

Devon & Somerset Railway

Great Western Railway, Barnstaple Branch

My route refresher over the Devon & Somerset began in August, 2011, when I joined the Railway Ramblers' visit to Dulverton. We walked the line from there to Exe Bridge and parts of the line, through Nightcote Tunnel, to East Anstey, where the owner had kindly laid on tea and cake.

The task, laden with sadness, was continued in 2017, following the line between East Anstey and Barnstaple, and finished in 2018, revisiting what is left between Taunton and Morebath Junction Halt.

The photographs are arranged in line order but they were taken on a number of rides in either direction.

When at Taunton School in the early 1970s, I got as far as Wiveliscombe, where railway stationery was still strewn around the booking office. I remember looking at Milverton Station from the road bridge. In the late '70s, I rode from Barnstaple to Taunton but remember very little of it and took no photographs.

This little album is not intended to be a complete study of the line's remains, only of those features that caught my eye.



The first underline bridge on the branch, Allerford, is evidence of the 1937 doubling of the line from Norton Fitzwarren to Milverton. Only one abutment remains and it is clear that widening took place to the north to carry a new Up line.

Out of sight on the embankment is the buffer stop of the West Somerset Railway's re-laid line which forms part of the Norton Fitzwarren turning triangle.



Barnstaple Branch mileage is measured from Paddington via Bristol.



The next bridge , Pontispool, is an occupation, although the lane is also a public footpath. As with Allerford, the “new” work is aligned to the roadway rather than to the original structure.

Often I wonder what the Great Western directors would have made of it had they been told that so many of the works authorized in those heady times would not last in use for thirty years.



The track from Pontispool can be followed for a short way thanks to it being a permissive footpath. This is looking towards Taunton along what, after 1937, was a double line, installed to facilitate the holiday traffic.



The ruined bridge at Croford was unusual in that it spanned a crossroads, perhaps a trick by the engineer to avoid realigning the roads or building two bridges.



Looking from the partly filled-in Castle Bridge, on the approach to Wiveliscombe, the sprayer's tracks must not be far from the railway's southern boundary fence, while the hedge at right is probably the opposite one.

The railway took fright at the sight of the hills and swung south from Wiveliscombe in search of a pass.



The scruffy environs of Wiveliscombe Station, sited, like Milverton, a convenient distance from the town centre.

When I first came here as a schoolboy, the station was still derelict after its abandonment by the railway in 1966.

One of the forms picked up from the floor of the booking office still resides in the exhibition room at Christow.

Its entries would have been phoned or wired in before the form was folded up and sent as an “Urgent Train Message.”

The date is unfortunately missing.

BRITISH RAILWAYS—WESTERN REGION

Terminal No.

DAILY FREIGHT ROLLING STOCK RETURN

From

St.

Date

19....

Prefix

Station and Ins.

Station and Ins.

SECTION A

STATEMENT OF WAGONS, SHEETS AND ROPES, ON HAND, RECEIVED

MAILED

ON HAND at 10.0 a.m. yesterday			RECEIVED since 10.0 a.m. yesterday			FORWARDED since 10.0 a.m. yesterday			ON HAND at 10.0 a.m. to-day			IN- WARD LOAD- ED DIS- CHARG- ED Since 10.0 a.m. yester- day
Loaded (inward and outward)	Empty	Total	Loaded	Empty	Total	Loaded	Empty	Total	Loaded (inward and outward)	Empty	Total	

TYPE OF STOCK

Code

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1													
2													
3													
4													
5													
6													
7													

OPEN

1 LOW (1 plank) LOW

2 LOW (1 plank) VB LOWFIT

3 MEDIUM (2 or 3 plank) MED

4 MEDIUM (2 or 3 plank) VB MEDFIT

5 HIGH (over 3 plank) HIGH

6 HIGH (over 3 plank) VB HYFIT

7 HIGH—Sheet Supporter HYBAR

8 HIGH—Sheet Supporter VB HYBARF

9 SHOCK ABSORBING SHOCK

10 SLEEPER SLEEP

11 CONTAINER PLAT CONT



Standing on the now filled-in Quaker's Lane Bridge, not half a mile from Wiveliscombe Station, Castle Bridge can be seen to the left of the twin electricity poles, where the little clump of scots pine stands.

