

Notes on an Ancient Crossing of the Trent between Repton and Willington.

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THE Act of Parliament authorising the building of a bridge over the Trent at Willington received the Royal Assent on August 21st, 1835. Up to the time of its erection the river was bridgeless between Burton and Swarkeston, a distance of ten miles or so. The necessity for the bridge is stated in the preamble; it "will afford a better, safer, and more easy Communication than at present exists between the several places near and adjoining to Willington . . . and will be a work of great public utility."

In August 1836 the first stone was laid by Sir Francis Burdett, M.P., with masonic rites and formalities, and the bridge and new road serving it were opened for public use three years later.

Before touching further on the provisions of the Act, it might be of interest to take a survey of the different means of passage over the Trent at this point previous to the building of the bridge, and of one or two of the topographical and historical problems arising out of their contemplation.

Just south of the river here lay Repton, a considerable place that from early times had been a centre of undoubted importance. Its claims to metropolitan status refer to a very remote period in Repton's history, and hardly concern us here, but during the earlier and later Middle Ages the town occupied, both as the seat of a Priory and

as a busy agricultural community, an assured position in South Derbyshire; with, we may be sure, traffic of considerable volume radiating to most points of the compass. The river-crossings, therefore, must have been of ancient origin.

As regards this question of traffic, it may here be submitted that the "ideal" medieval manor, regarded as an area of land occupied by a self-contained, self-sufficing community producing practically the whole of its own needs within the manorial borders, and with little necessity ever to cross those borders, is no more than a pretty picture drawn by the school-book historian. In fact, it has well been said that the "ideal" manor never existed. A substantial amount of inter-manorial communication, and traffic further afield, must always have been in progress during the medieval period.

Repton's line of approach to Derby and the north, before the bridging of the river, appears to have crossed the Trent at Twyford. The remains of two ancient trackways are traceable across the meadows which separate the two places, and opposite Twyford a green line still leads us right up to the site of the old ford. Originally there must have been two fords as the name indicates. Traffic in a west and north-westerly direction passed over the river at Willington, and it is with this line of route that we are here concerned.

At a time not easily determinable a main channel of the river flowed immediately below the bluff on which Repton Church and Hall stand. This old bed, known locally as the Old Trent Water, can still be followed all the way from just east of Willington Bridge down to its junction with the present main channel a short distance above Twyford Ferry.

At some period, in a way that rivers have, the stream made a "break-through" and formed the shorter and straighter course of to-day. For a very long time,

however, it would use both channels, with an island existing between them.

A good deal of confusion is visible in what some writers have had to say on this question of the Trent's divagation. Alec Macdonald, in his "Short History of Repton," remarks that: "The Old Trent may have been an earlier course of the river, or, more likely, a backwater"—obviously unconscious of the fact that a backwater, or "mortlake," is invariably a disused channel.

Likewise F. C. Hipkins, in his book "Repton and its Neighbourhood," after toying rather fascinatedly with the hackneyed quotation from Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part I, blandly states: "At some time unknown the course of the river was interfered with . . . That it was altered is an undoubted fact. The dam can be traced just below the bridge." Here Hipkins neatly puts the cart before the horse in his implication that the river was diverted by human agency, and that the existence of the dam immediately below Willington bridge is proof.

What appears actually to have happened—and the process can be paralleled at Ingleby and other places, in fact the Burdett map of Derbyshire (1762-7) shows a complete water-girt island opposite Ingleby where no island exists to-day, although its site can easily be picked out—is that the river itself altered its course. Rivers occupying wide valleys are constantly at work preparing "break-throughs" into fresh channels in accordance with their natural laws of oscillation, as described by Lord Avebury in his "Scenery of England." When a break-through occurs two channels will be active for a longer or shorter period, until eventually the older course gradually silts up at the place of fracture, and a point of time is reached when it is only after heavy rainfalls that it contains any volume of water.

