

Engineer at the forefront of fight to save famous Scottish bridge dies

21st December



Roland Paxton

Born: June 29, 1932

Died: October 30, 2025

Roland Paxton, who has died aged 93, was Britain's foremost expert on civil engineering heritage, one who was acknowledged as a world leader in the field. Infectiously enthusiastic, he was immersed in a quest for knowledge and was also an active champion of conservation and restoration.

One of the best-known examples of the latter concerned the historic Union Chain Bridge connecting Scotland and England across the Tweed near Berwick, the world's oldest vehicular bridge, dating from 1820. As its bicentenary approached, it had fallen badly into disrepair leading to Roland becoming patron of Friends of the Bridge, a worldwide campaign for its refurbishment. Thanks to his and others' input, considerable funds were raised to enable lengthy work to repair it and preserve its status as the world's oldest traffic carrying bridge.

Another example was the Laigh Milton Viaduct on the Kilmarnock-Troon line, the world's oldest railway bridge, built in 1811. Discovering it in a state of near collapse, he purchased it for £1 then set up a trust to raise the £1million-plus necessary for its restoration.

Canals heritage was another passion. He was a devotee of engineers John Smeaton and Thomas Telford, responsible respectively for the Forth and Clyde and Union canals and supported many related heritage projects including the installation of commemorative plaques. At unveiling ceremonies performed by the late Duke of Edinburgh, he would address Roland: "Ah, you're the plaque man!"

He was also instrumental in securing an International Landmark Plaque for the heavy lifting Titan crane at Clydebank and recognition for its designer, Adam Hunter, an “engineer extraordinaire” according to Roland.

His day jobs were in local government on both sides of the border dealing with transport, planning and construction issues in Manchester, Leicester and Edinburgh, latterly as senior principal engineer with Lothian Regional Council. From 1965 he was based in Scotland where he developed a strong association with Heriot Watt University as researcher, lecturer, honorary professor and honorary doctor of engineering. Honours bestowed on him included the award of an MBE, fellowship of the Institute of Civil Engineering (ICE), fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and three prestigious ICE medals, the Gold Medal, the Garth Watson and Alfred Carr medals.

Roland Arthur Paxton was born in Altrincham to parents James, a draughtsman, and Una. The eldest of three sons, he attended Altrincham Grammar School which he left aged 16 to join Ordnance Survey. From 1955 onwards he began working as a civil engineer in local government, combining work with part-time study, graduating in 1959 in Manchester.



Through his own continuing study and research alongside local government duties he was acquiring an unequalled knowledge of civil engineering history while amassing an extensive personal archive of related artefacts, memorabilia, books and articles. His connection with Heriot Watt University extended back to 1975 when he obtained an M.Sc. after part-time study for a thesis on the life and career of Thomas Telford, the 1st President of ICE while later he gained a Ph.D. for a thesis on the lighthouse engineers, the Stevenson family. The Forth Bridge was another of his interests, successfully drawing political attention to its deterioration following its centenary at which he had organised the Forth Bridge Centenary Symposium.

Following retirement in 1990, Paxton joined the university as an honorary senior research Fellow producing notable research papers and later was appointed honorary Professor. Lectures on engineering heritage inspired students and led to invitations to lecture in Scandinavia, Japan and United States which were widely acclaimed. He also wrote several books on the same theme.

Other appointments included membership of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, the first civil engineer so honoured, chair of ICE Scotland Panel of Historic Engineering Works, trustee of the James Clerk Maxwell Foundation and chair of Forth Bridges' Visitor Centre. He was also largely responsible for the creation of the ICE Scotland Museum at Heriot Watt University which houses some 670 objects connected with civil engineering and whose website hosts the Paxton Archive containing more than 400 materials on civil engineering topics by or about Mr Paxton.

On 22nd March 1956 at St. Mark's, Dunham Massey, Cheshire he married Ann Waterhouse, a teacher. They enjoyed a long happy marriage of 66 years during which they had daughters Karen and Adele, and later grandchildren Ben and Kirstin and great-granddaughter Mikaela.

He is survived by his daughters, grandchildren and great granddaughter.

JACK DAVIDSON