My bicycle is leaning against
the parapet wall.



One of the great freedoms of the walker and cyclist, largely unknown to the motorist, is being able to stop just to take in the view, here from a gateway on the B3227 turnpike overlooking Wiveliscombe. At centre right, marked by scots pine and a row of cottages, is Castle Bridge, and below can be seen a bit of the trading estate that now surrounds the closed station.

In the distance are the Quantocks and at their foot lies the Minehead Branch, only five miles away from Wiveliscombe.

It being past my lunchtime, I descended into town with some alacrity, skidded to a halt at the Co-op and bought my "Meal-Deal" sandwich to eat in a shaded spot provided by the little public park around the corner.

After lunch, I took in the sleepy settlements of Bathealton (whence the tunnel got its name), Kittisford, Appley and Greenham, passed the terminus of the Westleigh Quarry line at Canonsleigh, then went on through Westleigh and over Pugham Crossing to Sampford Peverell.

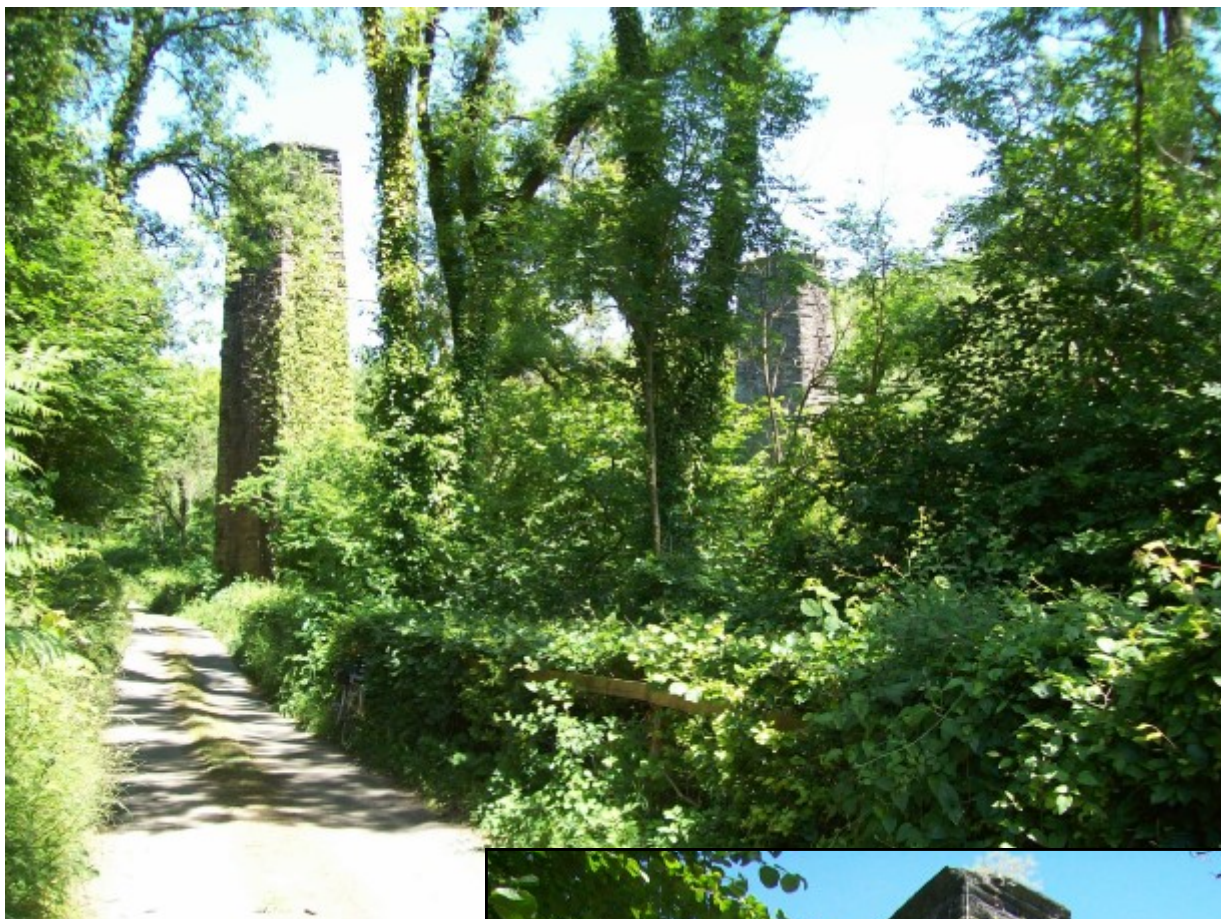


Now heading south-west, the line passes over Sminhay Bridge, where it is clear that the engineer has realigned the roads to make for less expensive construction.

