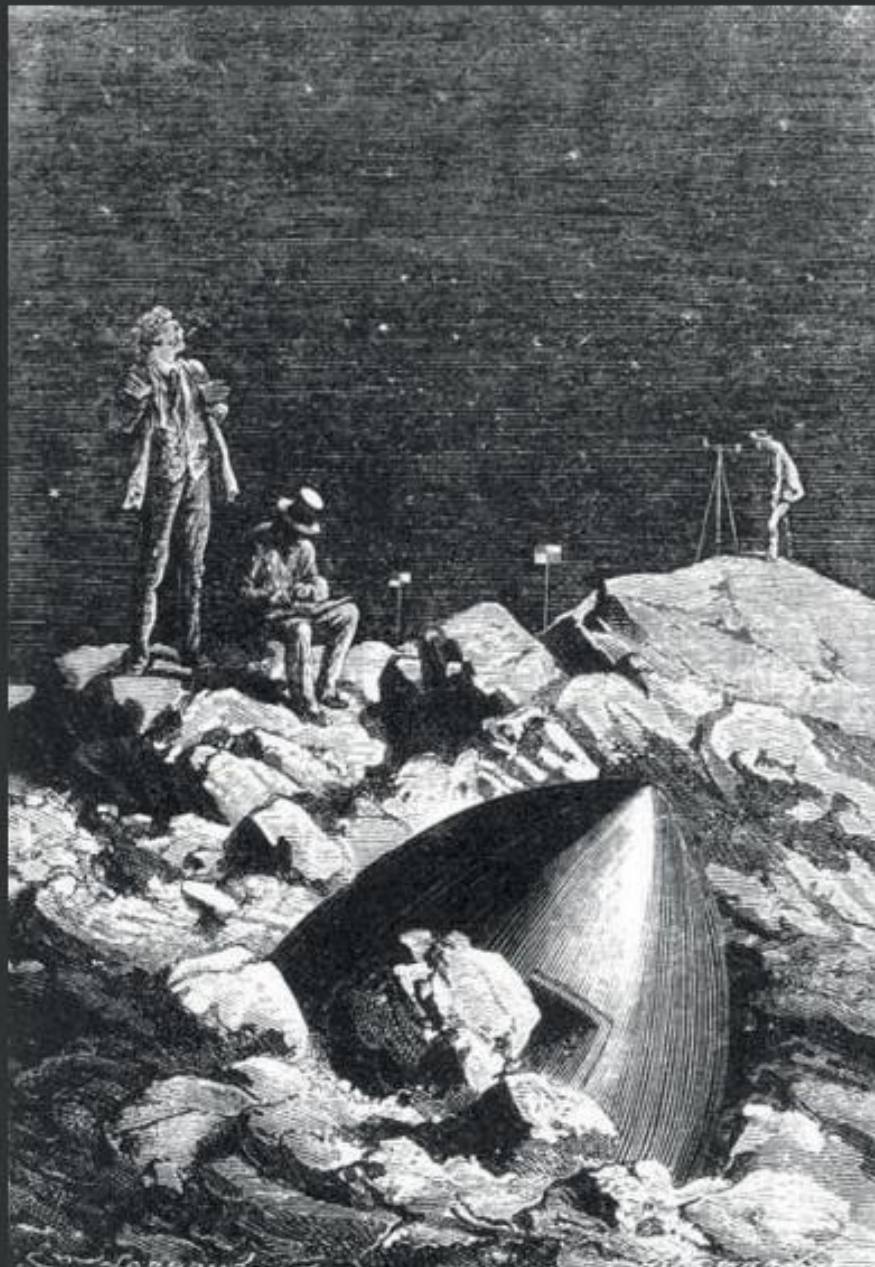


Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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150 Years On: Science Fiction in the 1870s

Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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Editorial

Paul March-Russell

The penultimate essay of George Eliot's final and strangest work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), is perhaps the most curious. Theophrastus is an 'egoist', to quote the title of George Meredith's contemporaneous novel, a failed philosopher and contrarian who, with jutting upper lip and 'walking with my head foremost and my chin projecting' eerily prefigures Wyndham Lewis's *Self-Portrait as a Tyro* (1921). (Lewis's last novel, *Self Condemned* [1954], makes extensive allusion to the works of George Eliot.) Theophrastus is an unreliable protagonist, whose opinion should be trusted no more than the other characters, whose foibles he derides, in Eliot's series of satirical sketches.

In 'Shadows of the Coming Race', Theophrastus is in dialogue with the optimist Trost who, like Voltaire's Pangloss, believes we are progressing towards the best of all possible worlds. Theophrastus insists, however, that humanity is on the brink of being superseded by the evolution of machine technology. As both the title and content of the dialogue indicate, Eliot is drawing upon two of the three novels (the other being George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* [1871]) which, if we are to believe Darko Suvin, kickstarted the sf genre: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), in particular, the latter's middle section, 'The Book of the Machines'. Both Bulwer-Lytton and Butler were writing satirically in the wake not only of Darwinism and industrialisation but also the successful (albeit abridged) translations of Jules Verne. As with Verne, though, the readers of *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon* had a tendency not to notice when they were being fooled. It is this literalism that Eliot, through the character of Theophrastus, is satirising; as Helen Small has rightly argued, what she presents in the dialogue of Theophrastus and Trost is not 'the wisdom of balancing claims' (as Ladislaw remarks, outsmarting Lydgate, in *Middlemarch* [1871]), but the absurdity of polarised and partisan debate. Even more curiously, such a dispute was to follow in the years immediately after Eliot's death in 1880: the original 'two cultures' argument between Matthew Arnold and T.H. Huxley. However, whereas pseudo-intellectualism and male posturing are figures of fun for Eliot, for Wyndham Lewis, writing much later in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), the end-logic of such literalism is a fully automated society where, 'at the pressing of a button', its human automata can be turned upon one another.

As literary historians have emphasised, most notably Herbert Sussman, the 1870s – the decade in which economic growth stalled, mass consumerism began, the balance of power was established, and Queen Victoria became 'Empress of India' – were a critical threshold, a point at which the apparent

certainties of the mid-Victorian period came under scrutiny. Yet, this decade has been largely neglected from the viewpoint of sf studies, although as Peter Keating observed in *The Haunted Study* (1989), this was also the moment when 'the relentless fragmentation and categorisation of fiction' began in earnest. Consequently, to mark the 150th issue of *Foundation* and to complement such recent studies as John Rieder's analysis of mass cultural genres, we thought it would be timely to solicit articles on science fiction from 150 years ago.

