

ART. XII.—*Thomas Harrison and Stramongate Bridge, Kendal.* By A. C. TAYLOR.

Read at St Catherine's Hall, Port Erin, July 3rd, 1969.

AT Kendal the main west-coast road from Lancaster and the South to Scotland crosses the River Kent at Stramongate Bridge. Pontage for repairs to the bridge at Kirkby-in-Kendal was granted in 1376, 1379, and again in 1382 when the "North Brigg" (Stramongate Bridge) was specified. In 1379, indulgences were granted by the Bishop of Carlisle for the building of the "ponte de Strowmondgate" and the "new bridge" was referred to in a will of 1380. In Leland's time Stramongate Bridge had "eight or nine" arches and the rubble core of the present bridge¹ may incorporate four of these, others, perhaps, being buried in the approaches. The bridge was in need of repairs early in the 18th century when the county was to be responsible for three-quarters of the cost.

In 1776 an advertisement² announced the projected rebuilding of the bridge. "Stramongate Bridge in Kendal. The Rebuilding of the said Bridge will be let at the Coffee-House in Kendal on Wednesday, the 5th day of June, 1776, agreeable for a Plan then to be produced. For Particulars in the meantime, apply to Mr John Bracken, High Constable, or to Mr John Shutt, in Kendal." In the same year Thomas Harrison, a Yorkshireman, returned to England after seven years spent in Italy studying architecture. After exhibiting his Italian designs at the Royal Academy in 1777, Harrison is next heard of at Lancaster where he was commissioned to rebuild Skerton Bridge over the Lune.

¹ But the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Westmorland, suggests the 17th century.

² Quoted in J. F. Curwen, *Kirkbie-Kendall*.

The first stone was laid by George III in 1783 and thereafter for a time Harrison's practice centred in Lancaster where he built, or rebuilt, between 1784 and 1802, the tower of St John's Church, much of the castle, and, two miles to the North, Quernmore Park; he probably gothicized Leighton Hall (see below) between Lancaster and Kendal. It was only after this early period that Harrison's practice moved further South and he became "Harrison of Chester".

At the Midsummer Assizes of 1791 at Appleby the High Constable of Kendal Ward was ordered to advertise the letting of Stramongate Bridge,³ and the following advertisement, dated 1 September, appeared in *Gore's Liverpool General Advertiser*, the *Leeds Intelligencer* and the *Cumberland Pacquet* early in that month.

To be let. At Mr. Maskew's, the Coffee-House, in Kendal, on Thursday next, the 22nd Day of September 1791. The finding materials, taking down and rebuilding Stramongate Bridge, over the River Kent in Kendal, after a Design of Mr. Harrison's of Lancaster, consisting of three Elliptical Arches, which may be seen at the printing office, in Kendal. The two End Arches, to span Forty-Five Feet each, and the centre Arch Fifty Feet; the carriage and Foot roads to be Thirty Feet within the Battlements. To be well and substantially executed and to be upheld for seven years.

Whoever undertakes the Building must give sufficient Security for the performance thereof, agreeable to conditions which may be seen at the printing office aforesaid, after the 1st September till the time of letting.

A most excellent Quarry of Lime Stone⁴ is open for that purpose, and Specimens of hammered work for different parts of the Erection, may be seen in the Brewery Yard adjoining the Bridge.

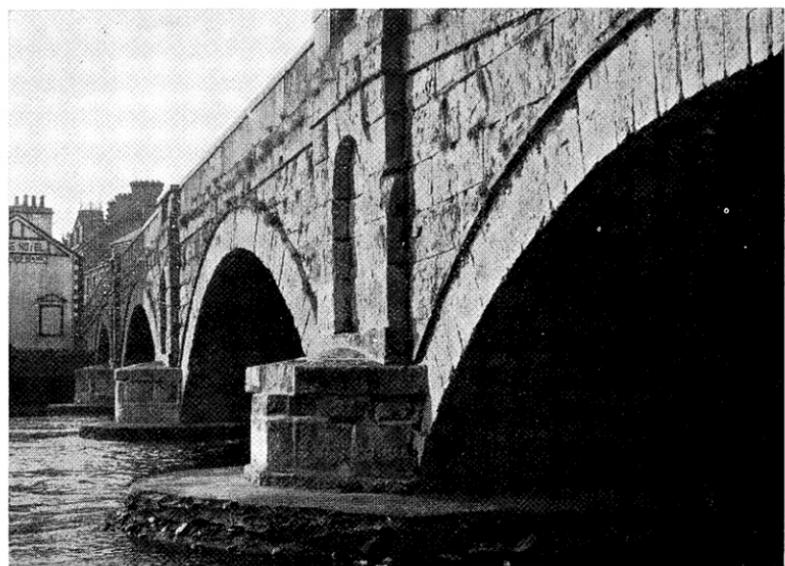
Proposals in writing sealed up, will be received by Mr. Wilkinson, Chief Constable of Kendal Ward, who is also empowered to receive Proposals for erecting a Temporary Wood Bridge, which is to remain till the New Bridge is built.

