



Professor Paxton with the rail section found on the river bed.

Unique rail track uncovered at old viaduct worksite

AN EXCITING find has been made at Laigh Milton Mill as the four-year-old viaduct renovation comes to an end.

The only known surviving intact example of a special type of rail developed to cope with the pounding which one early railway received from Stephenson's early steam engine 'The Duke', has been discovered in the silt under the viaduct.

The modified rail was discovered during a dredging operation to clear debris from the River Irvine under the structure.

Professor Roland Paxton of Heriot-Watt University, who is secretary of the Viaduct's Conservation Trust, identified the rail which, he said, is a tremendously exciting find.

"These strengthened rails, which were an invention of the Kilmarnock and Troon's manager, John Wilson, were introduced around 1817 and are unique on this track," he said.

Professor Paxton explained that the three feet long rails in use at the time, had two fillets added immediately under the flat wheel track in order to reduce breakages from the overloading and hammer-blow

pounding they received from George Stephenson's new steam engine.

It's estimated that around 70,000 of these rails were laid on the line, but when it was regraded in the 1840s they were all removed for scrap.

It appears that this was the only section of rail to have survived after being dropped into the river and considered too much trouble to fish out.

The Kilmarnock and Troon Railway, which incorporated the viaduct at Laigh Milton, carried goods and passengers from 1811, 14 years before the Stockton and Darlington line.

It was originally constructed for horse-drawn trains, but Stephenson's primitive travelling steam engine, 'The Duke', was introduced as a trial in 1816, although horse-drawn operations did continue for another 30 years.

The original railway ceased operations in 1846, and the viaduct was in a state of near collapse before the £1 million renovation work began in 1992.

Refurbishment is almost completed, and the viaduct is scheduled to be opened to the public in October.