



5 BRIDGES OF STAINFORTH

A visit ... to view the ruins and decay of the bridge.

By the start of the early modern period, county councils held the responsibility for the upkeep of bridges on main highways where a major river crossing was located. Until 1974, the Settle area was part of the West Riding and this council was required by law to maintain, for example, Settle Bridge, Horton in Ribblesdale Bridge, Ling Gill Bridge and Harden Bridge. Bridges on byways or on highways that spanned minor stream crossings were maintained by local administration. In the north of England, and especially in Yorkshire, administrative divisions.



*Stainforth Bridge in the 1890s looking upstream, showing Craven Heifer on the right
- photo courtesy David S Johnson*

A wapentake was an administrative division in the north of England (especially Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire)—known in the south of England as a hundred—that was in effect a precursor of the District (several wapentakes made up a Riding in Yorkshire). The word is derived from weapon take—in early medieval times (10th century) decisions were made by those of voting power showing their weapons. Thus, the raising of spears was the equivalent of a show of hands today. The Dales were split into three wapentakes:

Ewcross – stretching from Sedbergh through Ingleton and Horton in Ribblesdale to Clapham and Bentham;

West Staincliffe– consisting of the upper Ribble, the Forest of Bowland and Malham Moor, stretching from Buckden, including Stainforth, Settle and Slaidburn;

East Staincliffe—all other Craven parishes from Kettlewell to Keighley.

The present boundary of Stainforth is what was the Ewcross and West Staincliffe boundary. There were three markers in 1307, now lost: Langemangrave (almost certainly near Dead Man's Cave), Whettyngstan (Whetstone Bank) on the present Stainforth-Horton boundary, and Yuccrosse (Ewcross later) somewhere near the old ford at Helwith Bridge.

So, bridges maintained locally became known as wapentake bridges. Every wapentake bridge was given a number and a name: one such bridge was Stainforth Bridge, No. 261, over Stainforth Beck.

Most early, i.e. medieval, bridges were constructed of timber and it is rarely possible to determine when the first timber bridge was erected at a particular crossing. In the medieval period—and sometimes beyond—bridges did not exist at all. Rivers and becks were crossed, when water flow conditions permitted, by fords. Indeed, the origin of the place-name Stainforth is stony ford. Elsewhere in the Dales the place-name element wath denotes a ford.

What is relatively easy to resolve is when early wooden bridges or fords were replaced by stone structures. Documentary evidence exists from the mid-18th century onwards. Two documents are particularly useful in this respect, both dated 1752: *The Book of Bridges* and *An Alphabetical List of all the Bridges in the West Riding of the County of York which are repaired by particular Wapentakes*. The former contains original, scale surveyors' plans for all county bridges in the West Riding. The latter lists every single wapentake and county bridge in the West Riding and was published in 1834 by the Office of the Clerk of the Peace in Wakefield as part of *The Practice of the Court*. The alphabetical list states that Stainforth Bridge 'was repaired by the inhabitants of Staincliffe and Ewcross Wapentake'.

Stainforth Bridge

The construction of smaller bridges had been facilitated by the passing of the Bridges Act 1740 that, for the first time, empowered local justices to purchase land to either rebuild or widen bridges, and by the County Rates Act 1738, which gave them due authority to draw up contracts for bridge repairs. From the 1752 list we know that a bridge spanned Stainforth Beck in the village at that time, but we cannot deduce from this whether or not it was made of wood or stone.

In 1760, Articles of Agreement were drawn up and signed on 28 January, between the Chief Constables of Staincliffe and Ewcross Wapentake, namely

John Wilkinson of Skipton and Thomas Hesleden of Horton in Ribblesdale, on the one hand, and, on the other, two stonemasons, Joseph Jennings of Skipton and John Redman of Farnhill. The two masons contracted to repair those wapentake bridges that needed remedial attention over a seven-year period from 5 February of that year. In return they were to receive quarterly payments of £10. Their brief was to put right 34 bridges, including Stainforth Bridge.

