
The Long Bridge

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A bridge spanning the River Severn in Newtown has existed for at least five hundred years, but it was not until the early nineteenth century that this iconic structure acquired its name of 'the Long Bridge'. This is its story.



View of Newtown from Llanllwchaearn, John Warwick Smith, (original now in Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/National Library of Wales)

A wooden bridge across the Severn, close to the site of the Long Bridge was recorded as early as the fifteenth century. We can gather some idea of its appearance in its final days from two pictorial views made within about twenty years of each other at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. These show a simple wooden structure, probably of oak, consisting of a superstructure, or decking, supported on timber piles either driven into the river bed or embedded in low masonry pier foundations. Robert Owen was one of the earliest writers to provide us with some detail of the bridge. Writing in his *Autobiography*, he describes 'a wagon way with a narrow footpath'.¹ Whilst the pathway was narrow, the wagon way itself seemed to be little better, as he describes a near miss he experienced with a cart travelling in the opposite direction whilst riding his horse in his youth. The ensuing confrontation resulted in Owen being forced to choose between having his leg crushed by the wheel of the cart or leaping off his mount and risking a fall into the river. Luckily for him, and the future Cooperative Movement, he avoided both fates and landed on the walk way.

¹ Owen, Robert *The Life of Robert Owen*, New York, 1920, p.11



*Old St Marys's and the River, Samuel
Ireland, Powys Archives*

Despite its narrowness, the bridge must have been a robust structure as it withstood many floods, including the *Great Flood* of 1795 which destroyed a number of other bridges in the locality. However, with the dawning of a new century, it was becoming increasingly evident that something needed to be done about this venerable ancient structure. Warwick Smith's painting (overleaf), completed in the same year as the *Great Flood*, shows the view of Newtown from the hills above Llanllwchaearn. The rickety bridge is clearly shown, with a rather peculiar looking St Mary's Church to its left. Ireland's view (left) shows what may be a ferry crossing a tranquil river Severn, with the river behind and St Mary's Church, still in use on the left. Perhaps the ferry have been a safer option for cautious travellers! The opening of the canal in 1819 with the subsequent increase in traffic did little to improve the bridge's condition. It was clearly time to consider action.

For centuries the upkeep of roads and bridges had fallen on the shoulders - and the pockets - of the inhabitants of those communities in which they were situated. In other words, the rate payers. Not only did they pay for the maintenance, they also had to provide the labour. In the case of the Long Bridge, this meant that the burden fell upon the parishes of Newtown and its neighbour across the water, Llanllwchaearn. In order to help with such costs, a toll was levied on all those using the bridge.

It was the Justices of Peace for Montgomeryshire who had the unenviable task of ensuring that all bridges in their jurisdiction were kept in good repair - somewhere in the region of 70 at the beginning of the 19th century. They met four times a year in Welshpool in what were known as the Quarter Sessions. As well as ensuring the maintenance of roads and bridges, the JPs had a multitude of other responsibilities, including trying cases related to property, debt and felonies which did not carry the death penalty, the licensing of alehouses, supervising the County gaol and House of Correction and controlling vagrancy.

Whenever it was reported to them that a bridge was in need of repair, the Justices were required to issue an order to the named parish to undertake the necessary action. Such orders were rarely popular, so those liable to be charged could breathe a sigh of relief if they might be exempted. This was the case for the ratepayers of Newtown in 1818 when it was reported by William Owen, J.P., that 'a bridge over the river Severn called Caerhowell bridge on the highway from Llanfair to Montgomery . . . is ruinous and ought to be repaired by the hundreds of Montgomery and Newtown (the town and parish

of Newtown excepted).² The Justices could also punish the parish rate payers if the work was not completed. Thus, in the case of Caerhowell bridge, we find that:

*King v. [hundreds of] Montgomery and Newtown (town and [parish of] Newtown excepted) for not repairing Caerhowell bridge. A.D. Jones of Court and Thomas Bradley of Trwst Llewelyn, each in £20. Inhabitants appear and plead guilty and submit to a fine of £100.*³

But they had not been so lucky back in 1801, when the high constable of Newtown reported to the magistrates that 'that part of the bridge over the river Severn at Newtown which lies in [the parish of] Newtown' was 'ruinous in decay and out of repair and ought to be repaired by the inhabitants of the town and [parish of] Newtown'.⁴ Some remedial action must have taken place, for in July 1802, Maurice Mears and a Mr Lloyd reported that the bridge was 'good and in complete repair and likely so to continue'⁵. But the following year a contradictory report received by the Justices indicated that the bridge was still 'out of repair'. The magistrates ordered that a sum of £100 should be raised from the ratepayers to cover the cost of repair with £50 "to be paid to Thomas Sturkey (County Treasurer) immediately".⁶

However, little improvement seems to have taken place in the condition of the ailing structure when Richard Fenton visited the town in 1804 who described it as 'old and infirm'⁷. No further action on the bridge seems to have been taken for another ten years, but something must have been laid before the magistrates in 1815 for, in the autumn of that year, Newtown bridge is named amongst a list of five to have been 'respited', meaning any action on them had been adjourned. A further two respites were ordered a year later.