Our special section begins with Adam Baldwin's analysis of Chesney's lesser-known yet eerily prescient *The New Ordeal* (1878). An important aspect of Baldwin's account is the extent to which Chesney extrapolates from the publishing changes of the 1870s to criticise the treatment of war as entertainment, which complements the critique of declinism voiced by Eliot's alter-ego, Theophrastus. While Baldwin's study emphasises the geo-political context for Chesney's work, Juan Herrero-Senés argues that sf developed significantly in Spain during the 1870s in response to political revolution. Herrero-Senés examines three key themes within early Spanish sf to illustrate both the distinctive character of this emergent genre and the tension between cultural tradition and scientific progress. Lastly, Kristine Larsen offers a survey of comet fictions in which she demonstrates the 1870s to be a pivotal decade in the development of this sub-genre. She looks forward to the 1900s, and the beginnings of pulp sf, whilst also bookending her analysis with the return of Halley's Comet in 1910. Both Larsen and Herrero-Senés note Verne's influence; in addition, we also publish a sample from local historian John Lamb's research into how Verne adapted major landmarks of Birkenhead as topoi in his fiction. We are further delighted to feature Gwyneth Jones's appreciation of Verne's hero, Alexandre Dumas, and the influence of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844-6) on both Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!* (1955) and her own *Spirit, or The Princess of Bois Dormant* (2008).

No. 150 not only looks backwards but also forwards. This is our new longer format, to be published twice-yearly, so we also include a further four articles: Doina Ciocina's prize-winning essay on Cherie Dimaline and Waubgeshig Rice; Michael Eden on *Alien: Romulus* (one of two appearances for Fede Álvarez's film); Fiona Moore on the TV adaptation of Dan Simmons's *The Terror*, and Martine Mussies and Wouter Steenbeek on the Belgian comic *Suske en Wiske*. We also feature reports from the inaugural Speculative Fiction Across Media conference in Los Angeles and Tate Modern's current exhibition on art before the Internet. There is also a longer reviews section which we hope to expand in coming issues. (More fiction reviews please!) Our autumn issue will include a selection of articles from the highly successful *Women in the Black Fantastic* conference which was held last December in conjunction with Anglia Ruskin University.

Lastly, comings and goings. Following the sad loss of our friend and colleague, Heather Osborne, I am delighted that both Nicole Devarenne and Elizabeth Miller have joined as editorial consultants. Nicole has previously been a keynote speaker at CRSF in 2019 and a panellist for our discussion of John Christopher and Nigel Kneale in 2022. Elizabeth has run a series of conferences on cyberpunk and tech-noir at Bangor University, the first of which was reviewed in *Foundation* 143. Next, although it has fallen to me to oversee further changes at the journal as well as another anniversary after celebrations in 2021 and 2022, it is high time that I should be moving on. I have now edited *Foundation* for eleven years, second only to Edward James, whose record I have no interest in breaking! As long-term readers will be aware, I left full-time academia in 2022 – what is less well-known, until my article in *The Independent Online* last September, is that I have been a single parent since the end of 2023. After two previous attempts to step down from *Foundation*, I must now take a break from the editorship so I can find new employment and rebalance my finances – although I hope to return to the SFF once things have restabilised. It has never been a chore editing *Foundation*; the delights, opportunities and friendships have far outweighed that. Please see the job advert elsewhere in this issue. I would be more than happy to answer any questions (email: paulmarchrussell@gmail.com); the deadline is 1 June.

Around the World via Birkenhead: Bidston Hill in Jules Verne's Novels

John Lamb

As the world's second most translated author, Jules Verne is assured of a place in world literature. Although his pigeonholing by anglophone readers as a 'children's writer', and the abridgements and poor translations of his work (Robins 2021), have often denied Verne the critical respect he deserves, no less a figure than Jorge Luis Borges placed Verne alongside Henry James and Franz Kafka: 'during no other era have there been novels with such admirable plots as *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Trial*, *Voyage to the Center of the Earth*' (Borges 2003: 6). Verne is, of course, best-known for his *voyages extraordinaires*: his marvellous travels to the Earth's core, the deepest oceans, the farthest points on the map, and even the Moon. But in this essay, I want to show how somewhere less remote and, at first glance, less exotic influenced his writings: Birkenhead lying just across the River Mersey from Liverpool. I will detail why Verne was attracted to the region and how he came to use it as a device for the plotlines of three of his novels, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), *The Mysterious Island* (1873) and *Propeller Island* (1895), all in the context of Birkenhead's relevance to Verne's masterpiece, *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas* (1870). To further illustrate his literary technique, I have selected Bidston Hill as an example of how Verne reimagines a local landmark to solidify and give substance to his otherwise fantastical fictions.¹

Birkenhead and the Technological Sublime

For those who don't know Birkenhead, the town sits towards the mouth of the River Mersey on its western bank. Although its origins lie in the Anglo-Saxon period, and from the 12th century CE it hosted a Benedictine priory, Birkenhead remained a small agrarian settlement until the early 19th century. Whereas its opposing neighbour, Liverpool, had already expanded dramatically due to trade and industrialisation, Birkenhead was sheltered by the river until the late 1810s when, first, a ferry service and then a paddle steamer linked the two sides. Thereafter, the town grew rapidly, becoming an icon of innovation. Although the term 'technological sublime' stems from the work of the American historian, Leo Marx, and refers specifically to the expansion of the Frontier via the construction of railroads, bridges, tunnels, factories, telegraphy, and the emerging towns and cities (Marx 1964: 191-209), it can be equally applied to Birkenhead, such was its dramatic transformation and cultural influence.

Verne did not venture outside France until 1859 when he arrived in Liverpool onboard the *Hamburg* and took the ferry to Birkenhead (Verne 1992a: 65). He refers to Birkenhead and its shipyard, founded in 1829 by William Laird and his eldest son John, in eight of his fifty-four novels. Verne visited Birkenhead a second

time in March 1867, from where he sailed on Isambard Kingdom Brunel's *The Great Eastern*, and used his experiences as the basis for his romantic adventure *A Floating City* (1871). A second novel, *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1864), also starts in Birkenhead while six of Verne's fictional vessels were manufactured in the shipyard, including the *Nautilus*, whose steel plates are built at 'Laird's of Liverpool' (Verne 1998: 87). Other local details include the portrait of Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Catholic leader and abolitionist, which adorns Nemo's cabin wall and who in 1847 was laid in state in Birkenhead (O'Kelly 1947: 209). Verne's narrator, Aronnax, also laments the fate of the world's first transatlantic telegraph cable, designed and partially manufactured in Birkenhead (Verne 1998: 361). In 1866, *The Great Eastern* was converted into a cable layer and successfully laid the second transatlantic cable. In *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas*, the *Nautilus* follows the cable on the ocean floor. When Verne sailed from Birkenhead to New York in 1867, he did so in the company of the cable's architect, Cyrus Field, the inspiration for the engineer Cyrus Smith in *The Mysterious Island*.

