

ART. VII – *The Irthing Bridges at Lanercost*. By D. J. W. MAWSON

IN 1959 inspection of the old stone bridge over the Irthing at Lanercost (M.R. 553633) revealed serious deterioration of its southern arch. Designed for the requirements of a different age, it was no longer safe for modern traffic. The structural limitations of this bridge had been appreciated for many years, as the sandstone block inscribed “This bridge is not safe for traction engines” now set in the southern end of the downstream parapet testifies. In more recent times, a five-ton weight limit had been imposed, and this was reduced to two tons while the defective arch was shored up. Meanwhile, a scheme was prepared for a new concrete road bridge immediately upstream, and upon this being opened to traffic in 1962, the shoring was removed from the old bridge, which was retained for pedestrian use.¹

Jervoise describes the two arches of Lanercost Bridge as being almost four-centred in shape, with arch rings built in three orders. He gives the total span as 50 yards (45.72 metres) and the width between parapets as a mere 11 feet (3.35 metres).² According to Professor Pevsner, the bridge is medieval, but he adduces no evidence to support this conclusion.³ Others, with greater justification, have attributed it to either the end of the seventeenth or the early part of the eighteenth century. Whatever its date, however, the sparse ruins of an earlier structure 320 metres upstream afford clear evidence that the road crossing at Lanercost has not always been on this site.

Although the bridge is scheduled as an ancient monument, unhappily little is being done to conserve it.⁴ At the time of writing, a tree grows from the upper masonry near the downstream cutwater, and the bridge has a somewhat neglected appearance. As it no longer serves any useful purpose, possibly its days are numbered. If so, this account, based upon examination of the structure as well as upon documentary evidence, may be timely.

Until bridge building became accepted as a public responsibility, towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, travellers were naturally more accustomed to ford a river than cross it by bridge. The few bridges which did exist in early times were generally the result of private benevolence or monastic zeal. From time immemorial religious foundations, often in fulfilment of their land-owning obligations, had assumed a special responsibility in this field, but after the middle of the fifteenth century their progressive impoverishment was to ensure that few new bridges were built. If building practically ceased, it also became difficult, with the passage of time, to ascertain those responsible for the repair of many of the bridges constructed in an earlier age, so that these too fell into decay. By 1531, indeed, the problem of maintenance had become so acute that Parliament intervened. If no other liability could be proved, the county or corporate town in which the bridge lay must assume it.⁵ The Justices in Quarter Sessions were empowered to administer the new law and to raise the necessary funds for that purpose; but the task of routine supervision, later to be undertaken by bridge surveyors, was at first often entrusted to the High Constable.⁶

That the county was contributing to the repair of a bridge at Lanercost from an early date is evident from an entry in the household accounts of Lord William Howard of Naworth:

June 13 1625 Received of Thomas Jackson, highe constable, in part payment of that which my Lord had laid out for repaying of Lanercost and Warwick Bridge £8.⁷

Since the Justices had been unable to ascertain the full repairing obligations, one suspects that this bridge must have been an old one. It is indeed reasonable to assume, in spite of the dearth of documentary evidence to substantiate the point, that there had been a bridge hereabouts from early times, for the main route from the south into Bewcastle lay across the river at Lanercost, and neither the Augustinian canons of the Priory nor the Lords of Gilsland at Naworth are likely to have permitted their communications to depend indefinitely on the vagaries of a river which even today is capable of rising 8 feet or so in a very short time. Certainly Saxton's map of the country shows that there was a bridge here by 1576, but the survey of Gilsland Barony which Lord William made in 1603 is of more specific interest, for this not only identifies a bridge at Lanercost by name – "the Abbybridge" – but puts it at the foot of Boothby Bank, where the modern road bridge stands.*⁸

Inspection of the terrain, corroborated by two mid-eighteenth-century maps (Figs 1 and 2), suggests that at one time the river may have taken a more northerly course than is the case today, and that with the passage of time it divided into two channels about 180 metres upstream of this spot, so that more than one bridge would have been needed to keep the way open when the adjoining ford became impassable. It is indeed fundamental to an understanding of bridge development at Lanercost during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to bear in mind that the bridge across the northern channel, to which the county had contributed in June 1625, was a different structure to that known as the Abbey Bridge which spanned the main stream of the Irthing 90 metres or so to the south. The latter was a barony bridge maintainable at Lord William's cost, as another entry in his 1625 account book shows: "August 22 Delivered to the wrights by Mr. Radcliffe in full payment for building Abby bridge £8.10s."⁹ The fact that wrights rather than masons built it indicates that it must have been made of wood.

