



# Between the Lines

Land of Oak & Iron Mapping Project Newsletter

April 2020

It now looks likely the Covid-19 virus will be disrupting normal activities for some considerable time. While physical meetings are suspended we would encourage you to continue to take part in mapping projects and join the secure messaging service (see March edition). This month's featured article, written by volunteer Georgina Hodgson, provides an overview of some of the bridges in the Land of Oak & Iron.

## Secure Messaging Service - update

The Guild messaging service for mapping volunteers is set up and available for those who have registered. It offers a means of keeping in touch with other volunteers at this time when we are not able to get together in the traditional meetings.

Elsewhere, the Land of Oak & Iron Trust trustees are making use of their own Guild messaging service both for sharing group information and direct messaging. It's easy to use, allows everybody in the group to see the information exchanges and, being organised in "conversations", means that posts relevant to a particular topic can be kept in the same thread of dialogue. If you haven't given it a try yet please feel free to start a conversation about something you wish to share with the mapping group. If you haven't signed up yet please contact us on the email address overleaf and we will send an invitation to you.

One item that has come to light over the past month is whilst Guild is compatible with most Internet browsers it does not work with Microsoft Internet Explorer. We suggest using Google Chrome or a similar browser.

We thought we should also share information about a TV programme that may be of interest: "The Beauty of Maps", shown on BBC4, is available until mid-May on BBC i-player and covers a history of maps

## Building bridges – Part 1 – Derwent Valley and west

### Early routes between settlements

Historically, the population of the Derwent valley area was very small. Isolated communities existed largely in small settlements, often closely related to the Bastle, manor house or habitation of the dominant local landowner. As a rule, these were located near to fresh water and for access to woodland, arable land and pasture.

With very few bridges, fording points and stepping stones gave access to resources on the opposite bank, while there is some evidence that stepping stones were placed where there was a handy source of large flat stones. The evidence of many corn mills and fulling mills being built suggests a dependence on local processing of agricultural produce. Ideas spread slowly, but economic practices, especially of the monastic communities; favourable climatic conditions producing agricultural surplus and the extraction of minerals for sale; led to the gradual development of trading networks. Central

locations developed and a network of routes such as drove roads, packhorse trails and inter-village tracks must have grown. Initially these were often at higher elevations, avoiding damp, easily flooded and less safe areas. The "Lead Road" from Allendale to Blaydon being a case in point, or the Drove road south from Scotland via Stagshaw (which became the site of a massive cattle market and fair) to the Tyne valley. Monks and clergy from Durham travelled regularly to their "daughter" abbey at Blanchland. But, still, few bridges were built; the need, the technology and the finance being lacking.

There is some evidence of a bridging point on the Derwent at Ebchester, ostensibly related to the Roman road "Dere street"; archaeology supports this, but there is little actual evidence. Also found is historical evidence of a Roman bridge at Corbridge; some distance upstream from the Medieval, Georgian and current Victorian crossing.

It is with the emergence of a larger population and more structured society with markets, courts, gaols and formalised, legal land ownership, that there is a need for better transport links - these coming down from the higher land and utilising crossing points such as those at Linnels and Dilston over the Devil's Water, Hexham on the Tyne and Shotley on the Derwent - the "Bridge" coming later though.

### Stone replaces wood

As the north country emerged from a late Medieval period of Reiver Wars, the Civil War and political isolation, trading increased, roads become more frequented and ferry points developed as at Ryton, Bywell and Newburn on the Tyne and Swalwell on the lower Derwent. Bridges of stone masonry replaced earlier wooden bridges at Linnels, Dilston, Hexham, Corbridge and at the Bywell/Stocksfield crossing point. Salmon fishing ponds (as at Bywell) and very many water control weirs, leats, holding ponds and mill races (as at Shotley, Ovingham, Derwentcote and, of course, Winlaton) date from this 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century period, mostly serving developing local industries.

*(continued overleaf)*

### Contact:

Email: [landofoakandiron@groundwork.org.uk](mailto:landofoakandiron@groundwork.org.uk)  
Telephone: not available due to home working

