
Hugest of living creatures in the deep
Stretch'd like a promontory sleeps or swims,
And seems a moving land; and at his gills
Draws in, and at its breadth spouts out the sea....



Herman Melville *Redburn* (1849) and *Moby Dick* (1851).



The *Great Eastern* Exhibit at the Jules Verne Museum in Amiens, France.

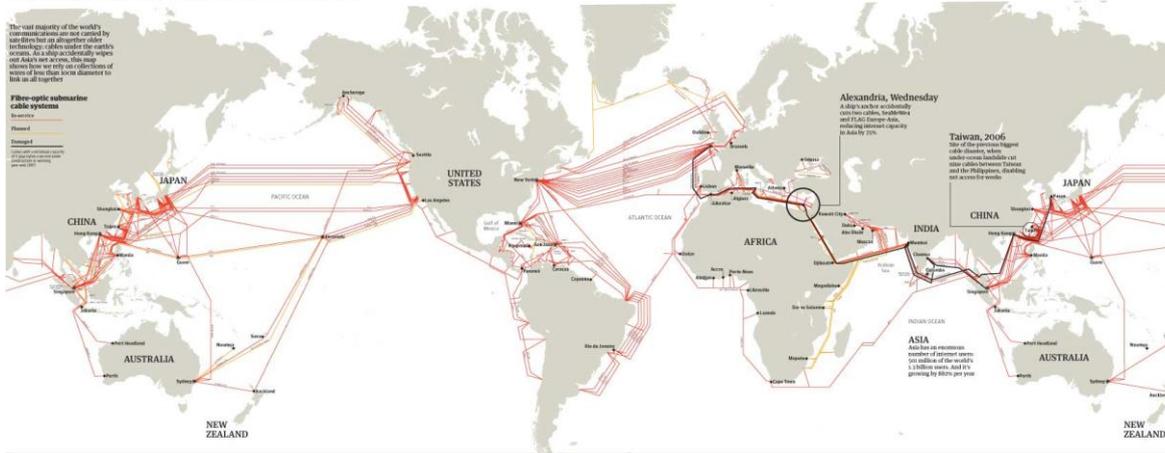
Today some 95% of internet traffic is carried by fibre optic submarine cables – a tribute to the perseverance of Cyrus Field and other pioneers of the first Atlantic Cable, many of them associated with the town of Birkenhead, England.

Illustrated cross section of a modern-day fibre optic submarine Cable.



The novel *Floating Island* is also a testimony to the genius of Jules Verne, who not only predicted one of the ultimate benefits of submarine cables – that of shopping on the modern-day Internet, but also anticipated its very real future effects on our local high streets.

The internet's undersea world



The Internet's Undersea World - The World Network of Undersea Fibre Optic Cables.

In one further astonishing twist to the work of Jules Verne, a single word expressed in numerical code will lead us directly to our fifth novel, wholly set in Birkenhead and Wirral.

That single code word will be

..... **Cable.**

Meanwhile back on Jules Verne's *Floating Island*.....

But here a factory appeared, its iron chimneys rising from its low, rough glassed roofs.....

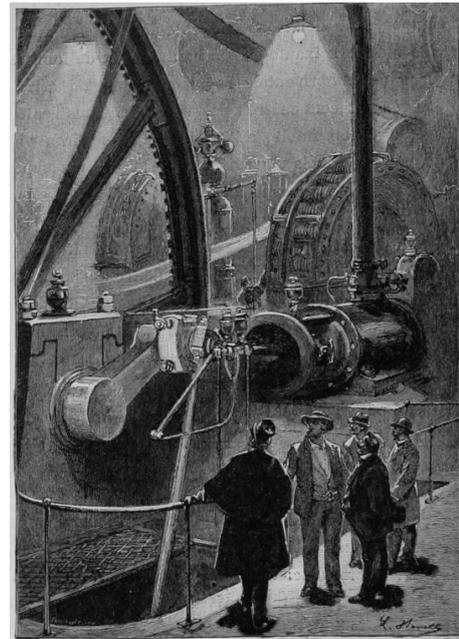
.... "And what is that establishment?" asked Pinchinat.

"It is a factory worked with petroleum," replied Munbar, looking as though his eyes would perforate his glasses.

"And what does this factory manufacture?"

"Electrical energy, which is distributed around the town, the park, the country, in producing motive force and light.

At the same time, it keeps going our telegraphs, telautographs, telephones, bells, cooking stoves, machinery, arc lights, incandescent lights, aluminium moons, and submarine cables."



One of the Factories

In the early 1890's Birkenhead was one of the first places in the United Kingdom to set up a public electricity supply. Here Verne is probably alluding to the construction of the 1896 generating station between Bentinck Street and Craven Street in Birkenhead.



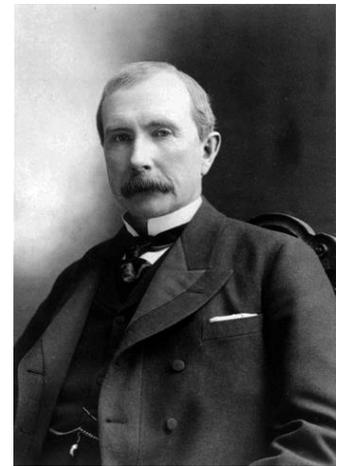
The Electric Lighting Station at Bentinck Street, Birkenhead.

Enlarged in 1902, today the Electric Lighting Station lies vacant, semi-derelict and at risk of demolition – the fate that has befallen so many of Birkenhead’s Victorian and Edwardian buildings.



The Birkenhead Town Crest on the Electric Lighting Station at Bentinck Street Birkenhead.

Verne discloses that the Floating Island has a name – ‘Standard Island’ so suggesting links to the Standard Oil Company of America established by John D Rockefeller in the 1870’s.



John D Rockefeller (1839-1937)

The Vacuum Oil Company - a subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company, did have an oil installation at Birkenhead Docks dating back to at least 1902.

The quartette continued their walk through the extraordinary town, the name of which was unknown to them. Ah! There is a church,” said Frascolin, and he pointed to an edifice of heavy design, without architectural style, rising from the green lawns of a square.

Our Lady’s Church, Birkenhead.



The name of the main city on the island is later given as ‘Milliard’ (Wirral?) by Jules Verne.

Our Lady's Church (1862) was planned by the Bishops of Shrewsbury as Birkenhead's Catholic Cathedral, it has been called the 'Cathedral That Never Was' as the planned church spire was never built.

"That is the Protestant temple," said Calistus Munbar,

*"It looks like it," observed Yvernes.
"With its heavy architecture, prayer
would not be elevated towards the sky,
but a crushing towards the ground."*

E.W. Pugin's spire to Our Lady's Church was never built - *prayer would not be elevated towards the sky.*

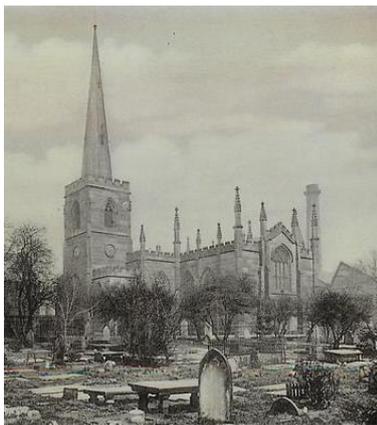


Our Lady's Catholic Church Birkenhead.