By contrast, I suspect that the bridge over the northern channel was stone-built. Joseph Powell was certainly to depict it as such in 1806 (Plate 1) and since I can find no evidence of its having been re-built during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, his sketch may well portray a survival from Tudor times. In 1670 this northern bridge seems to have been in need of extensive repair, for the Justices allocated £30 from the general bridge purvey for the purpose.¹⁰ Thereafter Quarter Sessions records fail to mention a bridge at Lanercost again for 23 years, and this is strange, since a new one was certainly built during that period, as a report by Deputy Recorder Gilpin in 1693 reveals:

The Comon Highway in the Parish of Leonard Coast leading from Brampton to Bewcastle [is] broken and decayed for the space of six hundred yards beginning at the North end of the New bridge over the River Irthing by the default of the parishioners and Inhabitants of the said parish who ought to repair the same.¹¹

* Boothby Bank is identified locally as the steep hill which the road ascends on the south side of the river between the New Bridge Hotel and Boothby House. I refer to this location, and not to the bank bearing the same name shown 640 metres downstream on the 6 inch O.S. Map.

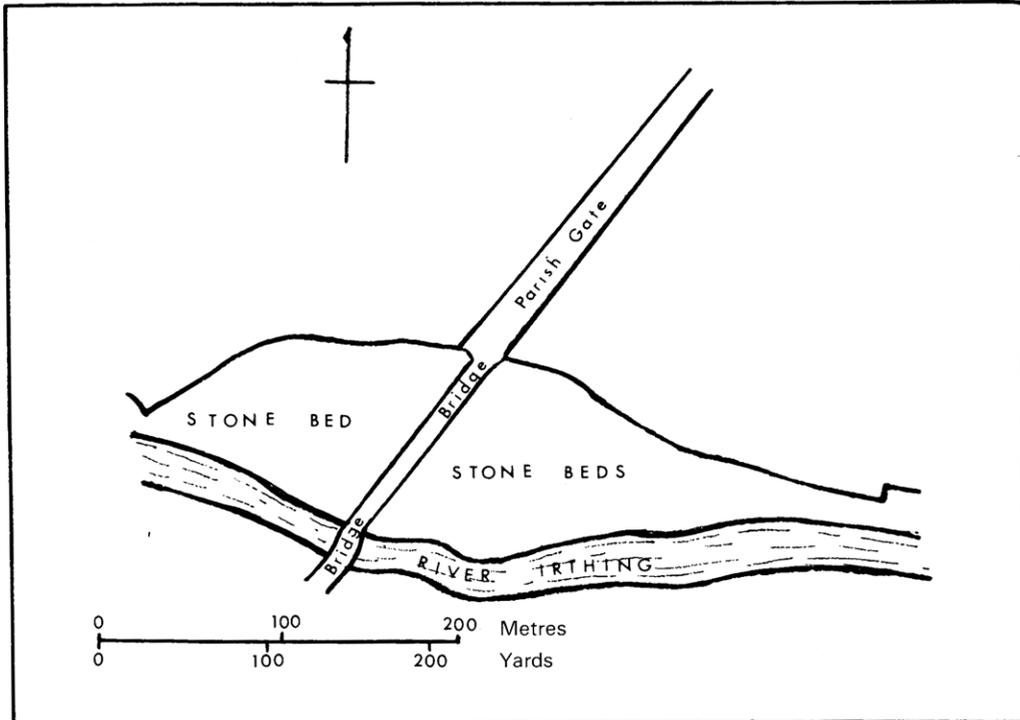


FIG. 1. - Abbey Lanercost Grounds, 1743. Source: HN Plan 179.

