

AN HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF TARR STEPS, EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK

PROJECT REPORT

By Hazel Riley



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tarr Steps is a clapper bridge, built entirely from local stones, which crosses the river Barle between Withypool and Dulverton. This study has used recent documentary research and field investigation to suggest that Tarr Steps was built in the 15th or 16th centuries to provide a dry way across the river by a long established ford. The bridge provided access to a water grist mill, sited close to the Barle on the Hawkridge side of the river, and a leat, over 1.5km long, which can still be seen in North Barton Wood, channelled water from West Water to drive the water wheel.

This study has also set out in detail the history of Tarr Steps in the 19th and 20th centuries, putting the repairs of 2013 in context. Over 280 photographs, drawings and paintings have been examined from 11 collections, providing a visual record of the structure and its condition from 1827 to the present day.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

District: West Somerset

Parish: Withypool and Hawkridge; Dulverton

Exmoor HER: MSO8673

Scheduled Monument: EH National Heritage List for England 1021325

Listed Building: EH National Heritage List for England 1058008

EH National Monuments Record: SS 83 SE 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Location and topography

Tarr Steps bridges the river Barle between Withypool and Dulverton below Tarr Farm at SS 8676 3211 (Fig 1). It lies on the boundary of the parishes of Withypool and Hawkridge and Dulverton, in Exmoor National Park. Here, the Barle has cut a deeply incised, winding valley with steep sides which are mainly wooded, with enclosed fields or open common land on the ridge tops and plateaux above the tree line (Fig 2). At Tarr Steps, meadow or pasture fields lie on both sides of the river and a small tributary of the Barle, Little River, enters the main river just downstream of the bridge (Fig 3).

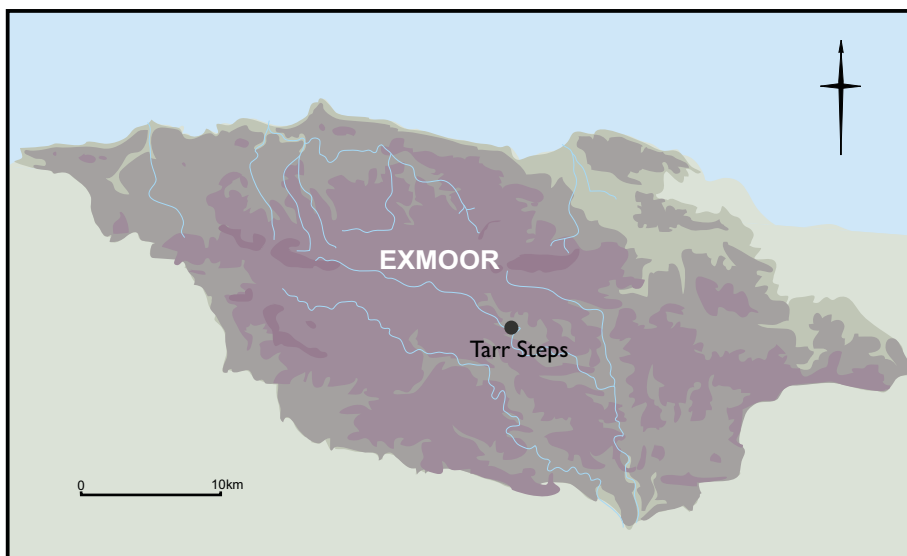


Fig 1 Location map

Ownership and maintenance philosophy

Tarr Steps and the ford upstream of the bridge are recorded as 'public highway,' meaning that ownership and maintenance responsibilities lie with the Highway Authority – Somerset County Council. The story of Tarr Steps set out below shows how the structure has, at various times, been displaced, damaged, or wholly washed away. Its importance is emphasised by the tradition that the farmers of both parishes used to remove fallen timber and replace displaced stones at Tarr Steps (Sweetapple-Horlock 1939, 3). Reinforcing the bridge or bolting the stones down to the bedrock have been considered, but Somerset County Council bridge engineers now see Tarr Steps as a good example of a structure with 'a wonderful self defence mechanism. The stones are knocked and relatively harmlessly dislodged.' Reassembling the stones is not as difficult as it once was, given modern lifting equipment: Tarr Steps could be knocked down and rebuilt many times before the cost of a new bridge is met (Radford 2013).

Stone numbering schemes

A tradition exists locally that the stones which make up Tarr Steps are numbered. The present County Bridges and Structures team have not seen numbers actually on the clapper stones, but say that 'each spanning stone is uniquely referenced meaning that they know in detail what the stones look like and where they should go' (Radford 2013). A lantern slide in the SANHS collection shows that the stone piers, not the clapper stones, were numbered. Underneath a photograph of Tarr Steps which has been inked over, the numbers 1-16 are written under each pier, beginning with pier 1 on the Hawkridge side of the structure. The photograph was taken in the late 19th/early 20th century, but it is not known when the numbers were added (SRO SANHS lantern slide neg no 10425). The survey carried out before the 1949 reconstruction numbers the piers, beginning from the Dulverton side, and showing piers 1-13 as several of the central piers were washed away in January 1940 (Figs 27 and 28).

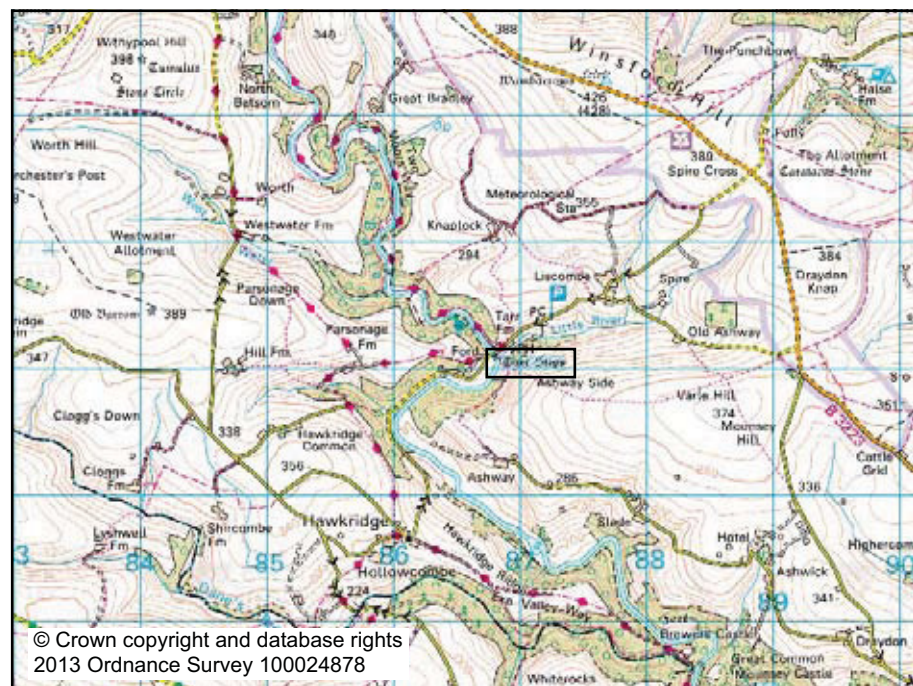


Fig 2 Tarr Steps: location and topography

AIMS, SCOPE AND METHODS OF STUDY

This study was carried out on behalf of the Exmoor National Park Authority, following damage to Tarr Steps in December 2012 when severe flooding swept away about half of the structure. The aim of the study is four-fold:

- 1 To improve our understanding of the structure of Tarr Steps and its historic landscape context
- 2 To gain a better insight into the possible age of Tarr Steps and the reasons for its construction
- 3 To help understand how the bridge has altered through damage by flooding and river debris and through the subsequent repairs and the action of the river itself
- 4 To help understand the historical and mythical significance of Tarr Steps (Exmoor National Park Authority 2013)

The study considered several types of evidence:

- 1 Unpublished documents held at the SRO, Somerset Heritage Centre (listed in detail below)
- 2 Material published online from the Victoria County History for Somerset
- 3 Published accounts of Tarr Steps and the area
- 4 EH National Monuments Records and Listed Building Records for Tarr Steps and its immediate environs
- 5 EH National Heritage List for England
- 6 Material held at the Exmoor HER
- 7 Collections of photographs (listed in detail below)
- 8 Online search for images of Tarr Steps by artists associated with recording the landscape and life of Exmoor (listed in detail below)
- 9 The results of an archaeological survey of the woodland around Tarr Steps undertaken on behalf of ENPA (McDonnell 2004)
- 10 The results of a walkover survey of the immediate environs of Tarr Steps, informed by a consideration of the above material, undertaken by the author in March 2013

Exmoor National Park Authority appealed for information, photographs and paintings or drawings of Tarr Steps in January/February 2013 when interest in Tarr Steps was high because of press coverage of the damage in December 2012 and its subsequent repair in February 2013.

The collections of photographs relating to Exmoor studied in detail were:

- The SRO index to the SANHS collections held at the Somerset Heritage Centre
- The Alfred Vowles collection, held at the Somerset Heritage Centre (A/BMS Box 1)
- The Exmoor Photographic Archive, held at the Heritage Centre, Dulverton
- The Exmoor Society collections, held at the Parish Rooms, Dulverton

A photographic record of Tarr Steps and its immediate environs was made in March and May 2013. No metric survey was undertaken but taped measurements of various components of Tarr Steps were taken to resolve conflicting or unclear dimensions given in various accounts and records.

DESCRIPTION OF TARR STEPS

Tarr Steps is a clapper bridge (see below), constructed entirely of stone, across the River Barle. A ford across the river lies immediately upstream of the bridge (Frontispiece). Tarr Steps is built of local stones, identified in 1884 as gritstones from the Pickwell Down basement beds (PSANHS 29 (1884), 62-6). Large slabs of this stone are available in the immediate vicinity of Tarr Steps, both in and around the river bed and as outcrops of rock on both sides of the Barle between Tarr Steps and the footbridge by Westwater Copse. These have been used to create walkways or causeways alongside the river as well as three small clapper bridges (Figs 3 and 4).