Jules Verne seems to be changing over the denomination of the churches, Our Lady's Catholic Church becomes the Protestant Temple, and Birkenhead's Protestant church of St Mary will become the Catholic cathedral.

"Are there any Catholic churches in your town?" asked Yvernes.

"Yes Sir, and I would like you to observe that although there are about a thousand different religions on our globe, we here confine ourselves to Catholicism and Protestantism.



The quartet then walk to the Catholic Cathedral Church.

The Catholic church rises in a vast open space so as to give a good view of its fine proportions. It is in the Gothic style, the style that can be admired close to, for the vertical lines which constitute its beauty lose their character when seen from a distance. St Mary's Church merits admiration for the slenderness of its pinnacles, the delicacy of its rose work, the elegance of its flamboyant pointed arches, the gracefulness of its windows.

St Mary's Church and ruins of Birkenhead Priory.

"Before going on," said Frascolin, who felt a sort of vague uneasiness mingling with his curiosity, "I have a proposition to make."

"And what is that?"

"Why not ascend the spire of St Mary's church? From where we could see This incomparable city without a rival in the world.

The Church of St Mary's built in 1819 is Birkenhead's oldest parish church - the spire and viewing platform is still open to the public, it directly overlooks Laird's shipyard.



Jules Verne may well have ascended the spire of St Mary's Church to view the sprawling town of Birkenhead – a town he had already described over two decades earlier.

... the double landscape of Liverpool and Birkenhead, studded with manufactory chimneys.

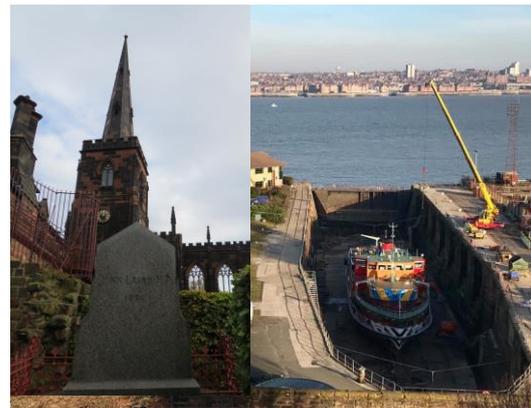
Jules Verne *A Floating City* (1871)

The View of Birkenhead St Mary's Church from Lairds shipyard c1910.

St Mary's church tower and its spire would cast its morning shadow over the very Lairds shipyard that had built the double hull of Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*.

Today, as part of Birkenhead Priory Museum, the tower viewing platform (inset) is still open for visitors to take in the same panoramic views over Birkenhead and Liverpool.

St Mary's tower and shipyard views.



In the mid nineteenth century, one quarter of Birkenhead's population were Irish born – these were migrants who were attracted to the town by work in the shipyards and docks.

The influx increased markedly after the Irish potato famine of the 1840's. Religious tensions frequently boiled over and there were Catholic / Protestant riots in 1850, 1859 and 1862. The 1850 'Birkenhead Riots' even made the Paris newspapers (right).

'No Popery' The Birkenhead Catholic Protestant riots of 1850. (*L'illustration Journal Universal*, Paris)



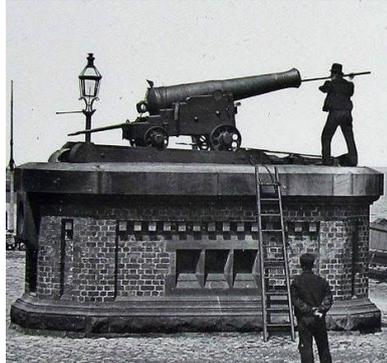
The 'Birkenhead Riots' will inspire the final storyline in Jules Verne's *Floating Island*.

They drank well after having eaten well, and the dessert was being finished with tea, coffee and liqueurs, when an explosion shook the glasses in the hotel.

“What is that?” asked Yvernes, with a start.

“Do not be easy, gentlemen,” replied Calistus Munbar, “that is the gun at the observatory.”

“If it only means noon,” said Frascaolin, looking at his watch, “I beg to state that it is late.”



The gun is not late because it is the Birkenhead One O'clock Gun being fired using the electrical wire running from nearby Bidston Observatory on Bidston Hill.

Bidston Observatory and the Birkenhead One O'clock Gun.

Bidston observatory was built in 1866, adjacent to the old Bidston Lighthouse and Signals Station on land owned by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. An equatorial telescope in the west dome was used mainly for the observation of comets, and a transit telescope in the east dome was regularly used for the determining time from the stars. The exact time was needed to aid nautical navigation.

Once the exact time had been calculated at Bidston observatory, an electric signal was sent by telegraph wire to the Birkenhead One O'clock Gun at Morpeth Dock, Woodside. The firing of the gun would allow ships in the Mersey to set their on-board chronometers.

The Birkenhead One O'clock Gun operated from 21st September 1867 until 18th July 1969.

Calistus Munbar takes the quartet on a tour of the observatory and tower.

“No, my friends, our walk will end with a visit to the observatory, the tower of which is a third higher than the spire of St Mary's Church.

You will not forget the ascent of the observatory”? Frascaolin reminded him.

“Forget it my dear, and I may say my old, friend! I would sooner forget my own name, which enjoys a certain celebrity. In another four miles I believe we will be in front of that magnificent edifice.



At the foot of this tower were the buildings of the observatory, devoted to different duties, some of which, with round metal roofs and glass windows, allowed the astronomers to follow the circuit of the stars.

The tower of Bidston Lighthouse and at the foot of this tower are the buildings of the observatory with two round metal roofs and glass windows. The domes are devoted to different duties.

Bidston Lighthouse and Observatory, Birkenhead.

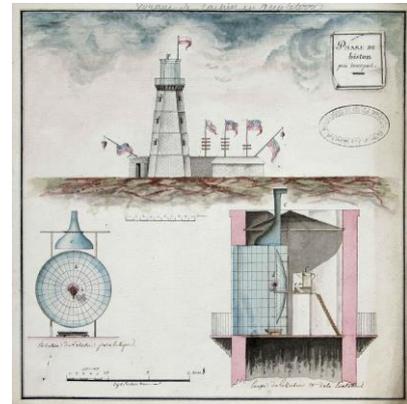
From its upper gallery the view around would extend for a radius of sixteen miles, if the horizon were not bounded by any high ground or mountains.

They stopped at the level of the upper platform of the tower.