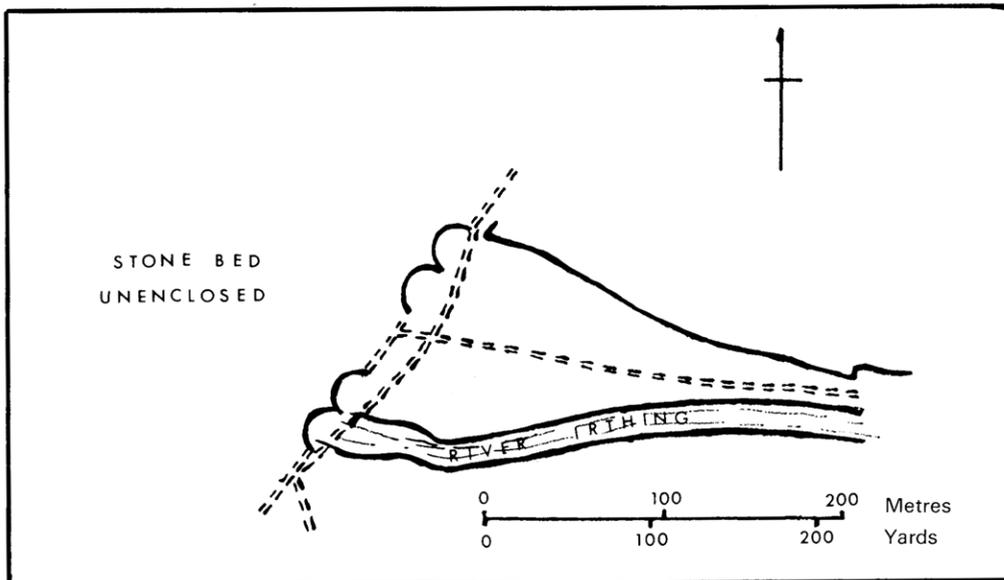


FIG. 2. - The stone beds east of Irthing Bridges 1763. Source: HN Plan (provisional) 229.

The new bridge had in fact been constructed in 1687, as a date-stone inscribed "This bridge was built in the 2 year of King James II", now set in the downstream parapet at the southern approach to the present stone bridge shows, but the stone has not always occupied its present position, and it would be imprudent to suggest that it relates to the bridge we know today.¹²

In their excellent treatise on highway administration, Sidney and Beatrix Webb describe how the growth of wheeled traffic, and improved standards of road administration, led to a country-wide demand for better bridges. Narrow structures, suitable only for packhorses, needed to be replaced by others wide enough to accommodate carts, and flimsy wooden bridges by larger and more substantial erections.¹³ In the absence of evidence from public or private records, conclusions concerning the 1687 bridge must necessarily be tentative, but if it was considerations such as these which led to pressure for an improved river crossing at Lanercost, one can imagine the barony objecting that the provision of a better bridge was hardly within the compass of its ancient obligations. The Justices, on the other hand, must also have been reluctant to accept responsibility for another bridge where already they maintained one. I fancy the dilemma was resolved by the traditional double bridge site adjoining the ford at the foot of Boothby Bank being abandoned for a new location 320 metres upstream, a little to the east of where the river divided, at which place a single bridge could be built instead. Part of the north bank abutment and the core masonry of a pier in the river are still there to identify the spot, while the arch springing survives to show that this must once have been a stone bridge. That the 1687 date-stone originally came from here is evident from the fact that on its reverse side there is a mason's mark identical to one of several such marks incised in the foundation masonry of the ruined abutment.

A bridge at this upstream site conforms to no recognizable road pattern, until it is realized that, in an earlier age, two public roads converged on the north bank of the river opposite Boothby Bank. One of these, the Parish Gate, lay to the west and north of the Priory, as does the modern county highway, but most travellers passing through the parish doubtless preferred the more direct route, which then lay along the riverside. A short section of this old way can still be seen to the south-west of Island Cottages (M.R. 561639) and insofar as the altered course of the river permits, the remainder can be traced by following Public Footpath 31020. It will be observed from Fig. 3 that the 1687 bridge joined this road, and when its site is reconsidered in the context of the contemporary thoroughfares, the choice, which at first glance seems so odd, is explained.

This new crossing was a source of anxiety from the start. Thomas Denton, one-time Recorder of Carlisle and therefore a man experienced in the problems of bridge maintenance, put his finger on the cause when he wrote of Lanercost, in the same year the bridge was built:

The demesne is only severed from Naword Park and Demesne by the Irthing which is often as troublesome a neighbour as pleasant to the inhabitants there, the rapid floods washing away much good land from that pleasant valley.¹⁴

If this description reflected past experience, it was also an augury of the perils ahead, for after bearing down on Edward Bell's land at Maryholm, the river turned to erode its northern bank on the bend 320 metres above the new bridge.¹⁵ Soon the bridge itself was under threat, so that in 1693 the Justices were compelled to engage contractors "to turn the water above Leonard Coast bridge to bring it under the bridge". Having accomplished

