

THOMAS TELFORD IN BICTON

As already mentioned in previous instalments, this year we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Telford who made his own contribution to our local landscape.

After leaving his native Scotland, he worked as a mason in London gaining skills and experience before being invited to Shrewsbury by its MP Sir William Pulteney in 1787. The initial project was the restoration of the castle but he soon got involved with other public works, such as the prison. This led to his appointment as County Surveyor and thereby the task of rebuilding Montford Bridge.

Throughout its 500 year life, it needed regular repairs, perhaps because of flood damage, as well as decay. Between 1245 and 1412 the crown granted the right to levy tolls for this purpose on several occasions. In 1538 Leland reported that 'the fine stone bridge had been lately renewed'. Later, the borough of Shrewsbury, now responsible for the bridge, ordered minor repairs in 1608 and levied a special tax in the town for major work in 1628. By 1792 it was no longer a question of repairs but total replacement to meet the demands of increasing traffic in the 'Turnpike Age'.

To avoid floods, Telford sprung his new bridge from the high cliff on the Montford side and built a large approach ramp across the floodplain on the Bicton side. The old bridge was completely removed and was no doubt 'recycled' to build this ramp and also provide rubble infilling around the arches. It was therefore necessary to erect a temporary wooden bridge during construction. About the only relic of the old bridge is a stone dated 1630 inserted into the rear of the new toll house a reminder of that 1628 repair order.

For both bridge and toll house, Telford used red sandstone from Nesscliffe, as it was more conveniently accessible than the more popular and better quality stone from Grinshill. Perhaps he had been introduced to this stone by his work on the castle where a colour match had been important. Anyway, authorities kept him on a tight budget.

Nearby on the main road 'Montford Little Bridge' was at some stage well built with similar stone. The bridge over this same brook on Preston Montford Lane is identical and both may have been part of this same project but records are lacking.

On the Montford site, the new approaches bypassed the small community in the valley around the original bridgehead. Nevertheless the Clive Arms Inn, formerly the Pheasant, later the Powis Arms, was still accessible. On the Bicton side, on a level terrace beyond the floodplain, some surplus road space appears to have been built over with blacksmiths' shops, a fine new brick house and the Nags Head Inn. The Swan, now hiding its 16th Century timber framing under stucco, still stood at an angle where the Preston Montford road once branched off. Its barn once almost projected into Telford's new road until within living memory.

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In 1800 the Irish and British parliament were united and soon Irish MP's were lobbying the government to improve the road between. After many surveys, reports and delays, money was allocated and Telford, by now a national rather than local figure was appointed to oversee improvement of the Holyhead Road. He chose the direct route through the Dee valley rather than the long way around by Chester and so our local road became part of that system. Bit by bit improvements were made and eventually in 1835 it was the turn of 'Montford Hill', where the steep gradients needed reducing. A combination of higher embankments and a deeper cutting still takes the road smoothly between Bicton and Montford Bridge, bypassing the little community around 'Montford Little Bridge'. The final work was actually directed by John Provis, since Telford had just died. He always had a reputation for leading a good team of engineers, but perhaps they tend to get overlooked because of the fame of their chief.

Montford Bridge settlement now became a more important service centre with inns and tradesmen, well recorded by the maps and directions around the middle of the century. By this time, however, the rail network was expanding and offering a new way to reach Holyhead and decline was inevitable.

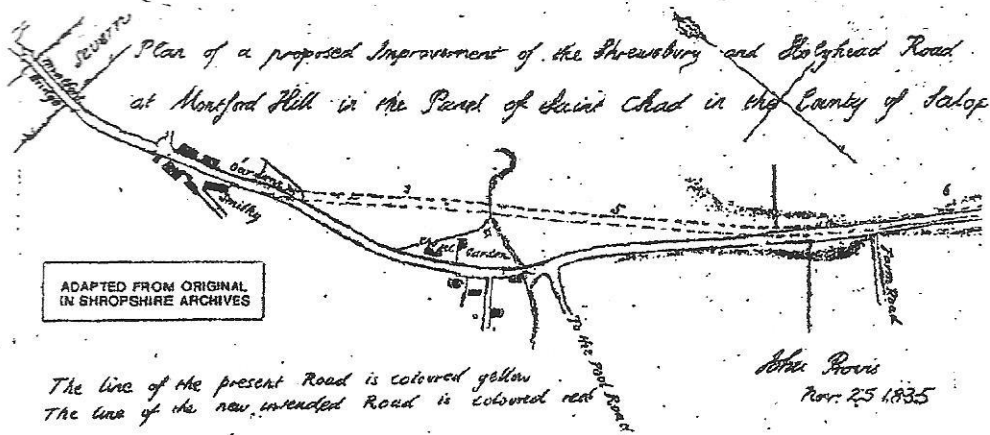
How the settlement developed later is a whole new story, sufficient now is to comment on the bridge itself. It stood firm through high and low water, but in 1963 suffered damage from water flowing between the road and the stone

parapet. Since the bridge was also proving too narrow for both footway and modern traffic the opportunity was seized to replace the whole deck with a wider overhanging structure. For speed, a system of prefabricated concrete beams were laid, held together with a quick setting 'high alumina cement'.

Unfortunately, this new untried material proved a disaster here and elsewhere as it decayed to powder! As a result, after the new bridge on the A5 was opened in 1991, engineers built a new concrete deck, this time slowly casting in situ. The necessary long closure of the road certainly encouraged travellers to use the new route with obvious impact on several roadside businesses. Telford's bridge is still underneath, but more out of sight—so please take the trouble to lean over and take a look rather than just drive over.



Thomas Telford C.E., F.R.S.



For his road west of Shrewsbury,
Telford designed a uniform set of
mile stones with cast iron plates
mounted on limestone pillars.

Example near Four Crosses,
Bicton.