The rise of Birkenhead was emblematic of the colossal changes driven by the Industrial Revolution. In 1818, when the land surveyor and future civil engineer Thomas Brassey established his business in Birkenhead, it was little more than a hamlet. But forty years later, in the same year as Verne's first visit, it was praised by the American designer Frederick Law Olmsted as the only town built with the 'advanced science, taste and enterprising spirit that are supposed to distinguish the nineteenth century' (Olmsted 1859: 65). Olmsted would model Central Park in New York City on Birkenhead Park, the world's first publicly funded park opened in 1847, and designed by Joseph Paxton, later the designer of Crystal Palace in London which housed the Great Exhibition of 1851. Key to the town's growth were the Lairds shipbuilders, who were not only pioneers in iron ship construction but also contributed significantly to the innovative grid design upon which the expanding town was built.

In 1832, Laird's younger son Macgregor designed the world's first ocean going iron ship, the *Alburkah*, for his Niger River expedition, described in Verne's *Great Explorers of the Nineteenth Century* (1881). By this time Brassey, whose firm had expanded into brickworks, lime kilns and stone quarries, had also met George Stephenson and he was encouraged to go into railway construction. Brassey went on to create not only railways in Britain but also three-quarters of France's rail network, and was praised by Verne in his *Backwards to Britain* (1859). Brassey also financed the completion of *The Great Eastern* in 1858 (Stacey 2005: 27); the same year as David Livingstone left Birkenhead aboard the *Pearl*, bound for the Zambezi River with the Laird's built steel hull sections of the steamer *Ma Robert*. As the world's first galvanised steel vessel, Verne's fictional mouthpiece, Colonel Everest, would hail the *Ma Robert* as 'a masterpiece' (Verne 1874: 25).

At the same time though, as Birkenhead was at the forefront of technological modernity, it was also inadvertently a contributor to new theories of Earth's geological past. Dinosaur footprints, found at Brassey's quarry in Birkenhead in 1828, were eventually displayed in the foyer of the Natural History Museum after its opening in 1881. Prior to that, a life-size replica of the 'Birkenhead dinosaur' was cast in concrete by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins to form part of the Dinosaur Court, unveiled in Crystal Palace Park in 1854. Positioned next to an ichthyosaur, plesiosaur and pterodactyl, this sequence was subsequently copied by Verne in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Schroeder 2019). In 1859, besides Verne, another overseas visitor to Birkenhead was the American engineer George Francis Train, who was building Europe's first street tramway. In 1870, Train became the first circumnavigator of the world in eighty days and stated that Verne 'two years later, wrote fiction of my fact' (Train 1902: ix).

Whilst the iron and steel constructions pioneered at Birkenhead contributed to the growth of trade, communications and exploration, they also enabled military purposes. Some of the first shots fired in the American Civil War in 1861 were from a cannon donated by Charles Prioleau, a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Birkenhead (Hussey 2008: 123). Prioleau later bankrolled the construction of the Birkenhead built Confederate warship CSS *Alabama* from Nautilus House, Liverpool. Other members of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club included its patron Queen Victoria, Verne's sponsor Emperor Napoleon III, the world's richest man Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Laird, Thomas Brassey, Thomas Ismay (founder of the White Star Line) and Charles Judkins, the real-life captain of the Cunard flagship *Scotia*: the first major ship to be attacked by Nemo. The Club also had close links with Gordon Bennett, editor of the *New York Herald* and literary sponsor of both Verne and Mark Twain. Bennett became the model for the journalist Gideon Spillett in *The Mysterious Island*.

During the Civil War, Laird's completed two ironclad ram warships for the Confederacy in 1863, only for them to be impounded by the British Government. However, the idea was not necessarily lost on Verne; the *Nautilus* would use its own formidable ram to sink shipping across three oceans. When the CSS *Alabama* was finally sunk off Cherbourg in 1864, its captain Raphael Semmes was rescued by the yacht *Deerhound* of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club. Semmes was plucked from the water by Henry Adams, the son of the keeper of Bidston Lighthouse at Birkenhead (Rigby 2020). Writing cryptically to his publisher in March 1869, Verne called-out Semmes's racist sympathies: 'The incident of the *Alabama* or a false *Alabama* is unacceptable and inexplicable, if Nemo wanted to take revenge on the slavers, he only had to serve in Grant's army' (qtd Verne 1998: 422). Indeed, the pro-slavery Semmes eventually served in General Lee's forces (Semmes 1869: 802).

Although the design of the *Nautilus* may have been inspired by the wave line hull of *The Great Eastern* (Ferreiro and Pollara 2017: 55), there is also circumstantial evidence that the *Nautilus* may have been influenced by the CSS *Alabama*. Both the *Alabama* and the *Nautilus* were mainly built in Birkenhead. Both Semmes and Nemo were gifted natural historians. Nemo's motto was 'Mobilis in Mobile' while Semmes was from Mobile Alabama. Semmes was branded a pirate by Abraham Lincoln, who put a bounty on Semmes's head, and Semmes was chased around the seas by Admiral Farragut of the US Navy. Nemo, conversely, was branded a pirate by Captain Farragut of the US Navy, who put a bounty on Nemo's head, and Nemo was chased around the seas by the ship *Abraham Lincoln*. Both Semmes and Nemo encounter an imaginary island, sail through a patch of white water, encounter fake Havana cigars, mention coral mausoleums, shelter in an extinct volcanic island, and have their final battle off Cherbourg. Semmes had a portrait of the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, in his cabin while Nemo had a portrait of the Union President, Abraham Lincoln, in his. In other words, if *The Great Eastern* was the template for the *Nautilus*, then the CSS *Alabama* was the latter's real-life alter-ego.

Bidston Hill: A Case Study

Having described Birkenhead's symbolic importance as a centre of technological innovation, and indicated some of the connections between the town, its leading figures, its products and Verne's fiction, I now want to focus on one particular landmark – Bidston Hill – as an example of how the local area informed three of Verne's novels. The Hill, named after the village of Bidston which is now a suburb of Birkenhead, is one of the highest points in the Wirral Peninsula. Of note are two buildings. Bidston Lighthouse, originally constructed in 1771 and rebuilt in 1873, was itself a technological innovation due to its pioneering use of a huge parabolic reflector, designed by its architect, the Liverpool dockmaster William Hutchinson. In 1866, Bidston Observatory was opened alongside the lighthouse. It contained two telescopes, one that observed comets and another that determined time from the stars. Until 1969, an electric signal would be sent by cable from the Observatory to the riverside One O'Clock Gun allowing ships to set their onboard chronometers.