This slow silting process at the upper end of the original channel will be accelerated by the intelligent agriculturist,

who objects to seeing his pastures drowned during every exceptional spell of wet weather. He throws a dam across at the point of fracture, with the object of confining the water wholly to its fresh course by keeping it out of the old one; and it is hardly to be doubted that this is the explanation of the dam seen below Willington bridge.

Of the existence of this postulated island we have ample documentary evidence to support the physical remains, but at what date it was formed is a point we will touch on later. Pilkington, in referring to the foundation of Repton Priory, c. 1170, states that one of its endowments was "eight acres of land in an island betwixt Repton and Willington." It does not seem clear, however, whether this endowment was contemporary with the founding of the Priory, or later.

In any case, a deed in the Public Record Office, c. 1265-70, mentions "one rood in the upper isle of Wylinton," (*D.A.J.* Vol. 53, p. 89) which takes us back to within a century of the Priory's foundation. Among other references to the island are the following:—

"1369 . . . grant all their tenements and arable lands in the town and fields of Repton and Willington holme." (*D.A.J.*, Vol. 36, p. 112).

"1432 . . . lands etc: in the towns and fields of Repyngton, Meleton, and Willyngton holme." (*Jeayes Charters*: No. 1989).

"1539 . . . the Goseflattes in le Netherholme." (*D.A.J.* Vol. 53, p. 79).

"1550 . . . a parcel of pasture called the Swan's Nest in the Overholme." (*D.A.J.* Vol. 53, p. 82).

It may here be pointed out that the term "holme," signifying an island in a river, is not uncommon along the Derbyshire Trent. Broadholme, which is spanned by Burton's long bridge, Cat Holme and Borough Holme, both between Walton and Croxall, are instances that occur to the mind. Repton was in the Danelaw, as many local place-name terminations testify.

From these extracts seems to emerge the fact that there were, for a period of some centuries at least, not one but *two* islands in this part of the Trent. This will occasion no surprise to those who have made even a superficial study of the topography of the river-meadows hereabout, where the multiplicity of ancient dry channels serves more to perplex than to enlighten the student.

The ford that took Repton's traffic over the river to Willington and beyond was situated about four or five hundred yards below the present bridge. It was approached from Repton along the Steinyard Lane, which skirts the School's principal playing-field on the east, following the line of the brook as far as the Old Trent Water. It then crosses the meadows to a point on the river bank opposite the eastern boundary of Willington Hall grounds. On the Willington, or northern, bank the gentle slope to the water's edge remains as it was, as does also the hollow of the ancient trackway leading up into Willington.

On the Repton, or southern, side the bank is unbrokenly precipitous, but this is explained by an injunction in the Bridge Act, which orders the Trustees to "stop up the ford . . . to make the river deeper at that part and to slope (i.e. steepen) the banks . . . for the purpose of preventing the said ford being used." It was, of course, necessary to do this on one side of the river only to render the ford impassable to traffic.

The other crossing to Willington was by means of a ferry which used to function about four hundred yards above the bridge. It was approached along Tanner's Lane, on which the Repton Laundry now stands. The double-hedged lane dies into the meadows, but the track beyond this point is easily distinguishable by means of the stopping short of the old plough "lands" at the line of the vanished hedgerow.

On an Ordnance Survey map published in 1836 both

ferry and ford are shewn, and on the ferry site a small building in an enclosure is marked. This would doubtless be the ferryman's cottage, and although it has now disappeared a formation of raised earth on the Willington bank still points to the spot it occupied.

There seems to be no evidence as to the date the ferry was established. The earliest reference to it I have come across is in a lease, dated 1674, which mentions "4 acres of meadow abutting on Ferry Acre." (*D.A.J.*, Vol. 36, p. 119).

