



Wylam in about 1860. This is the earliest illustration of the village and shows the bridge in the foreground. The colliery is on the left with the ironworks on the right and the former village school (still standing in Woodcroft Road) in the centre background.

Wylam Bridge—150 years

Before the opening of Wylam Bridge in April 1836, the Tyne was crossed by a ford and a ferry immediately upstream of the site chosen for the bridge. The approach road to the ford still exists on the north bank of the river, between River House and Tyne View. Earlier plans of 1780 to build a timber bridge to carry a colliery waggonway over the river never materialised.

The man largely responsible for promoting the scheme to build a bridge in the 1830's was Benjamin Thompson. A Yorkshireman by birth, he became closely associated with the establishment of ironworks in Northumberland and Durham, and in 1835, following the discovery that the waste material extracted from Wylam Colliery contained a high proportion of iron ore, he leased the area of land where the Falcon Centre (Library) now stands, to develop an ironworks. His two sons managed the ironworks and lived at Wylam Hall for several years.

Thompson was a director of the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway Company, and was actively involved in supervising

the construction of the line, the first section of which was opened between Blaydon and Hexham in March 1835.

With the new railway operating on the south side of the river, and his ironworks under construction on the north side, there would clearly be advantages to Thompson's business interests, as well as those of Wylam Colliery, and presumably most of the residents of Wylam (except perhaps the man who operated the ferry!) to provide a bridge to link both sides of the river.

Not surprisingly Thompson was one of the main subscribers to the project; it is not certain whether the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway Co. had any financial interest in the scheme, but John Blackmore, the Company's engineer, designed the bridge and performed the opening ceremony on 25th April 1836 which was reported in the local press.

'The bridge across the River Tyne at Wylam was formally opened. The bridge was built by subscription and is constructed of wood with stone plinth piers. It affords great accommodation being passable by both foot passengers and



The big moment! Mrs. Whitelaw about to cut the ribbon on December 2nd 1936, and declare the bridge free from toll. Mrs. Lee, Mrs. Henderson, Mr. T. Pattinson and Mr. R. Taylor are among those identified on this picture.

(Photo: courtesy Mrs. J. Efford and Mr. & Mrs. R. Gale).

carriages, for which a small toll is charged'.

The original toll-house stood at the southern end of the bridge on the east side, across what is now the entrance to the station car park.

Thompson took a 60 year lease of the land on the north bank of the river from Christopher Blackett, to whom he paid an annual rent of £10, together with a royalty of 1d for every ton of coal, lime or minerals taken over the bridge by rail, except for that taken to or from the ironworks.

The main purpose of the bridge was of course to provide a rail link between the ironworks and the colliery north of the river, to the newly opened railway on the south side, but it was a specific condition on the lease that there should also be a roadway on the bridge 'for the purposes of horses, cattle, carriages and foot passengers'.

The rails across the bridge were removed towards the end of the century when none of the local collieries were operating, and they had fallen into disuse. Between 1893-97 the timber super-

structure of the bridge was replaced by steel girders.

A new Bridge Company was formed in 1897 and five years later in 1902 the old toll-house was replaced by the new one which still stands at the northern end of the bridge.

Although none of the archives of the Bridge Company survive it is likely that the new Company was formed to cope with the situation which arose following the withdrawal of freight traffic, and the need to repair and improve the bridge.

Certainly with the loss of freight the upkeep of the bridge by way of tolls fell increasingly on local residents. The late 1890's and early 1900's saw the development of houses in south Wylam, built on land which had formed part of the estate of Lord Ravensworth at the time that the bridge was built, and these residents had free passes to cross the bridge. A limited number of free passes were similarly in the possession of the Blackett family, Squires of Wylam, and could be issued only to named tenants. Other residents and travellers were obliged to pay the toll, which gave rise to



Parish Council Chairman and village blacksmith Jack Henderson (left) making a presentation to Richard Taylor (right) one of the long-time activists in the campaign to abolish bridge tolls.

considerable resentment. There are many tales of how people sought to avoid paying the tolls – some successfully, others not. Incidentally several of the oval-shaped brass passes issued by the Bridge Company still survive today.

We do not have a comprehensive list of all the toll-keepers since the bridge opened in 1836, but John Carr and Isaac Adamson are two from the early period. In 1890 it was Thomas Fox, followed in 1894 by Edward Waugh, who served until shortly before the first War when he was succeeded by Edward Jones. He in turn was followed in the late 1920's by William Weddle, who remained until the bridge was freed from tolls.

Resentment at having to pay tolls, when the majority of bridges in the county were free, resulted in various protests to the Parish Council over many years – and the Parish Council tried to exert pressure on the County Council and Ministry of Transport. One of the main activists in this campaign was the late Richard Taylor who lived at Rose Cottage, and was the first secretary of the Institute.

Eventually after prolonged agitation by the village and protracted negotiations with the Bridge Company, the County Council acquired the bridge, toll house and part of the access road on 1st December 1936 at a total cost of £7,249, half of which was paid by the Ministry of Transport.

It had previously been agreed that the Parish Council would arrange a suitable ceremony to celebrate the formal freeing of tolls, and this took place on the following day, 2nd December.

Unfortunately all the Parish Council records of this period have been lost so we do not have details as to the exact programme arranged but we do know that it was Mrs. Whitelaw, wife of the local County Councillor Robert R. Whitelaw (who lived on Stephenson Terrace) who formally cut the ribbon. Several photographs of the ceremony survive and the late Mrs. Whitelaw's daughter (now Mrs. Joan Efford of Corsham, Wilts.) still has the scissors presented to her mother on the occasion.

Although there was a four ton weight limit on vehicles using the bridge, no signs



Those in the front line crossing the bridge after the ceremony include Mr. T. Pattinson, Mr. Reeve, Coun. and Mrs. Whitelaw, Mr. R. Henderson, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Elliot.

were displayed and it was common for heavier vehicles to cross it.

Until 1942 the bridge was only eleven feet wide without a separate footpath. That year work was undertaken by Dorman Long to enable it to be used by tanks, which involved moving the old superstructure upstream across the tops of the stone piers and providing on the downstream portion of the piers a new steel and concrete superstructure eleven feet in width. The new structure was used as the carriageway and capable of taking vehicles up to 40 tons, whilst the old superstructure was used as a footbridge.

The stability of the bridge has been threatened several times during the past 150 years. The eight stone piers of the bridge were originally built on a layer of rock overlying softer strata of gravel, coal and shale, but with erosion of the river bed one or more of the piers has been affected by subsidence.

In 1917, 1927 and 1952 certain piers required underpinning and protection by sheet steel piling, but the worst problems occurred during 1957.

Erosion of the river bed, caused by floods in January 1957, resulted in damage to one of the piers, necessitating a three ton weight restriction order. But worse was to follow when on 8th December further severe flooding resulted in the settlement of the two piers at the northern end and collapse of the bridge was a real possibility.

The bridge had to be completely closed to vehicles, and extensive repairs carried out. Sheet piling across the river at each side of the bridge was provided, and the opportunity was taken to strengthen the pier tops. The decking was reconstructed in 1960 and widened to 24 feet (18 feet of carriageway and 6 feet of footpath).

The County Council retained the toll cottage until 1973 when it was sold by tender.

Today the bridge is probably in better structural condition than at any time during its 150 year history – and should be capable of lasting at least another century and more.

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