

Visible Remains of the Railway

Many very old buildings, including the church with its Anglo Saxon quoins and Norman font, show that there has been a settlement in Hook Norton since the early Middle Ages. In contrast, little remains of Hooky's industrial past; once thriving kilns, quarries and railway tracks have been demolished, allowed to decay or converted to other uses. However, there are visible remains all around the village: in particular, the two railway viaducts built in the 1880s that dominated the village skyline before



Looking at the southern viaduct pillars from the foot of Swerford Road

Photograph: Gareth Richard

they were dismantled in 1964. An immediate impression of their mightiness – they were once called Oxfordshire's pyramids – can be gained from the crossroads where the Swerford Road leaves the village, near Wheatsheaf House (OS Explorer map 191: SP356327). Across the fields to the east the tall pillars of the southern viaduct can be seen, marching across the valley. However, we can approach the line much more closely, as it made its way from Banbury and Adderbury, and then on toward Chipping Norton, Kingham and Cheltenham.

As you travel into Hook Norton from Milcombe, the embankment of the railway line accompanies you on your right. You pass through the brick buttresses of the s.



The Northern Viaduct from the foot of Down End

Photo:

The trees are now too numerous and too dense to replicate this view nowadays.

railway bridge over the road – the wall on the left rebuilt in 2015, but the other much older. The large house on the left is the old Railway Tavern; the lane leading up to the new houses at The Grange (the name is a modern invention) originally led up to the railway station and the marshalling yard. The houses stand on top of the embankment that led the line south towards the more northerly of the two viaducts.

The best way to see the pillars of that viaduct is from the other end. Go to the bottom of Down End and Park Hill and take the path to Wigginton; alternatively, go east from Park Road toward Park Farm and take the diagonal path across the field on your right. In either case, head toward the left hand end of the treed railway embankment that you see in front of you (361333). Once there, you can stand under



The southern butt end of the northern viaduct, leading to the middle embankment.

Photo: Donald Ratcliffe

the first span, with the butt end of the viaduct on your right and the rest of the viaduct's pillars to your left. If you follow the broad path down the hill to your left a little way, you will pass a few of the massive stone piers that descend to the valley floor.

These pillars are solid, made of local stone, locally dressed. They vary in height between 60 and 85 feet; the tallest pillar is calculated to contain 2,000 stone blocks, some of which had to be raised 90 feet in

the air by wooden cranes. This viaduct had five spans, which were bridged by iron girders 100 feet long; steel plates were fixed to them to provide the roadway on which sleepers and tracks could be laid. It took 400 men four years (1883-1887) to build the viaducts – and four men four weeks to dismantle the iron work in 1964. While they were being built, two men fell from the viaducts to their deaths.

Now return up the hill to the end of the viaduct. Here you can see that dismantled railway lines that have been recycled as fence posts; in one case a tree has forced an angled buttressing piece apart from the upright it was once reinforcing. You could from here walk to the east following the route recommended in “Visible



The first pillar going down the hill towards much higher ones.
Photo: Donald Ratcliffe



Cut-down rails used as a fence post
Photo: Donald Ratcliffe

Remains of the Ironstone Industry”, in this section of the website. Instead, follow the embankment northwards that stands as an island between the two viaducts: walk along either side or even on top. From the top you get some idea of the view rail passengers had. From here they would see the ironstone workings on initially the western side and then the eastern. But as the train moved beyond the embankment in either direction, the view must have been stunning; one traveller in 1926 said, “These beautiful gorges and the lovely views from the train remind one almost of a miniature Vale of Llangollen.”¹

At the southern end of the embankment you reach the lane going to Park Farm (360329); turn left, then right down the narrow path that runs on the left hand side of the pillars. *[Alternatively, you can approach this point from Park Road, continuing straight across the top of Park Hill and along the lane to Park Farm; if*

¹ Quoted in Betty Brown, *Somewhere Along the Line*, page 18.

coming from Down End, turn left at the top of Park Hill. You will come to the strip of woodland that accompanies the route of the former railway, with the island viaduct on the left. Take the narrow path that goes down to the right from Park Farm drive, alongside the pillars of the southern viaduct.]

