

TURVEY AND THE TRAFFIC PROBLEM



The view of Turvey bridge from the mill, with "Jonah" in the right foreground. The County Council scheme for widening the bridge is referred to in the next column.

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TURVEY BRIDGE

HISTORIC STRUCTURE TO BE
MODERNIZED

WIDER AND STRONGER

Turvey bridge is to be widened. It is a venerable structure, dating probably from the 16th or 17th centuries, though no one can say just when it was built. Certain it is, however, that men of many generations have crossed the Ouse by the narrow way carried by the bridge's eleven arches, and that until the growth of motor traffic in the present century the bridge did faithfully and well all that was required of it. For some years past, however, it has proved quite inadequate to meet modern demands, for there are places in its length where two big lorries are unable to pass one another. The bridge's ancient stones are in many places rudely scraped and scored as a result of unfortunate encounters with motor vehicles.

The bridge is seven miles from Bedford by road and 30 by the course of the river. Plans for its widening were put before the Highways Committee of the County Council in January, 1928, and they approved a scheme then estimated to cost £13,647, exclusive of road works. This scheme, with some revisions, is now waiting the sanctions of the Ministry of Transport and of the Buckinghamshire County Council, for the distant end of the bridge is beyond the Bedfordshire boundary. The two authorities mentioned are at present awaiting detailed drawings of the work, which will be submitted to them in the course of a few days. These sanctions having been obtained, the matter will come before the County Council for final approval.

THE PROPOSED WORKS

The minimum width of the bridge at present is 12ft. between parapets. It is proposed to take down the whole of the north side parapet and to rebuild on a new line which will give a minimum width between parapets of 30ft. This will provide for a carriage way 20ft. wide and a 5ft. kerbed path on either side. The length to be reconstructed begins on the Turvey side of the "Three Fishes" Inn and stretches for a distance of 250 yards. It is a requirement of the authorities who deal with ancient monuments that the new structure shall be carried out in similar material to the original, and in a way that will preserve the original appearance of the bridge, even embodying little irregularities of elevation when this helps to achieve that end. Therefore, while the new portion of the bridge will be constructed in reinforced concrete, the whole of it will be encased in the local random limestone of which the old bridge was built. In this way the claims of both science and sentiment are met. The south parapet of the bridge (the one facing the mill and containing the familiar little recesses) will not be interfered with. The arches carrying both the new and the old portions will be strengthened by fixing over them a reinforced concrete slab. This, of course, will be invisible, being covered by the road surface. The new arch foundations will go down to the solid rock, and borings for this have already begun.

The cost of that part of the work which is in Buckinghamshire—about one-sixth—will, of course, be borne by that county, and it is hoped that the maximum grant towards the whole cost will be paid by the Ministry of Transport. The total cost, according to the latest estimates, is likely to be in the neighbourhood of £16,000. As soon as the scheme has been passed and tenders have been accepted the work will proceed, and it is hoped that it will be in full swing during the course of this summer.

THE BRIDGES HISTORY

It has been mentioned that the men who first built Turvey Bridge did their work well, and that is one reason why so much obscurity enshrouds its early history. In those days the larger bridges were repairable by the county, and Quarter Sessions was responsible for their maintenance. The upkeep of the smaller bridges, of which this was one, was the liability of the Lord of the Manor in which each was situated, or by his tenants "by reason of tenure", as the legal phrase puts it. And so little attention did this bridge need that few documents relating to it seem to have been preserved until the year 1824, when an action was brought to decide whether the private owners or the county should pay for certain repairs. As the magistrates of the county were interested parties, the case was tried in Cambridgeshire, and from the available documents it seems fairly certain that the verdict went in favour of the county. At any rate, there is no record of public money having been spent upon it in those days.

A map dated 1879 in the Muniments Room at the Shire Hall—the working plan of the County Surveyor in the days of Quarter Sessions—shows that the county was responsible only for the approach to the bridge and for one arch. The bridge itself was not only the responsibility of the land-owners but was actually their property, the public having nothing more than a right of way across.

A GREAT FIGHT

By the kindness of Mr. F. G. Emmison, County Records Officer, a representative of this journal was allowed the other day to delve among the dusty records of the case in 1824, and, judging by the piles of beautifully written legal documents relating to it, it must have been a grand fight! One of the parchments reads thus:—

"The Jurors for our Lord the King upon their oath present that from time whereof the memory of man is not to the contrary there was and yet is a certain common public bridge commonly called Turvey Bridge, situate and being in the parish of Turvey in the county of Bedford in the King's common highway, leading from the town of Olney in the county of Buckingham towards and into the town of Bedford. . . The said bridge . . . is very ruinous, broken, dangerous, and in great decay for want of upholding, maintaining, amending, and repairing the same, so that the liege subjects of our said Lord the King upon and over the said Bridge with their Horses, Coaches, Carts, and other Carriages could not during the time last aforesaid nor yet can go, return, pass, repass, ride, and labour as they before used and were accustomed to do and still of right ought to do without great danger of their lives and the loss of their goods to the great damage and common nuisance of all the liege subjects of our said Lord the King. . ."

(Continued from preceding column.)

Another document states that "It is generally understood that the Earls of Peterborough and Monmouth, who for ages possessed the Manor of Turvey with the fishery of the river Ouze, the advowson of the rectory, a moiety of the great tithes, and the greater part of the lands in Turvey, have for time immemorial maintained and were of right bound from time to time to maintain the bridge. . ."

One of the witnesses in the case was a William Ingram, who kept the "Three Fishes" Inn at the foot of the bridge, a house, incidentally, that bears upon its porch the date 1624. He said he entered the house in June, 1795, and remembered "a great Ice Flood" in February of that year and that one of the arches was blown up. He remembered that it was repaired under the direction of John Higgins the elder of Turvey House.

"JONAH"

No reference to Turvey Bridge would be complete, without a reference to Jonah, or St. Peter, or whomsoever the statue that stands in the mill pool is supposed to represent. Some say he was brought from Turvey Abbey, some aver that he came from a monastic garth at Ashridge, and yet others give other theories of his origin; but whoever he is, and whatever may be the true story of how and when he came to be set waist-deep in water outside that gaunt burnt-out ruin of Turvey Mill, it can be stated with authority that there is no proposal to molest his ancient, solitary reign. Jonah the Prophet (or St. Peter the Apostle) is to be left in peace to contemplate, perhaps with an expression even more weebegone than of yore, the spectacle of twentieth-century motor-traffic scurrying over a bridge that contains the craftsmanship of past generations together with the best of modern engineering skill.