In *The Mysterious Island*, five escaping Unionist prisoners, including a freed black slave, are swept in their balloon to a small islet in the South Pacific. The castaways wait for the tide to go out so they can cross to the mainland. This is odd as there are no tides in the Pacific location given by Verne, and he acknowledges the tideless Pacific in his later novel, *Robur the Conqueror* (1886). The tide goes down thirty feet in six hours: one of the largest tidal ranges in the world, but approximate to that of Birkenhead, which in more recent years has seen the real-world proposal of a Mersey Barrage to produce marine

energy (McDonough 2020). Seven miles across the Wirral Peninsula from Birkenhead is a small tidal islet called Hilbre Island, where seals swim off the rocky north end. In *The Mysterious Island* the castaways return to the islet at low tide to hunt seals from its rocky north end. If the area around Birkenhead is the geographical template for the novel, then the island's volcano, Mount Franklin, creates an obvious problem. Instead, Verne reimagines the tall tower of Bidston Lighthouse as the volcano, consisting of a 'semi-darkness' (Verne 2001: 90) (or 'half-light');² a 'central cone' and an 'upper cone (90) [...] 'like a large hat cocked over the ear' (86); a 'large circular foundation' supporting the upper cone (90); 'bare terrain punctuated in many spots by reddish rocks' (86); 'an unusually shaped spur' forming 'a powerful abutment to the central cone'(88); and 'a deep opening in the solid block' (92) with an 'enormous crevice' that leads to a 'natural staircase' and 'a large spiral path along the interior of the volcano' (92), culminating in the summit of the cone (92). We can compare the various stages of the description with the accompanying images of Bidston Lighthouse (fig. 1). It will take a humorous in-joke from Verne to confirm that we really are standing on the 'conical elevation' of Bidston Lighthouse roof and looking down on the adjacent Bidston Observatory with its twin telescopic domes:

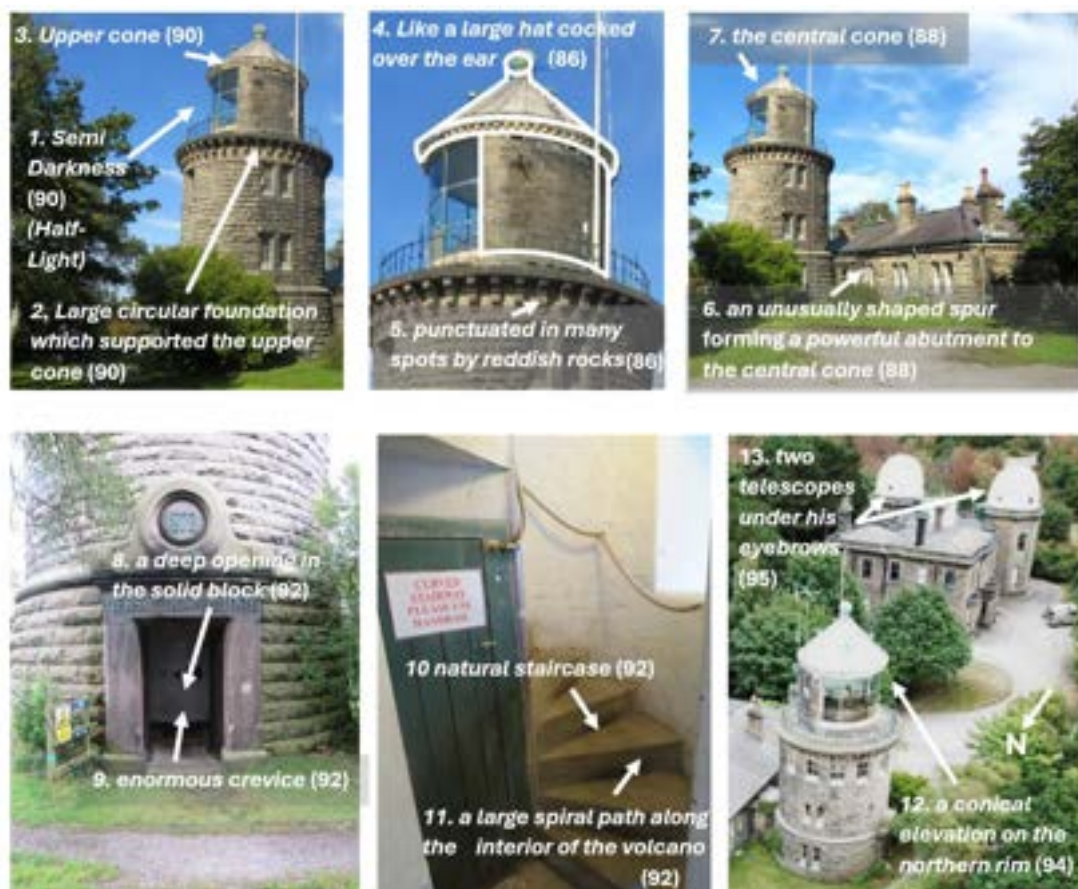


Figure 1. Bidston Lighthouse and Verne's transcript of *The Mysterious Island* (1873)

Pencroft, who possessed a marvelous power of vision, saw nothing. If there was land anywhere on the horizon, even if it appeared as an imperceptible vapor, the sailor would undoubtedly have detected it because nature had truly placed two telescopes under his eyebrows. (95)

Similarly, in *Propeller Island* (1895), the town of Milliard, like Birkenhead, has a grid-like plan which includes a main avenue linking to an English square, a church with a viewing tower, a tram connecting a ferry terminal to a great park with a serpentine lake, and a one o'clock gun fired remotely from an observatory via a telegraphic cable:

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. (Verne 1961: 48)

Again, we can compare the descriptions in the following images (fig. 2). The illustrated tower on Propeller Island is copied from the original lighthouse that existed from 1771 to 1868, complete with a giant flag (no. 17), the juxtaposed lighthouse and observatory

