

SHOCKED CROWD WEEPS AS BRIDGE DEMOLISHED



Secretary of Tiverton Civic Society Mrs Mary de la Mahotiere sheds a tear at the site of the old railway bridge where only the piers remain.

AN angry crowd watched in horror on Thursday as the historic Tiverton bridge over the River Exe at Westexe fell victim to a demolition gang.

Eye witness, town councillor Randall Williams, told the Gazette: "During the morning a crowd of people gathered on the thoroughfare upstream, amazed, shocked, angry, with tearful children as they watched the unseemly spectacle of the breaking up of the bridge.

"Soon a huge hole was opened at one side - rather like a giant bite having been taken - breaking into one of the arches.

The "Custer's Last Stand" campaign to save the remains of the Victorian railway bridge had ended in failure.

Conservationists had hoped to persuade the Department of National Heritage to order a halt on demolition work.

They had earlier appealed to English Heritage to recommend the preservation of the 108-year-old structure over the River Exe and, as dismantling began in connection with the Devon County Council southern relief road scheme, were anxiously awaiting a DNH decision on possible emergency listing.

But last Thursday, the DNH revealed that, following an English Heritage inspection, it had

decided the landmark bridge was not worth preserving.

A DNH spokesman said: "It does not date from the formative years of the railway network and is not of sufficient interest as an 1880s structure to merit listing.

"It does not have any special architectural, historical or technological qualities which would enhance its interest."

But that view was slammed by Mary de la Mahotiere, secretary of Tiverton Civic Society, which had staged the 11th hour campaign to preserve the attractive four arch bridge.

She said: "It's ridiculous. This is plain vandalism. They are not looking at the overall visual aspect. You cannot take the bridge in isolation from its environment."

She added: "I had been hoping to get an injunction to stop the demolition, but it's too late now to argue the toss with English Heritage . . . we will shed tears tonight."

'And what of the local populace; were their views sought? Not a bit of it. They were not treated democratically over this issue.'

The brick and stone bridge which took eight years to build, carried the single-track line of the Exe Valley branch that ran between Exeter and Dulverton and closed in 1963.

The bridge was considered so interest-

by chief reporter
COLIN RICHEY

ing locally that the county council published a special pre-demolition booklet as an historical record.

Now it is making way for a new structure, part of the council's £9 million southern relief road scheme at Tiverton.

Several campaigners including county councillor Mary Turner considered the bridge could have been included in the scheme.

But planners argued that very expensive engineering work would have been necessary, and it was eventually decided that some stone blocks from the old should be incorporated in the new.

The head of the county engineering consultancy services Jim Curle denies claims that dismantling had been advanced to thwart conservationist.

He added: "It's not true to suggest that we have speeded up the demolition. It is taking place at the time which is appropriate for the contractor's programme.

"We have complied with all the statutory requirements relating to the scheme, which has included full consultation, and we have planning permission to do what we are doing."

But this explanation was dismissed by Mr Williams.

"The haste with which the bridge was removed was probably done to try and avoid

further local public outcry," he said.

"At the end of the

day the demolition handiwork was plain to see - two pillars were left standing in the flowing waters of the Exe - think of those Victorian engineers 130 years ago laying the foundations in the middle of the flowing river, that was no mean achievement."

Mr Williams said the bridge ought to have been kept as a fine example of Victorian workmanship.

"And what of the local populace, were their views sought? Not a bit of it, they were not treated democratically over this issue. They were not canvassed; they were merely witnesses to the destruction - off with the old and on with the new."