### Portal:

<http://www.landofoakandironlocalhistoryportal.org.uk/index.asp>

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a rash of building stone bridges was undertaken along the Derwent valley. Bay Bridge, Blanchland Bridge, Ratchwoodford or Derwent Bridge near Edmundbyers, another at Eddy's Bridge and also at Allensford, all dated to about 1830. Those at Shotley, Ebchester and Swalwell were built a little earlier. The Swalwell Bridge was a toll point on the Gateshead to Hexham Turnpike as early as 1778. The Earl's (or Duke's) bridge at Dilston was also a toll bridge on this turnpike. All these bridges are of stone, generally built with a single carriageway, initially humped in character and with one or two arches, as necessitated by the local access and feasibility of building. In response to increased usage some of these bridges were widened or rebuilt. Several are now Grade II listed by English Heritage. Evidence of widening can sometimes be seen by looking at the underside of the arches where different masonry on either side of a dividing line indicates where changes that have been made. NB. the road along the Derwent Valley from Axwell to Hamsterley did not exist until after the Sopwith survey in 1832 and an Act of Parliament in 1833 (*c.lxxxix Road from Axwell Park Gate to Shotley Bridge (Durham)*), which was a response to the Valley landowners seeing a need for a better road. Once this road was financed a new toll bridge was built at Lintzford.

The 1869 stone bridge crossing the Derwent at Rowland's Gill, just below Gibside, was a replacement for the previous, wooden Cowbridge, widely reported in the press of the day as being washed away by the 1780's flood. However, at this time, the access to the Gibside estate was from Fellside Road, at the Gatehouses in the carpark of what is now Whickham Golf Course, and there would have been less need for a substantial bridge over the Derwent.

Other notable bridges in the area represent a greater need for links across rivers and for movement of people and goods between mines, works, mills and housing on either side of the Tyne. Those at Wylam (1836), Ovingham (1883), and Newburn (1893), all somewhat limited in functionality now, were undoubtedly built for access across the Tyne in far less busy times. In all these cases, Victorian engineering enabled wider stretches of shallow rivers to be crossed, utilising concrete pillars and wrought iron beams.

### Railway and recent road bridges

Largely related to the rapid economic development of the lower Derwent and Blaydon area and the coming of the railways, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century gave a rush of river crossings such as the Swalwell Viaduct near Blaydon, Wylam Rail Bridge and the County Bridge over the Tyne at Hexham; as well as the Nine arches, and Pont Valley viaducts in the Derwent Valley. Hownsgill Viaduct near Castleside, opened in 1857, was a response to the difficulties of shipping iron ore from the Cleveland mines across the 150ft deep ravine to the Consett Ironworks,

whilst the Chainbridge Suspension Toll Bridge (1831) at Blaydon brought the main road from Newcastle across the Tyne to Blaydon and Swalwell. A cast iron beam bridge, a short distance upstream of the old stone Swalwell Toll bridge, became the main route through this area in 1927. The rapid growth of Chopwell and Blackhall Mill in the early part of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century necessitated the building of a road bridge at Blackhall Mill in 1896. The current concrete beam bridge was built in 2001 and is rather higher above the flood prone crossing. The iconic "Hikey" suspension bridge at Swalwell was built in 1902, with its formal name of The Sands Suspension Bridge, it gave access to allotments on the Derwent floodplain.

Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century bridges in the Land of Oak and Iron have continued to be built, refurbished or widened in response to the demands of much increased traffic and the developing road system, but rarely does modern engineering show the character of the older river crossings.

(GH 04/2020)

### References:

Historic England register of Listed Bridges <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about-us/our-places/historical-bridges>

Note: an interactive map version of the list is available at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/map-search>

Bridges on the Tyne Website <https://www.bridgesonthetyne.co.uk>

### Extract from the "Sopwith Survey" of 1832

The following short extract (transcribed from an original copy, held at the Lit and Phil, by Val Scully) describes the route and condition of the road from Newcastle to Shotley Bridge; the survey forming part of the promotion of an alternative route being developed:

*Leaving the Post-Office of Newcastle, the present line descends very steeply to Tyne Bridge, then climbs a yet steeper ascent to Gateshead, and so continues rising to the summit of the Wind Mill hills. It then falls to below the level of Tyne Bridge, rises towards Whickham, and after passing a very undulating surface gains a lofty eminence at Marley Hill: from hence it descends to Burnop Field, and then sinks by a long and steep descent to Hamsterley Bridge. It continues to Shotley Bridge, by passing over a very elevated ridge, the ascent and descent of which are at all times both difficult and dangerous, and in winter exceedingly so. From this road to the village of Ebchester is by Cut-throat Lane, a deep and narrow pass of the kind already described. The road to Lintz Mill is of a similar description, and hence the most important and fruitful part of the vale is completely shut out from those advantages which would naturally flow from an easy intercourse with the adjacent trading and manufacturing districts.*



### Coming up:

**All meetings are suspended until further notice.**

To join the secure messaging service please send an e-mail to [landfoakandiron@groundwork.org.uk](mailto:landfoakandiron@groundwork.org.uk) requesting that we include you in the group.