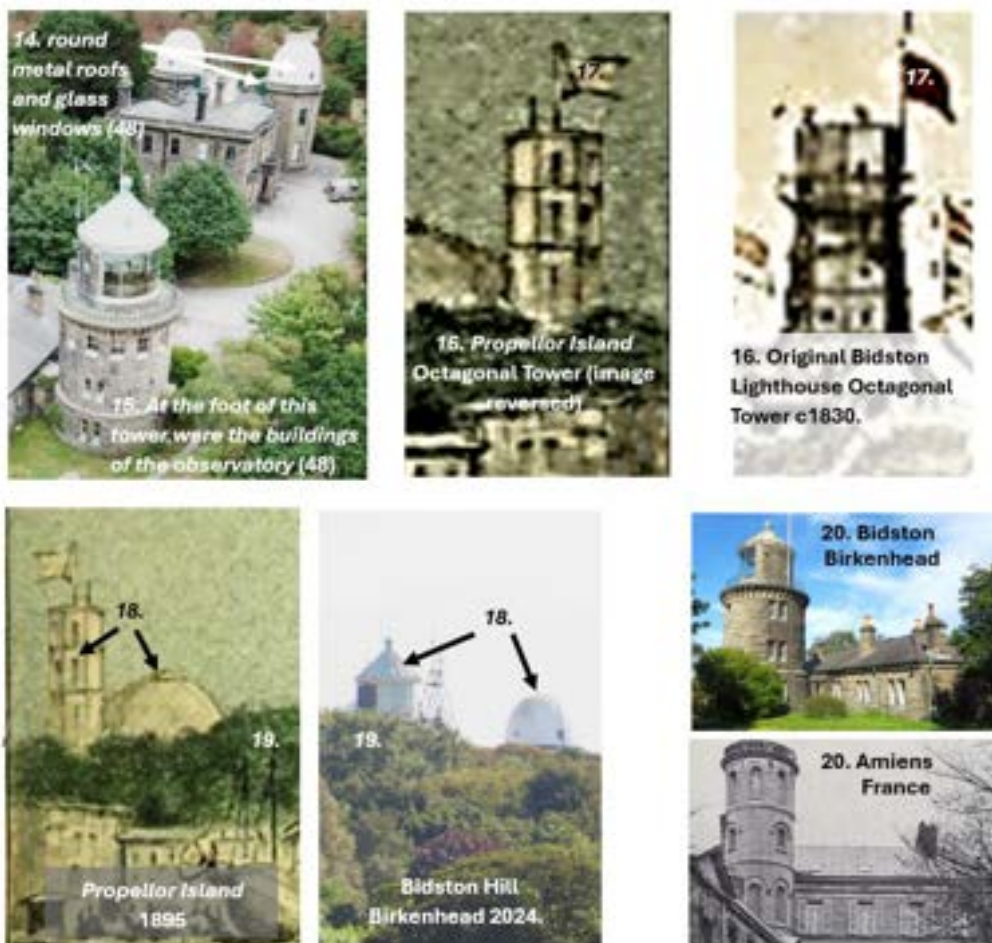


Figure 2. Representations of Bidston Lighthouse, Birkenhead in *Propeller Island* (1895) and similarities between Jules Verne's house in Amiens, France and Bidston lighthouse.

dome (nos. 18 and 19), and comparable hillside contours and vegetation, while the top floor of Verne's house in Amiens seems to echo the look of Bidston Lighthouse.

Lastly, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) takes us to Iceland, the real-life Snaefells volcano, and its fictional adjacent peak Scartaris. Prof Lidenbrock and his nephew Axel decipher directions from the ancient Icelandic explorer Arne Saknussemm,³ in which the alignment of a shadow from Scartaris with one of three volcanic chimneys will lead to the Earth's core. As Saknussemm writes: 'Go down into the crater of Snaefells Yocul, which the shadow of Scartaris caresses before the calends of July [...] and you will reach the centre of the earth' (Verne 1992b: 25). To reach the crater, the travellers have to scale the volcano 'with its twin peaks, one to the north and the other to the south' (82) with a hollow in-between. They are aided when 'a sort of staircase suddenly appear[s] in the middle of a vast carpet of snow' (79). Upon reaching the summit, Axel observes 'three vents through which [...] the central fire [had] forced its lava and its steam. Each of these chimneys was about 100 feet across' (83). Of Scartaris he writes: 'This sharp peak could thus be considered the style of a huge sundial, whose silhouette on a given day marked the way to the centre of our globe' (84-5).⁴ On 28 June, the sky clears and the sunlight pours down: 'Scartaris, especially, stood out like a sharp stone and began

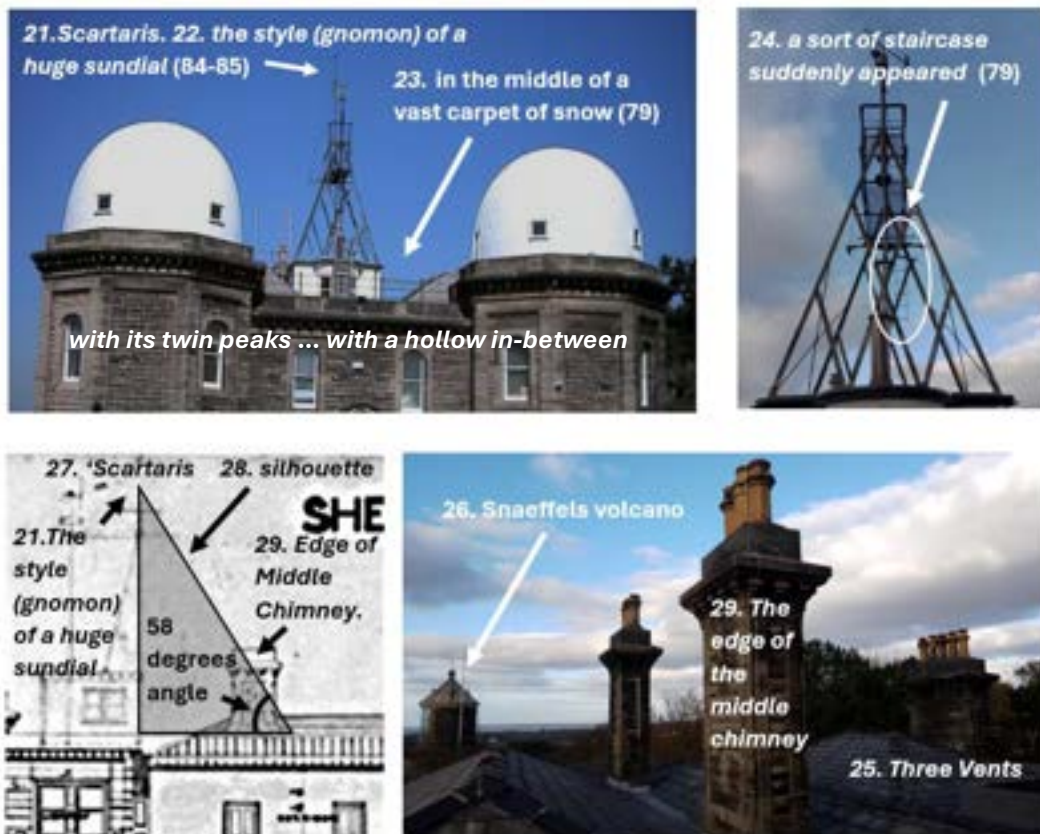


Figure 3. The features of the roof of Bidston Observatory, the 1863/4 roof plan and written excerpts from Verne's transcript of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864)

to turn imperceptibly with the radiant orb. [...] At the middle of the day, when it was shortest, it came and gently kissed the edge of the middle chimney' (85).