In the meantime, two changes had taken place which would greatly impact on the future of Newtown's river crossing. Firstly, a law was passed by Parliament in 1803 enabling

² QS 1818E23) NB: All references to the Quarter Session Rolls (QS) relate to the transcribed files held by Pows Archives - see <https://storipowys.org.uk/records-we-hold/digitised-and-transcribed-records/>

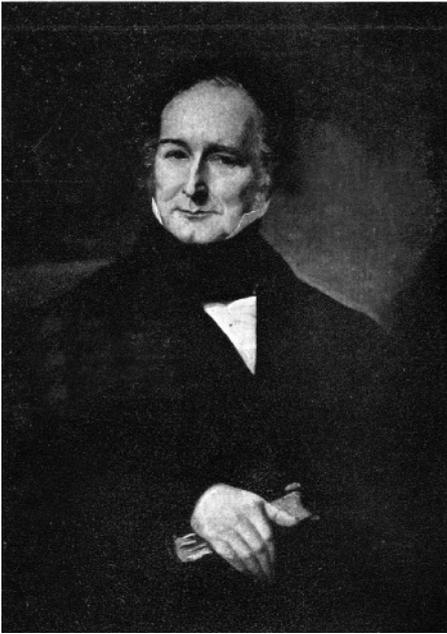
³ *Ibid.* 1818T/SOD/2/6/1b

⁴ *Ibid.* 1801M3

⁵ *Ibid.* 1802T3

⁶ *Ibid.* 1803E41

⁷ Fenton, R. *Tours in Wales (1804-1813)*, London, 1917, pp. 34-35



*William Pugh of Brynlywarch
(1783-1842) - Llyfrgell
Genedlaethol Cymru/National
Library of Wales*

old county family. After studying at Cambridge University and training as a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn, he returned to his native Montgomeryshire where he took up residence at Brynlywarch in Kerry and pioneered banking in Montgomeryshire. Pugh was one of the entrepreneurs who had achieved much in providing the conditions for Newtown to develop as a manufacturing centre for Welsh flannel. He had already spent out more than £10,000 in financing a new road to Llandrindod, which he eventually hoped would continue to open up the burgeoning South Wales coal fields to the town's flannel trade. Not content with that, he had also single-handedly borne the cost - a staggering £52,700 (the modern equivalent of about £5 million) - of completing the Montgomeryshire Canal extension from its terminus at Garthmyl to the new canal basin on the edge of town¹². The completion of the canal would allow coal to be brought in from North-east Wales to provide fuel for the power-looms he planned in his factory on the canal side. Finished flannel could then be sent northwards on the canal to compete with Lancashire and Yorkshire textiles, or by road to South Wales. The only element which was missing was a bridge to link the canal with the new road. For this reason, he proposed that a bridge should be built on a new site at the eastern end of the town, where the river Severn emerged from its huge loop around the town. Pugh argued that his plan was the only practical solution to the projected increase in heavy traffic from the canal which the old timber bridge would be unable to withstand.

As a magistrate, Pugh was in a good position to influence decisions and it may be that he was considering this solution to the problem as early as 1822, for in May of that year Pension met with 'Mr Pugh on the subject of Newtown bridge'.¹³ Whenever the idea first materialised, it was soon to be dashed. For the tradespeople of Newtown, a new bridge on the edge of town could mean that business might be diverted from the centre. To them the plan was likely to benefit Pugh rather than the wider interests of the community. As a consequence, the idea was dismissed (a second crossing on the site proposed by Pugh would have to wait until the late 20th century to be realised), in favour of a new-build at the existing crossing point. The project would cost in the region of £4,000, much of which was provided by Pugh who reasoned that a new bridge in the current location was better than the status quo.

¹² Richards, M. *A History of Newtown*, The Powysland Club, Newtown 1993, pp.58-59

¹³ QS, 1822T15.

Early in 1825, Penson was instructed to draw up plans and specifications for three alternative bridges - in timber, stone and in the relatively new bridge building material of iron. A notice to potential contractors was given in the press in February:

To all Persons willing to CONTRACT for BUILDING an IRON BRIDGE, a STONE BRIDGE or a TIMBER BRIDGE, over the River Severn at NEWTOWN, may see the Specifications and Plans, any time after 28th instant, at the Lion Inn in Newtown.¹⁴

It was a short notification period. The Committee of Magistrates were due to meet on the following 4 March to award the contract. Evidently, the advertisement failed to attract the necessary interest and, as a result, Penson again attended a 'meeting of a committee', at Newtown on 23 March where it was decided to tender only for a new stone bridge. He also took the opportunity to survey the line of a new road that would be needed on the Llanllwchaearn bank as the result of the planned re-alignment of the new bridge. As well as the cost of his attendance and travel, amounting to four guineas, he also charged the county 10 shillings for 'Drawing advertisement to setting Newtown bridge . . . [and] writing to editors of three papers drawing handbill and copy to printer'.¹⁵