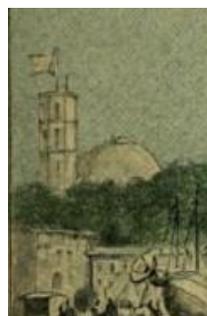
The first Bidston lighthouse was built in 1771 and housed a massive 13foot diameter parabolic mirror designed by ex-Liverpool privateer William Hutchinson.

This gave Bidston the most powerful lighthouse beam in the world and was recognised as such by the French engineer Joseph Cachin, whose paper ‘Phare de Biston’ is housed in the Paris Library and may have been studied by Verne.

‘Phare de Biston’ by Joseph Calchin (Paris Library).



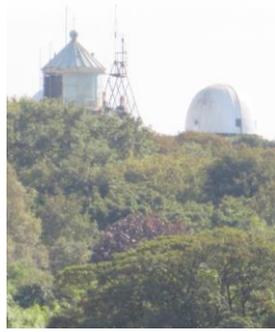
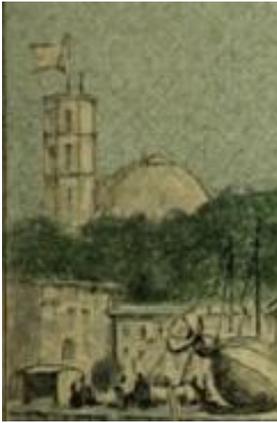
In this colour plate from *The Floating Island* (left) Jules Verne is using the original octagonal Bidston Lighthouse (1771-1869) and gigantic flag as depicted in the Paris Library.



Milliard City



**Bidston
Birkenhead**



In stressing the juxtaposition of the observatory dome and Bidston lighthouse, Verne uses the pre 1869 octagonal lighthouse (left) rather than its modern post 1873 counterpart (right).

The exact modern view cannot be replicated due to tree growth over the last 150 years.

Tower and Dome.
Milliard City (left) and Birkenhead (right).

The replacement Bidston lighthouse (right), built in 1873 still stands today. Like its predecessor it is a fixed 'half-light' but was of even greater intensity. The cylindrical tower replaced the old octagonal tower.

Bidston Lighthouse, in metaphor, will play an increasingly important role in the novels of Jules Verne.



**The second Bidston Lighthouse (1873 – present),
 Bidston Hill, Birkenhead.**



As housing the most powerful light beam in the world, Jules Verne would pay tribute to Bidston lighthouse by placing this futuristic searchlight on top of the observatory tower in the *Floating Island* (1895).

**Bidston lighthouse 1873 reflector
 and the tower searchlight from *The Floating Island* (1895).**

The *Floating Island* continues on its voyage westwards towards Hawaii.

Jules Verne's octagonal tower of the old Bidston Lighthouse (1771 – 1869) has now been replaced by an illustration of the modern cylindrical tower (1873 to present). Jules Verne has now paid tribute to the old and new.

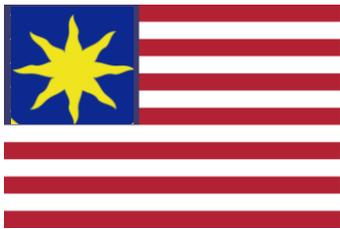
The Observatory Tower - *The point is established by the officers* (right)

Bidston Lighthouse (far right).



Of what nationality was this flag? None of our Parisians could recognize it. It was like an American ensign, with its lateral stripe of white and red, but the upper canton, instead of the sixty seven stars which twinkled in the Confederation at this epoch, bore only one, a star or rather a sun of gold on a blue ground which seemed to rival in brilliancy the star of the day.

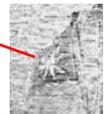
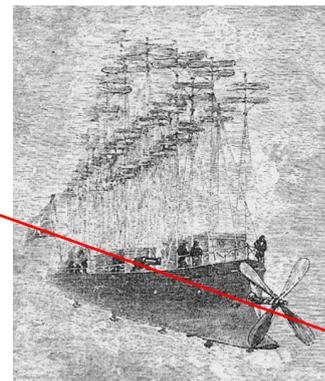
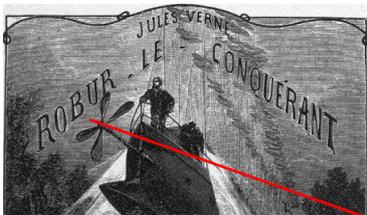
“Our flag, gentlemen” said Calistus Munbar, taking off his hat as a mark of respect.



The brilliant star from the flag of Milliard Island is taken from the ‘estoile azure’ on the Birkenhead town crest.

Verne will use the Birkenhead Coat of Arms on at least two more occasions.

Jules Verne’s antihero ‘*Robur The Conqueror*’ (1886) is named after the motto on the Birkenhead Town crest ‘*Ubi fides ibi lux et robur*’ (below). The flag of his flying machine ‘*Albatross*’ is also based on the estoile azure. Robur makes a return in one of Verne’s last novels ‘*Master of the World*’ (1904). The oak tree (quercus robur) represents the borough of Tranmere – the scene of the final surrender of the American Civil War.



Where there is faith, there is light and strength.

What a shriek – at first of surprise and then of anger – escaped them!

Frascolin turned towards Calistus Munbar.

“We are on an island?” he asked.

“And what is this island?”

“Floating Island,”

“And this town?”

“Milliard City.”

His comrades hold him back.



Floating Island was an island worked by screws. Milliard City was its capital. Why this name? Evidently because the capital was the town of millionaires, a Gouldian, Vanderbiltian, Rothschildian City.

Cornelius Vanderbilt, the richest man on earth, and his grandson William Kissam Vanderbilt, were both members of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

Calistus Munbar changed the course of his ideas by exclaiming,-

“Gentlemen, the tram starts in a few minutes. Let us be off to the harbour.”

“The harbour?” asked Zorn.

“Yes, it is only a mile – and that will enable you to admire our park?”

That which Munbar called a park was the country extending round the city. There were paths running out of sight, and verdant lawns. **It was a regular English garden**, with leaping fountains, baskets of flowers, then in all the abundance of spring.

As to the Lignon, it was represented by the serpentine river, whose vivifying waters followed the valleys of the landscape.

This provoked the ironical Pinchinat to exclaim,-

“Ah! Is that all you have in the shape of a river?”

Map of Birkenhead Park Lower Lake showing the long arm of Paxton’s ‘Serpentine’. c1850.

The Serpentine River.



The quartet would be following in the footsteps of Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York's Central Park.

Olmsted wrote movingly of the effect that Birkenhead Park had upon him as a landscape gardener, and as we shall see this will also greatly influence the writings of Jules Verne.



Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903).