The bridge has three distinct components: the large flat stone slabs or clappers which form the causeway; the piers which rest on the river bed and support the clapper stones, and the raking stones, which are stones placed against the piers to protect them against the direct action of the river currents (Fig 5). A stone causeway leads from the tarmac roads on both sides of the river (Fig 6).

Tarr Steps is 38.5m long, measured from river bank to river bank. The total length of the structure, including the stone causeways on both sides of the river, is 58m. There are 16 stone piers and 17 spans of clapper stones. Twelve of the spans are single stone slabs; four are double stone slabs, one is made of three stones: a total of 23 individual clapper stones (Fig 7). The clapper stones are large, rectangular slabs, c 2.3-2.8m long, 0.6-1.3m wide and 0.10-0.32m thick. The piers, which are built on the river bed, are on average 2m apart and 1m high. They are built of stone blocks and are c 2-2.3m long, 0.6-0.7m wide and 0.7m thick. The raking stones (also known as 'catchwaters') are massive stone slabs placed against the piers (Fig 5). These help to hold the clapper stones in place as well as deflecting water flow and debris under or, at times, over the structure. The total weight of the stone that makes up Tarr Steps is estimated at c 50 tonnes (Radford 2013).



Fig 3 Clapper bridge across West Water at its confluence with the Barle (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)



Fig 4 Stone causeway on the left bank of the Barle below Watery Lane (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)



Fig 5 Detail of the bridge showing the clapper stones, piers and raking stones on upstream side (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)



Figure 6 Stone causeway approach to Tarr Steps on the Dulverton side of the river (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Clapper bridges

Clapper bridges are structures designed to carry a trackway across a river by means of one, or more, large, flat stone slabs, either resting directly on the river banks or supported on drystone piers. They were used by pedestrians and by packhorses and are often on the route of a known packhorse track (EH National Heritage List 1021325). On Dartmoor some of the earliest examples are associated with the tinworking industry and have been dated to the 13th or 14th century (Gill 1970, 187; Worth 1953, 368-71). Clapper bridges continued to be constructed into the post medieval period on Dartmoor – one was built in 1808 over the North Teign River to give access to the newly established Teignhead Farm (Gill 1970, 187).

Dating Tarr Steps

The date of Tarr Steps has been the subject of some debate in the past. In the early part of the 20th century Boyd-Dawkins and Gray considered it to be a Bronze Age monument because of the convergence of trackways – which they thought to be Bronze Age in origin - towards Tarr Steps. Grinsell, reviewing the evidence in 1970, suggested a medieval or later date for Tarr Steps (Grinsell 1970, 150).

An early route across this part of Exmoor is recorded in the early 13th century. In 1219 the 'great way' ran from Road Castle near Exford, by Wambarrow, on the top of Winsford Hill, and so on between the two Ashways to the Barle (MacDermot 1973, 12). The crossing point of the Barle could have been at Tarr Steps or, as MacDermot suggests, further downstream at Three Waters. The names 'Tarr' or 'Tarr' Steps are not mentioned in this document.

Although Hawkridge is described as 'difficult for a stranger to find' in the late 18th century (McDermott and Berry 2011), by the mid-14th century until the 18th century



Fig 7 Single and double spans of clapper stones at the Dulverton side of Tarr Steps (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)

(sometime before 1797) one of the two annual Forest courts was held at Hawkridge and Withypool. In the morning of the Friday in the week of Pentecost the court assembled in Hawkridge churchyard and adjourned to Withypool in the afternoon (MacDermot 1973, 205). Some of the people who were obliged to attend these courts had to travel some distance, for example from Cleeve Abbey (Dunning undated). A river crossing to access Hawkridge was therefore well established in the medieval and post medieval periods. By the 18th century, the crossing of the Barle at Tarr was important enough to be shown on a county map of Somerset (Fig 8), and a road led directly from the river crossing to the church at Hawkridge.

The name 'Tarr' or 'Torr(e)' occurs in Devon where it refers to a cliff or steep, rocky hill or a rough stream or river. The river names Torr Brook and Torridge are derived from the word 'torri' which means to break – hence a violent, rough stream (Gover et al 1969, 14-5). Both of these meanings could be applied to the topography at Tarr Steps, but the latter is the most likely. The river Barle is cutting down at Tarr Steps and the noise of the river, especially when it is in flood, is amplified by the shape of the valley.

The 14th-century Lay Subsidy Rolls for Devon contain several instances of people who take their names from these topographic features, for example John atte Torre lived at the present day Torr Farm at Whitchurch in 1330 (Gover et al 1969, 251). The 1327 Lay Subsidy Rolls for Somerset list 'Thomas atte Torre' in the parish of Dulverton, suggesting that a settlement on the Dulverton side of the Barle - Tarr Farm - was in existence by this date (Dickinson 1889, 247). A house called Torr Steps is mentioned in 1644 and Tarr or Tarr Steps farm was recorded in the 18th century (Siraut undated). Two photographs of Tarr Farm, taken by Alfred Vowles, c 1911-1914 (Anon undated, 37), show details of the building before 20th-century restoration work, which suggest that the farm building dates from the medieval or early post medieval period, with a cross passage plan (SRO A/BMS Box 1).



Figure 8 Extract from the 1782 county map of Somerset (Somerset Record Society 1981)

This documentary evidence strongly suggests that a settlement existed at the crossing of the Barle on the Dulverton side of the river by 1327 and that it took its name – Torre - from the river itself. The earliest mention of Tarr Steps is in 1644. By the 18th century, the river crossing and the bridge called Tarr Steps are well established features of the landscape. The 1782 map of Somerset marks 'Tar Bridge', a building at Tarr Farm and shows the tracks and lanes which link the farms and converge at Tarr Steps (Somerset Record Society 1981) (Fig 8). Tarr Steps was probably built in the 15th or 16th centuries and took its name from the settlement – Tarr or Torr – which was already established on the Dulverton side of the river.

The origins of Tarr Steps

Across the Barle in the parish of Hawkridge the land was part of the Hawkridge rectory estate. This was land which was for the purpose of providing an income for the rectors of Hawkridge and Withypool. Dunning suggests that this estate had its origins in the 12th century, the probable date of the endowment of the churches of Withypool and Hawkridge, which both have 12th-century fountains. In 1291 the rectory estate was valued at £8 for taxation in 1291. The Hawkridge land was divided between five tenanted farms in the 16th century: Hill, Huntercombe, Hindame, Lambscombe and Westcombe. Westcombe had a water grist mill by 1571 (Dunning undated).

The term 'grist mill' is often used to describe a local mill where farmers brought their own corn to be ground into flour. One explanation for needing a bridge rather than a simple ford across the river at this point could be that it was needed for people and packhorses carrying grain across to the grist mill. The location of the farm known as Westcombe in 1571 and its mill is uncertain, but there is both archaeological and documentary evidence to suggest that Westcombe was on the Hawkridge side of the Barle above Tarr Steps and that the mill was close to the ford and bridge at Tarr Steps.

The current buildings – Horlock House and Webbs Cottage - on the Hawkridge side of the Barle at Tarr Steps appear to be of 19th or 20th century origin. The small scale late 18th- and early 19th-century maps show only a building on the Dulverton side of the river at Tarr Farm (Figs 8 and 9) (Somerset Record Society 1981). Horlock House or the Old Rectory was built between 1843 and 1840 by George Jekyll, rector of Hawkridge from 1834-1843. The house became a hotel in the early 20th century and



Fig 9 Extract from the 1822 county map of Somerset (Somerset Record Society 1981)

Webbs Cottage was built to house hotel workers, probably in the 1920s (information from R Wilson-North).

The large scale map of 1802, however, does suggest that there were some buildings on the Hawkridge side of the Barle at this time. The detail is rather unclear but there may be a building shown near or at the outbuildings of Horlock House and two buildings at the end of the lane to Tarr Steps, near the river (Fig 10). It also shows a watercourse which runs off the Barle just downstream of Tarr Steps through the meadows below Horlock House and back to the Barle below Webbs Cottage.

Further evidence for the location of Westcombe Farm is provided by the tithe map and award for Hawkridge. The small holding associated with George Jekyll's house is called 'Parsonage and Westcombe', and takes in just five steep fields, all Glebe land (part of the old Hawkridge Rectory Estate), above the river and the riverside meadows below the house, divided up by the watercourse described above (Fig 11). This could be the remnants of the 16th-century holding of Westcombe. The farm may have been between Horlock House and Webbs Cottage, as suggested by the 1802 map. Westcombe's mill was presumably by the Barle and on the Westcombe holding. The tradition that local farmers on both the Hawkridge and Dulverton sides of the river repaired and maintained the bridge every year may hark back to the time when a grist mill at Tarr Steps was used by the agricultural community.