³ Appleby Minute Books 1780-1804.

⁴ Local mountain limestone was the preferred building material of the Webster firm, almost their trademark. They first polished limestone as marble in 1788.



The bridge from the south.



The south side. Traces of the old bridge can be seen on the right.

By 1 September 1791, then, "Mr Harrison's" plans were ready. The completion of Skerton Bridge in 1785 must have goaded the county authorities into renewed activity and prompted them to turn to its architect for their design. "Mr Harrison, Architect" (as he is called in the county records) must be Thomas Harrison for there was no other architect of that name in Lancaster in 1791, but is the present bridge his design? At the Court of Quarter Sessions on 8 October 1791, the month after Harrison's designs were exhibited, it was decided to summon the magistrates of the County to a meeting on 4 January 1792 to "finally determine upon and adopt *some one of the plans and proposals*" for rebuilding. So further designs must have been submitted. Harrison may have produced more than one design, or perhaps Francis Webster, who, with William Holme, was to build the bridge, submitted plans of his own. He was the principal architect in Westmorland at the turn of the century and rebuilt many bridges, including Miller Bridge in Kendal in 1818. Certainly John Hird, who built Leighton Hall in 1765, but is otherwise little known, did so, for he received ten guineas in 1796, the same fee as Harrison for his first design, for drawing plans and estimates and making attendances.⁵

Whichever plan was then decided upon the old bridge itself now caused a further delay, for it was found that, unlike the crazy exterior, it was within so firmly cemented that nothing short of blasting would remove such solid work".⁶ The old core would have to remain. A further payment of £10 to Harrison in 1797⁷ for "his attendance, drawing plans and estimates for the amendment of Stramongate Bridge", suggests that he was sent for to adapt his design to the new

⁵ Kendal Minute Books 1780-1804.

⁶ Curwen, *Kirkbie-Kendal*.

⁷ Kendal Minute Books 1780-1804.

conditions. He probably changed the details of the elevations as little as possible, but was forced to use four arches of unequal span instead of three arches of 45 feet, 50 feet and 45 feet as planned, and to achieve the rise to bridge level over the eastern arch to the detriment of the design.

On 12 October 1793, Messrs Holme and Webster of Kendal were ordered to "procure workmen, (and) materials for repairing Stramongate Bridge, agreeable to the plan exhibited at the last Assizes at Appleby",⁸ presumably Harrison's second version. In July 1794 another contract was signed with Holme and Webster for completing the bridge.⁹

The bridge as built was a recasing on both sides in local mountain limestone of the old bridge, with four irregular spans of 39 feet, 41 feet (2) and 35 feet, and a total span of 190 feet. The arches are segmental instead of elliptical, but the "width between the battlements" is 30 feet as in Harrison's original plan. The date of its completion, 1794, is cut into niches on both sides of the bridge.

In addition to the documentary evidence there are stylistic similarities between Stramongate and Harrison's three other known masonry bridges. The Derby bridge of 1788 is very close to the Lancaster bridge in its details; the Chester bridge of 1827 is very much simpler in its detailing, and it is possible to see Stramongate Bridge as a connecting link between these two groups. Skerton Bridge is said to have been the first level bridge built in England,¹⁰ and it would be surprising if, almost at the same time and within twenty miles, another architect made the same step forward in design, for the Kendal bridge, too, is as level as

⁸ Kendal Minute Books 1780-1804.

⁹ Kendal Minute Books 1780-1804.

¹⁰ It has been suggested (P. F. Hesketh, *Architectural Guide to Lancashire*) that Rennie, who knew Skerton Bridge, drew the inspiration for his Waterloo Bridge (1811-17) from it.

the site, which has forced Harrison to achieve the rise to bridge-level over the end arches, will allow. There is a good deal of shallow, "punched", rustication on the cutwaters at Kendal and Lancaster and on the abutments at Chester. Most striking is Harrison's treatment of the piers in all four bridges. In each case the apparent mass of the piers is reduced by the introduction of an arch. This feature at Skerton Bridge becomes a tunnel penetrating the pier from side to side and framed by aedicules. At Derby the Doric order is dispensed with and the tunnel becomes a niche, segmental on plan, as it is too at Chester. At Kendal the niche is rectangular in plan.

That "Mr Harrison" of the 1791 design and the Kendal Minute Books is Thomas Harrison of Chester cannot be doubted; that the design of the existing Stramongate Bridge is also his is scarcely less certain.