

# Historic plaque marks world's oldest viaduct

By Ian Russell

**THE bicentenary of the opening of Scotland's first public railway, and the world's oldest surviving public railway viaduct, was marked with a special ceremony just outside Kilmarnock last week.**

Laigh Milton viaduct, near Gatehead, was the venue for the commemorative celebrations featuring representatives of both East Ayrshire Council and South Ayrshire Councils.

Officially opened on July 6, 1812, the Kilmarnock and Troon railway was constructed for the fourth Duke of Portland, William Bentinck, to transport coal to his custom-built harbour at Troon, mainly for export to Ireland.

The line is steeped in history. It's be-



**PROUD PROF:** Professor Roland Paxton with the plaque.

lieved to have been the first railway in the world to use a Stephenson steam locomotive. That was in 1816 and the locomotive was named The Duke.

It was Scotland's first public railway to transport passengers, initially in privately-owned horse drawn carriages, between Kilmarnock and Troon. The Duke, not in service for long because its piston action broke the cast-iron plate rails, was sold to Lord Elgin in 1824 for £70.

The project engineer for the railway and the Laigh Milton viaduct was William Jessop, a famous engineer in his day, who was responsible for large-scale projects including the Grand Canal of Ireland, the Ellesmere Canal with its renowned Pont Cysyllte aqueduct, Caledonian Canal (with Telford), and the West India Docks in the Port of London.

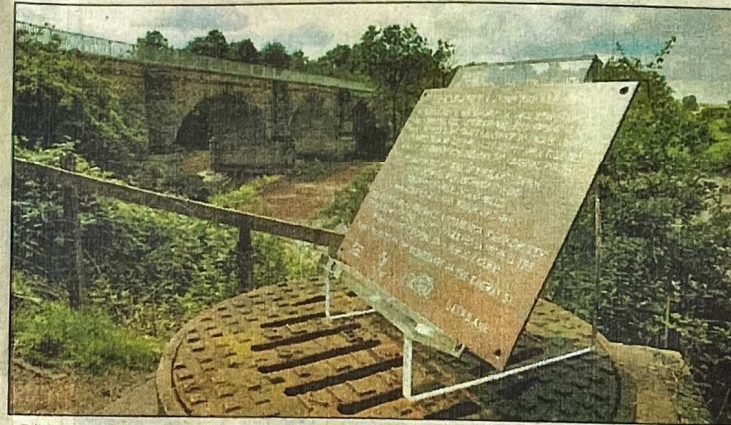
Jessop's viaduct carried the railway over the River Irvine until 1847 when it was bypassed by a timber viaduct designed on a larger curve for improved steam locomotion by engineer John Miller, dubbed by influential historian Professor Roland Paxton 'Scotland's Brunel'.

John Miller's great-great grand-daughter, Mrs Paula Clarke, attended the bicentenary event.

The line was replaced in 1865 by the present one on an even greater radius curve to facilitate faster travel. It still carries freight and passengers between Kilmarnock, Troon and beyond.

Provost Jim Todd unveiled a plaque generously gifted by the Institution of Civil Engineers.

He said: "The Kilmarnock and Troon Railway was a huge project in its day,



**OLD AND NEW:** The new plaque with the old viaduct in the background.

costing the Duke of Portland £150,000, which equates to at least £80million in today's money.

"However, the benefits to the whole area were incredible.

"We are very proud to have this magnificent monument to Victorian engineering in our area, and are committed to ensuring it has a viable use in the future and that it is safe for the public to use."

The provost thanked Professor Roland Paxton of the Institution of Civil Engineers Panel for Historical Engineering Works, who was the driving force behind the restoration of the historic viaduct, and his fellow conservation project directors, for their hard work and commitment.

In 1992 Professor Paxton, with invaluable help from others, initiated the Laigh

Milton viaduct conservation project, and work by Barr Construction to restore the viaduct began on-site in 1995. The viaduct was officially re-opened in 1996, and in 1999 was honoured with a Saltire Society commendation for its skilful conservation.

Said Professor Paxton: "In initiating and organising the K&TR200 plaque, the institution recognises the railway's outstanding historical significance.

"It also wishes to encourage the viaduct's custodians and owners since its conservation in 1996, East and South Ayrshire Councils, to develop its public potential as a national tourist attraction and as a safe crossing of the river for a footway/ cycleway facility."