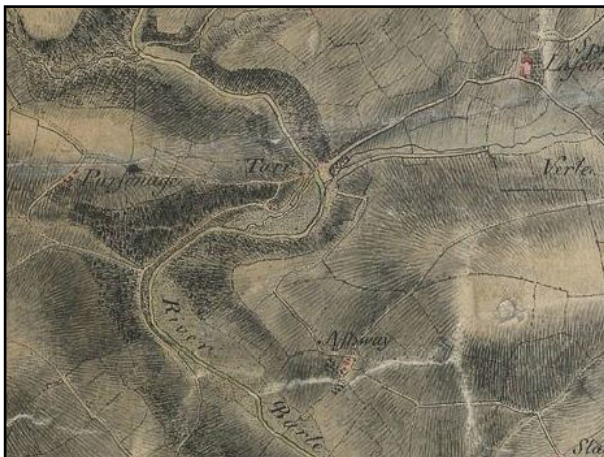


Fig 10 Extract from OS drawing Minehead 16 1802 (bl.ac.uk)

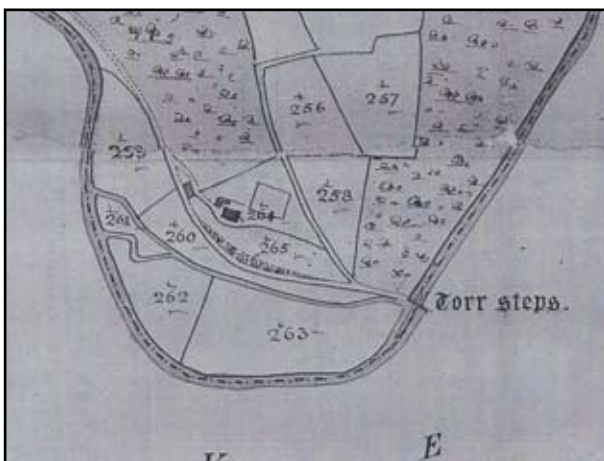


Fig 11 Extract from the Hawkridge tithe map 1841 (SRO DVD/Rt/ M/321)

Archaeological evidence

A suggested site is by the river, just upstream from the ford, where a possible building is shown on the 1802 map. A rectangular hollow is visible here, it is somewhat obscured by timber and brash but it measures 14m NS, 5.4m EW and is 1.4m deep (Fig 12). A large tree stump, perhaps 150 years old, lies on the SW corner of the hollow. A substantial leat ends 10m to the north of the north side of this hollow. The leat took water off West Water, 100m above its confluence with the Barle, where a weir is shown on the OS 1st edition map, and ran for some 1.5km. The leat is still a substantial landscape feature. It can be traced as an infilled channel, 0.8m wide, with evidence of a stone lining along much of its course, cut into the hillside to a depth of 1.3m, with a substantial revetment bank, 0.8m wide, on its downslope side (Fig 13). The leat crosses two rock outcrops, (Figure 14) towards its south end. The leat took water from Westwater rather than the Barle, presumably to ensure a more stable supply of water, given the way the river Barle is subject to sudden flood events. The resulting height of the leat ensures that it is above the floods but also means that it has to flow down two large rock outcrops which are unusual features (below). There is field evidence for its relative date: a boundary bank clearly overlies the infilled channel at SS 8622 3235 (Fig 15). This bank is shown on the 1st edition OS map (1882-88) but not on the 1841 tithe map, indicating that it was built after 1841 but before 1882-88.

Fig 12 Hollow by the river Barle at Tarr Steps (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)



Fig 13 The leat in North Barton Wood (7/5/2013) (Hazel Riley)



The leat was identified and recorded by Richard McDonnell during a survey of the Tarr Steps Woodland. He interpreted the leat as part of a designed landscape, including cascades where the leat runs down rock outcrops, around the Rectory and constructed by Rev George Jekyll when he lived there (McDonnell 2004). Jekyll had the new rectory built at or near the site of the old Rectory Estate farm of Westcombe – on Glebe land. It was built before 1840 and was a house with outbuildings and a large walled garden (Hawkridge tithe map and apportionment) (Fig 11).

The Rev George Jekyll was Rector of West Coker in south Somerset from 1802 until his death in 1843. He was granted a dispensation to hold the living of Hawkridge and Withypool in 1834 (Clergy of the Church of England online Database). George Jekyll died and was buried at West Coker in 1843; the living at Hawkridge passed to his son Joseph. This Rev Jekyll definitely lived at the rectory in Hawkridge. He was a sportsman, a keen angler and friend of Jack Russell, the well known huntsman and parson. Hawkridge Rectory at this time is described as ‘in a very lovely spot, but right down in the valley with the river just at the bottom of a field, and it was very damp there’ (family letters, published on (newman-family-tree.net)). The dating evidence for the leat – silted up and completely sealed by the field boundary by 1882-88 - and by the indications that Rev George Jekyll spent much of his time many miles away at West Coker and that his son was more interested in hunting and fishing than landscape gardening – suggest a late 19th-century designed landscape at Hawkridge Rectory to be unlikely.



Fig 14 The leat crosses a rock outcrop (7/5/2013) (Hazel Riley)



Fig 15 A field boundary bank overlies the leat (7/5/2013) (Hazel Riley)

Local information and folklore

The themes of the church and the devil have gathered around Tarr Steps:

'It is sometimes called the Devil's Bridge, and the woman in the cottage above told me that it had never been quite finished, the apron of his satanic majesty giving way with the weight of the stones, several of which might still be seen in an adjoining plantation. Another version says that he built it in one night, declaring that it was for his exclusive use, and that he would destroy the first creature crossing. An unfortunate cat attempted the hazardous passage, and was at once torn to pieces. This appears to have broken the spell, for a parson then crossed in safety, interchanging compliments, more forcible than polite, with the architect. 'The devil called the parson a black crow, to which the parson replied that he was not blacker than the devil'
(Page 1895, 91).

'There is a curious legend concerning Torr Steps, another name for which is the 'Devil's Bridge'. The Devil, it is said, built the bridge for his own delight, and being spiteful, resolved that it should not be used by mortals. He raised it in a single night, but towards morning, as he arrived with a finishing load of stones, his apron broke and the stones fell to the ground. One of them is to be seen at Mouncey Castle, another in the wood hard by. Taking his seat at a picturesque spot near the bridge, the Devil denounced destruction on the first creature that should venture across. A cat was cunningly sent over, and as soon as she touched the other side was unmercifully torn to pieces. The spell being broken, the parson was the next to cross, when some uncomplimentary expressions of the pot and kettle order passed between the two. The Devil called the parson a black crow, to which the parson replied that he was no blacker than the devil. The latter seems to have retired from the contest, leaving the bridge open; and here it is still. As it is believed to be not quite finished – there are signs it was intended to go further – perhaps this may be accounted for by the accident to the apron strings. According to another version, one of the Samson masons of old, engaged in building Hawkridge Church, was carrying across the ford a load of stones, when the Devil maliciously cut his apron strings, so that his burden dropped into the stream'
(Snell 1923, 262-3).

'Local tradition ascribes the work to the devil. As he was bringing the stones in his apron the string broke, and the large square stone thus dropped can still be seen between the holly trees on the left bank making a useful seat. The objection to this theory is that the devil, at all events in the writer's experience, has never been known to do anything so useful as to build a bridge. He has dropped many into raging waters, or led them into bottomless morasses, but to build a safe bridge is beyond his province'
(Sweetapple-Horlock 1939, 7).

'An old woman who lived close by would never go over the steps until she had assured herself that the devil was not a squatter. She came to know his likely

times. On a sunless day a siesta was pointless; on the other hand, the Devil liked it not if the sun was too hot. Understandably, he hankered for temperate conditions as a relief from the heat of the nether regions. So the old woman would look out at the bridge from her cottage window and say: 'Ah! Th'ol Divil iddn there: thickey stoan be too hot vur'n today. T'wud scald the backside feathers off un' (Hurley 1973, 41-2).

Tom Lock, born in Hawkridge in 1926 into a family of carpenters, wheelwrights and undertakers, recalled how, in the days before hearses, coffins would be transported by farmers' wagons. Mr Hepper from Ashway (in Dulverton parish but closer to Hawkridge church), who used to walk to church in Hawkridge every Sunday, requested that his coffin be brought along the same route for his funeral, which Tom Lock's father arranged (Exmoor Oral History Archive 1/10). This use of Tarr Steps, as a dignified and safe passage for a coffin across the Barle to the church at Hawkridge is remembered in some undated and unattributed drawings in the SANHS lantern slide collection. One shows a horse pulling a cart, with a coffin on it, through the ford with a group of clergymen crossing by Tarr Steps on foot, from the Tarr Farm side to the Hawkridge side of the river. A second drawing shows six pall bearers carrying a coffin across Tarr Steps with a group of mourners following behind; the river is high up against the stones in both drawings (SANHS lantern slides neg nos 10447, 10499). This use of Tarr Steps could partly explain its connection with the church at Hawkridge in local folklore; it could also be one of the reasons why the river crossing here was formalised into a stone bridge. Another local tradition is that the causeway of Tarr Steps used to be higher than it is now. There are stories of red deer stags swimming underneath the clapper stones and Tom Lock remembers running underneath the bridge when he was a boy in the 1930s (information from R Wilson-North and M Silverlock). The images and descriptions from the early 19th and early 20th centuries do not substantiate this (below).



Fig 16 'Tar Steps on the Barle' F C Lewis, 1827 (reproduced with permission of M Silverlock)

Tarr Steps in the 19th and 20th centuries

Two descriptions of Tarr Steps, different enough to suggest that were written independently, show how the basic design of the bridge has remained the same since the late 19th century:

'Consists of large slabs of stone laid on roughly piled piers projecting about a yard on either side of the roadway. The average length of a slab is perhaps about 7 feet, the width 3 feet 6 inches; the longest being 8 feet 6 inches by 5 feet wide. In the centre they are laid singly; towards the ends the stones, being narrower, are placed side by side. The piers facing the current are protected by sloping stones about 4 feet in length. There are no less than 17 openings. The total length of the bridge, including the paved approaches, is 180 feet, and its height above the water, except in flood time, when it is submerged, is about three feet. There is not an atom of cement in the structure'
(Page 1895, 90).

'The bridge of Tarr Steps consists of 17 spans, the covering stones being laid flat without mortar or cement of any kind, on pillars of rough stone placed not upon a foundation but upon the river bed. The pillars are from 4 to 6ft apart, 3 to 4ft high and about 3ft in breadth. Most of the pillars are spanned by one stone only, but some have two laid side by side, and one had three. They are laid so that the end of each stone reaches half-way across the pillar leaving space for the next flat flat slab to rest by its side. The great slabs are from 6 to 8ft long. One is over 10ft in length and nearly 1ft thick and is estimated to weigh 2 tons or more. One stone about the centre of the bridge is laid crosswise and this is said to mark the division of the Parishes of Dulverton and Hawkridge. At each pillar a long stone is slanted lengthways, one end resting on the river bed and placed there evidently to break the force of the rapid stream'
(Sweetapple-Horlock 1939, 6).