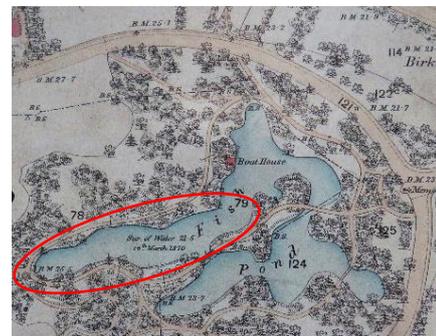
*Walking a short distance up an avenue, we passed through another light iron gate into a **thick, luxuriant and diversified garden.** Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent in studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit **that in democratic America, there was nothing to be thought of as comparable to this People's Garden.** Indeed, gardening here had reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of.*

Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England Frederick Law Olmsted (1852)

The same walk would have brought Jules Verne to the park's lower lake, the shape of which was designed by Sir Joseph Paxton to give maximum 'edge' and interest with a series of promontories and indents along the shoreline. The longest promontory was given the name 'The Serpentine' by Paxton as it represented a meandering river flowing out of sight.



Modern day map of Birkenhead Park.



Birkenhead Park and The Serpentine.



The Serpentine, Birkenhead Park 1847.



Serpentine Lake, Central Park N.Y. c1860.

At one end of the Serpentine, Jules Verne would have stood to admire the Roman Boathouse, Swiss Bridge, footpath, and rockery beyond. These features were not only replicated in New York's Central Park but will also play a profound part in the wider writings of Jules Verne.

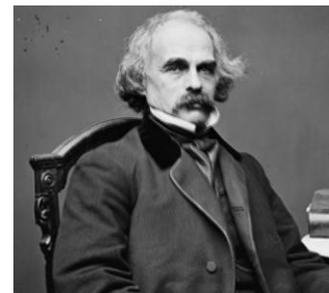
At this time the park was crowded. From the tower it looked like an immense basket of flowers. The people were crowding in, grown men and young folks, none of those little fops which are the shame of the great cities of Europe, but strong well-built adults. Women and girls, most of them in pale straw-coloured dresses, the hue preferred in the torrid zone, leading little lap dogs in silk coats with chains laced with gold. Here and there these people were following the sandy paths, capriciously winding among the lawns. Some were reclining on the cushions of electric cars, others were seated on benches sheltered by the trees. Farther off young gentlemen were playing tennis, and cricket, and golf, and also polo, mounted on spirited ponies. Groups of children – American children of astonishing exuberance, among whom originality is so precocious, particularly in the case of the girls – were playing on the grass.



Sports exercises are performed with remarkable enthusiasm.

Here Jules Verne seems to first take inspiration from Frederick Law Olmsted's description of Birkenhead Park and will then take a sarcastic sideswipe at the great American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had previously written this description of Birkenhead Park in 1853.

Yesterday afternoon J and I went to Birkenhead Park, which I have already described. It so happened there was a large school spending its holiday there; a school of girls of the lower classes, to the number of a hundred and fifty, who disported themselves on the green under the direction of the schoolmistress and of an old gentleman. It struck me, as it always has, to observe how the lower orders of this country indicate their birth and station by their aspect and features. In America there would be a good deal of grace and beauty among a hundred and fifty children and budding girls, belonging to whatever rank of life. But here they had most universally a plebian look, - stubbed, sturdy figures, round, coarse faces, snub-noses, - the most evident specimens of the brown bread of human nature. They looked wholesome and good enough, and fit to sustain their rough share of life, but it would have been impossible to make a lady out of any one of them.



**Nathaniel Hawthorne
(1804-64)**

Climate, no doubt, has much to do with diffusing a slender elegance over American young womanhood; but something perhaps is also due to the circumstances of classes not being kept apart as they are here.



**26, Rock Park
Birkenhead. Home of
Nathaniel Hawthorne.**

Nathaniel Hawthorne *English Notebooks* (1853).

Having satirized Nathaniel Hawthorne's English notebooks, Jules Verne gives a final cutting rebuff to the one-time Birkenhead resident Nathaniel Hawthorne....

Great rejoicings took place in the park, where the sporting events were brought off with great enthusiasm. The different classes associated together.

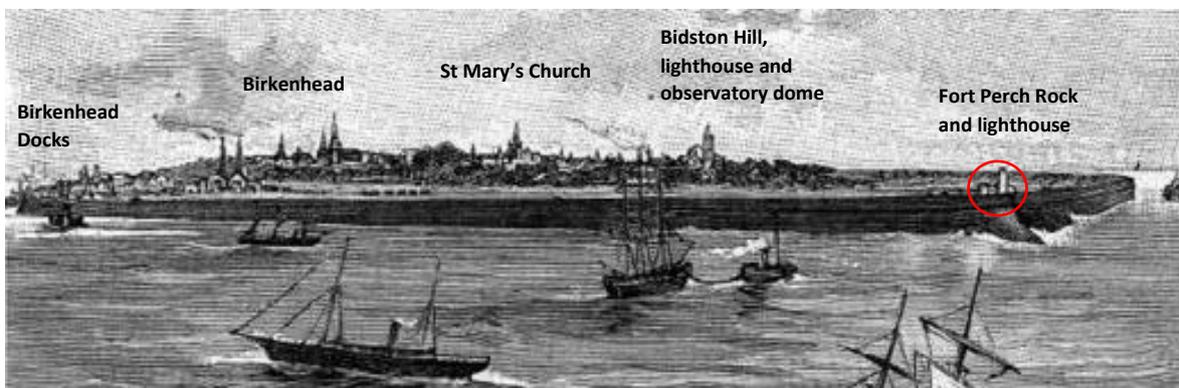
The tram skirted along the coast, with the sea on one side, the fields on the other. The cars ran along in this way for four miles. Then they stopped before a battery of twelve guns of heavy calibre, the entrance to which bore the inscription "Prow Battery"

Were there any soldiers in Floating Island? Yes, a body of five hundred men under the orders of Colonel Stewart, for it had to be remembered that some parts of the Pacific are not always safe. In approaching certain groups of islands, it is prudent to be prepared against any attack by pirates.



Not the 'Prow' Battery but the 'Prom' battery - Fort Perch Rock, New Brighton.

Fort Perch Rock is sited on the northeastern corner of the Wirral Peninsula.



This view of Birkenhead, Wallasey and New Brighton from *The Floating Island* would represent a view from Crosby in north Liverpool. The image is reversed from the original.



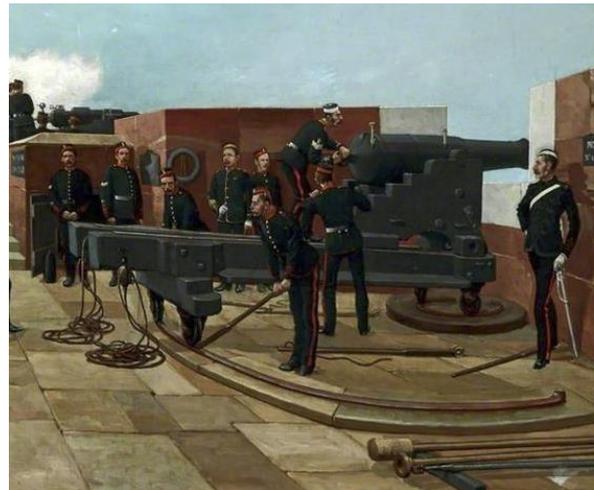
Fort Perch Rock and Lighthouse at the mouth of the River Mersey c1830 (left)

Verne's depiction of Fort Perch Rock and lighthouse in *The Floating Island* (above and right).