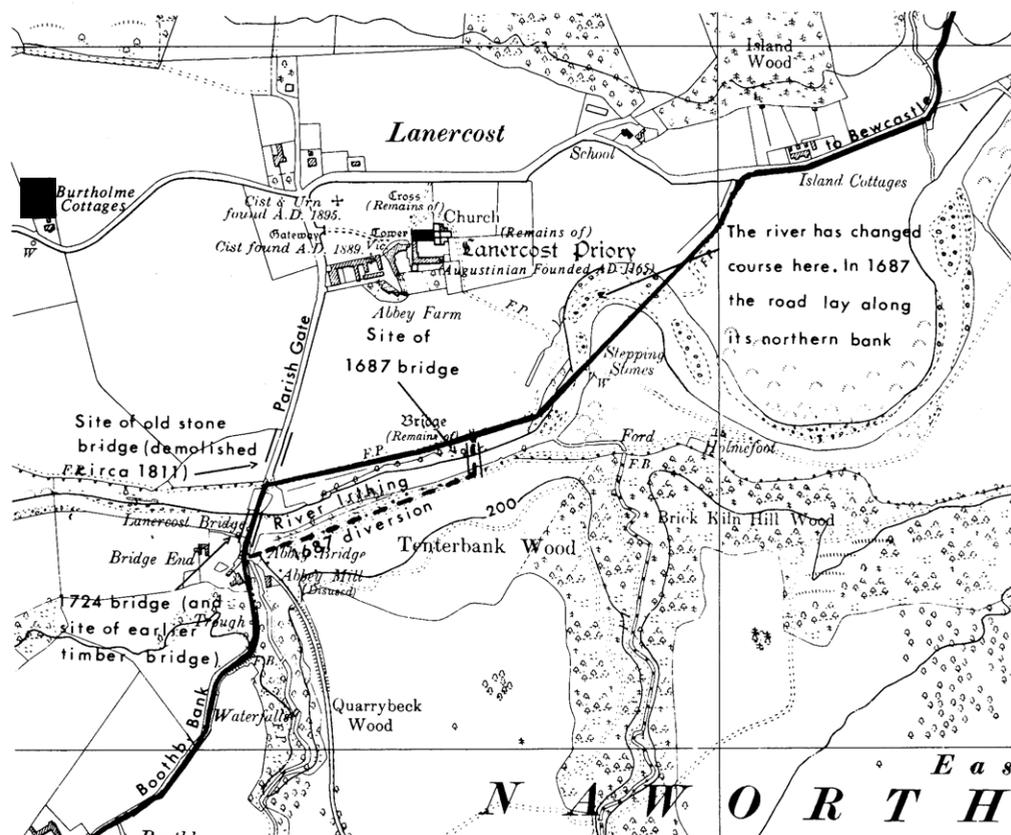


FIG. 3. — The direct route to Bewcastle, with the various bridges and the 1687 diversion, superimposed on the Ordnance Survey Provisional edition 1957, six-inch Sheet NY 56 SE. (Crown Copyright Reserved).

the task successfully, the workmen undertook to maintain the defences for a further seven years. Only then, however, did their problems really begin, for shifting gravel repeatedly undermined their weirs, causing them to complain to Sessions that they had been compelled to spend a great deal more than they had originally allowed for, or been paid by the county to do.¹⁶

The economies which it had been hoped a single bridge might achieve were now shown to be illusory. Not only were the wretched contractors losing money, but their efforts failed utterly to ensure the safety of the bridge itself. By 1698 the situation had become so serious that the constables of Eskdale Ward were required to raise a special purvey for its repair,¹⁷ but they need hardly have bothered, for floods carried away Lanercost Bridge along with that at Irthington, three miles downstream, three years later.

The loss of a single bridge would have been bad enough; the loss of two was a disaster. The parishes of Lanercost and Irthington promptly petitioned “that speedy and effectual care may be taken to have the said Bridges re-built by and at the charge of the County”, it being claimed that “The Inhabitants who live beyond the said River can neither come to Brampton nor any other market in the County to the Ruine of one Thousand families or more”. But the Justices were not to be hustled: still bent on cutting costs, they ordered

three of their number to view the fallen bridges and report "if one Bridge may Serve for both".¹⁸