Contemporary images corroborate this. The earliest image found during the course of this study is an engraving by F C Lewis, dated 1827 (Fig 16). Lewis was an expert engraver; he also painted landscapes, mainly of Devon scenery, and published several volumes of plates depicting Devon rivers between 1821 and 1843, as well as etchings of the 'Scenery of the Rivers of England and Wales 1845-7'. His engraving of Tarr Steps is a carefully composed view from a point downstream of the bridge, looking across the valley to Tarr Farm and Tarr Steps. It appears to be a faithful depiction of Tarr Steps, with 15 or 16 piers and raking stones and the clapper stones spanning the piers. The causeway leading to the bridge on the Dulverton side can be seen and Tarr Farm, half hidden by the woods, has a thatched roof with an upper room tucked under the eaves. A figure, perhaps a child in a pinafore, stands at the centre of the bridge.

Two watercolours from the later 19th century are the first colour images of Tarr Steps located during this study; these are by William Bidgood (1885) and H Montgomery (late 19th century). The painting by William Bidgood is a view of Tarr Steps from the Hawkridge side of the river, with Anstey Common in the background (Fig 17). The ford across the Barle is very clearly shown, as is the structure of the bridge. A figure

approaches on the stone causeway from the Hawkridge side, a second figure stands on the causeway close to the central span. It appears to be a very faithful representation of Tarr Steps, with individual clapper stones, piers and raking stones carefully painted. Montgomery's painting is a more stylised picture of Tarr Steps (Fig 18). The painting is titled 'Tarr Steps or Druids Bridge Dulverton.' It shows 11 triangular piers – a conflation of the raking stones and stone piers – with ten thick clapper stones forming the causeway. Cattle are being driven down the the lane to the ford from the Hawkridge side, and two figures on the Dulverton end of the causeway give a good scale. The dramatic peaks in the background add to the romanticism of the scene.

The earliest photograph of Tarr Steps is probably that taken by Robert Gillo (Fig 19). Gillo had a photographic studio in Bridgwater (c 1861-1881) during which time he travelled widely across Exmoor and West Somerset taking photographs for his business



Fig 17 Tarr Steps by William Bidgood, 1885 (SRO county neg no 1860)



Fig 18 Tarr Steps by H Montgomery, late 19th century (SRO county neg no 1859)

(Strickland 1988). This is a view taken from the Dulverton side of the river, looking across Tarr Steps, which is the focal point of the picture. The stone piers, raking stones and clapper stones are all in place, although the paired stones in the foreground are displaced to a certain degree.

Tarr Steps and Tarr Farm feature in several photographs and paintings of hunting and horses on Exmoor. A well known series of photographs by Alfred Vowles, probably taken c 1911-14, of the Devon and Somerset Staghounds at Tarr Steps feature the mounted followers fording the Barle and the hounds streaming across Tarr Steps (SRO A/BMS Box 1 T332; T329; T333; T338; T323; T339; T330). The sporting artist Lionel Edwards painted the Devon and Somerset staghounds at Tarr Steps and a family riding across the Barle with Tarr Steps in the background in the 1930s (eggford-studio.co.uk) and a recent exhibition by Ian Cryer – A Year on Exmoor – included three oil paintings of Tarr Steps (churchgate.gallery.co.uk).

*Fig 19 Tarr Steps by
Rober Gillo, c 1870
(SRO county neg no
361)*



*Fig 20 Tarr Steps
in the late 19th
century (SRO
A/CRZ/3/6.10)*



Fig 21 (left) Tarr Steps in the early 20th century (Alfred Vowles) (SRO A/BMS Box 1 T615)

Fig 22 (above) The large slab in the central pier used to mark the parish boundary (19/3/2013) (Hazel Riley)

One feature of Tarr Steps which is shown well in 19th- and early 20th-century photographs is the central span. Sweetapple-Horlock, writing in 1928, described a central stone, laid crosswise, which marked the parish boundary. The clapper stones at this point, instead of being reasonably level, definitely tilt upwards at this point. These features can be seen in the photographs of the bridge before the damage of 1939-40, a good example is one from a collection of 'Photographs of views of Somerset, Devon and elsewhere late 19th century' (SRO A\CRZ/3/6.10) (Fig 20) and those taken by Alfred Vowles between 1911-1914 (in SRO collection A\BMS Box 1)(Fig 21). Since the damage to the central part of Tarr Steps in January 1940 subsequent reconstructions have failed to reinstate both the central slab laid crosswise and the distinctive 'arching' of the causeway at the centre (compare Figs 20 and 21 with 29 and 31. The central slab has now become part of the central pier and seems to have been used like this since 1941 (Figs 28; 22).

The photographs also show how the line of Tarr Steps has changed over the past c 150 years. Somerset County Council bridge engineers report that 'the bridge is always re-assembled on a generally straight line but tends to (very gradually) assume some very gentle kinks as the effect of occasional log strikes take their toll'(Radford 2013). The late 19th- and early 20th-century images show that Tarr Steps was fairly straight from the Hawkridge bank to the central span, then curved gently upstream as it approached the causeway on the Dulverton side. This feature of the bridge was lost during the reconstruction of 1953 (compare Figs 21 and 31).

Correspondence between the County Council, Dulverton Rural District Council and the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock, the owner of Tarr Farm and Hawkridge Rectory in the 1920s and 1930s, shows how the condition of Tarr Steps deteriorated throughout the

1930s (SRO C/S/3/12). Dulverton Rural District Bridges 1930-1946 and below). In late November 1939 a large amount of timber and debris became lodged against Tarr Steps and displaced some of the structure. Alfred Vowles documented this damage with his camera and in correspondence (Fig 23). Severe weather in late January 1940 caused the Barle to freeze (Fig 24). The first thaw caused huge blocks of ice to batter the bridge and blocked the ford; the central part of the bridge was completely washed away. Temporary crossings of the Barle, which incorporated rope handrails, the island and several tree trunks, were constructed under the supervision of Rev Sweetapple-Horlock, much to the consternation of the County Council (Fig 25).

Tarr Steps was repaired in March 1941 by the construction of a steel girder bridge, approached by concrete ramps, built directly on the remaining clapper stones. This is shown in several photographs taken by Alfred Vowles (Fig 26). A plan and cross sections of eight of the piers, surveyed in 1949 before reconstruction work, document this work and also show the construction of the piers and raking stones before Tarr Steps was washed away in 1952 (Figs 27 and 28). It can also be seen in photographs of volunteers

Fig 23 Damage to Tarr Steps, late 1939 (SRO county neg no 10515)



Fig 24 Working party at Tarr Steps, preparing to clear and snow from the ford and bridge, late January 1940 (SRO county neg no 34386)



from Minehead Grammar School and workmen replacing the raking stones in the summer of 1945 (Exmoor Photographic Archive Withypool 36). The steel and concrete structure was taken down and Tarr Steps was finally restored in September and October 1949 by 116 Army Engineer Regiment (Fig 29) resulting in a structure which looked less uneven than the early 19th-century Tarr Steps but not as regular as the 1953 reconstruction (Compare Figs 20, 29 and 31). Less than three years later, in August 1952, Tarr Steps was completely demolished by floodwater (Fig 30). The reconstruction in June and July 1953 resulted in the spruced up version of Tarr Steps seen in holiday snaps of the 1950s and 1960s (Fig 31).

The Oaks at Tarr Farm kept a herd of milking cows in the 1960s and 1970s and they often forded the river twice a day to come in for milking (Exmoor Oral History Archive 1/7; Front cover). Sheep have also been photographed crossing the bridge, while tractors, cattle and horses prefer to use the ford (1930s postcard in Exmoor HER; photographs from 1970s in Exmoor Society collection; John Gay photographs in EH National Monuments Record). During the 1970s and 1980s occasional repairs to Tarr Steps were carried out as flooding displaced the clappers or raking stones (Fig 32).



Fig 25 The first temporary crossing at Tarr Steps, Jan/Feb 1940 (SRO county neg no 10500)



Fig 26 Steel girder and concrete repairs, March 1941 (SRO county neg no 34308)

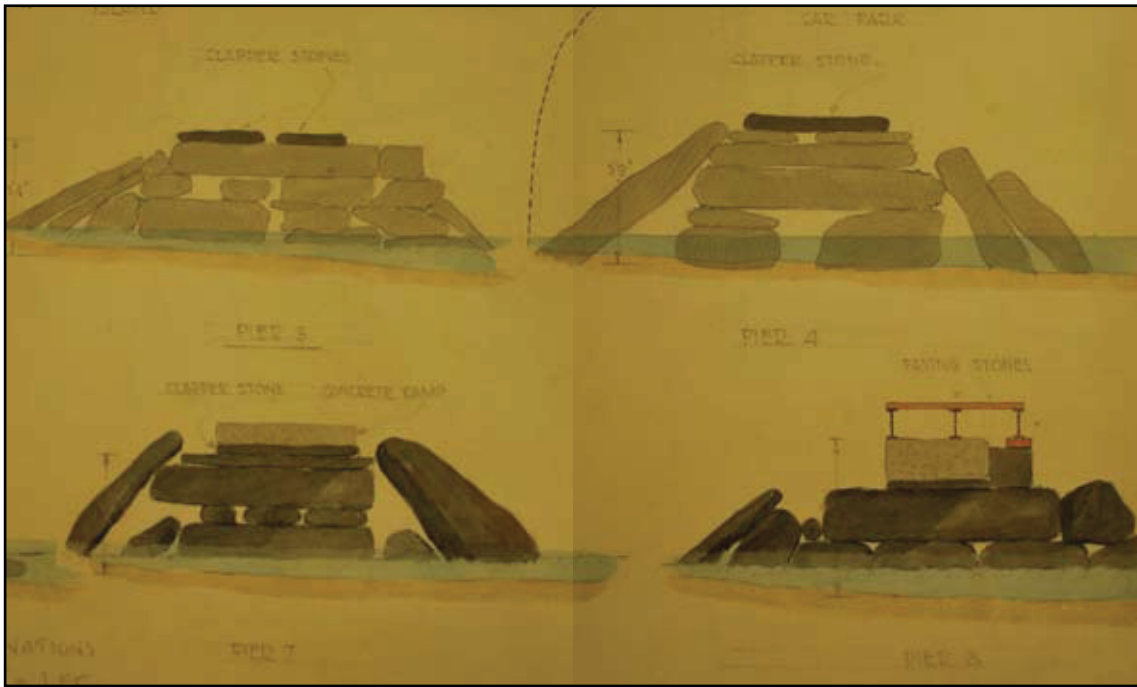


Fig 27 (above) Elevation drawings of piers (detail) which show the structure of Tarr Steps before it was swept away in the 1952 floods (SRO A\BHN/3)