The Prow Battery *The Floating Island*

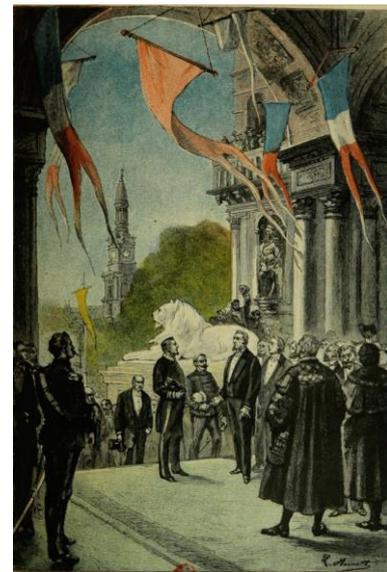


The Prom Battery Fort Perch Rock. c1870

Such was this new wonder of the world, this masterpiece of human genius, worthy of the twentieth century, of which two violins, an alto, and a 'cello were the guests, and which was bearing them to the west across the Pacific.

the artistes could perceive a sort of monumental palace, surmounted by a belfry of very light and elegant construction. They said to themselves that this must be the seat of government of the island, the residence of the municipality, supposing that Milliard City had a mayor and etceteras.

The view of the tower of Milliard Town Hall is shown in the background of this colour plate from *The Floating Island* (1895).



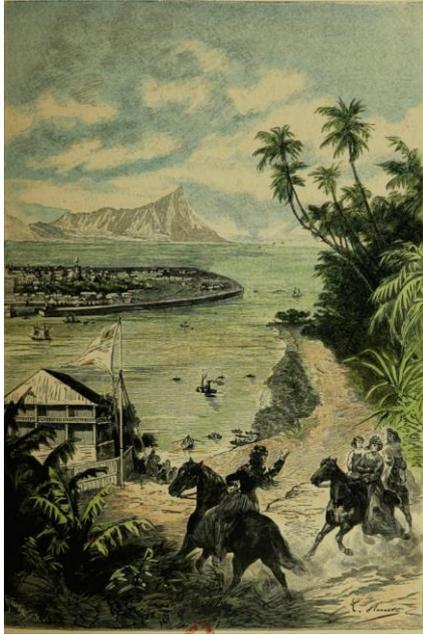
Milliard City



Birkenhead

In 1901 the tower of Birkenhead town hall (left) was destroyed by fire. It shared much of the same sequence of architectural styles as the town hall of Milliard City (far left).

Meanwhile back on the Floating Island there is increasing tension between Protestants and Catholics as *The Pearl of the Pacific* approaches Hawaii.

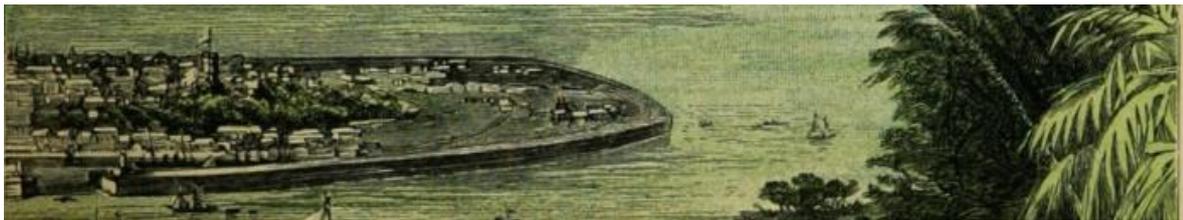


Coming from the north-east, Commodore Ethel Simcoe steered for Oahu, having for its capital Honolulu, which is also the capital of the archipelago. They passed between Oahu and Molokai. Floating Island, like a ship under the action of its rudder, was steered by its starboard and larboard screws.

Floating Island approaches Hawaii.

This view is a representation of the Wirral Peninsula as seen from the Liverpool side of the river and includes a depiction of the Dee Estuary and Welsh mountains in the background.

The admiration of the Hawaiians is boundless.



The Floating Island crosses the equator amid great celebrations by the inhabitants.

It was thirty-five minutes past ten in the evening – the calculation was made by the astronomers of Floating Island that the line would be crossed. At that precise moment a salute would be fired from one of the cannon in the Prow Battery. A wire connected this gun with an electrical apparatus arranged in the centre of the square of the observatory. Extraordinary satisfaction of self-esteem for the notable on whom devolved the honour of sending the current which would provoke the formidable detonation!

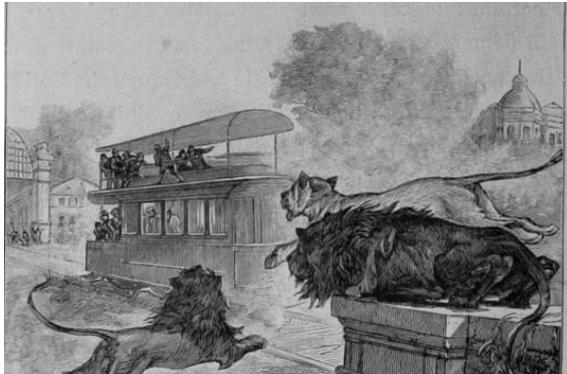
*The leaders of the Protestants and Catholics argue about who should fire the ‘Birkenhead One O’clock Gun’ however they are interrupted by the fact that *Floating Island* has been invaded by wild animals.*

Two women ran into the square of the town hall who had been pursued by an enormous alligator, which had regained the banks of the Serpentine River and disappeared in the water.

The Serpentine (Birkenhead Park Lake) is invaded by alligators.



The effect of this incredible news can be judged. An hour afterwards the look-outs noticed several tigers, lions, and leopards bounding across the country. The first tram for Larboard Harbour had barely time to run into the siding. Three lions had pursued it, and in a hundred yards or more would have reached it.



Lions attack Larboard Harbour or in our ‘reality’ - Birkenhead Woodside Station.

There was no doubt that during the night Floating Island had been invaded by a band of ferocious animals, and so would Milliard City if precautions were not immediately taken.

What an incident, what a subject for copy, what varied reports in the Starboard Chronicle, the New Herald and other journals of Floating Island.

A Shocking Sabbath Carnival of Death.
 SAVAGE BRUTES AT LARGE.
 Awful Combats Between the Beasts and Citizens.
 THE KILLED AND WOUNDED.
 Gen. Duryee's Magnificent Police Tactics.
 BRAVERY AND PANIC
 How the Catastrophe was Brought About—Affrighting Incidents.
 PROCLAMATION BY THE MAYOR.
 Gov. Dix Shoots the Bengal Tiger in the Street.
 CONSTERNATION IN THE CITY.

On November 9th, 1874, the *New York Herald*, under the ownership of newspaper magnate Gordon Bennett published a headline that claimed that wild animals had escaped from the New York Zoo and were rampaging through Central Park. The article caused widespread panic in New York.