History does not seem to record whether the masons reneged on the contract or found the workload too demanding but, on 26 October 1764, a further Article of Agreement was drawn up for the repair of 'Staneforth Bridge'. This agreement was between Josiah Morley of Giggleswick, William Hall of Settle, Joseph Hudson of Horton in Ribblesdale, and Thomas Hesleden, all acting on behalf of the wapentake, and Robert Charnley of Long Preston and Benjamin Cockshutt of Settle, stonemasons. The contract arose out of a visit the representatives had made to Stainforth in July of that year 'to view the ruins and decay' of the bridge. Detailed plans were drawn up along with detailed estimates of the costs involved, and we can gain an idea from this document as to the nature of the structure that was in such a sorry state. The masons' brief was for 'making an Addition to the said Bridge'. This would seem to suggest that it was already built of stone.

By the agreement, Cockshutt and Charnley were to have the bridge fully-built and open for use by 29 September 1765. Furthermore, they were to be responsible for maintaining the bridge for three years from date of completion.

The breakdown of costs confirms that, not only was the existing bridge stone built, but that it was also very narrow. It would appear to have been a typical, hump-backed packhorse bridge, possibly without parapets. This is suggested by the use of the phrase: 'An Estimate for an Addition of nine feet to be added on the lower side of Staneforth Bridge ... according to the Plan amended.'

The Estimate (£.s.d)

To:	
digging the foundations	£2. 10. 0
35 yards of stone for the arch	7. 0. 0
42 yards of walling for the wing walls and abutments	6. 6. 0
centering the arch	3. 0. 0
lime and sand	3. 10. 0
facia and coping stones	6. 0. 0
pedestal stone for the bridge ends	2. 12. 0
gravelling and grading the roadway over the bridge	4. 12. 0
	Total £35. 10. 0 (£35.50)

This sum represents a substantial amount for a small bridge and does seem to reinforce the view that the bridge was, to all intents and purposes, fully rebuilt. This phase of building can clearly be seen underneath the bridge: the upstream half has much cruder and larger voussoirs (the wedge-shaped stones) in its arch than the later, downstream half.

The masons were to be paid £11 when all the necessary materials had been delivered to site, a further £11 on completion of the arch, with the balance of £13.10.0 on final completion.

This, however, was not the end of the story. On 26th April 1797 Pontefract Sessions issued: *Account of the Bridges that were rebuilt and widened in the West Riding in the County of York for the last forty years*. In the wapentake bridges list there is an entry 'Stainforth Bridge, widened, £50.0.0'. Had Cockshutt and Charnley underestimated the task? To put this sum into a local perspective, the West Riding list includes:

Settle Bridge, widened	£300. 0. 0
Horton in Ribblesdale Bridge, rebuilt	70. 0. 0
Long Preston Bridge, rebuilt	400. 0. 0

In 1924, all wapentake bridges in the West Riding were re-designated as county bridges. Since then, of course, the bridge has been maintained and kept in a good state of repair (for example in 1901 and 1921), having been most recently repaired after the near-disastrous floods on the beck in 1985, and due for strengthening and parapet repairs in the near future.

The Great Flood

On Friday, 26 July 1985, 63.1 mm of rain were recorded at Stainforth. The average rainfall for the month of July is 70 mm. It was reported that several times this rainfall fell in the area that feeds Cowside and Stainforth Becks. The floodwaters raging down Stainforth Beck swept away a footbridge and a large area of the banking so that rocks that were carried in the flood increased the damage. The retaining wall on the South Side of Stainforth beck was badly damaged. A group of scouts were camping in Tom Sharp's field. Their tents were carried away and they spent the night in the village hall. The height of the beck was only just below the arch of Stainforth Bridge (see photograph). The water flowed out of the beck along the footpath on the lower side of the West Green and on to the road. The area outside the Vicarage was two or three centimetres deep in water. Sandbags had to be positioned to protect a number of houses in the region of Hollies Close and Allen Close. The fire service was called to pump water from a cottage on the east side of the beck.



Stainforth Bridge in 1985 flood - photo courtesy Chris Burgon

Stainforth Packhorse Bridge

From the *Craven Herald & Pioneer* (25 September 1931):

‘Efforts which have been made during the past few months for the preservation of Stainforth Bridge, which spans the River Ribble in one graceful arch close above the resounding and picturesque cataracts of Stainforth Force near Settle, culminated on Wednesday afternoon at Knight Stainforth when the bridge was formally handed over to a representative of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or National Beauty.