Fig 28 (below) Plan and elevation drawings of Tarr Steps, surveyed in 1949 (SRO A\BHN/3)





Fig 29 (above left) Tarr Steps after the 1949 rebuilding (SRO A\BAZ\4\13\17.36)

Fig30 (above right) Tarr steps in February 1953 (SRO A\BAZ\4\13\11 79-80)

Fig 31 (below) Tarr Steps c 1960 (reproduced with permission of R Spooner)



Fig 32 The Barle in flood at Tarr Steps, February 1980 (reproduced with permission of the Exmoor Society)



Rebuilding Tarr Steps in 2013

On the 22nd and 23rd December 2013 the debris arresting cables upstream from Tarr Steps were destroyed by floodwater and several large trees crashed against the bridge, removing about half of it (Fig 33). Locals said that this flood was the worst that had been encountered since August 1952. Somerset county Council bridge engineers agreed that the 2012 floods had caused the worst damage to Tarr steps since August 1952. Somerset County Council and Crestmoor Construction rebuilt the bridge in February 2013, using an inflatable boom to divert the river and a small JCB to lift the stones (Fig 34).

Fig 33 Tarr Steps after the December 2012 flood damage (Shirley Blaylock)



Fig 34 Rebuilding Tarr Steps in February 2013 (Hazel Riley)

TIMELINE DETAILING REPAIR OPERATIONS AND OTHER SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Date: 17th, 18th and 19th centuries

Event: Annual repair of Tarr Steps by local farmers

Evidence: 'In former days the farmers on the Dulverton and Hawkridge sides of the river used to meet once a year to draw out the timber and driftwood, and to do any necessary repairs, but this has not obtained for many years' (Sweetapple-Horlock 1939, 3).

Date: c 1860

Event: Tarr Steps completely washed away

Evidence: Oral history cited in Alves 1948-9, 160)

Date: early 20th century

Event: Tarr Steps partially destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions

Evidence: Oral history cited in Alves 1948-9, 160)

Date: 25th November 1925

Event: Tarr Steps scheduled as Ancient Monument by H M Office of Works

Evidence: English Heritage National Heritage List for England 1021325

Date: June 1930

Event: Tarr Steps reported as being in need of substantial repair

Evidence: County Works Report 16th June 1930 (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: Autumn 1935

Event: Large amounts of timber brought down the river Barle by flooding and caught against Tarr Steps. Cleared with the help of Dulverton Rural District Council on two occasions. A whole tree trunk with the roots lodged against Tarr Steps which had to be cut through before it could be removed. This displaced several of the large raking stones and caused damage to the stability of the bridge. Blamed on felling of woodland by the Dulverton Sawmills Company.

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 31st October 1935

Event: Dulverton Sawmills Company warned about damage to Tarr Steps by H M Office of Works

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: November 1935

Event: two large logs are lodged against Tarr Steps which need moving, but the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock's horses are not able to do this because of the high water levels and size of the timber. A considerable amount of damage has been done to the Steps

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: March 1936

Event: Promise to raise two or three stones at Tarr Steps by Dulverton Rural District council to the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: Autumn 1939

Event: A temporary footbridge across the river Barle upstream from Tarr Steps collapses and is washed downstream. Most of the structure – two large tree trunks 40 feet long and a footway 3 to 4 feet wide made of small logs – is lodged against Tarr Steps and remains there until the severe flooding of 26th and 27th November, causing a build up of timber and debris.

Evidence: West Somerset Free Press 13th January 1940

Date: 26th and 27th November 1939

Event: The river Barle rose to c 2 feet over the top of Tarr Steps and the large amount of floating timber and flotsam and jetsam displaced some of the big stones. The pile of timber and debris against Tarr Steps reached to 4 to 5 feet high above the bridge and blocked the footway. Three of the centre piers seriously damaged.

Evidence: Dulverton Rural District Council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

West Somerset Free Press 13th January 1940 (letter by A Vowles)

Date: November 1939

Event: Lorry with chains and ropes employed by Dulverton Rural District Council to pull timber away from the Steps.

Evidence: Dulverton Rural District Council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: December 1939

Event: West Somerset Branch of the SANHS write to Dulverton Rural District Council to express the hope that it may be possible to effect repairs to Tarr Steps as soon as possible. The committee suggest that a barrier placed upstream of Tarr Steps would prevent further damage by floating timber.

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 3rd January 1940

Event: County Surveyor is of the opinion that it is up to the Rev Horlock-Sweetapple as the owner and H M Office of Works as the scheduling body to get on with the repairs as and when they consider desirable.

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 9th January 1940

Event: Meeting at Tarr Steps of Dulverton Rural District Council and H M Office of Works. Rev Sweetapple-Horlock happens to be on the bridge and informs the party that the bridge is his private property and that the public way was through the ford. This results in the question of repairs being put on hold once again while H M Office of Works attempts to persuade the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock to relinquish his ownership claim so that the County Council could accept responsibility for the repairs.

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 13th January 1940

Event: Description of the poor state of Tarr Steps by Alfred Vowles. As well as the damage to the three piers caused by the floods of late November 1939, four piers have holes or gaps in them. One pier is badly undermined. The south abutment is in a poor state of preservation. Nine further piers have stones displaced and the foundations of the whole structure have become weakened. Four slabs of the actual footway are loose, one dangerously so, but those do not include the two displaced and sloping slabs which adjoin the parish boundary near the centre. Some time ago two feet of another slab must have broken off, and the hollow made is dangerous. The raking stones are displaced or missing. Much of this damage and decay existed before the floods of 1939 and is of long standing. 'Little Tarr Steps' which bridges a tributary stream of the Barle close to Tarr Steps is also reported as damaged.

West Somerset Free Press 13th January 1940 (letter by A Vowles)

Date: 20-27th January 1940

Event: Severe weather caused the Rivers Exe and Barle to freeze. With the first thaw

on 26th January huge blocks of ice, many tons in weight, floated down the partially flooded Barle, battering Tarr Steps to such an extent that about 20 feet in length of the centre arches were washed away, with large stones from the bridge carried 20 feet downstream. The ford was entirely blocked with large slabs of ice which were broken up and cleared by council workmen to form a way through the river.

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: After January 27th 1940

Event: Temporary repair of Tarr Steps by the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock. This was done by lashing small trees to the remaining stones and nailing these to a small plank, and very frail handrail for pedestrians.

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 17th June 1940

Event: Estimated cost of repairs to Tarr Steps £120

Evidence: County Surveyor Report to County Works 17th June 1940 (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 7th November 1940

Event: Concern by the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock expressed that no work has been done at Tarr Steps. No passage over Tarr Steps and everyone in the neighbourhood is put to the greatest inconvenience.

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: February 1941

Event: Serious damage caused to Tarr Steps

Evidence: Extract from Report of County Surveyor to Clerk of Works (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 10th March 1941

Event: Rev Sweetapple-Horlock admits that the structure of Tarr Steps is vested in the County Council as the highway authority.

Evidence: Minutes of County Works (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: March 1941

Event: Temporary repairs carried out to Tarr Steps. A temporary crossing provided at Tarr Steps by long steel girders. Public able to cross by the bridge on 20th March 1941. The girders spanned the central part of Tarr Steps and were approached by a concrete ramp which was laid onto the clapper stones on each side.

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12); Extract from Report of County Surveyor to Clerk of Works (SRO C/S/3/12); Alves 1948-49.

Date: April 1941

Event: Estimated cost of repairs to Tarr Steps £300

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: September and October 1944

Event: Exceptional flooding caused six slabs to be washed away at Tarr Steps.

Evidence: Extract from Dulverton Rural District council monthly report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 18th June 1945

Event: Council accept the offer of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society to help with reinstatement work at Tarr Steps under the supervision of

Alfred Vowles and subject to the supervision of H M Office of Works and the County Surveyor. The Council to provide tackle and a capable roadman to help with lifting stones.

Evidence: County Works report (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: 23rd June 1945

Event: Suggestion of the formation of a holiday camp in the neighbourhood of Tarr Steps for the purpose of providing volunteer labour for the recovery and reinstatement of as many stones as can be traced and handled. The County Surveyor considers that it is not a practical proposition to attempt full reinstatement at the present time.

Evidence: Correspondence (SRO C/S/3/12)

Date: August 1945

Event: Volunteers, including five boys from Minehead Grammar School, start reinstatement work at Tarr Steps. The work involved rebuilding the raking stones which protect the piers and 48 stones were moved.

Evidence: PSANHS 92 (1946), 5; Vowles 1946

Date: 1947

Event: Tarr Steps is in a 'deplorable condition, with hideous iron girders and cement'

Evidence: PSANHS 93 (1947), 12-13

Date: 1949

Event: Royal Engineers (TA) offer to restore Tarr Steps is accepted by County Council. Meeting of SANHS, Ministry of Works (AM Branch), Royal Engineers (TA) and Somerset Council at Tarr Steps to discuss the methods of restoration to be adopted.

Evidence: Alves 1948-49

Date: 20th June 1949

Event: Survey of Tarr Steps. The survey, details of the stones in the river and old and recent photographs used to make cardboard models of the clapper stones. The cardboard stones were fitted into position on the plan and from this the positions of the piers were fixed and the drawing was completed and used as the working drawing on the site. The coloured plan and elevation drawings of Tarr Steps (not dated or attributed) now held at the SRO is probably based on this survey. This plan is drawn at a scale of 1/8th to 1 foot and shows the temporary bridge across the central part of the bridge.