The article claimed that ‘Pete’ the rhinoceros, had impaled his keeper and made good his escape and then broken open the enclosures of the other animals resulting in at least 49 deaths.

The whole article was an elaborate hoax.

The Great Wild Animal Hoax, *New York Herald* 1874.

Jules Verne now has imaginary wild animals rampaging through both Birkenhead Park and Central Park New York – so emphasising the already known close connection between the two parks.

Gordon Bennett had a documented working relationship with Jules Verne and in 1889 commissioned the futuristic novella *In the Year 2889* from the author. In 1882 Gordon Bennett ordered his luxury yacht *Namouna* from the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at Tranmere, Birkenhead.

Gordon Bennett’s name of course, now lives on forever as a phrase in the English language.

Floating Island (Birkenhead) has been invaded by hordes of ferocious animals. Alligators have been sighted in the Serpentine River (Birkenhead Park Lower Lake) and are now threatening Hamilton Square. Worse is to come when thousands of marauding tribesmen from the New Hebridean Islands of the South Pacific will also invade Birkenhead's Hamilton Square and Birkenhead Town Hall.

At eight o'clock in the morning, the council of notables, convoked at the town hall, had all attended the Governor's summons. There was nobody in the avenues nor in the streets except the squads of militia and police going to the positions assigned to them.



"Gentlemen," said the Governor, "You are acquainted with the cause of this well-justified panic which has seized on the people of Floating Island. During the night our island has been invaded by a band of carnivores and saurian. It is urgent that we proceed to the destruction of these animals and we shall certainly do so."

Uproar in Birkenhead Town Hall

At our post, Gentlemen.

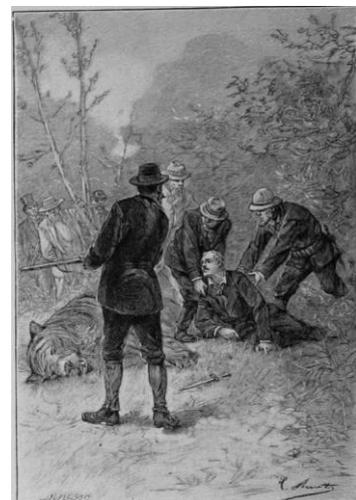
During the first hour two crocodiles had the imprudence to venture out of the Serpentine River, and as we know saurian, though formidable in their liquid element, are much less so on land owing to the difficulty they have in turning, Captain Sarol and his Malays attacked them with courage, and not without one receiving a wound, cleared the park.

The Serpentine Lake and Birkenhead Park are cleared of alligators.

Nat Coverley and Walter Tankerdon were the first to run into the square.

Suddenly while he was within three yards of Nat Coverley, Walter Tankerdon was knocked down by an enormous tiger.

Eventually the marauding tiger in Hamilton Square is shot dead and all the other animals are cleared from the Floating Island. However, there is more trouble in store for the *Pearl of the Pacific*.



The dead tiger's body lies in Birkenhead's Hamilton Square.

In fact everything was for the best, and, rid of its formidable visitors. Floating Island could safely resume its voyage towards the Fijis.

It is the day of the much-awaited wedding between Walter Tankerdon and Di Coverley, a wedding that it is hoped will unite forever the Protestant and Catholic factions of Floating Island.

By order of the authorities everyone had a holiday, even the sailors and militiamen, with the exception of the customs officers on duty along the coast.



At three o'clock all the inhabitants, those of the country as well as those of the town and the forts, flocked into the park along the banks of the Serpentine. The notables mixed familiarly with the populace.

When night came, the park was resplendent with the electric fires that the aluminium moons poured down in torrents. The sun had wisely disappeared below the horizon. Eleven o'clock, and a long procession advanced towards the town hall

Boating on the Serpentine – The games are followed with enthusiasm.

A moment afterwards some customs officers – many of them wounded – ran into the square opposite the town hall.

Cyrus Bickerstaff appeared on the steps of the town hall, followed by Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, and the notables, who had just joined them.

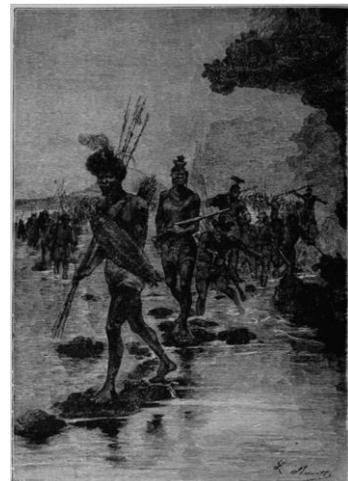
To the questions put to them, the customs officers replied that Floating Island had just been invaded by a band of New Hebrideans – three or four thousand of them – and that Captain Sarol was at their head.

He had promised them the pillage of this opulent Pearl of the Pacific, not an inhabitant of which was to be spared.

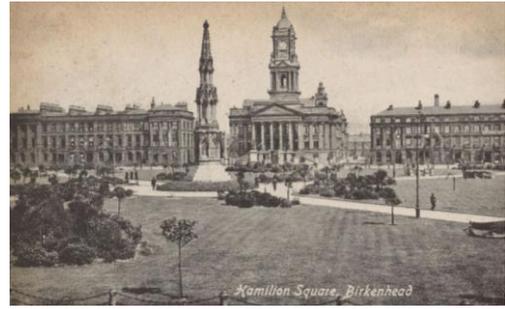
In a few minutes the rocks at the water level had given passage to three or four thousand savages.

The invasion of Birkenhead has begun.

The rocks at the surface of the water gave free passage.



About ten o'clock the gates were forced. Before the howling crowd that swarmed into the square, Commodore Simcoe had to retreat towards the town hall, which could be defended like a fortress.



About two o'clock the defenders had been driven back to the town hall square. Of dead there were already fifty – of wounded about twice or three as many.



Before the town hall was reached by the savages, its doors were closed; the women and children were moved into the interior compartments where they would be sheltered from the projectiles.

Verne would have known about the phrase *Women and children first* - also known as the *Birkenhead Drill* in honour of the crew of HMS *Birkenhead* who stood bravely as she sank off the coast of South Africa on 26th February 1852.

Sound the Birkenhead Drill ‘*Women and Children First.*’

So they stood an' was still to the Birken'ead drill, soldier an' sailor too.

Rudyard Kipling *Soldier an' Sailor Too* (1893).

The assault was immediately ordered by Captain Sarol, who felt sure of success, although the task was a serious one. In fact, the doors were strong, and it would be difficult to break them in without artillery.