On this occasion, I had ridden up the valley of the River Lowman, through Upplowman and Huntsham, skirting Bampton Down to reach the old passing place on the Exe Valley line, joining the Devon & Somerset near Morebath Junction.

The air was hot and so the gentle drizzle was a comfort.





The piers of Waterrow Viaduct rise like temples in a rainforest, remnants of a lost civilization.

Commonly called Waterrow, it was sometimes referred to as Venn Viaduct and the Ordnance Survey marked it as Tone Viaduct.





Taken from the abutment at the Taunton end, there is a void once spanned by steel. The first pier can just be glimpsed through the foliage.



A motorist, trapped by what he is convinced is his liberty, might sweep past this turning off the turnpike towards Bathealton without noticing the one pier of Waterrow Viaduct that peaks over the trees.



Venn Cross Station once fronted the B3227 but has now been bypassed.

The old road narrows to a footpath behind me, from where the mouth of Venn Cross Tunnel can just be seen.

Venn Cross was ruled by the Railway Clearing House "Hand-Book of Stations" to be in Devon, yet I am standing on the county boundary looking into Somerset.

A "cat's eye" tells of this once being a busy road, one that I must have taken on my last ride.



Further along, the bypass and county "welcome" sign can be seen at right.



The prettified yard and fake sign speak of wealth without activity.





Looking south-west, the line of pylons shadows the course of the railway between Venn Cross and Morebath.

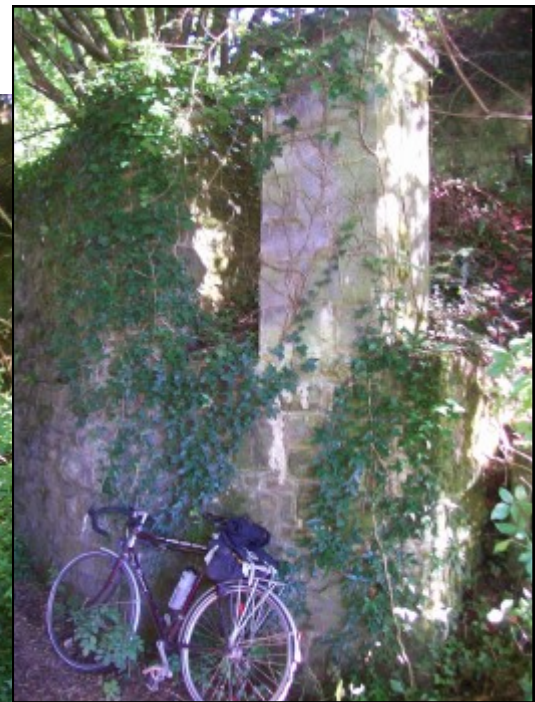




The approach to Morebath Station, at right, now leads to a number of homes.



The station bridge has newer columns which must once have carried platform extensions.
The Station Master's house remains along the lane and to the left.





The bridge which carried the B3190 over the Barnstaple Branch near Morebath Junction is now partly filled in and bypassed.



The concrete steps seen to the left of the bridge once led to the signal box and Morebath Junction Halt.