Little else seems to have happened until 1704, when a decision in principle to re-build the bridge at Irthington led Recorder Aglionby and Gilpin, his deputy, to enquire into the most suitable site there.¹⁹ Alarmed by this turn of events, Lanercost sought new allies, and at Christmas, supported by Brampton, Bewcastle and Stapleton, the parishioners not only petitioned for the replacement of their bridge, but stated precisely where it should be built and what materials were at hand for the purpose:

to have a Bridge over the River Irthing att the Abby where the old wood Bridge antiently was [will] not only be of the most use and convenience for the Country & the Markett of Brampton but of the most Safety to stand & without the Charge of Purchaseinge any way to itt, the old way being yet open which [will] be Convenient for all the Inhabitants before mentioned & for Cattle and other Goods which comes Daily to Brampton Markett out of Scotland & the Borders of England beyond Bewcastle . . . the Stones of the old Bridge wich are left being very neare [will] be very Convenient for the Building of a New Bridge att the place afsd & Lime and all Materialls are much more Convenient there than att any other place wich is proposed to build a Bridge att".²⁰

This petition from the four parishes was sympathetically received by the Justices, who directed:

that a bridge be with all Convenient speed built at the place over the sd River of Irthing att the Abbey where the old wood bridge was formerly and that two Bridge purveys be imediatly raised through the County . . . towards the building and providing of Materialls.^{21, 22}

Having got this far, the petitioners were in no mood to let matters rest, and when nine months elapsed with nothing done, they demanded action.²³ This time, however, Brampton did not join them, and perhaps the incident recounted by Bishop Nicolson in his diary on April 19 1705 explains why:

Sharp Repartees in the morning twixt Mr. Recr. Aglionby and Mr. Gilpin on the subject of the decay'd Bridge at Lennard-Cost wherein the Brampton men be divided.²⁴

Whatever the cause of this Brampton controversy, it seems to have had little influence on events, for by the year's end a contract to build a new bridge at Lanercost had been awarded to John Sheerwood, a Newcastle stonemason. Unhappily however he was unable to furnish the required sureties, and at their Easter sessions in 1706 the Justices were compelled to look elsewhere.²⁵

Whom they appointed, where they built, and with what materials, remains a mystery, for although the Quarter Sessions records during 1706 and 1707 refer often to the re-building of Irthington bridge, they do not mention a bridge at Lanercost again until 1722. Two entries in the Minute Book that year establish, however, that there must have been some sort of a bridge here meanwhile:

4 July 1722 Agreed and ordered by this Court that William Gilpin fferdinando Latus and Joseph Appleby Esqrs or any two of them contract with workmen for repairinge Abbey Leonard Coast Bridge and Gelt bridge.²⁶

and three months later:

3 October 1722 Ordered that Mr. Robert Monkhouse Treasurer of the money raised within the County for repairinge and re-building publick Bridges pay out of the Same to Mr. Mark Murray £15 for turning the River Irthing Above Abbey Leonard Coast Bridge into its right course.²⁷

This may have been a makeshift bridge, built on the ruins of one of the earlier crossings, or it may have been a more substantial structure, as the search for suitable contractors sixteen years earlier implies. In either event its life was short, for at the Easter sessions in 1724 it was directed:

that Joseph Dacre Appleby Esqur, the Rev. Hugh Todd Doctor in Divinity William Gilpin and fferdinando Latus Esqus or any two of them Supervise and direct the undertakers in building of a New Bridge over the River Irthing near Abbey Leonard Coast as near the late falen Bridge as can be with safety.²⁸

The new bridge, which cost the county £493 2s. was built by four local masons, Isaac Monkhouse of Castle Sowerby, William Railton of Raughtonhead, Philip Simpson of Sebergham and Joseph Simpson of Dalston, assisted by two Whitehaven carpenters, Richard Burton and Jacob Monkhouse.²⁹ Apparently it met with general approval, for in the following year the Justices awarded Isaac Monkhouse and his fellow masons a 21-year contract to maintain the public bridges throughout the county.³⁰