Evidence: Alves 1948-49; SRO A\BHN/3

Date: September and October 1949

Event: Restoration of Tarr Steps by the 116 Army Engineer Regiment (TA) under the command of Lieut-Col J A Chapman. A temporary suspension bridge erected upstream; temporary crossing of concrete ramps and steel girders demolished. As the concrete ramp to the girder bridge was built directly on the clapper stones it was feared that the clapper stones would be damaged by breaking the concrete up with pneumatic drills. However, concrete paper had been placed on the clapper stones and concrete had not adhered to the stones. Shallow trenches were excavated in the stream bed and the base stones of the piers embedded on gravel. Missing piers rebuilt and clapper stones replaced. Existing piers made good, raking stones replaced or repositioned, scour holes around piers filled in.

Evidence: Alves 1948-49

Date: 12th October 1949

Event: Survey of Tarr Steps at scale of 20 feet to 1 inch by D A Alves for Somerset

County Council. Published in Alves 1948-49, fig 7. The plan shows the extent of the reconstruction work carried out in September and October 1949.

Evidence: Alves 1948-49

Date: 15th August 1952

Event: Tarr Steps 'completely demolished' by extensive flooding which caused serious damage to roads, properties, bridges and agricultural land in the Simonsbath, Dulverton and Exford areas. An article written a year later notes that, with the exception of one clapper stone and its piers, the whole of the steps were demolished.

Evidence: Dulverton and Williton Rural Districts report on flood damage (SRO C/6/1/9); The Somerset Countryman October 1953

Date: 23rd and 24th August 1952

Event: 205 Field Squadron RE (TA) from Weston-super-Mare build a temporary suspension bridge upstream of Tarr Steps. Sir Donald Bailey, bridging expert and inventor of the Bailey bridge, was staying at the Tarr Steps Hotel that same weekend.

Evidence: Somerset County Herald 30th August 1952

Date: August and September 1952

Event: Search for the clapper stones. Most were found close to the site of Tarr Steps, the most remote clapper stone was 152 feet from the steps. It was possible to identify most of the clapper stones and their positions were plotted on a survey. The clapper stones, pier stones etc were lifted from the river, placed on the bank and lettered in accordance with their plotted positions.

Evidence: The Somerset Countryman October 1953

Date: 15th June 1953 to July 1953

Event: Reconstruction of Tarr Steps completed in about three weeks. The work was carried out by three skilled men, a nucleus of the County bridge gang under the direction of the member of the County Surveyor's staff responsible for the 1949 reconstruction. A heavy breakdown crane – an ex US military Ward La France 6x6 wrecker truck from Bartlett's Garage, Glastonbury - was used for lifting and placing the stones and for clearing the river bed of stones and debris on the downstream side. No cement or lime mortar or concrete of any description was used in the replacement of the steps. The one bay, untouched by the floods, was found to be very shaky and had to be taken down and rebuilt. The survey made in 1949 was found to be an invaluable aid. Levels had been taken after the 1949 restoration so that it was possible to replace the clappers not only in their relative positions along the survey line, but also at their correct heights. Many of the raking stones were either lost or smashed but it was possible to find others of similar shapes or sizes.

Evidence: The Somerset Countryman October 1953

Date: July-October 1953

Event: Erection of wire boom upstream of Tarr Steps to prevent damage to the steps during winter floods.

Evidence: The Somerset Countryman October 1953

Date: 6th April 1959

Event: Tarr Steps listed Grade I

Evidence: English Heritage National Heritage List for England 105800

Date: December 1979

Event: Exceptionally high rainfall caused flooding and damage to Tarr Steps. Two clapper stones washed away and several raking stones dislodged.

Evidence: Exmoor National Park Authority 1981, 83

Date: Spring 1980

Event: Missing stones from the December 1979 flood damage located a few feet downstream from Tarr Steps and replaced.

Evidence: Exmoor National Park Authority 1981, 83

Date: 22nd and 23rd December 2012

Event: Large trees brought down the river Barle by floodwater destroy the debris arresting cables and crash against Tarr Steps, causing damage to about half of the bridge on the Hawkridge side of the Barle. Several clapper stones are dislodged and piers damaged. Some of clapper stones can be seen in the river near pier stones. Locals say that this was the worst flooding encountered since August 1952.

Evidence: ENPA photographs; Radford 2013

Date: 11th February 2013 to 16th February 2013

Event: Crestmoor Construction and Somerset County Council repair the damage to Tarr Steps. An inflatable boom was used to hold the river water away from the repair site and this was kept in place by straw bales to prevent damage to the stones. A JCB with a sling on the bucket was used to help reposition the stones.

Evidence: Exmoor National Park Authority photographs

ASSESSMENT OF THE SOURCES

Artists working on Exmoor

John Swete (1752-1821): no relevant images located (Gray 1999)

J M W Turner (1775-1851): no relevant images located (tate.org.uk/research/publications/jmw-turner/somerset-and-north-devon-sketchbook)

Robert Bevan (1865-1925): no relevant images located (tate.org.uk and various online catalogues)

Lucy Kemp Welch (1869-1958): horses fording Barle with Tarr Farm in background, recently sold, unnamed painting (messums.com)

Cecil Aldin (1870-1935): no relevant images located (various online catalogues)

Alfred Munnings (1878-1959): no relevant images located (tate.org.uk and various online catalogues)

Lionel Edwards (1878-1966): 'The Devon and Somerset Staghounds at Tarr Steps', 1930s, and 'Riding on Exmoor, Tarr Steps' 1933 (eggford-studio.com)

Ian Cryer (b 1959): three oil paintings of Tarr Steps, late 20th/early 21st century (churchgategallery.co.uk)

Somerset Record Office, Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton

Search of image collection card index using fields: Hawkridge and Withypool, Dulverton, Tarr Steps. This extensive collection includes material from the Somerset County Council and the SANHS collections. The most important material is located in the SANHS lantern slide collection and in the SANHS collection dated 1940-41, which are the photographs of Tarr Steps taken by Alfred Vowles between 1939 and 1945, when he was president of the West Somerset branch of the SANHS.

SANHS lantern slide collection: dated and attributed paintings, drawings and photographs

Tarr Steps 1885 by William Bidgood SANHS collection (oversize) County library neg

number 1860 (Colour original and neg)
 Tarr Steps by H Montgomery (late 19th century) SANHS collection (oversize) County library neg number 1859 (Colour original and neg)
 Tarr Steps c 1870 by Robert Gillo (1841-1891) SANHS collection County library neg number 361
 SANHS lantern slide collection: undated and unattributed paintings, drawings and photographs
 Neg no: 10425 pre-1939/40 damage photograph which has been inked over. The piers are numbered 1-16 from the Hawkridge side looking upstream
 Neg no: 10426 undated photograph
 Neg no: 10427 possible 1939 flood damage
 Neg no: 10428 possible 1939 flood damage
 Neg no: 10429 Alfred Vowles postcard 'Tarr Steps, Exmoor'
 Neg no: 10430 early photograph. Four figures on Tarr steps. Shows curving nature of bridge and uneven causeway. Clothing suggests late 19th century riding habits?
 Neg no: 10431 same sort of photograph with inked detail as 10425
 Neg no: 10432 detail of timber on bridge
 Neg no: 10433 undated photograph
 Neg no: 10434 possible 1939 flood damage
 Neg no: 10435 temporary crossing built after the late January 1940 ice damage: postman with distinctive hat crossing
 Neg no: 10436 possible 1939 flood damage
 Neg no: 10437 undated photograph Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10438 good photograph of temporary crossing built after the late January 1940 ice damage
 Neg no: 10439 undated photograph Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10441 temporary crossing built after the late January 1940 ice damage: period cars, handrail
 Neg no: 10442 undated photograph Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10443 2 unattributed and undated cartoons of Tarr Steps showing a keen huntsman riding out across the bridge then returning by moonlight crawling across the bridge with no sign of his horse
 Neg no: 10445 early but undated photograph of Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10446 photograph temporary crossing built after the late January 1940 ice damage
 Neg no: 10447 2 unattributed and undated cartoons of Tarr Steps showing group in Victorian dress crossing bridge together with one black cow; 3 cows about to ford the river; second cartoon shows a horse with bier and coffin fording a high river Barle and a group of assorted clerics, carrying a cross, crossing by Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10479 close up of causeway showing possible 1939 flood damage
 Neg no: 10480 undated but early photograph showing island and period car at Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 10484 undated but early, clear photograph of Tarr Steps taken from Tarr Farm
 Neg no: 10499 2 unattributed and undated cartoons of Tarr Steps showing pall bearers carrying coffin across Tarr Steps with mourners behind; the river is very high; second drawing shows cattle swimming across a high river Barle
 Neg no: 10500 photograph of Tarr Steps very soon after the late January 1940 damage,

not in SRO index. This shows how there were two temporary crossings. This must be the first one made from a single tree trunk with a rope handrail for balance across to the Island.

Neg no: 10501 undated photograph by Alfred Vowles titled 'The Barle Up at Tarr Steps' 2 huntsmen fording a very high river; huntsman standing on edge of bridge with hounds crossing causeway; looks like debris is caught on the piers. Photograph taken when Tarr Farm still thatched. Probably 1911-1914 (Anon undated)

Neg no: 10502 temporary crossing over central span with snow on bank. Undated but probably late January 1940

Neg no: 10503 Barle flowing right over Tarr Steps; probably January 1940 snow melt

Neg no: 10505 central span gone at Tarr Steps after late January 1940 ice damage

Neg no: 10515 not in SRO index; undated but probably shows 1939 debris and damage to Tarr Steps

Neg no: 10516 not in SRO index; undated but probably shows 10 very cheerful workmen about to clear ice and snow from Tarr Steps and the ford in late January 1940

Neg no: 10517 not in SRO index; undated but after late January 1940 with log bridge and handrail temporary crossing

Neg no: 10518 not in SRO index; temporary crossing at same stage as photograph 10438

Neg no: 10519 temporary crossing with handrail across central span after late January 1940; snow on river bank; figure standing in river

Neg no: 10521 undated photograph but probably detail of 1939 debris against the bridge

Neg no: 10522 SANHS report 34309 undated photograph, probably showing the first temporary crossing after the late January 1940 damage

Neg no: 10715 Alfred Vowles postcard of huntsmen fording the river and hounds crossing titled 'Hounds and field crossing at Tarr Steps' not dated but before 1940 damage and probably 1911-1914 (Anon undated) T333 and ENPA neg no 210/016 SANHS Tarr Steps 1940/41

Collection of photographs by Alfred Vowles, catalogued in SRO card index as 'Tarr Steps 1940/41 SANHS Archaeological Reports'. These are photographs taken by Alfred Vowles which record the damage and subsequent temporary crossings and steel/concrete repairs at Tarr Steps between November 1939 and March 1941. Two photographs show the raking stones being repositioned in 1945. Negatives could not be copied in positive by the fiche reader so only the negatives viewed.

