

EASTCOTT BRIDGE, TETCOTT BARTON FARM, DEVON
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

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by

Stewart Brown and Anita Travers

SUMMARY

Eastcott bridge dates from the 17th or early 18th century and appears on Donn's 1765 map of Devon. It was substantially rebuilt in 1842. The bridge was erected by the Tetcott manor estate to connect landholdings to the west and east of the River Tamar.

THE PROJECT

The archaeological assessment of the bridge was undertaken by Stewart Brown. Documentary research was carried out by Dr. Anita Travers. The work was conducted as part of a management plan associated with a Countryside Stewardship scheme funded by Natural England. The assessment provides historical background information to accompany survey drawings and a report on the bridge's present structural condition by Bill Harvey. The photographs of the bridge were taken by Stewart Brown in May 2009. The site archive is stored at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon (accession number NDDMS2010.27. An online copy of the report is available (OASIS ref. Stewartb1-76044).

DESCRIPTION

The bridge comprises two river arches and two smaller flood arches set within a raised approach causeway to the east. The river arches are low rise segmental in shape and have plain soffits and single arch rings (Plates 1 and 2). The pier between the river arches has a pointed cutwater both upstream and downstream. On the upstream side, the top of the cutwater abuts the arch voussoirs to each side, showing that it was built up after the arches had been constructed. Above the cutwaters are pilaster buttresses rising to the top of the parapet walls (Plate 3). A further pair of pilaster buttresses rise from the river bank between the main river channel and the flood arches (Plate 4). A remnant of another buttress survives toward the east end of the bridge on its north side. The two flood arches are also low rise segmental in shape and vaulted with hand-made brick. The flood arch nearest the river is still open and carries floodwater conveyed to it by a ditch dug through the presently wooded area upstream (Plates 5-7). The channel beneath the arch retains remnants of slate stone flagging intended to prevent scouring beneath the foundations (Plate 8). There are also a few individual flagstones surviving along the bottom of the ditch close to the bridge. A low revetment wall extends northwards from the flood arch on the west side of the ditch (Plate 6). The easternmost flood arch is now disused and largely choked with sediment (Plates 9 and 10). The parapet walls of the bridge are capped with hand-made brick, but the capping has been repaired on numerous occasions, in places with later industrial brick, in others with stone (Plate 11). A few cobbles are visible at the east end of the bridge roadway, presumably part of the original paving (Plate 12).

The bridge is built of uncoursed random rubble. The building stone comes from the local Culm Measures comprising grey sandstone and shale beds which outcrop in the river bank next to the bridge. The mortar used in its construction is a light brown or buff-coloured lime mortar containing coarse river gravel aggregate. This appears in the masonry of all parts of

the bridge, although darker in shade where damp. The bridge has been re-pointed on numerous occasions in the past two centuries. Some of the earliest re-pointing was carried out with white lime mortar containing fine gravel aggregate. Later re-pointing used cementaceous mortars. There has also been some modern underpinning of the central pier and eastern abutment with shuttered concrete.

DATE

The earliest parts of the bridge comprise the central pier and the two abutments up to the level of the arch springing. The pier is slender by comparison with those of medieval and early post-medieval bridges and more characteristic of bridges built in the 17th and 18th centuries. The remains of the first bridge cannot be dated closely but it would be surprising if it had stood for long before it appeared on Donn's map of 1765.

A large sum of money was spent on the bridge in 1842 (see Documentary Background, below). This must represent a substantial rebuilding. There can be little doubt that the rebuilding comprised the construction of the present two river arches, the parapets above, and the approach causeway to the east containing the two brick-vaulted flood arches.

This upper part of the bridge shows a number of features strongly suggestive of an 18th- or early 19th-century date. These include the pilaster buttresses, the low-rise segmental shape of the arches, and the hand-made brick vaults of the flood arches. Pilaster buttresses are not found in medieval or early post-medieval bridges, but are neoclassical features commonly used in 18th- and early 19th-century bridges, such as the turnpike bridges at Calves Bridge, Chelfham Bridge, Higher and Lower Cherrybrook Bridges and Post Bridge, which were likewise built of plain uncoursed random rubble (Thomas 1992, 187). Low-rise segmental arches gradually replaced earlier semicircular or high-rise segmental arches in the post-medieval period. Hand-made brick occurs as early as the 17th century in Devon towns and grand country houses but generally very rarely in rural contexts before the 18th century. In Cornwall, brick was uncommon in the countryside before the 19th century. By the mid 19th century hand-made brick had been replaced by industrially produced, higher-fired and harder brick such as that used to repair the bridge parapet capping.

These physical characteristics provide a date range for the rebuilding spanning the 18th and first half of the 19th century, but considering the large expenditure made on the bridge in 1842, it would appear highly likely that the rebuilding took place at this time, especially in view of the lack of evidence for other major repairs. It may well be that a private bridge in such a secluded location adopted architectural features found in bridges already existing elsewhere in the locality.

