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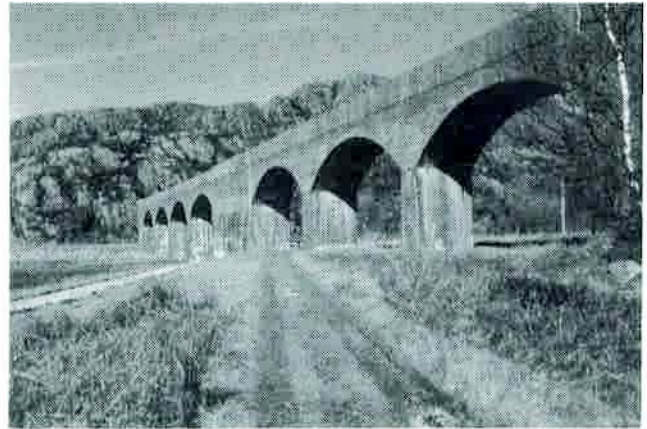
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Loch-nan-Uamh Viaduct

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MEDIA RESPONSE TO THE SOLUTION OF A HIGHLAND 'MYSTERY'

by The Editor

Readers of this *Newsletter* will already be aware of the hitherto unsuccessful attempts to discover whether or not a horse and cart had met an untimely end, buried in the pier of a nineteenth century Highland viaduct (see *Newsletter*, No.88). The use of radar scanning finally proved the truth of the tale and the announcement of the discovery received extensive media coverage. The press release which sparked such interest is as follows:

There has been a long-standing legend in the West Highlands that, as a result of an accident, a horse and cart belonging to contractor Robert McAlpine was buried in a pier of a concrete viaduct on the West Highland Railway Extension during its construction in c.1899. If true this would probably be the only known case of a horse and cart entombed within a British viaduct.

In 1984 Roland Paxton of the Institution of Civil Engineers' Panel for Historical Engineering Works attempted to resolve this matter by following up a suggestion that the remains were in Glenfinnan Viaduct. Holes were made through the walls of the hollow King post (main) piers and internal photography was

done gratis by Geoff Nelson, Steeplejack using a fish-eye lens on the end of a pole. Nothing was found. On advice from Mr Macmillan of Arisaig, the search then switched to the curiously wide central pier of the dramatic 8-span Loch-nan-Uamh viaduct. Drawings at Railtrack show this pier with a cavity measuring 37 x 11ft in plan, with 5ft thick side walls and 9ft thick end walls. In 1997 Professor Paxton arranged for radar specialist Dr Colin Stove to scan through the pier, but the work was not completed. Last year Jim Shipway, great-grandson of the Railway's designer, organised the drilling of holes through the pier wall and found not a cavity, but stone rubble!

Professor Paxton then advised Sir William McAlpine, great grandson of Robert McAlpine, the viaduct's builder, that he thought the matter could be resolved by using the latest state-of-the-art radar scanning techniques developed by Radar World Limited, to whom Dr Stove is the Chief Scientific Consultant. A research exercise was then set up by Professor Paxton and Dr Stove, sponsored by Sir William McAlpine, and a site survey was carried out on 7 April 2001 using specially developed equipment.

Radar World found evidence of 'the remains of a wooden cart positioned 2m from the inside north wall and propped up against the east wall' (the viaduct is aligned south to north towards Mallaig). This suggests a fall of about 40ft for the stone-laden cart, but less for the horse whose remains are vertically orientated above it. Probably the cart was being backed-up to the edge of the hole to tip rubble, went too far, and plummeted down pulling the unfortunate horse with it, constrained upright by the cart shafts. There is evidence that the horse's neck was broken, presumably in the fall, and that backfilling continued. Iron-shod wheels of 1.48m diameter, wood and individual bones have been identified. The viaduct is owned by Railtrack.

The media responded very positively: *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* all carried the story on inside pages on Thursday 10 May 2001 under such headlines as 'Radar Hunter Hits a Nag'. Other papers to publish pieces included the *Oban Times*, the *Scotsman*, the *Herald* and the *Sunday Post*. Professor Paxton was also in demand for interviews which included BBC Scottish News (for television), Radio Scotland, a London Local Radio Station and a producer of a documentary commemorating the centenary of the West Highland Railway Extension.

It is a rare occasion when matters concerning aspects of the history of engineering receive the attention of the national media and, writing personally, I am both absolutely delighted, but somewhat surprised, that the discovery of the evidence of a nineteenth century construction accident should have engaged the interest of the national press to the extent which has been evident. Whilst memory can be fallible, and selective!, the last occasion when the national press 'picked up' on an aspect of civil engineering history was Professor Skempton's linkage between the proposed methodology for saving the Tower of Pisa and that used in the nineteenth century by James Trubshaw on St Chad's Church spire, at Wybunbury in Cheshire (*Newsletter*, No.77, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1998). The interest in this case is perhaps understandable because it concerned a structure of international renown. The sparsity of exposure in the media is not entirely for want of trying. Readers will not be surprised to learn that a number of unsuccessful attempts have been made to interest the non-technical/specialist press in the annual Historic Bridge Awards competition reported on in the last *Newsletter*.

Given the fact that one of the objectives of PHEW is to 'promote the knowledge of civil engineering heritage', I would welcome correspondence on issues

associated with attempts to engage the media in advancing that objective.

REPORT ON THE SPRING PANEL MEETING, LONDON – WEDNESDAY 17 APRIL 2001 by The Editor

The formal Panel meeting was preceded by three informative presentations:

- i The Chairman showed a video entitled *The Strengthening of Hythe Bridge, Oxford*. This was a project which had received one of the awards in the recent Historic Bridge competition. The video provided a clear insight into the technique of strengthening cracked cast-iron beams by attaching pre-stressed carbon-fibre reinforced polymer (CFRP). The project claims to be the world's first application to a cast-iron bridge.
- ii Mr Jeremy Lake from **English Heritage** gave a well-illustrated presentation of English Heritage's involvement over recent years in identifying aspects of heritage interest on largely redundant Military Airfields. He conveyed aspects of the process for recording, selection and conservation of important sites and structures, and made available English Heritage's short, but informative publication *Twentieth-Century Military Sites*.
- iii Mr Richard McWilliams of **Whitby Bird and Partners** presented a 'live' review of their website – Engineering Timelines (<http://www.engineering-timelines.com>). This currently provides information on some 180 sites and structures mainly ordered on a geographical basis.

During the subsequent Panel meeting Denis Smith reported the excellent news that the text of the London and Thames Valley volume of the *Civil Engineering Heritage* series had been sent to Thomas Telford Limited with publication planned for the Autumn. Steady progress was reported in respect of the preparation of the Scottish volume which will, when published, complete the series. Distribution figures for the currently published volumes in the series show a continuation of the historical level of sales.

Amongst other business David Greenfield reported on arrangements in hand for the 2001 Historic Bridge Awards. Progress was reported in respect of the work of 'sub-panels' considering aspects of the history of single types of historic structures. Those involved in