A competent local writer on matters archaeological has recently expressed the view that he cannot believe the Old Trent Water was functioning in medieval days, which statement presumably carries the corollary that the present channel dates from ante-medieval times. It is, of course, clear that any area of land that had at one time been an island might conceivably retain the geographical label long after it ceased to be an island in fact. And this might well apply to the references to Willington "holme" from the 13th to the 16th century, already quoted.

Although admittedly a difficult problem, and one not to be dogmatised on either way, some light appears to be shed on it by a licence granted to the Canons of Repton by the Earl of Chester in the first half of the 13th century, which gave them "licence to fish in the water of Trent below his house" (*Jeayes' Charters*: No. 1954), and it is a legitimate assumption that this can only refer to the Old Trent Water, and that it was, therefore, a fishable stream at that date.

There is another fact to be considered. The parish boundary between Repton and Willington leaves the present course of the river just below the bridge, and runs, a hundred yards or more to the south, along an ancient bed whose lower end is studded with willows and still harbours a considerable amount of water in wet

weather. This old bed and the parish boundary together link up with the present channel a short distance lower down.

Now it is surely a logical deduction that this old course would be an active bed of the river, not shewing any signs of cessation, when the territorial boundary was laid along it. This brings us into a highly speculative field of enquiry. When were our parish boundaries formed? Dr. J. C. Cox writes: "So far as England is concerned, the parochial divisions . . . began to be established in the 10th century." Prof. G. M. Trevelyan states that: "Before the Norman Conquest most of the island was supplied with parish churches and parish priests."

Taking the 10th or 11th century, therefore, as an approximate date at which what we may term the "parish boundary" channel was the principal stream—a stream not then shewing signs of decrepitude—and bearing in mind the 13th century licence to the Canons of Repton, we appear to have reasonable grounds for considering the likelihood of this stream and the Old Trent Water both functioning in, at least, early medieval days—and possibly well into the Middle Ages.

The Act passed for the erection of the river-bridge, which rang the death-knell of ford and ferry alike, contains some curious sidelights on things as they were a century ago. It first proceeds to appoint all the Justices of the Peace for Derbyshire as Trustees for its execution. Many local names, still well-known in Derbyshire, figure in the list, including Sir Francis Burdett, Sir Henry Every, Thomas Allsopp, Edmund Lewis Crewe, John Herrick Macaulay (the then Headmaster of Repton School and first cousin to the historian), Hugo Meynell, Reginald Chandos Pole, Francis Ward Spilsbury, and the Hon. George John Vernon. It was directed that the Trustees should hold their first meeting at the Mitre Inn, Repton, and all subsequent meetings within four miles of Willington Church.

The Bridge must be built "of stone, iron, bricks, or other durable materials," and must be erected within four hundred and fifty yards eastwardly of Willington ferry. The Trustees, or the persons contracting with them, were empowered "to dig and make proper foundations in the said river, and on the lands on each side thereof, for the piers and abutments of the said Bridge," and to cut and remove any impediments whatsoever which might hinder its erection.

The statement in Lysons' (1817)—repeated by Glover (1829) in effect—that the boat traffic between Shardlow and Burton was discontinued in 1805 by arrangement with the proprietors of the Trent and Mersey Canal, reads rather strangely with the clause in the Act which enjoins that "no interruption or impediment shall be caused to the navigation of the said river, or the hauling path on the sides thereof, for a longer space of time than shall be absolutely necessary."

The explanation may be sought in the fact that a renewed lease of the Trent Navigation to the Burton Boat Company was granted in 1784, and that "this lease . . . expired on the death of Samuel Lloyd in 1849." (See Molyneux's "Burton-on-Trent," p. 115). The clause appears to have been a protective one inserted to safeguard the interests of the Burton Boat Company. It is possible, also, that a certain amount of localised traffic may have persisted after 1805.

It was usual at that time for road repairs to be the responsibility of the parishes and the upkeep of bridges a charge on the counties. But it is expressly stated in the Act that the new bridge shall not be deemed a County Bridge, and that neither the county nor the parishes concerned shall be liable for its maintenance. This question of repairs will be glanced at later.