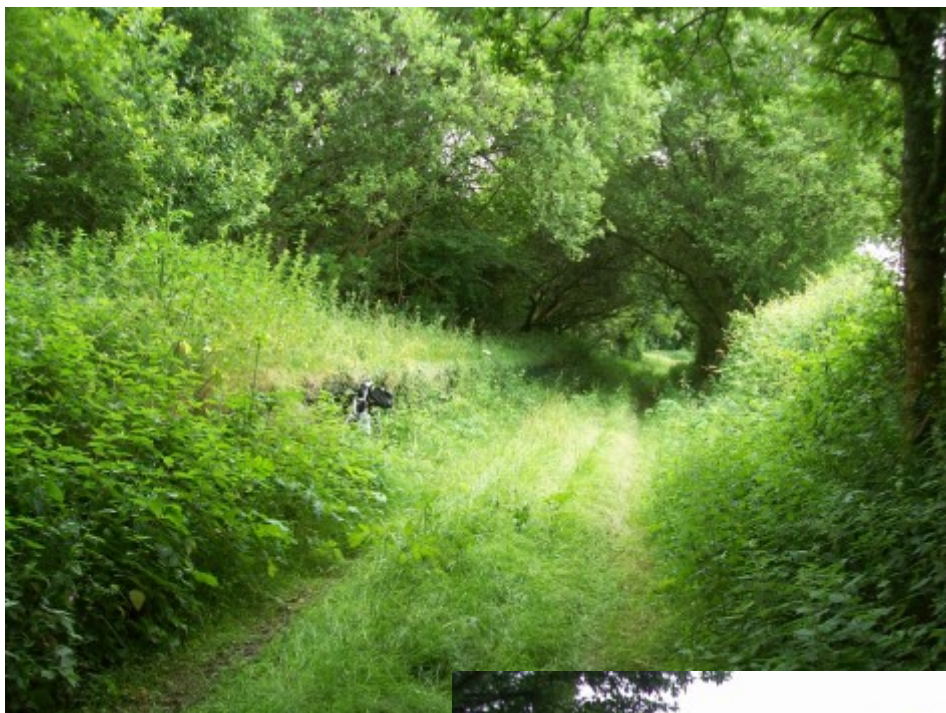


A disused road over a disused railway.

If nature had had its way the old road would be entirely overgrown, but has been kept open, perhaps because the pedestrian right of way for some reason was not extinguished.



From the bridge, an unmistakable railway curve, actually continuing as a mile-long straight, gives away the course of the line towards Taunton. It is shadowed by a line of pylons.



My bicycle is leaning against the platform of Morebath Junction Halt.

At the occupation crossing, also a bridleway, in Ashtown Farm, just along from the halt, I found the farmer on his motorized quadricycle and chatted with him about the railway and the area, where he had been all his life. He well remembered the trains.

The wicket gate at left was once at the end of the path leading to the halt.



Unlike its neighbours in Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset, Devon County Council ripped out most of its cast iron and wood signposts in the late 1970s.

On the A396, just over the border into Somerset, an arm still points to Dulverton Station.

On this occasion, the E. & T.V.R. utilicon was returning from Dunster, where the railway's motor trolley was temporarily based.



The ruined Exe Bridge was as far as the Railway Ramblers' party could go when the line from Dulverton was walked in 2011.

The road frontage of Dulverton Station in August, 2011.



A bit of the Up platform was all that remained.



A turntable once stood in the foreground.

Looking towards Barnstaple from what once would have been the island platform.



Oddly obscured in two previous shots, the later brick-built extension of the goods shed to provide a large office gives an indication of how much traffic would once have been handled at this railhead on the edge of Exmoor.



A furnishing I always look for in photographs of Dulverton Station is the unusual sheeted platform barrow.

It was this that inspired me in 1978 to have made a canvas "tent" for the barrow then at Longdown.

In 2016, this was repaired at Christow and a new detachable sheet bar manufactured.

Since then, I have seen another one in an old photograph, on the platform at Witham (East Somerset Junction).

It is fair to say that the item remains a rare piece of station equipment.

The sheet was made by Gray's of Exeter, whose marquees were once to be seen at every local event in spring and summer.

Having designed this with only functionality and outward appearance in mind, I am left wondering how it differs from what was drawn up by Swindon.





The bridge carries the road to Dulverton and Exmoor; the town is two miles away to the right.

Just down the road to the right was the Carnarvon Arms Hotel, built in 1874, not long after the station opened. It survived the closure of the railway but not the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001, which badly affected tourism. It is now apartments.

Further down was the Brushford Cattle Market.



Left to nature, this view from the bridge at East Anstey would have vanished.

Were it to close and its track lifted, any operational station today would look like this in less than ten years. Some are halfway there as it is.



