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FRONT COVER

London Transport, ex-Metropolitan Railway, Class E 0-4-4T No.L44 runs round its train at Stanmore in October 1961.
(Colour-Rail LT286)

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LISTED REDUNDANT VIADUCTS — THE PROBLEM OF RETENTION

This month's guest editorial is from the railway and architectural historian **GORDON BIDDLE**.

By the end of the 1970s there was growing recognition by senior railwaymen that the conservation of Britain's industrial heritage included parts of the railway's historic infrastructure and that sometimes it could be easier, even cheaper, to restore than to replace, while still meeting modern requirements. In 1985 the Railway Heritage Trust was established by British Railways to channel funds and encourage conservation partnerships with other organisations, public and private. Since then it has awarded grants of £32.6 million and attracted external contributions of £38.7 million. In 1979 the annual National Railway Heritage Awards scheme was established to give public recognition, with help from BR and the preservation movement. It is now sponsored by the railway industry.

Redundant viaducts present a particular problem. Since the time when they were built 150 years or more ago, attitudes have changed. In 1871 John Ruskin deplored the railway's desecration of Monsal Dale in Derbyshire, yet a century later when BR closed the line and proposed to demolish the viaduct, there was a public outcry. It was now a valued part of the landscape. Many disused viaducts and other structures are listed and therefore cannot be demolished, yet they need maintenance if they are to remain safe. Disposal is only possible when responsible new owners can be found possessing sufficient resources to take on the long-term liabilities: generally public bodies or substantial commercial organisations. Sustrans is an exception. The sustainable transport charity has established a National Cycle Network of 10,000 miles, using many old railways, including 64 viaducts. But there are still 32 listed viaducts in public ownership under the care of BRB (Residuary) Ltd., a company wholly owned by the Department of Transport for managing redundant railway property.

Among viaduct owners the Northern Viaduct Trust is unique. It was formed in 1989 to restore the spectacular Smardale Gill Viaduct which, 90ft high on fourteen stone arches, crosses a dramatic valley west of Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria. It stood on the South Durham & Lancashire Union Railway (later North Eastern) built across the Pennines by the engineer Sir Thomas Bouch in 1861. The railway closed in 1962 and some twenty years later it was observed that masonry was falling off, whereupon British Rail decided on demolition. Eden District Council promptly arranged for it to be listed (eventually Grade II*) and at a subsequent public inquiry consent to demolish was refused. BR therefore offered to put the estimated demolition cost of around £230,000 towards restoration, suggesting that possibly a charitable trust might be formed to raise the balance. Four people accepted the challenge: the businessman who discovered the damage became chairman, his solicitor the secretary, a friendly bank director treasurer, and a local councillor. After registering as a charity they began the task of securing grants from a range of organisations which included local authorities, the Countryside Commission, the Railway Heritage Trust and English Heritage. The final cost of some £350,000 included 'stitching' piers with over 100 stainless steel rods, masonry repairs, laying a concrete deck, new drains and erecting handrails. The viaduct now formed a footpath link between Cumbria Wildlife Trust's linear nature reserves along the trackbed at either end. In 1992 it won a National Railway Heritage Award following the formal handing over by the late Lord Whitelaw, along with the nearby Drygill Viaduct which has only two arches.

The trust next acquired 1¼ miles of trackbed east of Kirkby Stephen, intent on creating a cycleway and footpath linking several public paths. It included two more listed viaducts, fortunately in better condition. The trust was enlarged to eight members and further grants were obtained. BR agreed to give the trackbed, together with the eleven-arch Podgill Viaduct, overbridges and culverts. Podgill needed a new deck and drains, but the biggest job was constructing a steel-arched bridge over the River Eden to reach a road near the town. Designed by a local civil engineer, the Millennium Bridge was opened in 2002, winning an environmental award. But Merrygill Viaduct at the eastern end had been sold to the adjacent Hartley quarry, owned by Cemex who generously agreed to hand it over to the trust. More grants were obtained to repair the nine arches and provide the path with access for the disabled, winning a second Railway Heritage Award. Cemex gave materials for surfacing and two lineside huts were repaired to become interpretation points illustrating the history of the railway and the quarry. In 2005 Sir Neil Cossons, Chairman of English Heritage, officially opened the path. The complete circular walk is called the Viaduct Round, providing splendid views of the northern Pennines, particularly from Podgill Viaduct where steps down to a picnic area enable it to be viewed from below. The path is well-used by local people and visitors, and the trust has published a four-page walking guide to it and to Smardale Gill.

There are still only eight trustees, with no general membership. The trust has been cited as an example for viaduct restoration elsewhere, although other trusts include public authorities of some kind. The Northern Viaduct Trust is alone in being composed solely of private individuals.

Gordon Biddle is the present chairman of the Northern Viaduct Trust.

The website address is www.nvt.org.uk