Neg no: 34298 crossing ford at Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34299 Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34300 temporary crossing at Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34301 steel/concrete repairs to Tarr Steps in March 1941

Neg no: 34302 crossing ford at Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34303 Barle in flood at Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34304 figure on temporary crossing

Neg no: 34305 not clear

Neg no: 34306 not clear

Neg no: 34307 damage to Tarr Steps

Neg no: 34308 steel/concrete repairs to Tarr Steps March 1941

Neg no: 34309 lantern slide 10522 undated photograph, probably showing the first

temporary crossing after the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34375 damage to central part of Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 34376 steel/concrete repairs to Tarr Steps March 1941
 Neg no: 34377 damage at Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 34378 displaced stones at Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 34379 temporary crossing at Tarr Steps after late January damage
 Neg no: 34380 not clear
 Neg no: 34381 snow/floods
 Neg no: 34382 debris caught on Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 34383 not clear
 Neg no: 34384 not clear
 Neg no: 34385 lantern slide I0517 undated but after late January 1940 with log bridge
 and handrail temporary crossing
 Neg no: 34386 lantern slide I0516 undated but probably shows 10 very cheerful
 workmen about to clear ice and snow from Tarr Steps and the ford in late January 1940
 Neg no: 34387 temporary crossing spanning damaged part of Tarr Steps after late
 January 1940
 Neg no: 34388 not clear
 Neg no: 34389 temporary crossing spanning damaged part of Tarr Steps after late
 January 1940
 Neg no: 34390 temporary crossing spanning damaged part of Tarr Steps after late
 January 1940
 Neg no: 34392 workmen at Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34393 not clear
 Neg no: 34394 detail of the spans at Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34395 detail of the spans at Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34396 detail of the causeway at Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34397 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34398 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34399 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34400 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34401 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34402 lantern slide I0519 temporary crossing with handrail across central
 span after late January 1940; snow on river bank; figure standing in river
 Neg no: 34403 Barle in flood at Tarr Steps
 Neg no: 34404 lantern slide I0435 temporary crossing built after the late January 1940
 ice damage: postman with distinctive hat crossing
 Neg no: 34405 lantern slide I0518 temporary crossing with figure: the Rev Sweetapple?
 Neg no: 34406 lantern slide I0505 central span gone at Tarr Steps after late January
 1940 ice damage
 Neg no: 34407 beginning the steel/concrete repairs at Tarr Steps, March 1941
 Neg no: 34408 steel/concrete repairs at Tarr Steps March 1941
 Neg no: 34409 temporary crossing at Tarr Steps after late January 1940 ice damage
 Neg no: 34413 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34414 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34415 Detail of poor state of the central part of Tarr Steps before it is swept
 away in late January 1940

Neg no: 34416 Temporary crossing at Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34417 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34418 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34419 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34420 Tarr Steps before the late January 1940 damage
 Neg no: 34421 Workmen replacing raking stones in summer 1945
 Neg no: 34422 Workmen replacing raking stones in summer 1945
 Tarr Steps by Iris Hardwick 10th June 1959 Somerset County Library negs 3819, X820, 31191, 31192, 31186
 Tarr Steps by Iris Hardwick October 1962 Somerset County Library neg 24197
 Search of SRO document catalogue using the field: Tarr Steps
 DD\CP/1-2 Photographic plates 1899-1910
 Catalogue gives reference to Tarr Steps in this collection but it was closed on H&S grounds (7th March 2013) and I was unable to view it
 A\CRZ/3/6 Photographs of views of Somerset, Devon and elsewhere late 19th century:
 A\CRZ/3/6.10 Tarr Steps on the River Barle, Somerset
 Late 19th century photograph with figure sitting on raking stones at the parish boundary
 A\CFH/4/2/102 A collection of topographical views, portraits, genealogies and printed matter relating to the county of Somerset 1915. Includes a photograph of Tarr Steps taken from Tarr Farm
 D\RDul/24/1/130 Alterations to Tarr Steps Farm, Hawkridge 1931
 Plans showing proposed improvements to Tarr Steps Farm. The farm had a tea room by this date. A small plan at 1:2500 scale, based on OS 2nd edition, shows the building – called Tarr - and Tarr Steps.
 DD\BRC/47/55 Francis Frith postcard of Tarr Steps, Exmoor c 1930s
 A\BAZ/4/13/17.35 Judges postcard of Tarr Steps. Dated to 1933-1938 on basis of Judges numbering (1933-1939) and condition of bridge. Shows the very uneven nature of the causeway, worn and one stone displaced.
 DD\X\WBB/102 Photograph album of unidentified family 1929-1934. Black and white photographs of holiday at Minehead in 1934. Dated image of Tarr Steps before the damage of autumn 1935, showing the damage recorded in the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock's correspondence.
 A\BAZ/4/13/17.34 Postcard 'Tarr Steps near Dulverton T964' Alfred Vowles postcard c 1911-14.
 A\BHN/3 Plan of Tarr Steps 20th June 1949. Plan based on survey by Somerset Council undertaken before the major restoration work of September/October 1949. This is a plan of Tarr Steps at a scale of to 1/8" to 1'. The surviving piers are numbered 1-13 starting from the Dulverton side. The plan shows the temporary repair of March 1941: a concrete ramp up to a central paved section on steel girders. Below the plan are elevation drawings of piers 1-8 drawn at a scale of 1/2" to 1'. These show the clapper stones on piers 1-6, the concrete ramp laid on top of the clapper stones on pier 7 and concrete and steel girders supporting the paving stones on pier 8.
 A\BAZ/4/13/17.36 Exmoor Survey EX/GE 28 R J Sellick Hawkridge, Tarr Steps 1949
 This shows Tarr Steps after the reconstruction of September/October 1949. Causeway is more level than seen on 19th and early 20th century photographs but not as level as it appears after 1953 rebuilding.

A\BAZ/4/13/11 Photographs and negatives of the flood disaster at Lynmouth, Devon 1952-1954 these include the following items:

A\BAZ/4/13/11 79-80 Exmoor Survey R J Sellick EX/FLO 39 Tarr Steps remains 29th February 1953

A\BAZ/4/13/11 81-82 Exmoor Survey R J Sellick EX/FLO 38 Temporary footbridge at Tarr Steps 29th February 1953

A\BAZ/4/13/11 79-80 Exmoor Survey R J Sellick EX/FLO 40 Temporary footbridge at Tarr Steps 29th February 1953

These three photographs are the only ones found during this study that show the damage caused by the floods of August 1952

DD\X\CND/2/2/44 Collection of photographs of Somersetshire c 1950s. Two photographs of Tarr Steps after the 1953 rebuilding

DD\X\WBB/193/19 Postcard of Tarr Steps c 1955. Tarr Steps with period cars and picnic table

DD\X\HOWE/4/4 Photograph album 1949-1970s. Frances Edwins c 1960 on holiday at Tarr Steps

DD\X\SSX/11 File of photographs of Somerset and Wiltshire c 1970s-1990s. Colour photograph of Tarr Steps, caption 'once romantic – but people have ruined it'

A\BDL/3 Colour slides 1971-1976. Number 736 Tarr Steps Exmoor. Close up of bridge with 2 people crossing

A\CXO/1/2 West Somerset slides 1983-88. Three slides of Tarr Steps, including ford in use and figures on the bridge

A\DDG/1 Postcards of various Somerset locations. Tarr Steps in 'The Magic of Exmoor' postcard series, 1992 postmark

Search of SRO catalogue using the fields: RefNo=C/S (County Surveyor)

C/S/6/9 Dulverton Rural District Council storm damage. Newspaper cuttings about, and typescript reports on, the Council's response to, the August 1952 flood damage in the Dulverton area, including 'complete demolition' of Tarr Steps.

C/S/3/12 Dulverton Rural District Bridges 1930-1946. Correspondence between the County Surveyor, Dulverton Rural District Council, HM Office of Works and the Rev Sweetapple-Horlock regarding damage, repair and the ownership of Tarr Steps.

Alfred Vowles glass plate collection, donated to the SRO by Joan Astell.

A/BMS Box 1

Collection of negatives, contact sheets and an unattributed, undated typescript of a biography of Alfred Vowles. An index identifies the contact sheets by parish, place or subject. These images are included in the SRO image index but this does not include all of the negatives in the box. The 'T numbers' are those written on the postcards by Vowles. Negatives could not be copied in positive by the fiche reader so only the negatives or contact sheets viewed.

Catalogue of glass negatives searched by 'Tarr Steps', 'Dulverton', 'Hawkridge' 'hunting and misc':

Tarr Steps T694 (ENP neg 165/001)

Tarr Steps across the Barle T615 (ENP neg 165/002)

Tarr Steps in snow T617 (ENP neg 165/003)

Tarr Farm nr Dulverton T616 (ENP neg 165/004)

The DSSH at Little River, Tarr Steps T332 (ENP neg 210/014)

Huntsmen crossing River Barle T329 (ENP neg 210/015)

Hounds and field crossing at Tarr Steps T333 (ENP neg 210/016)

Pretty hunting scene at Tarr Steps T338 (ENP neg 210/017)

Hounds on the pitchstone bridge at Tarr Steps T323 (ENP neg 210/018)

A lovely scene of hounds crossing Tarr Steps T339 (ENP neg 210/019)

The Barle up to bridge at Tarr Steps T330 (ENP neg 210/020)

The negatives of the glass plates are organised alphabetically by place. The envelopes numbered T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 contain 10 negatives of Tarr Steps and Tarr Steps Farm. Only T5 is dated but all are before the 1939/40 damage. The hunting scenes were probably photographed c 1911-1914 (Anon undated, 37).

