# OLD TYNE BRIDGE AND ITS "CELLARS."

READ 29TH AUGUST, 1883, BY JAMES CLEPHAN.

THE bibliographic Dibdin, having visited our northern town, commemorated in his "Reminiscences" its "overhanging glories of the Elizabethan period;" story nodding over to story from St. Nicholas' to St. Mary's, as though at their topmost height they would fall into each other's arms, and embrace. Here and there an occasional opening might afford the wayfarer a glimpse of sky or river—some access to the parapet of the bridge, where, as in the local legend, a moralizing Alderman, addicted, like the third Richard, to toying with his finger-ring, might lose it into the Tyne. But, on the whole, the transit of the valley, from church to church, was not without its resemblance to the threading of a tunnel.

Letterpress and pencil have familiarized the Newcastle mind with the picturesque aspect of Old Tyne Bridge—that fantasy in stone, with tower and gate bestriding the narrow way, and houses and shops straggling on either side in more or less unbroken succession. These crowning features—these "overhanging glories"—of the quaint superstructure, are of imperishable fame. Tier upon tier of windows rose from roof to roof. Homes and marts encroached on the thoroughfare on the one hand—hung over the tide on the other—in rival endeavour to accommodate their inmates and customers. Nor, when the wants of the pontine population had been cared for above, was ingenuity exhausted; for, between way and water below, a resource remained of which advantage was seized in a fashion of which our Ælian literature is bound to take especial note. Tyne Bridge had its pendent as well as its towering curiosities of architecture; and in the interests of local history it is well to embalm them in archæological print.

On the eve of the remorseless inundation that was to devour the wondrous fabric, the marvel of successive centuries, Smeaton was making report, October 18th, 1769, "concerning the state of that part of Tyne Bridge, between Newcastle and Gateshead, which is in the county palatine of Durham." He had "found the first arch, beginning

from the south side," needing, apparently, "no material repairs." It was, however, "in a great measure, blocked up by cellars for convenience of the houses above, and had no current of water through it when the low-water was below the sterlings or jetees, as they were called, which surrounded all the piers in the manner of London Bridge."

Thus does the engineer of the Eddystone light-house admit us to an exterior peep at the "cellars" of the Newcastle viaduct, prolonging downwards the upper stories of the dwellings clustering over the southern arch; and an interior view of one of them is incidentally shown to us by a rare tract of 1768, "sold by B. Fleming," one of the members of a family long carrying on the business of "bookseller and stationer" at "The Bible and Crown under the Magazine Gate" of the bridge.

With an appropriate motto, chosen from the Assize Sermon of Dr. (afterwards Bishop) Lowth, the title of the pamphlet runs—"The Case of Mr. James Oliphant, Surgeon, respecting a Prosecution which he, together with his Wife and Maid Servant, underwent in the year 1764, for the Suppos'd Murder of a Female Domestic." Brought before the Court at Durham on the 17th of August in that year, the prisoners were on the same day acquitted by the jury; whereupon Mr. Justice Bathurst, after a few words from Mr. Oliphant, sorrowed for him in his misfortune, and declared his belief "that he was as innocent of the crime laid to his charge as himself."

Lamentable was the sad case which forms the burden of the more than four-score pages of print that have come down to us. On one of the number, "that the reader may have a clearer apprehension" of the narrative, "some description" is given of Mr. Oliphant's dwelling, and its situation:—"The house stands at the south end of Tyne Bridge, on the first arch, and on the west side of the street." Beneath the attics, "in the second or middle floor," are "the kitchen and parlour, whose doors are opposite to each other. Next below is the shop, on the ground floor; and underneath the shop is the cellar, into which the descent is by winding stairs. The cellar has a door cut into two parts; the upper part opening for the purpose of receiving air and light; the under part opening occasionally, for the convenience of loading or unloading goods from thence into or from the river Tyne, which at high tide runs deep and rapid, and almost close below."