As, by reason of the erection of the bridge, the roads leading to the ferry would be rendered useless and the

parishes responsible for them relieved of a burden, it was directed that those parishes should take over the upkeep of the new road leading to the bridge to within one hundred and fifty yards of its centre on either side.

It was declared unlawful for any person to build another bridge, or establish a ferry, or make a ford, within a distance of one mile from the new bridge. And if any person should, for hire, convey horse, beast, waggon, cart &c: over the river within one mile of the bridge, he must forfeit a sum not exceeding five pounds; of which sum half went to the informer and half to the Treasurer of the Trustees.

Before they can erect a toll-bar, the Trustees are ordered to treat with the proprietors of the ferry "and the tolls now taken there," for its purchase.

The financial side of the undertaking is set forth at great length, and can only be summarised here. A sum of £8000, as the probable cost of the bridge and the attendant expenses, was to be raised by the Trustees by public subscription. This sum to be divided into 400 shares of £20 each, and the interest payable was not to exceed 8 per cent. per annum. Interest and repayment of principal were to be met out of the bridge tolls, but the expenses of maintaining the bridge and its works were to be a first charge on the receipts.

After all financial demands were met—cost of toll-collection, repairs to the structure, payment of interest on shares—and the resulting surplus amounted to £100, the Trustees could apply this sum to the extinction and discharge of shares, "unto such shareholders as shall be determined by lot or ballot," and this procedure was to be maintained until the whole of the shares were paid off.

When this position had been reached the Trustees were to place further surpluses in the public funds, until a sum of £500 had been accumulated as a fund against unforeseen accidents to the bridge. Toll would then cease to be

payable by the public. But if the fund of £500 had to be expended on exceptional repairs, and it became necessary to borrow money in consequence, then the tolls were to be re-imposed.

The Trustees, after making satisfaction for the ferry and its tolls, were instructed to erect a toll-gate or toll-bar on the bridge or near it. The provisions regulating the procedure of toll-collection make interesting reading. No toll was payable in the case of conveyances transporting "produce of lands" across the river. Also toll-free was the transport of "any dung, soil, compost, manure, or lime" intended for the improvement of land lying within four miles of the bridge. On material for use on land beyond that limit half toll was to be charged.

His Majesty or any member of the Royal Family could cross without payment. This also applied to "mails of letters or expresses" under the authority of His Majesty's Postmaster-general. Other toll-free passengers were soldiers upon duty, prisoners in custody, volunteers and yeomanry cavalry in certain circumstances, and any person going to or returning from any election of a knight or knights of the shire on the day or days of the election.

Provision was made for the Trustees, at their discretion, to let to farm the bridge tolls, for a term not exceeding three years, upon public bidding or private tender. Should any lessee or renter of the tolls depart from the table of charges affixed to the collector's house, he was liable to a fine up to five pounds for each offence. Specified acts of misbehaviour by the collector carried penalties, as did assault or obstruction of the collector by users of the bridge.

An examination of the table of tolls laid down in the Act reveals some curious and interesting items. If the wheel of a conveyance measured between three and four and a half inches across the toll charged was ninepence; up to six inches, sevenpence, and so on. The broader the

wheel the smaller the charge, because it more effectively acted as a roller to the benefit of the road surface. A toll of one shilling was payable on a "coach, stage-coach, chariot, chaise, berlin, landau, sociable, curricle, calash, phaeton, whiskey, gig, or chair"—names which are now largely mere dictionary-words, with little beyond a historical interest.

In 1898 Willington Bridge was freed from toll by public subscription. The only relics now remaining, so far as I am aware, to remind us of its former state are the toll-house by the bridgehead, the painted board of tolls, at the time of writing housed in Repton church vestry (with its face to the wall!), and a formidable wooden bar, bristling with iron spikes, which surmounts a garden wall in Milton lane at Repton.