

Smardale Gill Viaduct



Cracked and damaged piers, Smardale Gill Viaduct, 1990.
Photo: Gordon Biddle

Michael Pettigrew, Honorary Secretary of the Northern Viaduct Trust, tells how four resourceful people saved an outstanding landscape feature adjoining Cumbria Wildlife Trust's reserve.

Articles about Cumbria Wildlife Trust's Smardale Gill National Nature Reserve, west of Kirkby Stephen, frequently mention the disused railway and viaduct forming its core, yet the remarkable story of the charitable trust that was responsible for saving it is little known.

Smardale Gill viaduct was built in 1861 by the Cumbrian engineer Sir Thomas Bouch, better known as the designer of the first Tay bridge, which collapsed while a train crossed it in a storm in 1879. The very fine structure of Smardale's viaduct is 90ft high, crossing the steep, narrow valley on 14

curving arches, forming a dramatic element in the rugged landscape. The railway of which it was part, from Barnard Castle to Tebay over Stainmore, closed in 1962. In the 1980s, Gavin Martin, the Northern Viaduct Trust's founder, saw that masonry had fallen from several piers. British Rail's response was to propose demolition at a cost of £230,000, but Eden District Council arranged for the viaduct to be listed so preventing its destruction.

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The award-winning Northern Viaduct Trust was then formed by just four people, who were successful in persuading British Rail to sell it to them for a token £1.00. British Rail also provided an endowment equal to the cost of demolition, provided that the Northern Viaduct Trust could raise the balance of the estimated restoration cost of £350,000. The renovation included 'stitching' several piers with numerous stainless steel rods, new stonework, waterproofing the deck, installing new drains and erecting railings along the low parapet. It was a proud day for the Northern Viaduct Trust when the late Lord Whitelaw handed over the viaduct in the autumn of 1992. As a permissive footpath, it links the two parts of Cumbria Wildlife Trust's reserve and today is enjoyed by numerous walkers and wildlife enthusiasts.

Subsequently, the trustees (now numbering eight without any general membership) acquired and restored the listed Podgill and Merrygill Viaducts, east of Kirkby Stephen, and created a popular one-and-a-quarter-mile footpath from Stenkrith to Hartley. This route includes the new Millennium Bridge over the gorge on the River Eden, and was opened by the chairman of English Heritage, Sir Neil Cossons, in 2005. A descriptive leaflet and walking guide are available at Kirkby Stephen Tourist Information Centre.

