



The story of Cannington Viaduct



Cannington Viaduct

This is one of Britain's most remarkable early mass concrete railway viaducts. Built between 1900 and 1903, it carried trains across this valley for more than sixty years before the line closed in 1965. Today, for one special weekend, you can once again experience this extraordinary viewpoint.

DID YOU KNOW?

The viaduct is around 203 metres (666 ft) long and 28 metres (92 ft) high.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



Construction of Cannington Viaduct c.1902

Crossing the valley

The Axminster to Lyme Regis Railway challenged engineer Arthur C. Pain with steep gradients, sharp curves and unstable ground. His bold solution was to build this great viaduct in mass concrete, then still an innovative construction method. It has stood proudly across the valley for well over a century.

DID YOU KNOW?

The recesses along the parapet provided refuges where track workers could shelter safely as trains passed.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



Final stages of construction c.1903

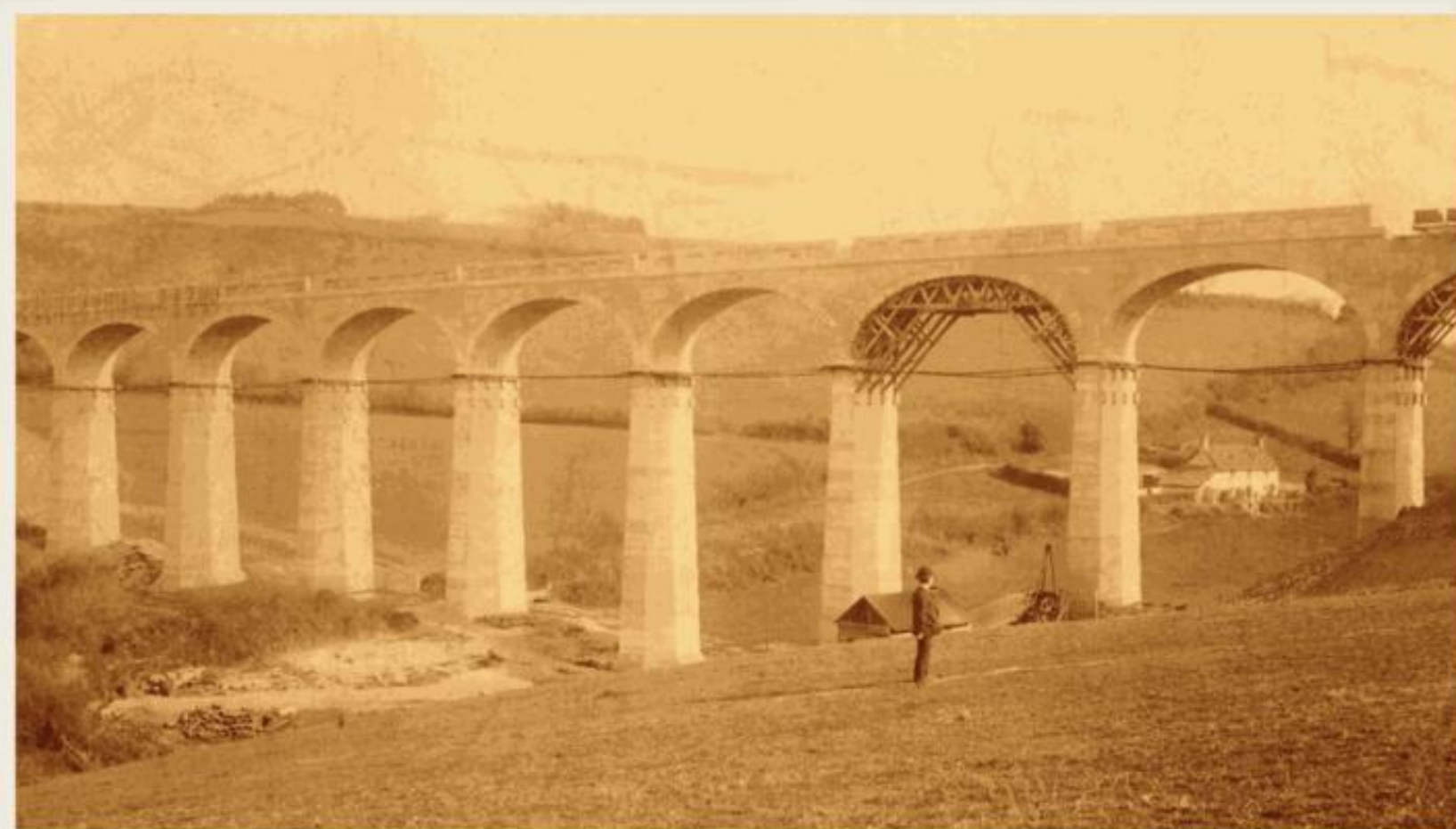
How they built it

The piers were built upwards in tapering stages. Instead of scaffolding from the ground, the builders supported huge timber centres from the piers themselves. These temporary frameworks shaped the arches while the concrete was placed around them.