The bridge has many claims to the consideration of residents and tourists, and not the least of these is the fact that in all its long life it has never cost the ratepayers a penny. So far back as records can show, it has always been repaired by the owner of Knight Stainforth Hall, the public having a right of way across the bridge, which connects the two hamlets of Knight Stainforth and Stainforth.

The origin of the bridge is shrouded in antiquity. It was formerly a link on an ancient track that crossed the Nidd at Pateley Bridge, the Wharfe at Grassington, and, coming forward by Malham Tarn to Feizor and Clapham was reckoned the shortest route from York to Lancaster. Roman and earlier remains abound along its course and local tradition that the first bridge was built by the Romans cannot be disregarded. The age of the present structure

has been estimated to be at about four centuries, with a good margin on either side, and was probably erected by the Tempest family of Broughton Hall, near Skipton, or the Watsons, a Wigglesworth family who obtained the manor Knight Stainforth in 1547.

Until the advent of the motor car the only wear and tear on the bridge was the passing of farm carts and livestock, and thus the owners of the Hall were well able to keep in repair the bridge. In the break up of properties which followed the Great War, Stainforth Hall Farm was sold, and was purchased by the tenant, Mr Thomas Maudsley, whose family had lived at the Hall and farmed the land for some two centuries.

The cost of all kinds of repairs rose, and the increasing weight of traffic over the bridge caused the owner a natural anxiety. When an inspection was made a few months ago it was found that a motor lorry had already chosen the bridge as a regular route and the plaster, which in pre-war days would have lasted for years was daily shaken off in showers.'

Deeds handed over

'The scheme for the preservation of the ancient structure was first broached in a letter from the Settle Naturalists and Antiquarian Society to the Settle Rural District Council last year when it stated that it had been approached by Mr Ralph M Robinson, on behalf of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments asking the Settle Society to allow an appeal to be made under their name for the raising of the greater portion of £250 as an



Packhorse Bridge - photo courtesy Ronnie Chapman



The 1931 ceremony to hand over the Packhorse Bridge to the National Trust held at Knight Stainforth Hall - photo courtesy the Maudsley family

endowment fund. This sum was required for the preservation and closing of the bridge to heavy vehicular traffic.

On Wednesday the scheme was brought to successful fruition, and the ceremony of handing over the title deeds and endowment fund was attended by a large number of residents. Favourable weather enabled the ceremony to be conducted on the lawn of Knight Stainforth Hall.

The meeting was presided over by the Rev. H Edwards, vicar of Langcliffe, who was supported by Mr Ralph M Robinson, Great Missenden, Bucks, the originator of the scheme; Mr G Geoffrey Dawson, of Langcliffe Hall; Mr Thos Maudsley, junior, the son of the owner of the bridge who was unable to attend through indisposition; Mr B Logan Thompson, assistant secretary and representative of the National Trust; Mr F J N Dufty (Recorder to the Craven Museum); Mr Alfred Green (Skipton) and Mrs Green; Mr C H Charlesworth and Mr G K Charlesworth (Settle); the Rev. E G H Bryant (Skipton); Mr S C Davidson (Highways Surveyor to the Settle Rural District Council) and Mr T E Pearson (clerk); Mrs and Miss Piper (Settle); Mr Frederick Riley (Settle); Mr F Lister (Settle), treasurer to the Endowment Fund; Mr C Ratcliffe (Stackhouse); Mr and Mrs J Ingham (Langcliffe); Mr and Mrs F Marlor (Settle); Miss Geldard (Cappleside); Miss Perfect (Langcliffe Hall); Mrs Perfect (Stainforth); Miss Precious; Mrs Atkinson (Settle) and Miss Crofton, amongst others.'

Assured for all time

'The Chairman said that it was a great day in the history of the Parish of Stainforth and a happy one, as the safety and future of the old bridge was assured for all time. It meant, also, that the bridge would still serve the needs of the parish without crumbling in its old age. The bridge was not going to be placed on the "dole" (laughter) and would be in good condition for many years to come. The Chairman also referred to the history of the bridge, given above.

Mr Maudsley, Jnr, handing over the title deeds to Mr Thompson, the representative of the National Trust, said he would like to express his appreciation to the people who had contributed to the Endowment Fund and had thus made possible that ceremony. The bridge had not required a great deal of repair work, but during the last few years it had become a popular rendezvous for cyclists and hikers, and especially motoring tourists, so that he had felt that the bridge would be better looked after if the National Trust would take it over. He also expressed his appreciation of the services of Mr Robinson.

