# Did Jules Verne Predict Internet Shopping and the Decline of the High Street?

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In 1895 the ‘father of science fiction’ the writer Jules Verne (1828-1905) predicted that shoppers in the future would view pictures of retail products on personal video screens and place written orders on a ‘teleautograph’ to be transmitted internationally via submarine cables. Today some 95% of international internet traffic is carried ‘online’ by submarine fibre optic cables.

In his fantasy novel *The Floating Island* (1895) Jules Verne also correctly predicted that this entirely new method of shopping would lead to an almost deserted High Street.

**You can find an illustration of Jules Verne’s ‘Phonotelephote’ here**

2889.jpg (620×446) (wordpress.com)

The amazing new findings are published on a new website devoted to Jules Verne, called *Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead* which highlights the French author’s growing relationship with Birkenhead - a town lying opposite Liverpool, England.

The website is the brainchild of retired Liverpool Geography teacher John Lamb, who was born in Birkenhead and last month revealed that in Jules Verne’s novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) Captain Nemo commissions the hull of his fictional submarine the *Nautilus* from Birkenhead’s Lairds shipyard.

Mr Lamb’s latest findings have been included on the Société **Jules Verne (Paris) Website.**

*The Floating Island* (1895) is an early Science Fiction novel and involves the adventures of four musicians who are taken to ‘Standard Island’ off the Californian coast. The musicians do not realise that they are actually on a giant artificial island designed to take millionaire Americans on a permanent cruise around the Pacific. The island then proceeds to float off across the Pacific Ocean taking the unwitting quartet with it.

The population of Floating Island drive electric motor cars, 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 main town is called ‘Milliard’ and despite having ten thousand inhabitants, one of the four musicians is surprised to find no customers on the local High Street. Jules Verne explains why.

*‘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.”*

Verne also explains that the whole system is connected to the United States via submarine cables.

**But why the link with Birkenhead?**

As well as building some of the nineteenth century’s finest ships, Birkenhead was at the forefront of developing and promoting submarine telegraph cable technology in the mid-19th Century – what has now become known as the ‘Victorian Internet’.

- The entrepreneur Cyrus Field ‘The Father of Submarine Telegraphy’ obtained investment for his first 1858 Transatlantic telegraphic cable in Birkenhead at the home of Charles William Harrison Pickering.

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- A new factory was set up by RS Newall and Co in Birkenhead to manufacture half of the length of the 1858 Transatlantic cable with Pickering as its Managing Director.
- Research into the new cable technology was carried out jointly by the scientists Fleeming Jenkin in Birkenhead and William Thompson in Glasgow – Thompson is now better known by his later title – Lord Kelvin.
- When the 1858 cable failed after sending just 400 telegrams, Cyrus Field returned once again to Birkenhead and in 1864 achieved financial backing from the Birkenhead engineer Thomas Brassey for a second cable.
- Brassey bought Isambard Kingdom Brunel's ship the *Great Eastern* for a knock down price of £25,000 and converted it into a transatlantic cable layer.
- The *Great Eastern* successfully laid the 1866 Atlantic Cable – the greatest technological feat of the Nineteenth Century. By 1901 a network of submarine telegraphic cables had crossed all the major oceans many times over and is now referred to as the 'Victorian Internet'.
- The *Great Eastern* was scrapped at Birkenhead in 1889 – the remains of its keel still lie in the Birkenhead mud.

**In a tribute to Birkenhead's role in developing the 'Victorian Internet', Jules Verne gives obvious clues that the Floating Island is actually 'Birkenhead in disguise'**

**Both Milliard City on Floating Island and the town of Birkenhead have…**

- a ferry terminal near a 'Pier Head'.
- a rectangular plan of streets with a third avenue devoted to entertainment and leading on to a great lawned square with a town hall.
- a one o'clock gun, fired via a wire from an observatory which happens to stand next to a lighthouse tower.
- a St Mary's church with a tall spire and a viewing platform open to the public.
- a population strictly divided between Catholics and Protestants.
- a world class park connected to the ferry service by a tram.

Birkenhead Park is a world class park, the oldest public park in the world and the model for New York's Central Park. Birkenhead's tram system – the first in Europe, ran between Woodside Ferry terminal and Birkenhead Park. The tram system was inaugurated by George Francis Train – the first man ever to go around the world in eighty days.

In the novel *The Floating Island* there are also pictorial representations of Birkenhead Town Hall, the old Woodside Railway Station, Bidston Observatory and Lighthouse and Fort Perch Rock and Lighthouse in New Brighton.

Mr Lamb's favourite comparison however is Jules Verne's satire on the great American author Nathanial Hawthorne's previous derogatory comments on Birkenhead Park.

In his 1853 English notebooks, Nathanial Hawthorne wrote;

*Yesterday afternoon J and I went to Birkenhead Park. 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.*

*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.*

*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.*

**Nathanial Hawthorne *English Notebooks* (1853).**

**However, Jules Verne satirises Hawthorne's words when he describes the great park on his Floating Island.**

*At this time the park was crowded. The people were crowding in, grown men and young folks. 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.*

*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.*

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

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

**QUOTES**

The novel *Floating Island* is 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 effects on our local high streets.

The satire on Hawthorne is really the 'Literature DNA' which undoubtedly proves that Jules Verne based his 1895 Floating Island as a homage to the town of Birkenhead.

It also proves that Verne did a massive amount of research, both into the history, geography and culture of my hometown. In many ways the town of Birkenhead drives Jules Verne's plotline – it is a masterclass in using the landscape and heritage of an area to stimulate the ultimate in creative writing.

There are however two secrets that Jules Verne hid on his *Floating Island* and these will be disclosed in future articles.

I believe that Jules Verne was able to come up with such successful scientific predictions as he had a much closer relationship with the scientists and thinkers of his day than has perhaps been realised. Verne had a luxury yacht and he could easily have held philosophical debates with scientists on the potential of cable technology and its impacts. As a former stockbroker, Jules Verne would surely have recommended buying shares in Amazon Prime!

Now the location of one fictional island has been discovered, next month the website will deal with another, and that is Jules Verne's masterpiece *The Mysterious Island* (1875) – the sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and the novel that marks the reappearance of Captain Nemo and his Birkenhead built *Nautilus*.

**Next month's article is titled 'The Return to Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*.**

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