Isambard Kingdom Brunel

IBNS members who attended either European Congresses held at Maastricht in 1989 or 1990 might be familiar with the promotional notes given away by Harrison and Sons, founded in 1750 as Thomas Harrison. These were test notes already in use, overprinted in two places on the front for the occasions. They display the title “Isambard Kingdom Brunel”, with what would appear as the reigning sovereign of the fanciful fictitious naval power Kingdom of Brunel. The leader in top hat is prominent on the reverse as well as several steam ships.

Figure 1 HS-101b test note front

Figure 2 HS-101b test note reverse

Of course all Britons and engineers know such is not the case, with the real gentleman displayed with the rather unique name IsIsambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859). Indeed, in 2002 Brunel would finish 2nd in a BBC poll of the 100 greatest Britons. His given name came from his father, the French civil engineer Sir Marc Isambard Brunel, and Kingdom after his English mother, Sophia Kingdom.

Brunel built dockyards, the Great Western Railway (GWR), a series of steamships including the first propeller-driven transatlantic steamship, and numerous important bridges and tunnels. Three of his steam-powered ships each set engineering records as they were put into service.

- The SS Great Western of 1838, was a wooden-hulled paddle-wheel steamship built of pine, she was the largest passenger ship in the world from 1837 to 1839.
- The SS Great Britain of 1843 (now a museum ship) was a passenger steamship and advanced for her time. She was the longest passenger ship in the world until 1854. While other ships had been built of iron or equipped with a screw propeller, she was the first with both of these new innovations.
- Originally named Leviathan, the SS Great Eastern of 1858 was an iron sailing steamship and by far the largest ship ever built at the time until 1899. It had the capacity to carry 4,000 passengers from England to Australia without refueling.

Figure 3 Replica of Great Eastern laying transatlantic cable

These great ships are depicted on the reverse of most paper versions of the test notes, four of which have a brown 1859 seal and the other three a blue 1859 seal. The use of bridges (Royal Albert & Clifton) and multiple steam ships motifs on the note celebrate Brunel's accomplishments. There are also partially printed and an essay proof version of this series. Another difference is with and without watermark and security strip. A 30 page leather-bound binder touting H&S counterfeiting devices lists and displays watermark, latent image, fluorescent intaglio, and infrared intaglio devices on these notes. The security strip observed was not mentioned in the binder.

Figure 4 Back light image showing watermark & security strip

The engraved image of Brunel on the reverse probably was based on the popular photo of Brunel dockside with the launching chains of the SS Great Eastern in the background. The photograph was taken by Robert Howlett in 1857. Launching chains form the right border on the reverse of the notes.

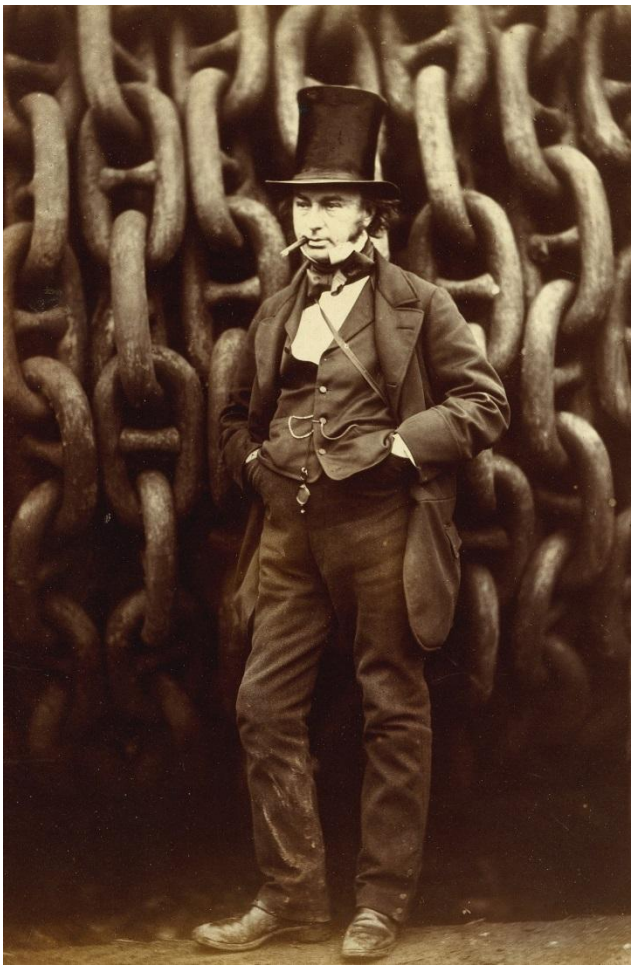

Figure 5 Brunel posing at SS Great Eastern

Thomas de la Rue bought out most rivals in the United Kingdom, including Harrison and Sons in 1997. Harrison and Sons looked to the future and experimented with polymer Guardian® substrate produced by the then named Securency firm, well over a decade before TDLR patented their polymer substrate in 2012. H&S produced two polymer Brunel test notes, identical but one featured a pattern in a clear window while the other has a clear window only. These notes lack the ship details of the prior issues but offer a bridge structure on the reverse. Both window versions appear together on full sheets discovered with “R B A POLYMER TRIAL” printed on the margin, suggesting the Reserve Bank of Australia, before the merger in 1996 to form Securency, was producing trial notes for Harrison and Sons Ltd.