***The doors were strong* Birkenhead Town Hall.**



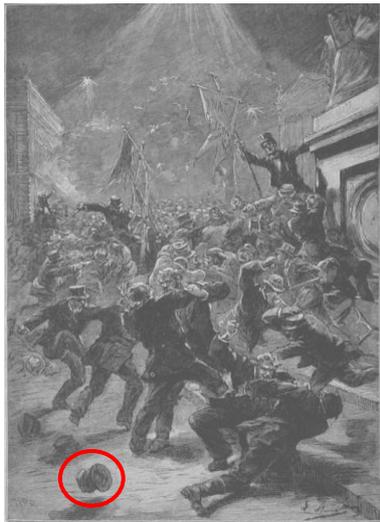
John Laird (1805-74)

Standing in front of Birkenhead's Town Hall is the statue of John Laird (1805-74), the father of Birkenhead, the builder of Captain Nemo's fictional *Nautilus* and the sponsor of George Francis Train's (Phileas Fogg's) real life Birkenhead Tramway.

Having defeated wild animals and marauding New Hebrideans, perhaps The Floating Island greatest danger is from within, and new elections are dividing the people upon sectarian lines.

At last the 15th of March arrived. The election was to take place in the principal room of the town hall. A noisy crowd blocked the square, as the Roman populace formerly did before the palace of the Quirinal, when the conclave proceeded to the elevation of a Pope to the throne.

On 26th November 1850, a meeting of ratepayers at Birkenhead (old) Town Hall was called to protest against ‘encroaching Romanism’ due to the influx of Catholic Irish workers. The Town Hall was immediately stormed by ‘several thousand Irish navvies’ and the ‘Birkenhead Riots’ made international news including the Paris *L’illustration Journal* (below).



***The election period is open.
The Floating Island (1895)***



***‘No Popery’ The Birkenhead Riots of 1850.
(L’illustration Journal Universel, Paris 1850).***

The top hat, shown bottom left in both illustrations is a type of visual clue that Jules Verne will repeat many more times in our adventure.

Similar riots occurred in 1859 over Catholic rights to burial grounds at Birkenhead’s new Flaybrick Cemetery. The largest riot, the ‘Garibaldi riots’ occurred in 1862 after a talk supporting the anti-Catholic Italian leader Giuseppe Garibaldi was advertised on bright orange wall posters at Holy Trinity Church on Price St – there were over 4,000 combatants.

Jules Verne would have been acutely aware of how easily these sectarian conflicts arose and the rich potential to inspire his storylines. Ironically, a decade earlier, Garibaldi’s two young sons Menotti and Riciotti, had been schooled just three miles away in New Brighton and would have been very familiar with the wild streets of Birkenhead.



Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-82)



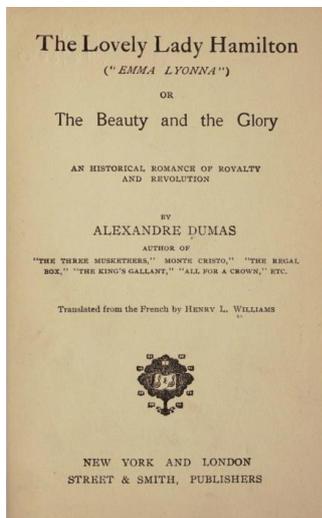
Verne's great friend Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Three Musketeers* and the *Count of Monte Christo*, was a passionate supporter of Garibaldi and in 1860 Dumas sailed to Italy to join the Italian leader's siege of Naples.

Dumas wrote about his exploits in the book *On board the Emma - Adventures with Garibaldi's "Thousand" in Sicily*. The *Emma* of the title was the name of his own private yacht, the *Emma Lyonna*.

Alexandre Dumas (1802-70)

The *Emma Lyonna* was a Liverpool (possibly Birkenhead) built yacht purchased by Dumas in 1860, it was named after a Wirral woman who utterly fascinated Alexandre Dumas – her name was Emma Lyon, otherwise known as Lady Hamilton, mistress of Lord Nelson.

Emma, Lady Hamilton (1765-1815)
Lord Horatio Nelson (1758-1805)



Dumas wrote at length about Lady Hamilton in his book *Emma Lyonna* (left).

Emma Lyon was born in 1765 at Swan Cottage, Ness, just seven miles outside Birkenhead.

As a keen yachtsman, Jules Verne must have been greatly amused that his close friend's own yacht was named after Wirral's greatest celebrity of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

***The Lovely Lady Hamilton* by Alexandre Dumas.**

As far as our own story is concerned, the Wirral link with Alexandre Dumas is most probably 'coincidental noise' – but in the surreal world of Jules Verne – you never really quite know. One other example of 'coincidental noise' can be found in *The Floating Island* but is best left for another day.

The Palace of the Quirinal probably refers to the elevation of Pope Pius IX to the papacy in 1846 and the later siege of the Papal Quirinal Palace in Rome in 1848. The Birkenhead Riots of 1850 are therefore contemporaneous with those that Verne refers to in Rome.

Pope Pius IX himself will return later to our adventure as he encounters one of our most celebrated 'Heroes of Birkenhead'.

On the Floating Island the election between the Catholic candidate and the Protestant candidate ends in a tie and partition is suggested. The two leaders disagree on where they want the island to set sail to next and set their respective engines in different directions.

Suddenly Floating Island began to move in a very strange manner. What did this movement indicate?

The result is that Floating Island is swinging around on its centre, and the gyration will last as long as the caprice of these two obstinate personages.

This absurd situation – comic from one point of view – probably caused a laugh. Unfortunately, the double maneuver was extremely dangerous, as the Commodore observed. Driven round and round by six million horsepower, Floating Island was in danger of being shaken to pieces.

Floating Island pirouetted on its centre. The park, the country described concentric circles, and the places on the shore swung round from ten to twelve miles an hour.

And so, since Floating Island had been prey to this gyratory folly, the currents had carried it about a thousand miles to the south east.

Floating Island was in danger; its foundering was only a question of a few hours.

At the same time the weather was getting worse. The sky was covered with red, coppery hues. The barometer was falling more quickly. The atmosphere had every sign of an approaching storm.

Immediately more quakings of the ground took place, and the houses began to fall as if they were built of cards. In a few hours nothing would be left of the superstructure of Floating Island.

"Gentlemen," said Commodore Simcoe, "we can no longer remain at the observatory, which is in danger of being a heap of ruins. Let us get into the country, and wait until the storm is over."

The King of Malecarlie, Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, Sebastien Zorn and his comrades, the astronomers, and the officers, abandoned the observatory, where they were no longer safe. It was time. Scarcely had they gone a hundred yards, before the lofty tower collapsed with a horrible noise, fell through the ground, and disappeared into the abyss.



The hull was now rent in a thousand places. The joints were cracking everywhere. St Mary's church, the temple, the town hall, had fallen through the gaping fissures through which the sea came leaping up. Of these magnificent edifices not a vestige remained. What riches, what treasures, pictures, statues, objects of art had vanished forever! The people would see no more of this superb Milliard City when daylight came, if ever the daylight came for them.

One of the piers is swallowed up.

The sea began to spread over the country, over the park. The island sank lower and lower in the water. The surface of Floating Island was at the level of the sea, and the cyclone was driving the waves over it.