There are therefore two phases of construction represented in the standing structure: 1/ remains from a 17th- or early 18th-century bridge comprising the central pier with its cutwaters and the lower parts of the two abutments; and 2/ the rebuilding of 1842 comprising all the masonry and brickwork above arch-springing level, including both river arches, the parapet and its pilaster buttresses, and the causeway to the east containing the two flood arches. All the minor repairs to the structure are of later 19th- and 20th-century date.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE BRIDGE

The bridge lies a little over 1km to the south-west of Tetcott Manor, a few hundred metres to the west of Tetcott mill (now derelict) and its mill leat. There was formerly a lane leading down to the bridge from the manor house and another leading from the mill to the bridge, but these have now disappeared. Upstream from the bridge is a small plot of woodland which has had a number of ditches dug through it leading to the bridge's flood arches. One of the ditches cuts across the line of an earlier hedgebank which flanks the river for about 1 km and once provided a measure of flood protection for the adjacent meadows. Some 20m to the west of the bridge are the remains of the early 19th-century Bude Canal (Plate 13). The canal is now an earthwork feature comprising a channel on average 1m deep with a raised bank, formerly the towpath, on its east. It runs for a short distance parallel with the river then turns westward at the bridge, suggesting that it was brought intentionally to the closest accessible point at which to offload cargo destined for Tetcott manor. To the north are the remains of an incline plane associated with the canal. A little upstream from the bridge, the western river bank of the Tamar has been revetted by a stone wall (Plate 14). The wall cannot be closely dated but it may well have been associated with the canal's construction.

The building of the bridge was clearly an undertaking of the Tetcott estate. It has never been linked to public roads or maintained by a local authority. Its principal purpose was to connect estate landholdings to each side of the Tamar. The estate held considerable lands in Cornwall as well as Devon. The bridge is likely to have lain on one of the private drives or rides leading out from the manor house, so that the owners and their guests could enjoy the countryside without ever leaving estate property. It was also used by the local hunt, which is known to have been centred at Tetcott. There were kennels on the lane leading down to the bridge until recently. The bridge may have had a secondary use for moving stock across the river.

DOCUMENTARY BACKGROUND

Records were consulted at: Cornwall Record Office; Devon Record Office; Plymouth and West Devon Record Office; and the Westcountry Studies Library at Exeter. Copies of maps were provided by the Cornwall Centre, Redruth. Archives relating to the Tetcott estate are deposited at Cornwall Record Office. They are box-listed, but not as yet catalogued systematically, so research on particular topics such as the bridge at Eastcott is difficult and time-consuming. The most likely boxes were sampled but this may have omitted some evidence.

The only reference found in the archive to work on the bridge occurs in 1842, when £112. 12s. was spent on Eastcott Bridge, and £15 two years later (Cornwall RO MA/BOX/22). This was evidently a substantial repair since the cost of building a completely new bridge over the nearby River Deer in 1825, together with a road leading to it, was £243.10s. In 1849 the cost of building the farm house destroyed by fire was £342. 5. 0, which again suggests work on the bridge was considerable. The rebuilding may have been connected with severe weather late in 1839. The *Exeter Flying Post* reported 14 November 1839: 'In consequence of the very heavy rains that have fallen of late, the rivers, tributary streams, and brooks, have caused the low-lands in this County to be much overflowed by the great rise in the waters, and much has been the damage Several of the small bridges on these rivers and streams have also been much damaged, and it has been the wonder how many have stood the heavy torrents of water.' The report refers to lowlands, and is oriented perhaps to the locality of Exeter, but the Tamar too may have been affected.

Map Evidence

The earliest map to show the bridge is Donn's 1765 map of Devon, on which it is labelled simply 'a Bridge'. The bridge is not shown on Martin's *New Map of Cornwall* 1748, but this does not indicate every bridge that existed at the time. A fragmentary plan of 1817 shows 'Eastcott Bridge', and a track leading from it through Eastcott wood passing Vale House (now Veal House) on the Cornwall side of the river (Cornwall RO QS/PDH/1/3). Martyn's second edition map of Cornwall 1827 includes the bridge. The bridge is shown on the 1837 tithe map for Tetcott, with a track leading to it (DRO Tetcott tithe map and award). It is shown on the 25 inch series of OS maps.

The Tetcott estate and hunt

The Tetcott estate was owned by the Arscott family until 1788 when it passed to the Molesworths of Pencarrow, Cornwall (Cherry and Pevsner 1989, 802). The Arscott family not only owned large tracts of land in Cornwall, they liked to hunt on it, as celebrated in verse by the Rev. Robert Stephan Hawker, of Morwenstowe. The poem begins.....

'On the ninth of November, in the year fifty-two
Three jolly fox-hunters, all sons of true blue,
They rode from Pencarrow . . . ' (Hawker, 1879, pp186-189)

A slightly different version occurs in JR Powell's manuscript notes:

'In the month of November, in the year seventy-two
Three jolly Foxhunters, all sons of the blue
They came from Pencarrow, not fearing a wet coat
For (to) have some diversion with Arscott, of Tetcott.

He took them to his kennel and shewed them his hounds
On Monday, said Arscott, our joys have no bounds.
I've horses and footmen that can go to the ground
Both horses and footmen and staunch metal hounds.' (WSL JR Powell MS notes vol xiv)

Both versions go on to indicate that the hunt was into Cornwall. It is entirely plausible that one reason for the construction of Eastcott Bridge was the convenience of getting horses and hounds from the main house across the Tamar to good hunting country.

THE BUDE CANAL

When the Bude Canal was projected, Sir Arscott Molesworth was a subscriber. Work on the section of the canal from Tamerton Bridge to Druyton, passing by Tetcott, was commenced in the summer of 1824 (Harris and Ellis 1972, 46-7). A set of ten detailed plans of the canal were made in 1826, but unfortunately the one covering Tetcott is now missing (Cornwall RO DC/NC/15/42-450).

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