The underline bridge at Bottreaux Mill, between Yeo Mill Halt and Bishop's Nympton & Molland, possibly had its steel spans replaced with concrete during the war.

What would consultants make of it today? Their reports would no doubt dwell on its crumbling condition and its absolute inadequacy to carry trains again.

The road to Barnstaple.





Next to Bishop's Nympton & Molland Station is The Black Cock Inn, formerly an hotel. I last lunched here thirty years before when a pal of mine was the landlord. On that visit I walked part of the line in the Taunton direction.



An estate agent's particulars of the station buildings include this shot of

the milepost on the Up platform; the agent asks whether it is the platform number.

The bridge at Bottreaux Mill is just over two miles away so this should be M.P. 193. The timetable mileage is $193\frac{1}{4}$.



The lean-to extension of the former Station Master's house at right is actually a double garage.

Behind me, the old "Auction Mart" is now part of the pub's extensive campsite.



As is often the case, the South Molton Station site is occupied by a road haulage firm, a successor of the ones which so undermined the railway's trading position between the wars through unequal terms of competition.

The station building, which stood to the right of the goods shed, was still there when I last rode this way; it was demolished in 2003.



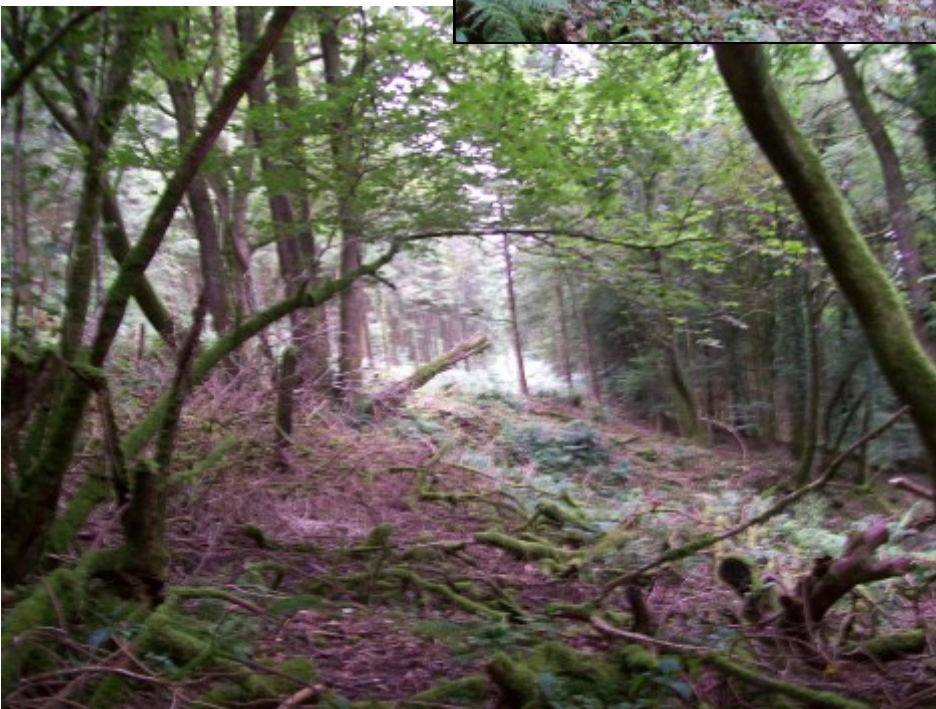
The colour of the goods shed door, more ochre than umber, matches the pumphouse door at Christow.





The eastern portal of Castle Hill Tunnel, between South Molton and Filleigh.

The western portal of Castle Hill Tunnel.



Some rotting fence posts describe the rim of the cutting at the Barnstaple end of Castle Hill Tunnel, although it is hard to see that between the camera and the trees beyond there is actually a large depression.



Although the A361, the North Devon Link Road, is very busy, the traffic often comes in waves, caused by bunching behind lorries. Thus, with a little patience it was possible to capture the new Castle Hill Viaduct free of wretched road vehicles.

This is looking towards Barnstaple.