Through this lofty home on the bridge, at noonday on the 17th of July, 1764, the alarm ran, from archway to parlour, "of the deceased's

having thrown herself out of the cellar window;" and in the course of the next four days, the body of "the ill-fated girl" was "found floating in the middle of the river," and an inquest held. After the lapse of seven more years, the shadows which had fallen on the happy ark of the Oliphants were deepened by the overwhelming flood of 1771. The bridge and its abodes, assailed by a deluge of waters, were a wreck; a new viaduct must be built; and its engineers, modifying the old line of river wall, narrowed the waterway between shore and shore. Smeaton's "first arch, beginning from the south side," fell within the lessened limit of the stream, and was consequently incorporated, in reconstruction, with the land-abutment. Not more of it, however, was disturbed by the builder than his needs required; the rest was wrapped round as a fossil; and there it lay inurned until the present century was far spent. The tide had ebbed and flowed for generations from the time of the destructive inundation; and the historic bridge, that had undergone so many mutations, was to be transformed once more. In the year 1864 (the centenary of the Durham assize trial), workmen were clearing the way for the River Commissioners' "Hydraulic Swing," the latest platform over the Tyne on the Roman site. A stroke of the pick was the prelude to a surprise. It let in the light upon the hanging chamber of the Plantagenet structure. Winding stairs, as described in the tract of 1768, led down to an apartment not without some pretensions to ornament—memento of the well-nigh forgotten tale of 1764. The storied remains of the ancient viaduct were curiously scanned, and not suffered to pass away until they had been registered and depicted among the instructive records and plans of the Improvement Commissioners.

The Old lingers in the lap of the New. Relics of the roadway erected in the reign of Henry the Third had clung to the wonted site down to the days of Queen Victoria; and beyond the place of the southern arch there yet reposes in its primitive bed, below the busy traffic of the passing day, the terminal masonry of the Imperial Builder, whose mantle is with us still. History has proverbially its romance no less than Fiction. Life has ever its poetic side. The story of our earliest viaduct is one long epic. The Protean way—way of wood, and stone, and iron—having won its completest form and largest use—forthwith there came to the Tyne for its inauguration, in the summer of 1876, a ship of the country that first gave the river a bridge. Bound

for the Elswick Engine and Ordnance Works, it took on board, for the Government of Italy, a gun of one hundred tons. To and fro passed the "Europa" of the Italian Navy. Rome had inaugurated Tyne Bridge in its first form and fashion, and repeated the ceremony in its latest. Two eras, separated by an interval of seventeen centuries, were brought together as the hydraulic door glided softly open for the service of a ship of steam; and who could look upon the scene, with its suggestions of contrast and resemblance, and not be thoughtful? It was a spectacle on our river beyond the dreams of Hadrian, speculative and far-reaching as was the great Emperor who gave our town and bridge a name, and whose impress rests on the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of the Tyne. (See pp. 146, 147, "The River Tyne, its History and Resources," by the late Mr. James Guthrie, Secretary to the River Commission.)

Smeaton, whose words as to "the first arch beginning from the south side" have been quoted, had also something to say as to the second, not less memorable—"The Drawbridge Arch" of Old Tyne Bridge. In Bourne's historic folio of 1736, reference is made to a draw-bridge which had disappeared at some forgotten date. Walking along the antique roadway from North to South, the curate of All Saints' calls the attention of his townsmen to the Magazine Gate near the Sandhill; to the Great Tower standing as a prison-house midway; to the Blue Stone marking the boundary between Newcastle and the Bishopric; and to "another tower, where has been a draw-bridge;" a feature common to the ancient thoroughfares across the Thames and the Tyne; Old London Bridge being "particularly noted," says *Gephyralogia* (1751), "for its lofty houses and shops, built on each side of it, which give it so much the appearance of a common street that a stranger scarce knows he is crossing a river till he discovers it by two openings near the middle, which are over the draw-bridge." Smeaton, reporting to Bishop Trevor, when about to make repairs no long time before the fatal flood of 1771, had to state what he had ascertained as to the arch where the draw-bridge of the river Tyne had been. There was here (he said) a floor of earth and pavement, the work "roughly executed," and "having all the appearance of a job done in a hurry;" one of the riddles of Time whose solution the venturesome may essay to guess, and the cautious be disposed to let alone.