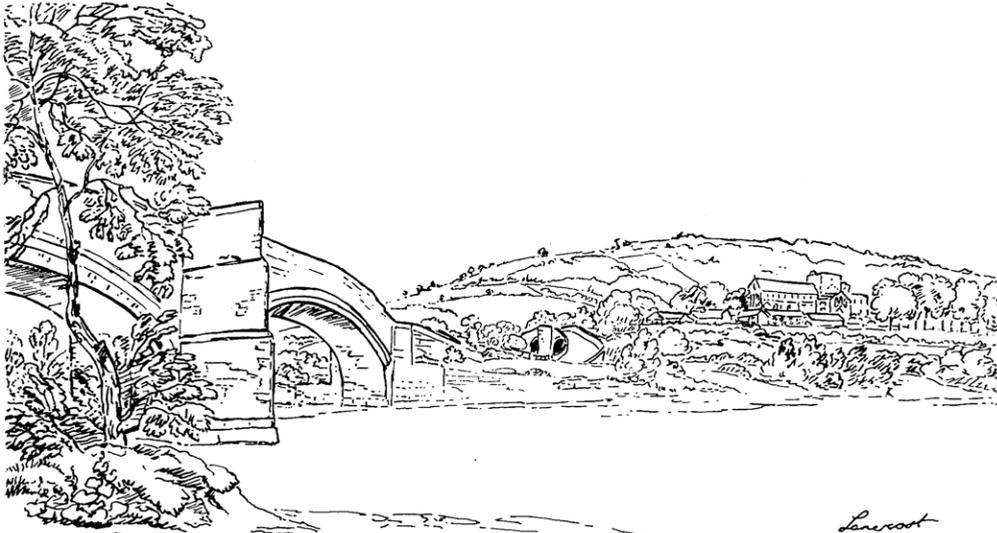


PLATE I. – Lanercost Bridges, a pencil sketch by Joseph Powell, 1806. In the foreground is the 1724 bridge and beyond it the older crossing of the river's northern channel.

That there is not a single entry in any official record relating to repairs at Lanercost during the next 49 years speaks for itself, as does the fact that the bridge withstood the phenomenal flooding which occurred in November 1771, so graphically described in the contemporary report of Lord Carlisle's local agent, Thomas Ramshay:

. . . last Saturday the Rain began in the morning about 4 or 5 O'Clock and continued very heavy without any intermission till near midnight which raised the Waters in general much higher than has been known in the memory of Man and done prodigious damage by distroying and covering Land with Sand carrying away Mill Bays Houses etc. etc. My Lord's Estates near the Water have suffered a great deal . . . It has swept the River Tyne of Bridges (viz.) Alston Bridge, Naresdale do, Featherstone do, Ridley Hall do are all quite demolished. Hadon Bridge part of it gone and the new Bridge at Hexham quite gone, and a part of Newcastle Bridge. If the Accounts we have are true there is not an entire Bridge over the Tyne left but Corbridge and it is damaged.

Glenwelt Bridge is also damaged so as Carriages cannot at present pass over it and part of Chollerford Bridge is destroyed so the Newcastle Waggons were all Stopped. Carlisle Bridges are Standing and the Bridges over the Irthing also, tho' some of them are damaged . . .³¹

Although Lanercost Bridge survived, it must nevertheless have been one of those reported by Thomas Ramshay to be damaged, since sixteen months later the Justices, at their Easter Sessions, minuted that:

. . . the Bridge over the River Irthington (*sic*) called Abby Laner Coast Bridge is and for some time hath been greatly out of Repair and indicted, and if not immediately repaired is in great Danger of being carried away. This Court doth therefore order that it be referred to the Justices of Eskdale and Cumberland Wards or any two of them immediately to contract for the Repair thereof.³²

Soon afterwards a team of Wetheral stonemasons tendered £89 and were awarded the contract.³³

Meanwhile, the much earlier stone bridge across what had once been the northern course of the river had been allowed to fall into decay. The infilling of this channel is plainly portrayed in a map of Lanercost drawn in 1743 (Fig. 1) on which the old bridge is shown to be high and dry in the middle of a gravel bed. The surrounding area may nevertheless have remained susceptible to flooding, for the same map also shows that the road still crossed by the bridge, implying a degree of contemporary use.³⁴

Although the situation was much the same twenty years later (Fig. 2)³⁵ it had altered considerably by the early years of the following century, when a map drawn by John Fryer in 1804 (Fig. 4) places the highway alongside the old bridge instead of over it, and also reveals the enclosure of the adjacent gravel beds.³⁶