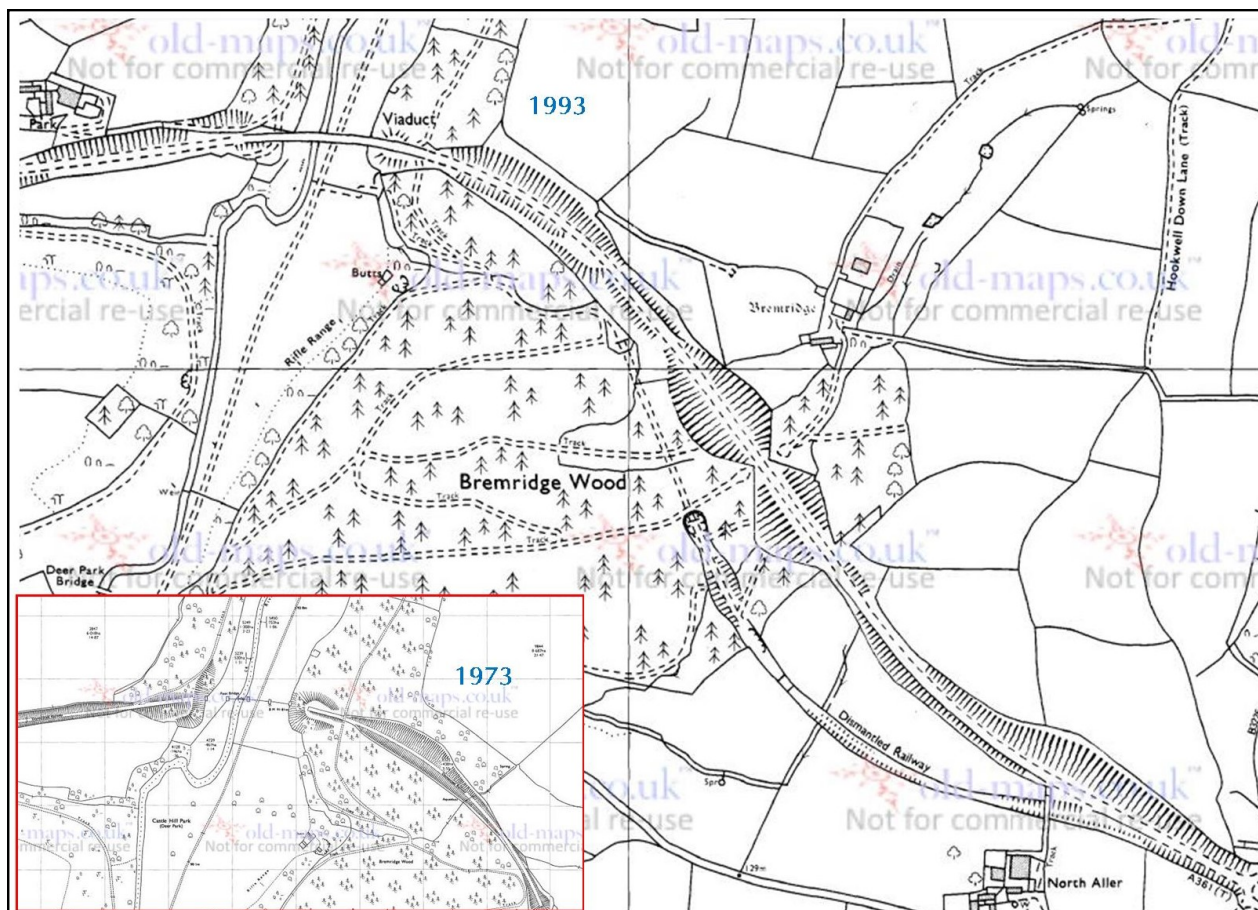


Unseen by the myopic motorist are the slender masonry piers which carried the single line of rails of the Barnstaple Branch across the Bray Valley. The river is amongst the trees beyond the track.



Looking towards Taunton, the road does not curve towards Castle Hill Tunnel beneath Brembridge Wood, as the railway did, but climbs and breaks through the wood in cuttings.

It was while I was sitting on the safety barrier waiting my moment that two young fellows stopped to ask if I was all right, which I recount in the story towards the end.





The dwarf piers at each end take the place of the railway's approach embankments and abutments, making the viaduct much longer than the original structure.

Looking back towards Taunton, the first dwarf pier and the new abutment can be seen.



