



*The Stephenson Monument in c.1890, with St John's Church behind.
Inset: a detail from the monument.*

THE STEPHENSONS AND THE RAILWAY

Probably the greatest manifestation of progress in the 19th century was the arrival of the railway age. In Newcastle and throughout the North East, the formative years of the railway network and its associated industries was dominated by one man and his son – George and Robert Stephenson. The most obvious surviving reminder of their contribution to the region's development is the Stephenson Monument at the foot of Neville Street where it converges with Westgate Road. John Lough's monument was erected in 1862 and portrays George Stephenson arrayed in classical costume, facing down Westgate Road towards the High Level Bridge. Around his feet at the four corners of his plinth are seated idealised classical figures representing a blacksmith, a coal miner, a railway platelayer, and a locomotive engineer. Closer examination of these figures reveals that each one either holds or leans on some article representing their trade, respectively an anvil, a miner's safety lamp, a length of rail track plate, and a steam locomotive. In particular, the safety lamp is, of course of Stephenson's own design – known as a 'Geordie' – rather than that of his rival in the field, Sir Humphrey Davy. Only yards away in the rooms of the Literary and Philosophical Society, an authentic example of a 'Geordie' lamp is on permanent exhibition. It was at the 'Lit & Phil' that Stephenson first demonstrated his new invention in 1815. The siting of the monument and the subsequent development around it have unfortunately made it little more than a traffic island now. But in its day, like many other features of the town, it had a music hall song or two written about it – notably William H. Dawson's *A Pitman's Visit to the Stephenson Monument* which praises the statue in typical contemporary style: "Ah said lang might it stand here to Stephenson's glory, the wee trapper laddie, the pride o' the Tyne!"

Though Lough's handiwork did not meet with universal approval. A later song written by John Harbottle in 1904 expressed the hope that one day:

"Ah hev nee doot they'll aall think shame
That we've done see little for Stephenson's name.
Wor shabby bit monument they'll pull doon
And a worthier thing his fame'll croon,
And a Stephenson Institute honour the toon
A hundred years fra noo!"

In recent years it has become almost a folk tradition for the four figures at Stephenson's feet to be irreverently crowned with traffic cones as headgear by weekend revellers.

Behind Stephenson in Neville Street stands the Central Railway Station. Designed by John Dobson, the station was constructed in 1849 and was formally opened by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on 28th September that year. To commemorate that occasion stone medallions depicting the young queen and her consort face each other above the inside of the station's main portico entrance, opposite the modern ticket office. Either side of them the date of their visit is carved in Roman numerals. A later addition sandwiched between them represents their son, who as King Edward VII visited Newcastle in 1906 to open the railway bridge over the Tyne that still bears his name. His medallion, showing his head, shoulders, and amply bemedalled chest, facing slightly outward, has another head directly above it. This character, who is wearing a winged helmet, presumably represents Mercury.

Hidden away among the warren of back lanes behind the station can be found the building which once housed Stephenson's engine works. No. 20 South Street still has the number above the door, but at the time of writing there is no indication that this dilapidated and deserted factory was once

one of Tyneside's most seminal industrial powerhouses. It was here from 1824 onwards that the Stephensons helped to transform the steam locomotive from a slow and unreliable curiosity into the efficient workhorse of the industrial revolution. It was also to Stephenson's specification that the coach-builders Atkinson & Philipson of Pilgrim Street were to build the world's first passenger railway carriage for the Stockton and Darlington Railway.

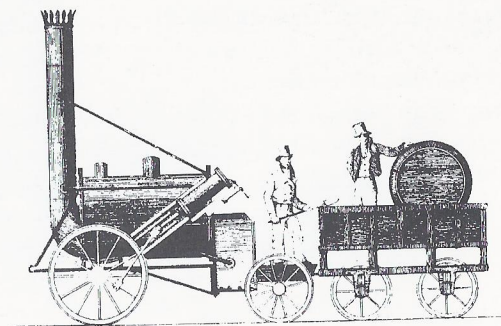
To find a monument to Robert Stephenson, we need look no further than the High Level Bridge over the Tyne. Perhaps rather shabby today alongside its newer neighbours, it was the engineering marvel of the day when built, and was one of the final links which connected London to Edinburgh by rail. The bridge was completed in 1849 and still retains a certain gloomy gothic charm which has attracted the attention of several TV, film, and commercial directors in search of an unusual scenic back-ground. Inevitably in 1849, the new bridge attracted the attention of Tyneside's irrepressible troubadours, and at least three songs and a hornpipe dance tune were composed in its honour. One song by Ned Corvan takes the form of an imaginary dialogue between the new bridge and its neighbour, the old Tyne Bridge (which was soon to be demolished to make way for the Swing Bridge). The High Level Bridge pours scorn on its elderly neighbour:

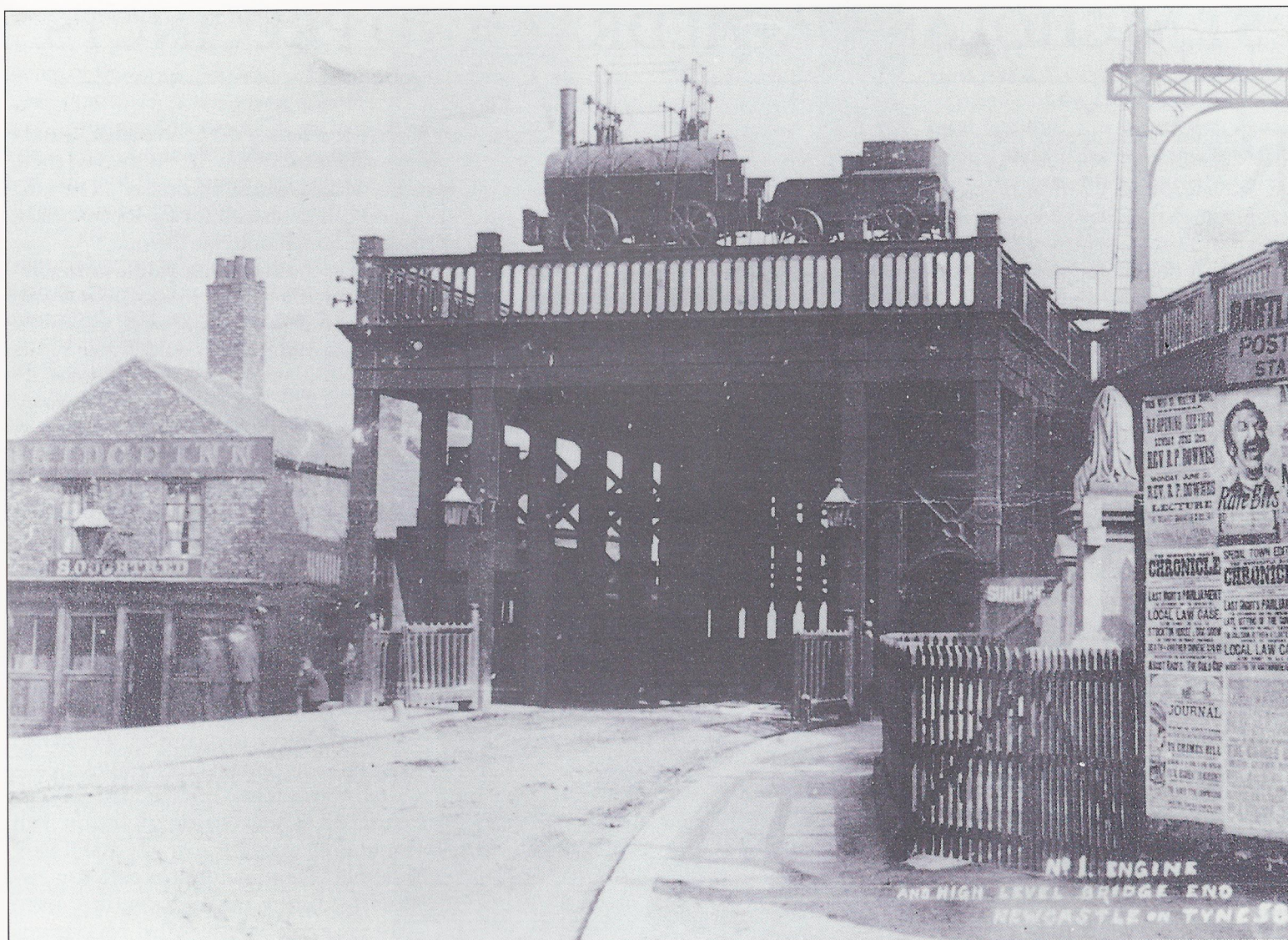
"Ye crazy auld bridge, ye'll soon be pull'd doon
And your stones in the river be hurled;
Yor nee ornament noo, but disgracin' wor toon,
Luk at me - a's the pride o' the world!"

As might be expected, not everyone was so keen on progress of this nature, and at least one wordsmith expressed the widespread concern at the large scale destruction of old parts of the town caused by the expansion of the railways. It is indeed a sobering thought to remember that Victorian engineers came very close to demolishing the Castle entirely, and even when the Keep and Black Gate were saved it was seriously proposed to convert them into signal boxes. Nevertheless, the bridge provided a tantalising new vista of

the town for the new generation of rail travellers, one of whom wrote to the *Newcastle Journal* in 1919: "Very few towns indeed have a chance of being seen to advantage when approached by train. Generally they cannot be seen at all, and anything one does see is the worst part of them. But there is one exception I know and that is Newcastle as seen in the glory of a fine sunset from the High Level Bridge ... for picturesque grandeur, unaided by romantic accessories Newcastle so seen is hard to beat."

Below the rail tracks on the top of the bridge are covered pedestrian walkways which run from Castle Garth in Newcastle to Wellington Street in Gateshead. These are little used today in what have become rather run down areas immediately to either side of the bridge. Nevertheless, a walk over the High Level Bridge on a fine day affords a magnificent if rather breezy bird's-eye view of The Close below, as well as a panorama of the 'Hanging Gardens of Hanover Street' while the five thousand tons of cast and wrought iron arches overhead give the impression of walking through an airy tunnel.





*This view of the High Level Bridge dates from c.1885. The old Bridge Inn to the left was rebuilt as the Bridge Hotel.
The engine on the bridge is 'Billy', the Stephenson Locomotive 1.*