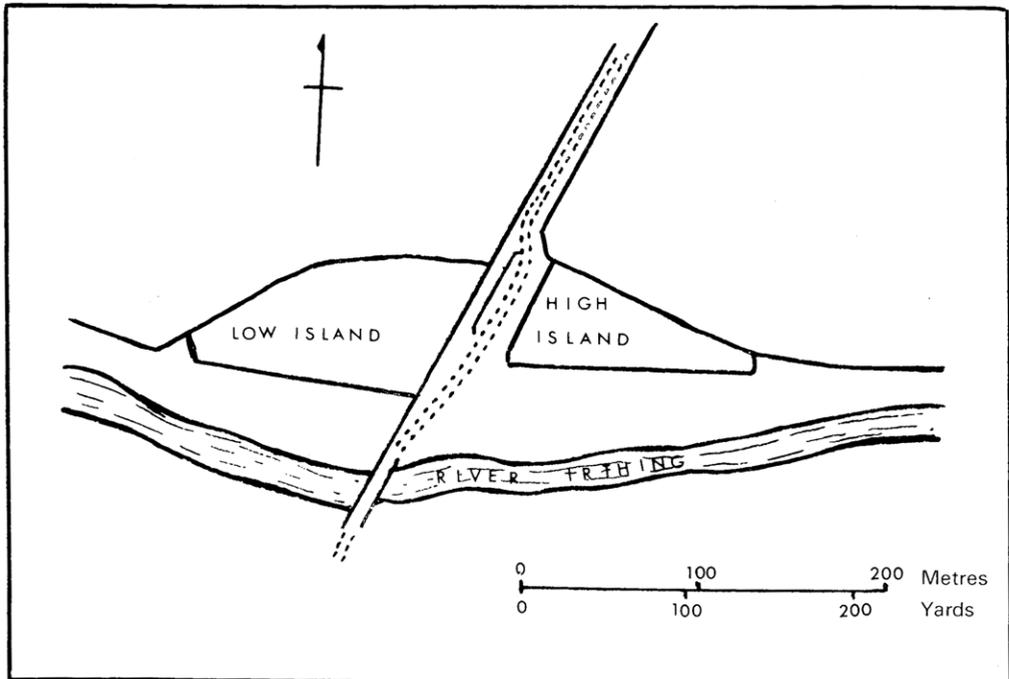


FIG. 4. – Lanercost demesne lands, 1804. Source: HN C202/3.

In spite of the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century it no longer served any useful purpose, this northern bridge survived for several years as a riverside feature. Joseph Powell sketched the bridges in 1806 and his drawing shows that the old northern bridge was remarkably like the 1724 bridge over the main channel we see today. At the Easter Sessions in 1811, however, the Justices instructed two of their number to:

inspect Lanercost bridge and make enquiry respecting the same and in case they think it expedient cause it to be sold.³⁷

This terse direction doubtless marks the demise of the old bridge, and certainly it had been demolished by 1829, since Bowman fails to show it on the map he made of Lanercost that year (Fig. 5).³⁸

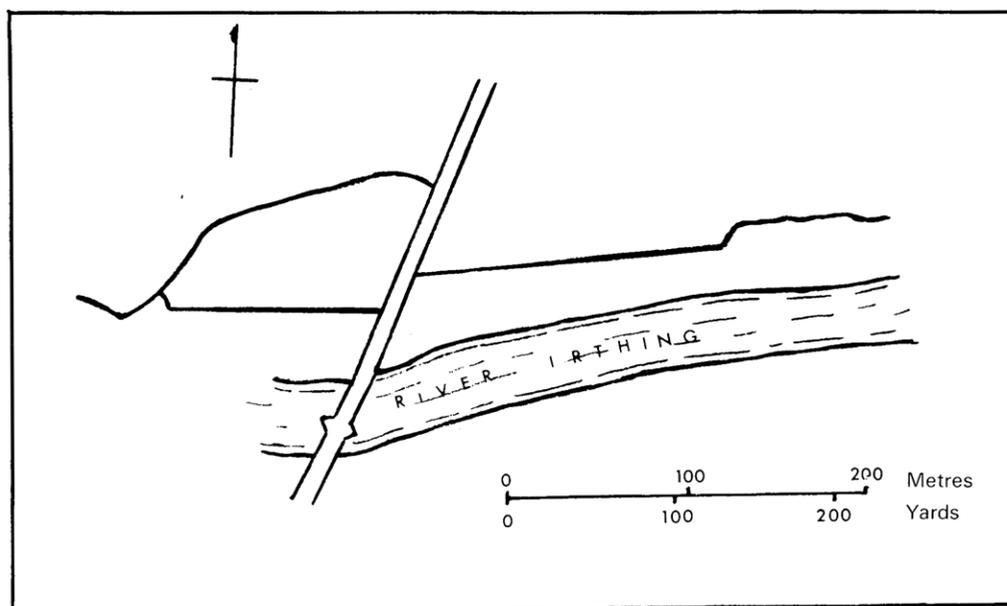


FIG. 5. – Abbey Lanercost 1824. Source: HN Plan (provisional) 25.