Figure 6 HS-111a test note front

Figure 7 HS-111a test note reverse

The last year before being bought out, H&S chose Brunel yet again as a subject, this time their 1997 calendar cover. It features the design elements of the reverse polymer test note, including another view of the Royal Albert Bridge, completed after 5 years in 1859, one of Brunel's last engineering feats.

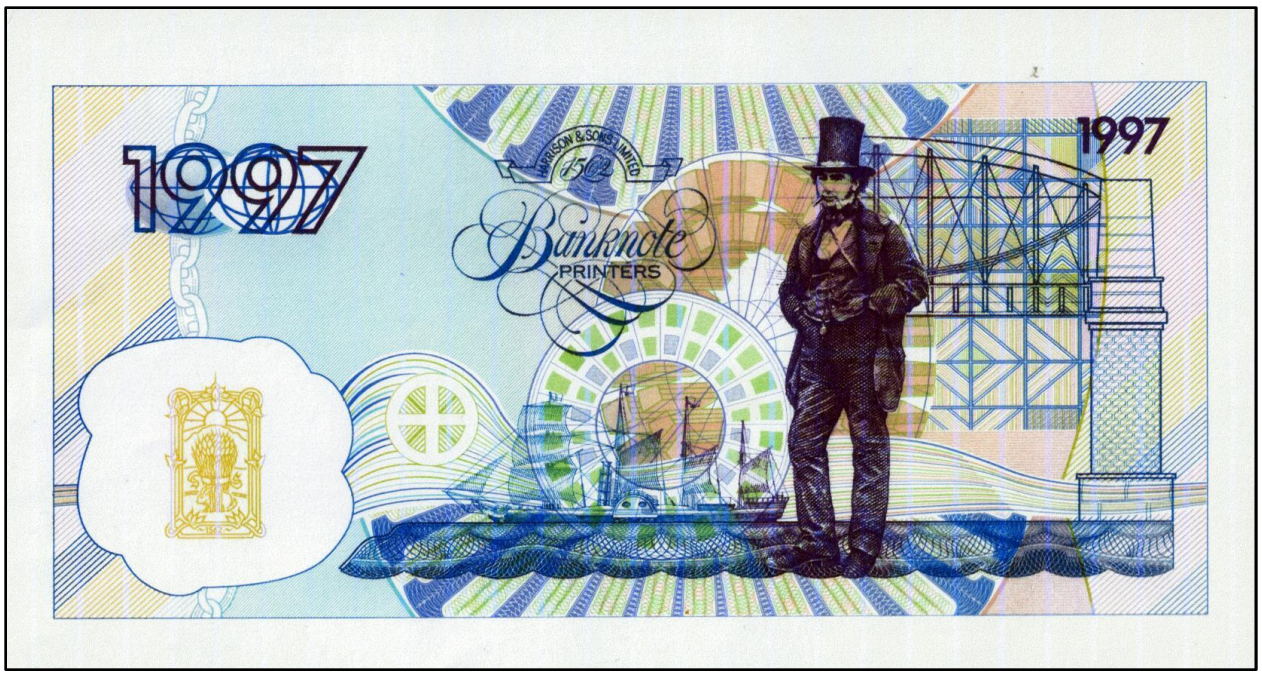

Figure 8 HS-161 Calendar cover – 1997

De La Rue made use of Brunel in a fashion in 2008 with a uniface test note touting their holographic Depth Image™ security thread.