The 'calends of July' is the first day of the seventh month in the Roman calendar. On the roof of Bidston Observatory there is an angular meteorological tower and three chimneys. The north-south alignment of the observatory roof means the noonday sun casts a shadow northward towards the three chimneys, but is the shadow long enough at midsummer to reach the middle chimney? At noon on 28 June, the sun at Birkenhead is 58 above the horizontal. Looking at the 1863/4 plan of Bidston Observatory roof, it is possible to draw the shadow cast from the top of the tower, thus confirming that the shadow is indeed long enough (fig 3).

Having verified the shadow's length, the direction and exact time of the shadow also need to be verified. The website, Sunearthtools, projects shadow lines on a vertical aerial photograph at any time and date for any location. The black lines show both the length and direction of the shadow cast from the top of Bidston Observatory (fig. 4), moving clockwise as a black line across the roof at noon on 28 June 2024. The shadow from the tower's gnomon does indeed touch 'the edge of the middle chimney' (x) as Axel specifies. The sun is not exactly due south at Birkenhead at noon but that is compensated by the chimney stack being slightly offset from due north. Although this might seem a coincidence, we should also bear in mind the many occurrences and direct allusions to Birkenhead in Verne's other writings.



Figure 4. Vertical aerial view Bidston Observatory. Copyright Sunearthtools.

Finally, upon reaching the bottom of the chimney, the travellers rest. The next morning Lidenbrock inquires: 'Have you ever spent a more peaceful night in our house on Königstrasse? No noise of cartwheels, no cries from the market, no yelling boatmen!' (90). According to Joyce Scoffield in her history of Bidston Observatory, 'a deep trench known as the moat, surrounded the whole building to insulate the telescopes from the vibration caused by the movement of traffic' (Scoffield 2006: 95). The silence confirms that we are now inside the acoustically insulated basement of Bidston Observatory, the unique the unique conditions of which were later used to predict the tidal movements and decide the date of the D-Day landings in June 1944.

Conclusion

Although nineteenth-century authors, such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell or Thomas Hardy, used real-life settings in their work or took inspiration from real-life places to create fictional locations, such as Gaskell's Cranford or Hardy's Wessex, Verne goes one step further. To give his fictions what Henry James once called 'the supreme virtue of a novel', its 'air of reality' or 'solidity of specification' (James 1987: 195), Verne took actual landmarks but imaginatively recreated them, so that a lighthouse or an observatory can become a volcano, or a coastal town can become a floating island. As scholars have also noted, Verne was admired by early surrealistic authors such as Raymond Roussel (Hale and Hugill 2000: 123), who similarly took real-life locations and fabricated them as something completely other, as indicated by the title of Roussel's most influential novel, *Impressions of Africa* (1910). The difference, though, is that whereas these writers layered reality with a dreamlike lucidity, to draw out the unconscious life within, Verne tied his flights of fancy to places he knew to give them their extraordinary realism. As he remarked in his quarrel with H.G. Wells:

I make use of physics. He invents. [...] He goes to Mars in an airship, which he constructs of a material which does away with the law of gravitation. *Ça c'est très joli* [...] but show me this metal. Let him produce it. (Sherard 1903)

The same principle of extrapolation and reinvention underscores how Verne makes use of real-life places to generate his fantastical locations and give them their substance; a quality that James also found in another adventure novel: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) (James 1987: 202-3).

As I have suggested, my examples here are not coincidence but a small sample of a greater whole. The sixty Birkenhead landmarks used by Verne relate exactly to their sixty fictional locations in *The Mysterious Island* in terms of distance, compass direction, and height relative to one another. Verne creates

his own three-dimensional matrix: he knows exactly where everything is so he can concentrate on developing his storyline (equivalent, we could say, to how fantasy writers often begin with a map of their invented world). However, Verne's inventions frequently comment on the real-life issues of the day, such as slavery, abolitionism, war, and political hope. His invented worlds act as microcosms where these issues can be played out and scrutinised. Following his greatest influence, Edgar Allan Poe, Verne is also a master of deception who gives clues at the same time, and the fun is in interpreting them.⁵ Who would have thought that a futuristic electric submarine would be inspired by perhaps the most famous wooden pirate ship of the nineteenth century, an island could be inspired by a peninsula, or a volcano by a lighthouse? All these point to the humour and genius in Verne's work.

Local knowledge of Birkenhead, its geography and history, combined with a love of science fiction and adventure, will help us uncover more of Verne's secrets. In doing so, we will also achieve a greater appreciation of how location is intimately connected to the globalised movements of empire, trade, and scientific discovery. As Wells observed:

Birkenhead or Milan or London or Calcutta, a huge extension of human power and the scale of human operations. This growth was elaborated in the physical and chemical laboratories and the industrial experiments of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century and chiefly in Europe. (Wells 1906: 68)

Note.

This is the end of the article in the spring 2025 *International Review of Science Fiction* but H.G Wells would be correct as 'Birkenhead being a huge extension of human power' as it would not just be Jules Verne who would use Bidston Hill to drive the plot line of his novels.

Another author would enter the stage, one who had compared Birkenhead to a 'desert island' in his *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin* (1888) his name is Robert Louis Stevenson and his novel *Treasure Island* would use Bidston Hill and give further context to Jules Verne.

Bidston Hill and Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island (1881).

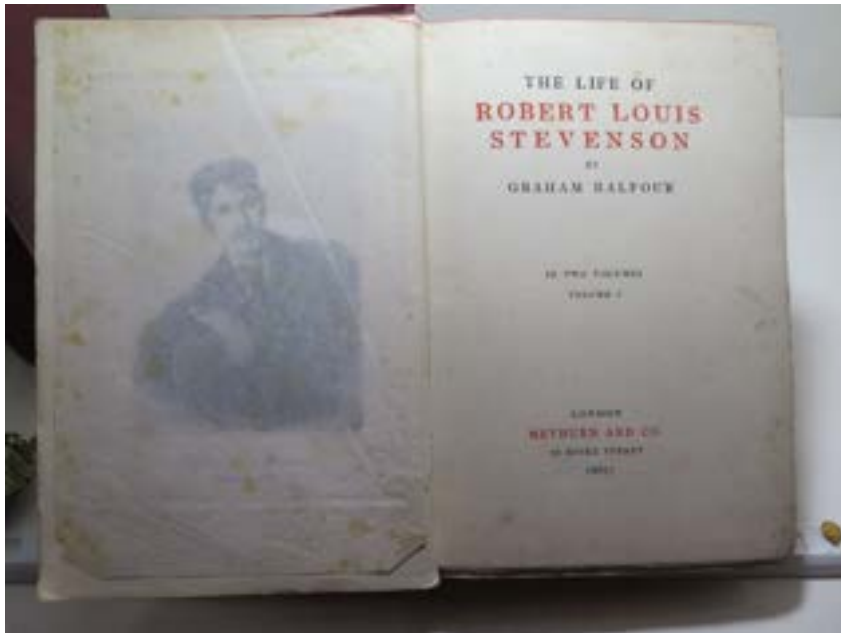
In 1890 Robert Louis Stevenson moved to Upolu, an island in Western Samoa.