Although the northerly bridge no longer exists, its elegant eighteenth-century sister, though deteriorating, still survives, for the moment at least, as a fine monument to a generation of craftsmen whose engineering skills matured in the wake of a growing awareness that the high cost of making and maintaining suitable bridges must increasingly become a public rather than a private responsibility, if the general desire for better communications was to be fulfilled.

Notes and References

¹ *The Municipal Journal*, 15 March 1963, 752.

² E. Jervoise, *Ancient Bridges of the North of England*, (London, 1931), 117.

³ N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England (Cumberland and Westmorland)*, (Harmondsworth, 1967), 157.

⁴ In 1976 it was estimated that £30,000 would be needed to stabilize the structure and prevent further deterioration (full restoration would cost considerably more). At the time of writing (September 1977) the County Council is negotiating with the Department of the Environment for that Department to take the bridge into guardianship.

- ⁵ The Statute of Bridges 1531 (22 *Henry VIII c.5.*).
- ⁶ S. & B. Webb, *The Story of the King's Highway* (London, 1913; reprint of 1963), Chapter VI contains an excellent summary of bridge development in England.
- ⁷ *The Household Books of Lord William Howard of Naworth*, Surtees Society 1877, 212.
- ⁸ Plan accompanying *Lord William Howard's Survey of the Barony of Gilsland, 1603*, Howard of Naworth MSS (hereafter HN), Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic, University of Durham, C 713 (Brampton), and T. H. B. Graham, *The Barony of Gilsland*, CW (Extra Series) xvi.
- ⁹ *The Household Books of Lord William Howard*, op. cit., 215.
- ¹⁰ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/1/1, 1670.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1692.
- ¹² Several other dates are inscribed on the present stone bridge: the dates 1511 and MDCCXXIII on a curiously shaped stone which is built into the parapet of the upstream cutwater, and two more, 1769 and 1794, on the central pier.
- ¹³ S. & B. Webb, op. cit., 93.
- ¹⁴ C.R.O., Carlisle, *Thomas Denton's MS*, D/LONS/L.
- ¹⁵ C.R.O., Carlisle, QS/11, 1700. A petition presented at the Michaelmas Sessions refers to Edward Bell's land, and Lanercost Parish Registers show that he occupied Maryholm at this time.
- ¹⁶ C.R.O., Carlisle, QS/11, 1700.
- ¹⁷ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/1, 1698.
- ¹⁸ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/1, 1701.
- ¹⁹ Report by Aglionby and Gilpin upon the best site for a bridge on the River Irthing, June 1704, HN/C 170/36.
- ²⁰ C.R.O., Carlisle, QS11, 1704.
- ²¹ A single bridge purvey raised £82.86. J. V. Beckett, "Local Custom and New Taxation, Cumberland", *Northern History XII*, 109.
- ²² C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/1, 1704.
- ²³ C.R.O., Carlisle, QS/11, 1704.
- ²⁴ Carlisle Library, Jackson collection. Bishop Nicholson's diaries in MS.
- ²⁵ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/1, 1706.
- ²⁶ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/2, 1722.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1724.
- ²⁹ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/AB/4, 1724.
- ³⁰ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/6/2, 1725.
- ³¹ Letter, 22 November 1771, T. Ramshay to J. Turner, HN/C565/111/1.
- ³² C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/7/3, 1773.
- ³³ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/AB/4, 1773. There is an undated list of Bridge Bonds, CQ/AB/3, which indicates that these repairs related to the southern bridge.
- ³⁴ *A Map of the Abbey Grounds of Lanercost, 1743*, HN Plan 179.
- ³⁵ *A Plan of the Stone bed or lands appertaining to the Abbey Estate lying Eastward from Irthing Bridges, 1763*, HN Plan (provisional) 229.
- ³⁶ *Copy of a Plan of Demesne Lands in the Manor of Lanercost*, surveyed by John Fryer in 1804, HN C 202/3.
- ³⁷ C.R.O., Carlisle, CQ/7/5, 1811.
- ³⁸ E. Bowman's *Plan of Abbey Lanercost, 1829*, HN Plan (provisional) 25.