About three in the morning the park cracked along a length of two kilometers in the bed of the Serpentine River, and through this the sea flowed. Instant flight was inevitable, and the people dispersed into the country. Some ran towards the ports, others towards the batteries. Families were separated; mothers in vain sought for their children; while the sea rolled over Floating Island as if in an enormous tidal wave.



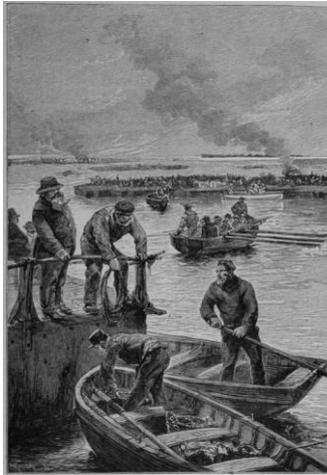
The houses are starting to come down.

At five in the morning, more cracking and rending of metal were heard in the east.

A piece about half a mile square in area had been detached from Floating Island.

It was Starboard Harbour, with its works, its engines, its warehouses, that had drifted off.

When the day broke, a spectator from a height of a few hundred feet would have seen three fragments of Floating Island, measuring two or three hectares each, floating on the sea, and about a dozen of smaller size at a short distance from one another.



Observations being taken with the instruments at Starboard Harbour, there was no doubt as to the identity of this land. It was northern island of New Zealand.

The shipwrecked people were very hospitably received by the New Zealanders, who gave everybody food who required it.

On the morning of 10th April, the remains of Starboard Harbour run aground on the coast of New Zealand.

Such is the end of the story of the ninth wonder of the world, this incomparable Pearl of the Pacific! All is well that ends well as people say, but all is bad that ends badly, and was such the case with Floating Island?

Ended, no! It will be rebuilt someday – at least Calistus Munbar says so.

And yet – we cannot repeat it too often – to create an artificial island, an island that moves on the surface of the seas, is it not to overstep the limits assigned to human genius, and it is not forbidden to man, who disposes not of the winds or the waves, to so recklessly usurp the functions of the Creator?

THE END

And so, Jules Verne ends his story of the *Floating Island*. The reader may still not be convinced that an artificial island at present lying in pieces off the coast of New Zealand, was once, in fiction at least, part of Birkenhead, Wallasey and New Brighton. They may put it all down to ‘coincidence’ or an author’s ‘flight of fancy’ and that author not being Jules Verne.

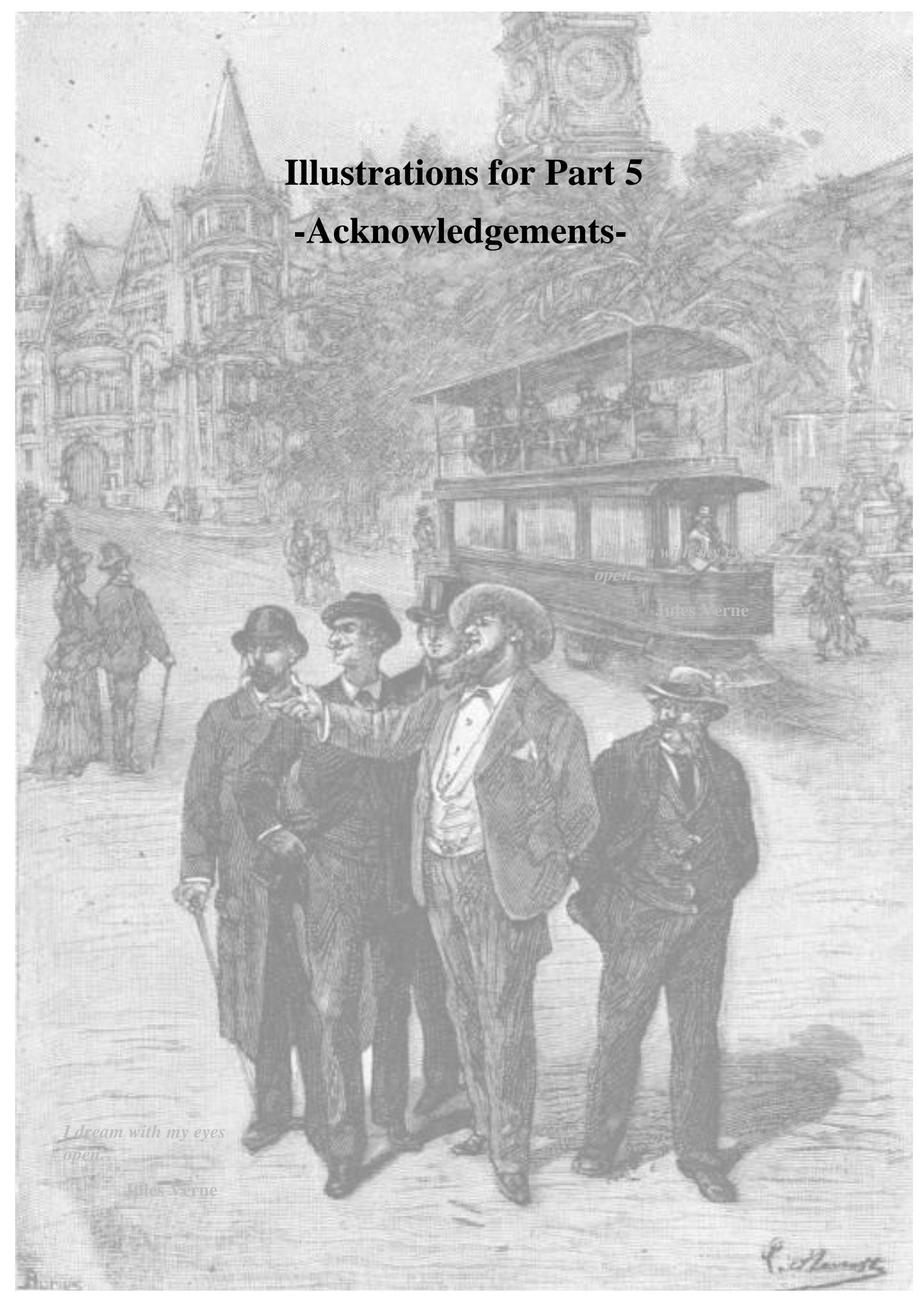
Who can blame anyone who has now read the first five parts of our adventure for not showing ‘healthy scepticism’ but remember, courtesy of the great Mr Jules Verne, there are many more dramas to unfold including his revealing of the two great secrets that he purposely hid on his *Floating Island*.

Some may still dismiss all this as ‘coincidence’, if so, then the *Floating Island* will have served its purpose, for there will be many many more ‘coincidences’ in our next novel.

Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead (Mid-September 2021)

Part 6 – The Return to Jules Verne’s *Mysterious Island*.

The reader may wish to view this brief introduction. [Mysterious island \(1961\) - Trailer - YouTube](#)



Illustrations for Part 5
-Acknowledgements-

*I dream with my eyes
open.*

Jules Verne

*I dream with my eyes
open.*

Jules Verne

L. H. ...

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17b	John Lamb	34c	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
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