Envelope T1 Early photograph of Tarr Steps Farm, probably 1911-1914 T611

Envelope T2 Early photograph of Tarr Steps Farm, probably 1911-1914 T613

These two photographs are detail shots of the front of the cottage and farm house, with details of the building and thatching techniques and materials. A woman with children stands outside the building. T611 appears to be the earlier and suggests that the farm house is a building of medieval or early post medieval date with a cross passage plan.

Envelope T3 4 photographs of Tarr Steps numbered 63-66. These are well composed landscape photographs of Tarr Steps from the river, showing the elevation of the bridge in the early 20th century. All contain figure(s) on the bridge.

Envelope T4 Photograph of Tarr Steps from Hawkridge side of river T609

Envelope T5 Good photograph of Tarr Steps from Hawkridge side of river with period car, dated 11th April 1936.

Envelope T6 Negative has broken corner; shows bridge before 1939/40 damage T612

Envelope T7 Well composed landscape photograph of Tarr Steps from Tarr Farm before 1939/40 damage T964

Exmoor Photographic Archive, Dulverton Heritage Centre

Catalogue reference: Withypool parish

Description: 7 photographs of Tarr Steps

Withypool 11 Tarr Steps 1895

Withypool 19 Tarr Steps 25th May 1939

Withypool 21 Tarr Steps 1905

Withypool 23 Tarr Steps 1895

Withypool 29 Tarr Steps 1939

Withypool 36 Relocating stones at Tarr Steps 1945

Withypool 46 Tarr Steps 1940 (but after 1949 or 1953 rebuilding)

Exmoor Society photograph collection, Parish Rooms, Dulverton

The Exmoor Society hold an important collection of photographs of Exmoor places and people based around material which was donated by Brian Pearce from ENPA.

Those of Tarr Steps date from the 1970s and 1980s, a period from which when few images and accounts of Tarr Steps have been found elsewhere. They show how the condition of the bridge changed from the pristine, newly restored Tarr Steps of the late 1950s and 1960s, to a rather scruffy looking structure in 1990.

File name: Tarr Steps

Six monochrome photographs dated February 1980, Barle is very high and central stones are displaced

Undated monochrome photograph; river high, debris against bridge
Two sheets monochrome contact prints; undated; c 1970/80s
One sheet monochrome contact print titled Dulverton School trip to Tarr Steps c 1970s/80s. Includes Fordson Dexta tractor fording the river by Tarr Steps
File name: FILE EX 9/32: Monochrome photograph of Tarr Steps by Robert Boother, 14 Church Street, Dunster 7th July 1987. Causeway is very uneven, looks very different to neat and tidy 1953 and 1960s bridge.

Exmoor HER and information from appeal for images in the local press, following the damage to the bridge in December 2012

Drawing of Tarr Steps by FC Lewis, 1827: 'Tar Steps on the Barle' owned by Marion Silverlock. Earliest image located during this study shows Tarr Steps and Tarr Farm
Tarr Steps before 1900, copy of photograph owned by Jeremy Connell
Postcards of Tarr Steps c 1930-1938 owned by Barbara Adams
IMG_001 Valentines postcard 'Exmoor' coloured c 1930s
IMG_002 Alfred Vowles postcard T615 c 1911-14
IMG_003 Postcard rather unclear view of Tarr steps, postmark 30th August 1932
IMG_004 Postcard detail of centre of Tarr Steps with cyclists; shows detail of structure just before late November 1939 damage
IMG_005 Valentines postcard 'Tarr Steps, Exmoor (The Oldest Roman Bridge in England) c 1930s (213455JV)
Postcard from Quick Print, Minehead 'Tarr Steps near Dulverton 364' Large flock of sheep crossing Tarr Steps, c 1930s, information from Faye Balmond
Four postcards of Tarr Steps c 1930s owned by Keith Towells.
IMG_001 '5973 Tarr Steps, Exmoor' before late 1939/40 damage
IMG_002 'Tarr Steps, Exmoor' Alfred Vowles postcard before late 1939/40 damage
IMG_003 'Tarr Steps, Exmoor' before late 1939/40
IMG_004 'Tarr Steps' Catford postcard before late 1939/40 damage
Photograph and postcard of Tarr Steps c 1935 owned by Keith Hill
Tarr Steps 1 Postcard 'Tarr Steps' with Tarr Farm and bridge before 1939/40 damage
Tarr Steps 2 Photograph of Tarr Steps c 1935, with family group
Photographs owned by P J Lloyd
Tarr Steps Ice Flood 0001 has date Feb 39 on back but shows ice and the temporary crossing of late January 1940
Tarr Steps Ice Flood 0002 has date Feb 39 on back but shows ice in Barle late January 1940
Photograph of Tarr Steps c 1960 owned by Robert Spooner
Tarr Steps May 2007 by Matt Bristow
Three photographs of Tarr Steps before the 2012 damage
Tarr Steps 10th January 2013 by Shirley Blaylock
Damage to bridge after the December 2012 floods
Tarr Steps 12th February 2013 by Steve Guscott.
Tarr Steps Re-Building 05 Shows boom and straw bales
Tarr Steps Re-Building 53 Detail of clapper stone being lowered by JCB
Tarr Steps Re-Building 57 Detail of clapper stone in sling
Tarr Steps Re-Building 59 Detail of clapper stone in sling
Tarr Steps 13th February 2013 ENPA

P5070183-070202 21 photographs of rebuilding of Tarr Steps, 2013
Tarr Steps 13th February 2013 by Shirley Blaylock
DSCF0703-0716 14 photographs of rebuilding of Tarr Steps, 2013

English Heritage National Monuments Record online search for images of Tarr Steps available online

Collection of 15 photographs by John Gay c 1955-1960.

Although these photographs are dated April 1953 they must be of the bridge after the reconstruction in September/October 1953. Other images in the same collection are dated 1955-1965; the cars and clothing suggest 1955-60 for the Tarr Steps photographs. The collection is of particular interest as it shows stock and stockman using the bridge and ford, most likely Mr Oaks of Tarr Farm with his milking herd which used to cross the ford twice a day.

AA074149 stockman, dog, cattle

AA074150 stockman and cattle

AA074151 cattle

AA074152 figure on bridge

AA074153 figures on bridge

AA074154 figures on bridge

AA074155 riders crossing ford; open nature of meadows below Horlock House

AA074156 figures on bridge; open nature of meadows below Horlock House

AA074157 figures on bridge; open nature of meadows below Horlock House

AA079494 car fording the Barle at Tarr Steps

AA082628 riders crossing ford; open nature of meadows below Horlock House

AA087301; AA087802-4 Looking downstream to Tarr Steps

University of St Andrews Photographic Collection online search for 'Somerset'

JV-29387; JV-29388: two Valentine's postcards of Tarr Steps dated 1898

Display at Tarr Steps rebuilding February 2013

'Tarr Steps 1906' photograph

'An early photograph of Tarr Steps' (Exmoor Photographic Archive Withypool 19 25th May 1939)

'A copy of a lithograph of Tarr Steps reportedly dating from 1949' (after late January 1940 and before March 1941)

'Tarr Steps. Temporary Bridge' (after late January 1940 and before September 1949)

'An early photograph of Tarr Steps (Exmoor Photographic Archive Withypool 23 dated 1895)

'Tarr Steps is reassembled by the Army, reportedly in 1949' (rebuilding Tarr Steps, September and October 1949)

Tarr Steps is reassembled by the County Council Bridge Gang in the 1950s' (rebuilding Tarr Steps in June-July 1953)

Late 19th and early 20th century photographs on display in Tarr Steps Inn, May 2013

'Tarr Farm' early 20th-century photograph, not seen in other image collections

Figure on Tarr Steps with Tarr Farm in background 25th May 1939 (Exmoor Photographic Archive Withypool 19)

Tarr Steps 1895 photograph (Exmoor Photographic Archive Withypool 23)

CONCLUSIONS

Recent documentary research combined with a walkover survey of the immediate area around Tarr Steps has shown a date and reason for the building and maintenance of a river crossing and bridge. Tarr Steps was built in the 15th or 16th century to provide a dry crossing for people wishing to get the corn grist mill at Westcombe which seems to have been located on the Hawkridge side of the Barle across the lane from Tarr Steps.

Tarr Steps has been damaged and partially or wholly washed away by debris, floodwater and ice over the past 150 years. This process probably happened in the earlier years of its history. The bridge was maintained and rebuilt as necessary by the local community in the 18th and 19th centuries, and now Somerset County Council bridge engineers working with other relevant bodies continue that tradition of re-assembling the structure as it is needed.

Tarr Steps today is a product of four or five hundred years of building and re-assembling a structure in the same place out of mostly the same materials. It seems likely that most of the clapper stones and some of the larger stones used in the piers and in the raking stones are of considerable antiquity. Some may even date from the first time that Tarr Steps was built.

The amount of information we have about Tarr Steps is considerable. There are many late 19th- and early 20th-century photographs of Tarr Steps which give us a good idea of how the bridge appeared before the damage caused by ice in late January 1940. The subsequent girder and concrete bridge built on Tarr Steps and the reconstructions by the army and by Somerset County Council are documented but have tended to become part of a rather muddled narrative. This study has set out the story of Tarr Steps in some detail. It emphasises not only the importance of Tarr Steps as a structure of considerable antiquity in the Barle Valley but also its importance to the community and the many visitors who have captured an image of Tarr Steps as part of their Exmoor experience.

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Thanks to Rob-Wilson North and Bob Dunning for sharing their ideas and research about the origins of Tarr Steps and for the provision of unpublished research material. Staff at the Dulverton Heritage Centre, the Exmoor Society and the Somerset Heritage Centre were unfailingly helpful during my quest for yet more images of Tarr Steps.

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