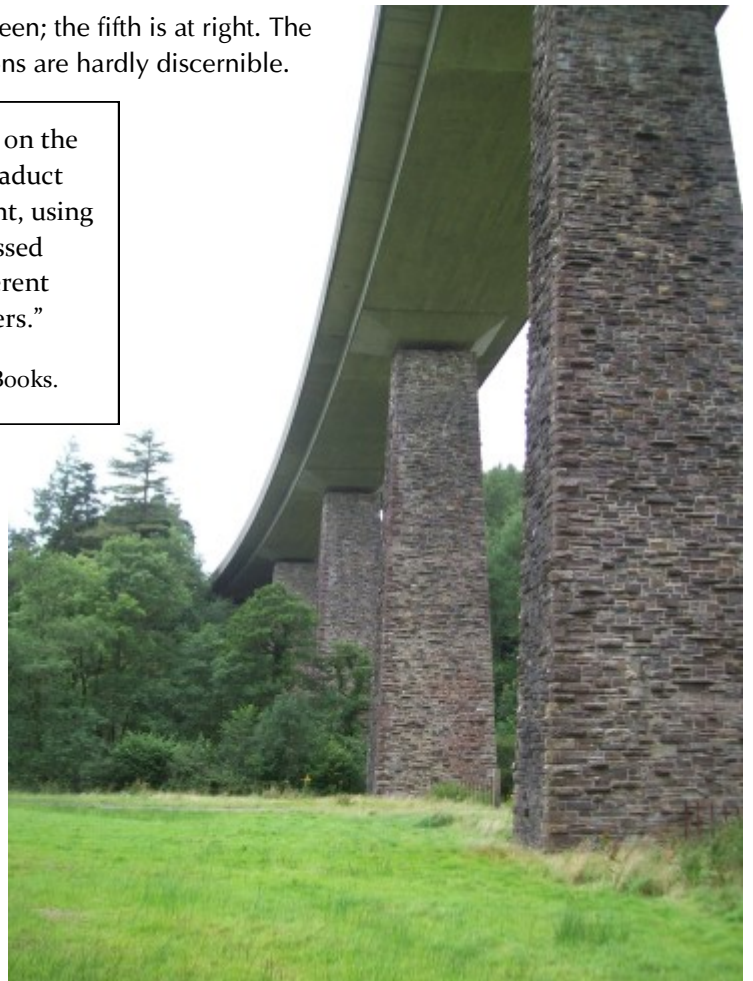
The railway's abutment once stood where there is now a dwarf pier.



From the valley floor, four of the five original piers are seen; the fifth is at right. The new masonry has naturalized such that the raised sections are hardly discernible.

“The North Devon Link [Road] crosses the Bray Valley on the line of a disused railway, so the piers of a redundant viaduct were pressed into service. They were extended in height, using masonry to match the original. The deck is of pre-stressed concrete, but because the curvature of the road is different from that of the railway, it is built off-centre on the piers.”

Taken from *Devon Roads* by Michael Hawkins, Devon Books.





Looking towards Barnstable.

At the Barnstable end of the viaduct, the immediate new pier is followed by the five originals, now raised .



One of the two bearings at the top of each pier.



At the Victoria Road terminus of the line in Barnstaple, 208 miles from Paddington, the goods shed and this bit of the main platform are all that remain.

When I came here with my Dad in the early 1970s, the station was still being used by National Carriers Limited, an offshoot of the nationalized railway. Track materials were lying around.

Such was the weight of traffic, it had taken me a few minutes to cross the road here, and on each side a police car had passed by. Very soon I was joined by a constable, whose case I was able to solve.



An Amusing Story—in part

One grey day, with thunder forecast, I got off the train at Eggesford and rode to South Molton. Kings Nympton is closer but my train was not booked a request stop. The crossing train was just pulling in as I left and even after calling in at the Fox & Hounds to see where the cattle pen siding used to be, it seemed ages before my train overtook me beside the main road.

From South Molton to Barnstaple, the North Devon Link road is built upon the course of the railway from Taunton, closed in 1966. I hadn't followed the route since the late '70s and had never seen beneath the viaduct built on the piers of the original railway structure at Castle Hill.