He was joined by his cousin and biographer Sir Graham Balfour.



Balfour would write Robert Louis Stevenson's Official Biography in 1901.



Sir Graham Balfour died in 1929 and despite being born in London and living in Staffordshire, strangely enough his express request was to be buried in his wife's home town of Birkenhead. His wife died in 1958 and is buried with him.

Sir Graham Balfour is buried at Flaybrick Cemetery on the flank of Bidston Hill, Birkenhead. Bidston Hill plays Spy-glass Hill in Stevenson's 1883 classic novel *Treasure Island* (see later).



Indeed, Balfour's grave is just 350 yards away from Bidston Windmill which 'plays' the first of the 'three tall trees' in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.



The gravestone has been restored to an upright position thanks to help from the family of Sir Graham Balfour, The Friends of Flaybrick Memorial Gardens, The Robert Louis Stevenson Society and local Birkenhead people.

The inscription reads.

*And so. He bringeth them unto
the haven where they would be.*

Bidston Hill, Birkenhead ‘plays’ Spy-glass Hill on Treasure Island.

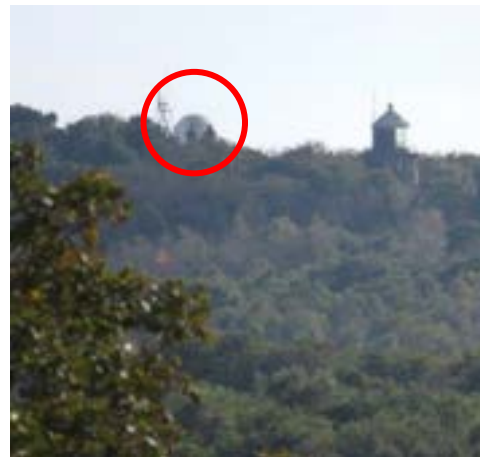
It is upon Bidston Hill, Birkenhead that Robert Louis Stevenson will complete probably the greatest metaphorical description in world literature as he consciously gives the reader clues that Spy-glass Hill on *Treasure Island* is actually Bidston Hill, Birkenhead. Here are the relevant final clues / quotes taken directly from the novel *Treasure Island*, as Stevenson proves a master of the metaphorical craft.

Silver, as he sat, took certain bearings with his compass.

Sheer above us rose the Spy-glass, here dotted with single pines, there black with precipices.

Robert Louis Stevenson *Treasure Island* (1883).

The dome of Bidston Observatory (*The Spy-glass*) on Bidston Hill, Birkenhead.

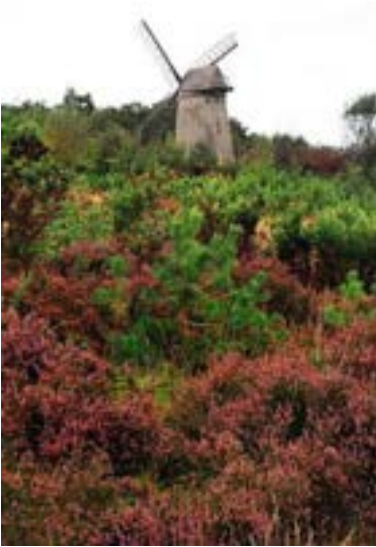


“There are three ‘tall trees’” said he, “about in the right line from Skeleton Island. ‘Spy-glass shoulder,’



Bidston Hill, Birkenhead – the ‘*Spy-glass shoulder*’ with ‘*the three tall trees*’.

I take it, means that lower p'int there. It's child's play to find the stuff now. I've half a mind to dine first."



The first of the tall trees was reached, and by the bearings proved the wrong one.

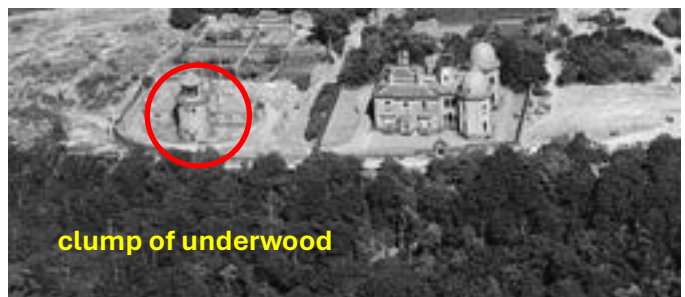
Bidston Windmill... *the first of the tall trees.*

So with the second



Bidston Observatory... the second tall tree

The third rose nearly two hundred feet into the air above a clump of underwood ...



Bidston Lighthouse... the third tall tree *above a clump of underwood*

... a giant of a vegetable, with a red column...

like the red sandstone column of Bidston Lighthouse.



... as big as a cottage...

like the lighthouse keeper's cottage



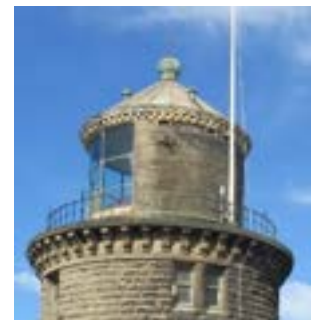
and a wide shadow around in which a company could have manoeuvred

Like the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company who built Bidston lighthouse and of course were a company dedicated to 'manoeuvring' ships in and out of the Port of Liverpool. Robert Louis Stevenson's own grandfather wrote in detail about Bidston Lighthouse.



It was conspicuous far to sea both on the east and west

Bidston lighthouse is a fixed 'half-light' and is indeed conspicuous far to sea both on the east and the west.



and might have been entered as a sailing mark upon the chart.

Like the mariner's chart showing Bidston lighthouse as the main sailing mark and light into the Port of Liverpool.





Before us was a great excavation, not very recent, for the sides had fallen in and grass had sprouted on the bottom. In this were the shaft of a pick broken in two and the boards of several packing-cases strewn around. On one of these boards I saw, branded with a hot iron, the name Walrus—the name of Flint's ship.

At the foot of Bidston Lighthouse (the third tall tree).

