

Roland Paxton

◆ Civil engineer and conservationist behind restoration of the world's oldest railway bridge

Roland Paxton, civil engineering historian and conservationist. Born: 29 June 1932 in Altrincham, Cheshire. Died: 30 October 2025, aged 93

Roland Paxton was Britain's preeminent civil engineering historian and conservationist, a world leader in the field. In an honour-strewn career he combined practical engineering work with life-long study of the profession's history, which fascinated him. A dedicated enthusiast, he had an insatiable appetite for knowledge, education and conservation.

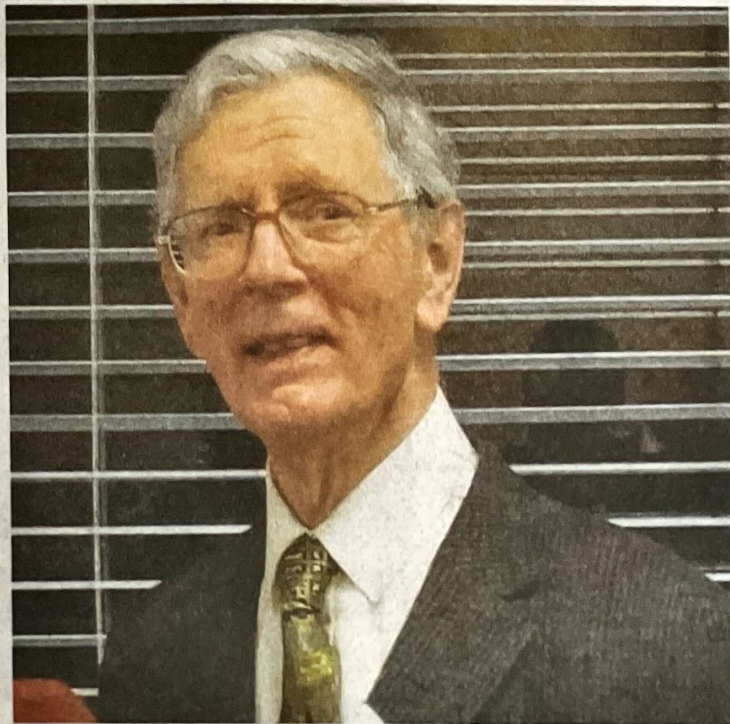
His "day jobs" were in local government on both sides of the Border, dealing with a variety of projects including transport, planning and construction issues in Manchester, Leicester and Edinburgh. Since 1965 the major part of his career and life was spent in Scotland, where he developed a strong association with Heriot-Watt University as a highly distinguished researcher, lecturer, honorary Professor and honorary Doctor of Engineering. Other honours bestowed on him for outstanding contributions to his discipline 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.

One of the best examples of Roland's conservation work related to his discovery of the world's oldest railway bridge, then in a state of near collapse, the Lough Milton Viaduct near Kilmarnock, which had been erected in 1811. Demonstrating an enterprising bent alongside his academic talents he purchased it for £1 and then was instrumental in raising the £1 million plus necessary for its refurbishment.

Another example was his pivotal role in the restoration of The Union Chain Bridge near Berwick which straddles the River Tweed between Northumbria and Berwickshire. Built in 1820, it was once the world's longest wrought iron suspension bridge and oldest vehicular bridge, but had fallen badly into disrepair. With its bicentenary approaching in 2020, a "Save the Bridge" campaign was set up with Roland as a Patron. Bringing his expertise, commitment and enthusiasm to the table he, along with others, contributed hugely to raising the necessary funds to restore and preserve it by 2023 to ensure its future as the world's oldest bridge carrying road traffic.

Shortly after Roland's death an Early Day Motion was tabled in the House of Commons, "recognising with deep sadness his passing," commending his many achievements and "celebrating his enduring legacy as champion of engineering heritage whose work will inspire generations to come".

Roland Arthur Paxton was born in Altrincham, Cheshire to James, a draughtsman, and Una, nee Chandley. The eldest of three sons, he attended Altrincham Grammar



Roland Paxton was a world authority on civil engineering heritage

School which he left aged 16 to begin working as a surveyor with Ordnance Survey. During this period he undertook National Service with the Royal Artillery based near Salisbury and from 1955 onwards began working as a civil engineer in local government. Combining work with part-time civil engineering study, he graduated in 1959 from Manchester College of Science and Technology.

Posts in Manchester and Leicester followed prior to his moving to Edinburgh in 1965, where latterly he was Senior Principal Engineer with Lothian Regional Council until 1990, involved in planning the Western Approach Road and preserving Scotland's oldest railway tunnel at St Leonard's, Edinburgh, "The Innocent Railway".

At the same time as carrying out local government duties, through his own study and research he was acquiring an unequalled knowledge of civil engineering history, its infrastructure and contribution to society while amassing an extensive personal archive of related artefacts, memorabilia, books and articles. As part of that process his connection with Heriot-Watt University extended back to 1975 when he obtained an MSc after part-time study for a thesis on the life and career of Thomas Telford, the iconic civil engineer and 1st President of ICE, while later he was awarded a PhD for a thesis on the famous lighthouse engineers, the Stevenson family. The Forth Bridge was another of Roland's interests, and he successfully drew political attention to its deterioration following its centenary, at which he had organised the Forth Bridge Centenary Symposium.

Following retirement in 1990, Roland joined the University as an honorary senior research Fellow producing several notable research papers, before being appoint-

ed honorary Professor. Lectures on engineering heritage inspired interest among 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 topic.

Other appointments included membership of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, the first civil engineer so honoured, Chair of ICE 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 consisting of more than 400 materials on civil engineering topics by or about Roland.

In 1956 at St Mark's, Dunham Massey, Cheshire he wed Ann Waterhouse, a domestic science teacher. They enjoyed a happy marriage of 66 years, during which they had daughters Karen and Adele, with grandchildren Ben and Kirstin and great granddaughter Mikaela following. Ann, who was a great support to Roland, deserves much credit for her role in his success.

A multi-faceted gent, Roland's greatest interest and love was for his family, with whom he enjoyed hill walking and camping holidays. Academic but also a man of action, he was comfortable climbing to the top of the Forth Bridge. Described as "lovely" and "very personable", he was not materialistically ambitious but always sought improvement. "Aim High" was a favourite mantra. Humility and an occasionally wicked sense of humour made him an excellent companion. He is survived by daughters, grandchildren and great granddaughter.

Jack Davidson