After putting away a hog-roast bun with all the trimmings at Mole Valley in South Molton, convinced I was in for a soaking, I set off along the road which has been in the news since it was built because of accidents. I dived into woods to find the tunnel which was of no use to the road builders and then went over and under the nearby viaduct.

Although heavy, the traffic came in waves, probably caused by bunching behind lorries, and so it was possible to snap an empty viaduct. I had captured one end and was sitting on the crash barrier at the Barnstaple end waiting for the moment when a car pulled up with two young chaps. The driver leant across his passenger and asked: "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I replied, fearful that they would cause an accident; I had only just been thinking that it would not be safe to stop here in a vehicle. "Just having a rest, are you (granddad)?"

"Yes." I didn't burden them with my purpose, adding: "Thanks for stopping."

Chuckling to myself, with the sky darker still, I headed to Barnstaple, not realizing that I'd set in motion a search.

It was a quick ride. The weight and speed of the traffic right beside me I found strangely exhilarating, although I was of course brooding on the madness of it all. In no time it seemed I was at the old terminus in Barnstaple, one of its three stations.

Little remains of it: just the goods shed and a bit of the platform. I was waiting to cross the road, by now choked with slow moving traffic, when a police car passed me and I felt that I had been observed. The same car passed me after I'd crossed the road. Next thing, I spotted a constable walking in my direction. If I'd done something wrong, I thought, I wished I knew what it was so that I could come up with a story.

Finally, he came up to me and very politely enquired whether I'd just ridden from South Molton. Wondering what ever sort of surveillance there is now, I answered: "Yes."

"Did you stop on the bridge?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a fine piece of engineering."

"There have been incidents on that bridge," he told me.

"Oh? ... Ohhh!" I suddenly realized how my behaviour may have looked and imagined a busybody motorist calling in: "Some old git's leaning over the parapet. Think he's going to jump."

"We've been looking for you, but didn't think you would have got this far."

"Not bad for an old git," I quipped.

Anyway, case solved, I told him that underneath the new concrete deck was the original masonry and that the road had been a railway. I pointed at the platform wall behind us and the goods shed opposite and the line that used to connect with the other stations and allow trains to work through to Ilfracombe. I told him of the summer Saturdays when 10,000 passengers might pass through the seaside terminus. "Now look at the place," I said. "It's a shithole." "Mind you, it was a shithole when the railway was open," I added.

"I've worked there," he said, "and couldn't possibly comment."

"This can't go on," I said. "We have to rebuild the railways and return to public transport, walking and cycling."

After a lengthy chat, my new friend in blue said that he was pleased to have met me and went on his way. And I felt that, as coppers' duties go, his had been a pleasant encounter. This same officer may have been called to the accidents a few days later, at spots that I had just passed, when a mother and child were killed, followed a day or so later by another child.

The road that used to be a railway was back in the news.



This is the site of South Junction on the Victoria Road triangle.

To the left is the terminus, to the right is East Junction and the line to Taunton, and behind me is the Great Western line to Barnstaple Junction, whence its trains would have exercised running powers over the Southern to Ilfracombe.

The rain which I had been sure would drench me since I left South Molton on this ride, finally came down while I was comfortably seated in the station café at Junction Station sipping tea and reading the paper. I dashed out to snap all that remains of rail transport in North Devon: a 1980s railbus on a single line that doesn't even reach the end of one platform of a former three-platform station, hemmed in by retail sprawl and by vastly more road infrastructure than will ever be needed in the long term.

As the train was about to depart, a cyclist fell into the unit looking like a drowned rat. He had not been so lucky.



The Ugly Usurper

The B3227 occupies nearly a mile of the route from the former Milverton Station towards Barnstaple.

The accursed North Devon Link Road occupies almost the entire course of the Barnstaple Branch for the 10½ miles between South Molton and Victoria Road, including the former stations at Filleigh and Swimbridge.

In July, 2018, Devon County Council put forward a proposal to spend £93-million on a scheme to improve and make safer this notorious road.

Only 19% of North Devon District's railway stations remain open.

All of the stations in Exmoor National Park are closed.

The box above was included in letters written to North Devon District Council and Exmoor National Park Authority in support of the planning applications made by the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway in 2016.