DID YOU KNOW?

Local stone was crushed, mixed with cement and reused to make the viaduct's concrete.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



Construction c.1902. Photo: The Railway & Canal Historical Society

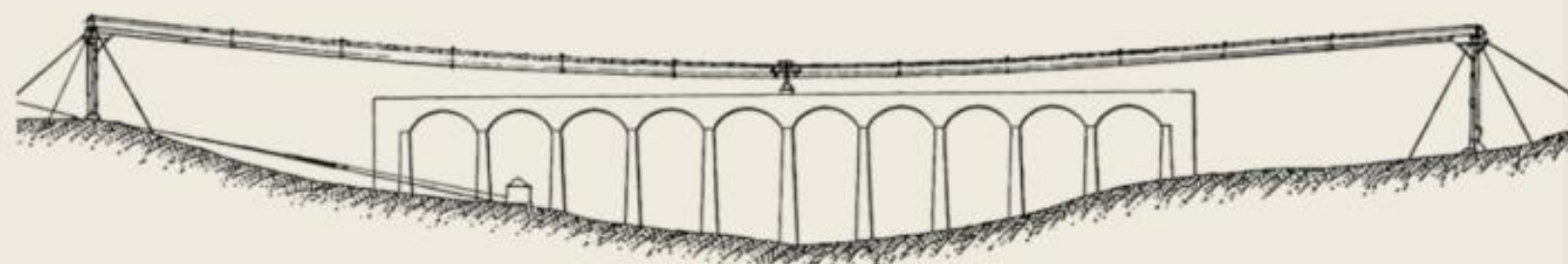
Built by navvies

Navvies and local labourers did the hard physical work of building the railway. They prepared and placed concrete, erected timber formwork and worked in all weathers. Their efforts created a structure that has stood for well over a century.

DID YOU KNOW?

Navvies originally built Britain's early canals. Generations of these tough labourers went on to build the railways.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



CANNINGTON VIADUCT CABLEWAY: 1000 FEET SPAN.

Main image: Institution of Civil Engineers



AI image

Concrete by cable

Builders used an aerial ropeway to carry buckets of mixed concrete across the valley to wherever they were needed. This meant they could deposit concrete directly into timber moulds used to form the great piers. Look closely at the concrete today and you can still see the marks left by the shuttering.

DID YOU KNOW?

The ropeway was known as Blondin after the tightrope walker and is said to have come from a local cement works.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



The Jack arch

When the ground moved

Just months before the planned opening, movement in the unstable ground caused serious settlement at the Axminster end. Engineers responded with substantial strengthening work, including the brick jack arch. It was an unexpected final challenge for the most ambitious structure on the line.

DID YOU KNOW?

Despite the scale of the problem, the opening of the railway was delayed by only a few months.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



A train bound for Lyme Regis in the 1950s. Photo JC Way

Cheap and challenging

This viaduct was the one costly structure of a line built 'on the cheap' after the Light Railways Act of 1896 allowed less demanding construction standards to encourage building of rural railways. Its steep gradients and tight curves would previously have been unacceptable on a conventional railway.

DID YOU KNOW?

Gradients as steep as 1 in 40 made this one of the most demanding branch lines for locomotive crews.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



Holidaymakers pack this train in 1959. Photo: Roger Joanes

Local life changed

When trains began running in 1903 they transformed everyday life and greatly boosted the local economy in this area. People travelled to work, farmers and other businesses reached wider markets and holidaymakers flocked to Lyme Regis.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Axminster to Lyme Regis journey time reduced from over an hour in horse drawn omnibus days to 25 minutes by train.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY



A great place for nature

Nature has quietly reclaimed the railway. Since the last train ran, the viaduct (now grade II listed) has become part of the surrounding landscape. It provides a haven for wildlife amongst woodland, hedgerows and grassland that supports a rich variety of birds, mammals and insects.

DID YOU KNOW?

Surveys have found that the viaduct and surrounds provide valuable habitat for a remarkable variety of wildlife.

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY

Keep the story alive

**We hope you've enjoyed your visit to
Cannington Viaduct**

Please help us cover the costs of today's event by making a donation. Your support will also help us continue our work — and, we hope, make events like this possible again.



Thank you

Please give what you can

Drop a donation into one of our buckets
or scan the QR code to donate online

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY

FOR THE LOVE OF A RAILWAY