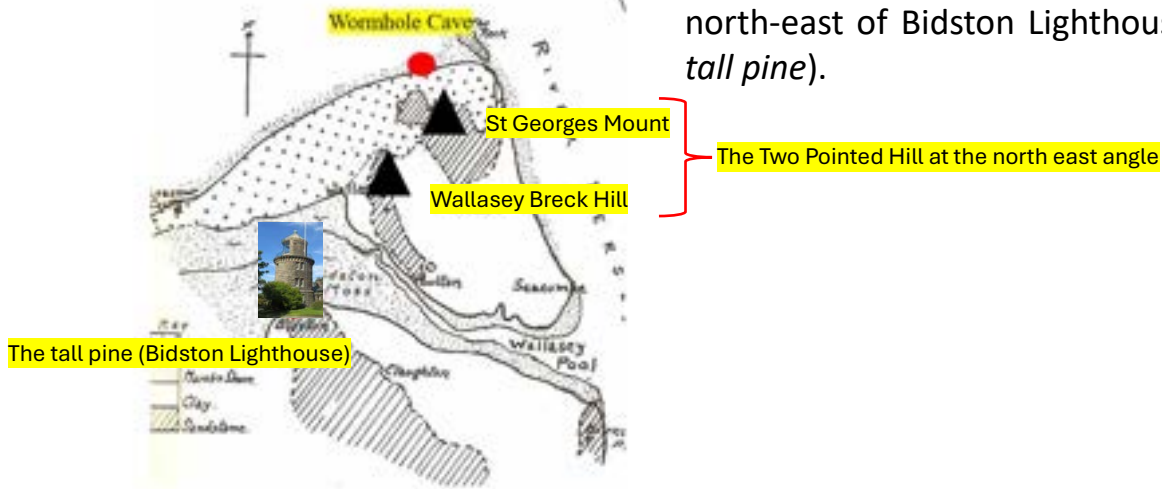
All was clear to probation. The cache had been found and rifled; the seven hundred thousand pounds were gone!

*Ben, in his long, lonely wanderings about the island, had found the skeleton—it was he that had rifled it; he had found the treasure; he had dug it up (it was the shaft of his pick-axe that lay broken in the excavation); **he had carried it on his back, in many weary journeys, from the foot of the tall pine to a cave he had on the two-pointed hill at the north-east angle of the island, and there it had lain stored in safety since two months before the arrival of the Hispaniola.***

Robert Louis Stevenson *Treasure Island* (1883).

Ben had found the treasure; he had dug it up, he had carried it on his back, in many weary journeys, from the foot of the tall pine (represented by Bidston lighthouse) to a cave (represented by Wormhole Cave) he had on the two pointed hill (Wallasey Breck and St Georges Mount) at the north east angle of the Wirral Peninsula, and there it had lain stored in safety.

The cave can only be Wormhole Cave in New Brighton. The only cave to the north-east of Bidston Lighthouse (*the tall pine*).



*When the doctor had **wormed** this secret from him on the afternoon of the attack, and when next morning he saw the anchorage deserted, he had gone to Silver, given him the chart, which was now useless—given him the stores, for Ben Gunn's cave was well supplied with goats' meat salted by himself.*

Robert Louis Stevenson *Treasure Island* (1883).

*When the doctor had **wormed** this secret from him* Robert Louis Stevenson has now confirmed that Ben Gunn moved the treasure to **Wormhole Cave** New Brighton, with its salt encrusted walls



The site of Wormhole Cave today, landlocked behind the New Brighton Championship Mini Golf.



The walls of Wormhole Cave – encrusted with salt from Ben Gunn's salted goat.

The full transcript of my dissection of *Treasure Island* can be found here...it is about a one hour read.

[40.-Robert-Louis-Stevenson-sets-his-classic-novel-Treasure-Island-in-Birkenhead_compressed.pdf \(julesverneandtheheroesofbirkenhead.co.uk\)](http://julesverneandtheheroesofbirkenhead.co.uk/Birkenhead_compressed.pdf)

The main links between Robert Louis Stevenson and Birkenhead are through arguably his two greatest friends. Firstly, his lifelong friend and mentor, the engineer Fleeming Jenkin (who worked on telegraphic cables in Birkenhead in the 1850's) of whom Stevenson wrote Jenkin's biography in which he compared Birkenhead Docks to a 'Desert Island'.

Secondly through Robert Louis Stevenson's cousin Sir Graham Balfour, of whom Balfour lived with Stevenson of the South Pacific Island of Upolu, who wrote Stevenson's biography, and who is buried on Bidston (Spy-glass) Hill, Birkenhead.

This is all undoubtedly by design by two of the world's greatest authors, Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote an essay on Verne's works after reading Verne's *Mysterious Island*, and Jules Verne himself, who praised Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and mentioned Stevenson and *Treasure Island* in his 1895 novel *The Floating Island*....that is because as we have seen, *The Mysterious Island*, *The Floating Island* and *Treasure Island* are all set in Birkenhead, as is Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

This is not coincidence and there is far more to tell.

Thankyou

John Lamb cads.2la@gmail.com

A Statement from Birkenhead Member of Parliament Mick Whitley Concerning Jules Verne's Mysterious Island and Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island.



Mick Whitley MP
Birkenhead



John Lamb
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04 August 2022

Dear John

Thank you so much for visiting my office and sharing your findings regarding the centrality of Birkenhead and Wirral to fictional works of the French Author, Jules Verne and Robert Louis Stevenson's world-famous novel Treasure Island.

The extensive research you have carried out and kindly shared with me and my team have convinced me that your conclusions regarding the centrality of Birkenhead, and other locations on the Wirral, to works such as Mysterious Island, are sound. I believe that these links can and should play a central role in celebrating the cultural heritage of our town and region and its connections with world literature.

I commend your work and your commitment. I am grateful you have shared your findings with me. Please accept my congratulations and support for your continuing research.

Yours Sincerely,

Mick Whitley,
Member of Parliament for Birkenhead

Endnotes

¹ For more about the connections between Verne and Birkenhead, see my website: <https://julesverneandtheheroesofbirkenhead.co.uk>.

² W.H.G. Kingston, in one of the first translations of the novel, renders 'semi-darkness' as 'half-light' (Verne 1876: 131). Both seem equally valid, though, with the difference being a change of emphasis for dramatic purpose. For me, Kingston's translation indicates the origin of Verne's imaginative response in the Bidston Lighthouse.

³ The final syllable in Arne's surname might also be an allusion to Semmes since most Icelandic surnames end in 'son' and none in 'semm'. Thank you to Ken Lamb for this observation.

⁴ F.A. Malleon, in his 1877 translation, renders 'style' as 'gnomon' (the part of a sundial that casts a shadow) which again seems more accurate for my purposes (Verne 1996: 71).

⁵ On the importance of hoaxes, the literary techniques of Poe and Verne, and the reader's believability/gullibility, see Dolby (2011).

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