Mr Lister, the treasurer, then handed over the Endowment Fund of £250, and the Chairman remarked that the money had been contributed by all classes, and the donations had ranged from 6d to £50. In a further tribute to Mr Robinson, the Treasurer said he had a great interest in the old bridge, and his efforts had saved it for posterity. Had it not been for his work there might have been a bridge of steel girders.

Accepting the deeds and cheque, Mr Thompson said he was sorry Mr Charles Holmes was not present to represent the Trust. Mr Holmes was keenly interested in the Ribblesdale district and had connections with the parish of Stainforth. The Trust owned a considerable amount of property, valued at over £250,000, consisting chiefly of ancient monuments and beauty spots, and was recognised by Parliament and could enforce its own bye-laws for the protection of property. No grant was received from the Government, however, and for that reason the Trust might often seem churlish in refusing to accept gifts. The committee had decided that they could not accept Stainforth Bridge as a gift. "We have to look gift horses in the mouth", added the speaker amid laughter, "because the bridge would have to be kept in repair forever, and it was necessary to ask for an endowment fund".

Relic of former times

'Many of those present had worked extremely hard for the fruition of the project which now, perhaps, they thought was accomplished. He asked them to consider that the work was not complete and that their responsibilities had not been entirely shelved. Damage to the bridge of any kind would constitute an offence, but it depended upon them whether the bridge was to be preserved or not. The Trust had the power to draft bye-laws to prevent

damage by heavy vehicular traffic, but he did not want the Trust to exercise this power, and he felt that the strength of public opinion would be a sufficient enough deterrent against wanton damage. He wanted there to be a 'taboo' against anyone who drove heavy motor vehicles over the bridge. Most of the people who visited the picturesque beauty spot were strangers to the district, and he would like the residents to inculcate into the minds of the tourist visitor a reverence for the bridge so that nobody would harm it. The Trust owned a great deal of property in various parts of the country, but until that day owned only two monuments in Yorkshire, a mediaeval stone cross at Ripon and the Treasurer's House behind York Minster. He was rather sorry that so few monuments and beauty spots were vested in the Trust in this part of Yorkshire, but the gesture that has been made that day was a good sign, and he felt sure there were many other places of historic interest that would perhaps become vested in the Trust.

"You cannot call Stainforth Bridge famous and it is just as well", he said. The beauty of the English countryside was not made up of famous beauty spots but by the unsullied and more obscure places of interest, typical of a district. The Trust could not preserve the whole of the countryside, and they could not retard progress. Petrol pumps would have to be erected and bun-galows built, but they did try to discourage blatancy and preserve the character the characteristics of a district, and features of village scenery were the ancient parish churches and bridges. Churches were well looked after by ecclesiastical authorities, but bridges needed care for their preservation. "A bridge like Stainforth Bridge is a relic of a former time and of a former generation, and I hope that you will look upon this preserved monument as yours; something valuable in the history of the district, something to be preserved for future generations".

Votes of thanks

'Mr G Dawson, in proposing a vote of thanks on behalf of his brother to the subscribers and the National Trust, said the Trust had become famous and they were proud that their bridge had been vested in so famous an institution.

Mr C H Charlesworth, on behalf of the joint secretaries of the Endowment Fund, said they appreciated the trouble the Trust had taken in the matter and they hoped the trouble taken would be of advantage. He would also like to thank Mr Dawson for attending the meeting, having regard to the difficulties of his leaving London at such a time. All credit was due to Mr Robinson who had worked so hard to preserve the ancient bridge.

Mr Thompson, responding said that when repairs became necessary they would consult the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, whose advice they always took. He also thanked the chairman.

Responding Mr Edwards drew attention to three pictures displayed on the lawn. One was of Sawley Abbey, whose Abbott was once Lord of the

Manor of Great Stainforth; in the middle was a modern painting of the bridge, while the remaining picture was of Broughton Hall, the ancestral home of the Tempest family, who once owned the Manor of Knight Stainforth and perhaps, built the bridge.

Later, those present along with schoolchildren from Stainforth, visited the bridge.'



Sources

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