Here among the trees you see an even more impressive set of massive stone piers, creating eight spans, again each of 100 feet, with the tallest pillars reaching up to 90 feet. Small trees are clearly growing from the top of some of them. Around their bases may be found sleepers and evidence of old railway lines. At the bottom of the hill is a stream but no bridge; in dry weather it may be crossed easily, but in flood it can be treacherous (and very wet!) to wade or leap. Climb the hill, go through the gate into the nature reserve proper. Climb the left hand side of the embankment: as you walk south, note its width at its base, and try to spot where a siding ran off to the left about the point where the embankment turns into a cutting.



The bridge carrying the Swerford Road over the railway.

Photograph: Gareth Richard

You will appreciate the feat of engineering required to move the huge amount of spoil to create the cutting, which in places is 76 feet deep. In 1876 there were 2,000 men and 120 horses involved in digging and moving out the spoil. Most of it was transported along the line to build up the embankments. Two workers died in the cutting, one from a fall of clay.

Halfway along the cutting you will reach the bridge (360323) carrying the road from Hooky to Swerford over the railway. *[It is possible to drive up the road from Wheatsheaf House, where we caught our first view of the southern viaduct; park on the Hooky side of the bridge.]* A flight of steps joins the road to the

railway, and from here you get a good view of the bridge in its patched up splendour.

If you pass under the bridge, you can walk southwards along the cutting to the tunnel that once carried the track for quarter of a mile under the hill. It is one of two

tunnels that were necessary to carry the line to Chipping Norton; the other is even longer, at 685 yards compared with Hooky's 418 yards. The tunnel entrance itself (359320) is barred by locked doors. The sound of running water gives an indication of the problems the tunnellers had with springs during the construction – and indeed in later maintenance.



The cutting leading to the tunnel

Photo: Gareth Richard

The work of creating the tunnel, the cuttings on each side of it and the embankments took seven years, even before the viaducts were started. This was the work observers compared to building the pyramids.

From the tunnel you have to retrace your steps to the bridge and climb the steps to the road. [*If you wish to return to Hooky, turn right and continue down the hill to Wheatsheaf House.*] To inspect the south end of the tunnel, go back towards Hooky for 200 metres, go left into Cross Banks Lane and carry on to the T-junction. Turn right, and then left in 200 metres. This is Cow Lane, and you descend 500 metres to grid reference 356313, where the railway crossed the road. The bridge has gone, but the abutments are there still on both sides of the road.

It is worth noting that the railway companies, later British Rail and now Network Rail, are responsible for the maintenance of disused railway bridges. Where they cross roads, they are usually demolished; where the road crosses above the old track, as with the Swerford Road, they have to be maintained. Pass the abutment on your left, and you will see the entry to the nature reserve, which used to be the cutting leading to the tunnel's southern portal.

Towards the tunnel, you can see clearly on either side the parliamentary fences that, for obvious safety reasons, railway companies were required by law to erect and maintain. On your right, you may be lucky to see another section of GWR

rail sawn up and used as a fence post. These rails were discarded when broad-gauge was abandoned, so this is an early and unusual form of recycling.



Photo: Gareth Richard

The further you go along the track bed, the more difficult progress gets. This is because the sides of the embankment have slipped blocking the track. The cutting had always been unstable and on several occasions remedial work had to be taken to keep the line open. In 1959, however, the line was deteriorating, and no one was prepared to undertake the massive restoration of the track. What you see is the death blow to the railway as a through route.



The south end of the tunnel

Photo: Gareth Richard

At the approach to the tunnel entrance, the slipped earth has almost completely obliterated the old trackbed. Although accessible to the public, this is a very quiet and undisturbed part of the world and well worth a visit. The tunnel entrance is bricked up, with gaps in the upper part for bats.

Indeed, nature has taken over from industry. The railway cutting (SP 3594 3210) wildlife conservation area is managed by The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust. Rare species include the solitary bee *Andrena bucephala*, recorded at only three other sites in Britain, and the dark green fritillary, marbled white, white-letter hairstreak and meadow brown butterflies. There are lizards and badgers, 47 species of birds and an abundance of wild flowers, ferns and lichens. Iron and steam seem a long way away, though they configured this landscape.

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Suggested Reading:

William Hemmings, *The Banbury and Cheltenham Railway*, 2 vols. (Didcot: Wild Swan, 2004).

Barbara Brown, *Somewhere Along the Line: the Story of the Cheltenham Railway and the People Associated with It* (HNLHG, 1983).

Richard Chalmers, "The Railway at Hook Norton", in the [Economic Life](#) section of this website.

For the nature reserve, see <http://www.bbowt.org.uk/reserves/Hook-Norton-Cutting>