

EDITORIAL THE RAILWAY MONUMENTS OF AVON COUNTY

Angus Buchanan

The new National Railway Museum was formally opened in York on 27 September 1975 with considerable pomp and public attention by HRH Prince Philip. British Rail ran the High Speed Train specially to carry official visitors from London to the ceremony, and sufficiently relaxed its guard on all matters relating to conservation to appear to welcome the event. Coinciding as it did with the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, which was being duly celebrated a few miles to the north with a splendid working replica of George Stephenson's **Locomotion No 1** drawing carriages over a stretch of the original route, the new museum was a hopeful portent that British Rail was beginning to recognise the immense heritage value of the possessions for which it is responsible.

Regretfully, it must be observed that there is little sign of such enlightenment penetrating to the Bristol region. Here, in the past year, railway preservation groups have encountered formidable non-co-operation, which in at least one case has proved to be insurmountable, and two of the finest station monuments in the country have continued to linger in the limbo between legislative protection and sympathetic re-use. Simultaneously, the erosion of minor features on the railway routes of the region has continued unabated. It is clear that, far from British Rail having adopted an enlightened policy towards its heritage structures, its mood as represented in Avon County is still strongly against conservation.

The most depressing aspect of this myopic policy is the neglect of Old Temple Meads Station. For a decade now this outstanding building, the earliest main line railway terminus in the world to survive in anything like its complete form, has been empty and almost derelict, only partially re-used as a car park. Consisting of Brunel's flamboyant office block fronting on Temple Gate and the splendid single-span train shed with its ornamental hammer-beams incorporated in the wooden roof structure, the whole unit is a Grade I Listed Building and British Rail has been properly refused a request to redevelop the site. The building was the subject of a BIAS Survey in **BIAS Journal 4** in 1971, and there is no need to enlarge once again on its extraordinary historic significance. The important point is that it is deteriorating through neglect and that it is urgently necessary for British Rail to come to an agreement with the local authorities about a suitable re-use of Old Temple Meads Station and the sympathetic re-development of the adjoining area. Already the potential adaptation of the train shed as a railway museum, which has been one of the most encouraging suggestions in recent years, has been gravely compromised by the construction of an office building across the entrance to the station extension, thus blocking rail access to it. While this idea languishes, it is ironical to find the GWR goods engine 2818, rescued from the scrap yard by Bristol City Museum and beautifully restored to an early livery, finding a home at last in the new museum at York.

The other great station conservation problem of the region is that of Bath Green Park. Admittedly, in this case British Rail has withdrawn from responsibility by selling the Station to Bath Corporation, but the run-down and neglect of this elegant hundred-year-old structure has contributed significantly to the current situation in which the front office block has become a shambles and the magnificent iron-arch roof is in desperate need of attention. Bath Corporation has treated the station as a very sensitive issue and has so far failed to announce a definite policy for it apart from inviting interested parties to submit schemes for the use of the site and holding an exhibition to display the entries. Considerable ingenuity was shown in the designs which included schemes for concert halls, skating rinks, and amusement arcades which would preserve most of the existing structures while permitting new office and housing development on the adjacent site. In a city so heritage conscious as Bath it is a pity that there is so comparatively little appreciation of its Victorian monuments, for in Green Park Station it possesses a building of which other less well endowed towns would be justly proud. And as the city provides a home for an international music festival without the facility of a large or medium sized concert hall, there is at least one function for which the station could be adapted which would be a tremendous local asset.

Elsewhere in Avon County the deterioration of the railway monuments should alarm all conservationists. A particularly unfortunate event of the past year has been the collapse of the scheme for re-opening part of the Somerset & Dorset Railway at Radstock as a leisure amenity. This admirable proposal was worked out by the Somerset & Dorset Railway Society. It involved the retention of about half a mile of track between the centre of Radstock and Writhlington Colliery, and the restoration of a number of steam locomotives and appropriate rolling stock to operate on it. The National Coal Board co-operated to the extent of making some of the now redundant pit-head buildings available to the Society as a small mining museum, providing a focus at one end of the line, and the Society made good progress with restoring some locomotives in a shed at the Radstock end. Local landowners also showed sympathetic interest and would have sacrificed some development prospects to the scheme. But British Rail insisted on its pound of flesh, and by fixing the scrap value of the track at a level beyond the reach of a small voluntary society it caused the plans to founder and drove the group of ardent local railway enthusiasts to shift their attention and their locomotives to Taunton and the restoration of the Minehead line.

Again, it is not only British Rail which is to blame for the collapse of this scheme. Perhaps a little more business skill by the Society, or a little more readiness to subscribe essential funds by local authorities and interested individuals could have tipped the balance. But by setting a financial target which seemed impossibly high British Rail undermined the morale of the promoters, discouraging them and com-

elling them to go elsewhere. The result is that Radstock has lost an amenity which it badly needs in order to bring the vitality of some communal activity into an area in danger of becoming an unplanned dormitory suburb for Bristol and Bath. It is arguable that Avon County badly needs a 'New Town' development around Radstock and Midsomer Norton as a counterpart to the Yate scheme on the northern side of the county, and in any such growth the S & D Railway scheme would have been an amenity of quite incalculable value.

The Bristol and Suburban Light Railway enterprise is still operating, with plans to re-open the abandoned line from Mangotsfield to Bitton and even to push further towards Bath. Perhaps the best of all possible solutions to the Green Park problem would be to re-open it as a railway terminus for this route, but the longer the time that passes the more difficult such an imaginative restoration becomes. It remains far from clear whether this organisation can sustain itself in the face of public indifference. Whether or not the track of this and other abandoned railways can be restored, it is most desirable to preserve their alignments as bridleways and to obtain them as rights of way for walking and other forms of recreation. By doing so, of course, the possibility of re-opening sections of line at some future date is kept open. Sadly, many such opportunities have already been lost as farmers and developers have hurried to purchase British Rail land as it has come on the market. Of the few deliberate attempts to convert abandoned railways into 'linear parks', the Bath conversion of the Twerton-Bloomfield section of the Somerset & Dorset line is an excellent example and should provide the model for efforts elsewhere before it is too late.

Such schemes are regrettably exceptions rather than the rule the closure of large sections of British Rail permanent way has been a badly missed opportunity for amenity conservationists quite apart from the railway enthusiasts who would keep the track at work if they possibly could. On the main lines that remain, the erosion of interesting and sometimes historic features goes on steadily. The loss of the Brunel-designed masonry bridge over Pulteney Road in Bath is one of the latest examples, although in this case the traffic congestion was sufficiently notorious and the defacement of the bridge by unsuitable brick repair work was such that no serious preservation protest was made.

It is well known that the Government has required British Rail to balance its budget, and that this public enterprise has been trying to achieve such solvency by cutting out all uneconomical services and all functions not immediately concerned with running trains. It is unfortunate for the public that while British Rail has failed to achieve this level of efficiency, it appears also to have forfeited a great fund of public good will and to have suffered a debilitating loss of morale in its own organisation. What British Rail needs to recognise is that the historic monuments in its charge are not only important in themselves, but they are moreover vital for its own integrity - for its self-respect as a great public service with a distinguished tradition. The neglect of this tradition has indeed proved to be disastrous for British Rail. The railways of Great Britain, as of all other industrial nations, can no longer hope to operate without a large public subsidy, and in return for this the railway organisation should be required to take due care of the industrial heritage which it holds on trust from the nation. In no part of the nation is it more necessary or more appropriate to adopt such an enlarged view of its function than in Avon County, where so much historic material is still in jeopardy.