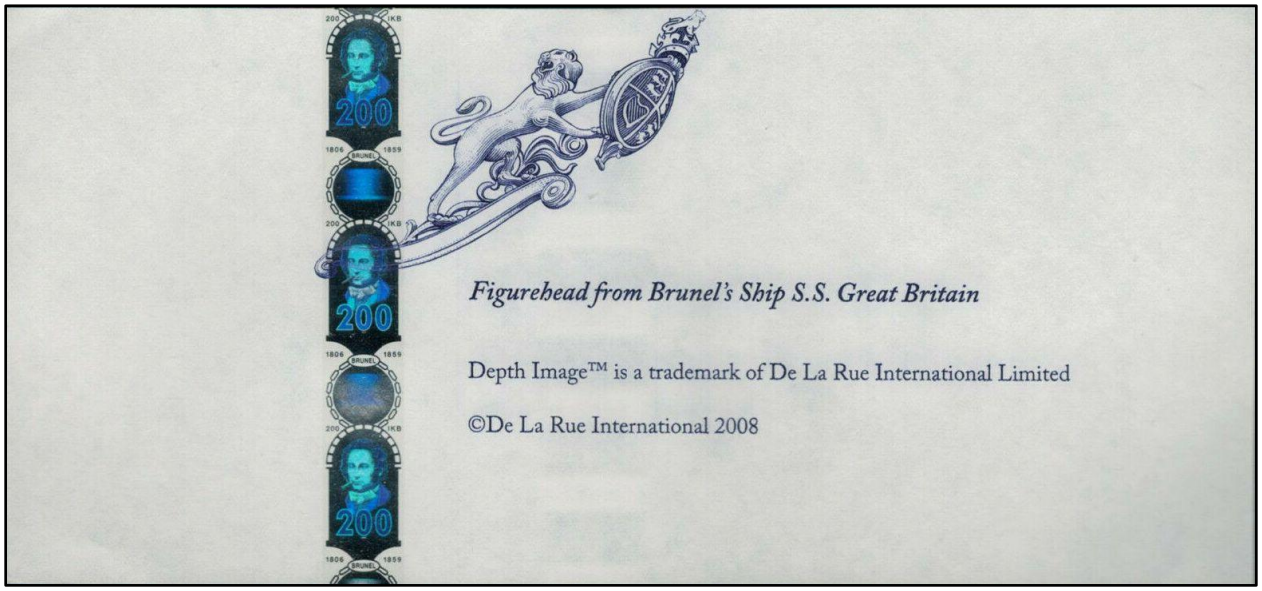

Figure 9 TDLR-683 test note - 2008

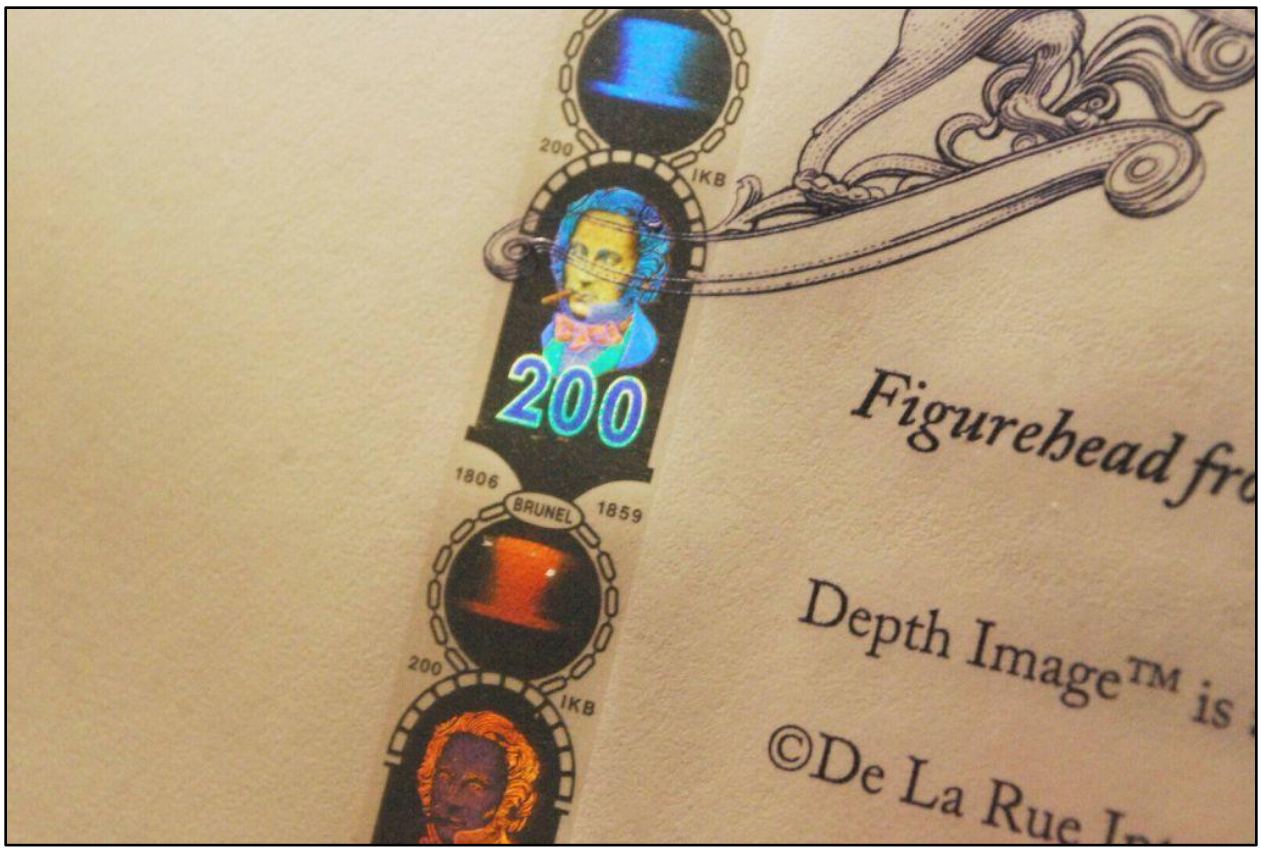

Figure 10 Holographic Depth Image strip viewed at a different angle