These re-advertisements appeared in April, but again with no interest shown. As a consequence of these difficulties, the Bridge committee decided to modify the specification which involved further work for the surveyor - 'Preparing plan, elevation, section, specification and estimate for building a stone bridge at Newtown, committee having determined by order of 15 April to build a bridge of a different description to the plan before adopted', for which he charged a fee of seven guineas. A further advertisement appeared in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* on 20 May, but the notice seemed to be incredibly short, as the advert stated that a decision would be made at a meeting at *The Bear's Head Hotel* five days later.¹⁶ As things turned out, it was not until 9 June that a contract was awarded to a Mr Nichol for the building work.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 18 Feb 1825

¹⁵ QS 1825T39

¹⁶ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 20 May 1825

¹⁷ QS 1825T39



O.S. six inch to the mile, 1888,
National Library of Scotland

Construction of the Long Bridge began in the summer of 1825 when water levels were sufficiently low to enable the foundation of the bridge piers to be laid. Thomas Penson, claimed a fee of five guineas for his attendance at Newtown for five days in July 'to inspect the foundations of the pier previous to it being laid and seeing the same done', and a further £3 for horse hire and travelling expenses. He was back in Newtown on 3 August to 'survey the further state of the foundations there', and again at the end of the month to inspect the foundation work and to report to the committee of magistrates who were supervising the construction. He also attended the opening of the quarry 'by the county near Penstrowed'. It was this quarry (probably the 'Old Quarry' named at the top left in this OS map of 1888, rather than the modern quarry at lower centre) which would be the source of the stone needed not only for the Long Bridge, but also bridges being constructed at Abermiwl, Caersws and Llanidloes. The work on the foundations of the bridge piers was slow and exacting involving additional work not foreseen at the planning stage. Penson made a another site visit on 2 September 'by order of the committee to measure and value the extra work done by the contractor at the foundations of the piers'.¹⁸

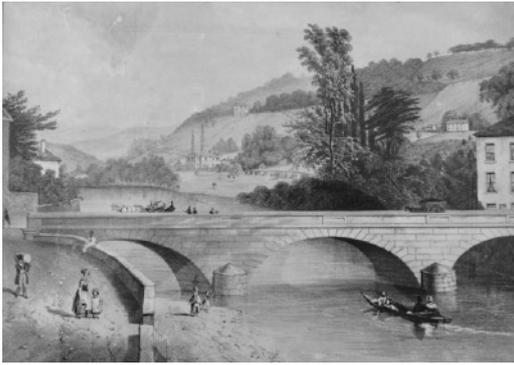


Timber falsework in place with pier foundations. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6q2HljWHoXo> for complete animation

Work was no doubt slowed as winter set in and flood waters rose, but an important stage in the work came on Boxing Day, 1825 when Penson attended the site 'to direct the striking of the arch and moulds at Newtown bridge'. Essentially, builder Mr Nichol was using the same techniques of bridge construction that masons had followed since medieval times. Over the preceding months, whilst the river was at its lowest level, Nichol's workmen had driven timber piles into the river bed to create two *coffer dams* - water-tight enclosures. Water was then bailed out using either buckets or a temporary water wheel as a pump in order to expose the river bed. A stone platform of rubble and mortar was then created before piers began to rise above the river. Once the piers had reached the desired level, timber falsework, or *centring* was built to support the arch until the mortar had set. Once the keystone was in place and the arch was self-supporting, the timber supports were 'struck', or removed, by Nichol's masons. Thus by the end of 1825 the most important stages in the construction of the new bridge were completed.

Sadly, we do not know the exact date for when the Long Bridge was opened. No contemporary account has been found, but it is safe to assume that it was accompanied by

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1825M23



The Long Bridge c. 1845, (NTM)

some celebration. What we do know is that by the beginning of 1826, it was nearing completion. However, use of the bridge came with attendant problems. Initially it did not look as impressive as this print of c. 1845 suggests. The new structure was higher than its wooden predecessor. This meant that a ramp had to be built to raise Broad Street to the new level. Tenders for the work were not published until February 1827 when interested parties were invited 'to Contract for Making, Embanking, Forming and Fencing the Approaches to the Bridge now built over the Severn at Newtown'.¹⁹

In the meantime, a temporary fix was made. On 11 January 1826, Evan Humphreys, carpenter, was paid the sum of 12 shillings and sixpence (5 days labour) for his work. He was also reimbursed a further 9 shillings for materials. These included timber for 'handrails' and 'plank'.²⁰ Presumably to allow travellers to step on to the bridge and to safeguard them from falling.



The Long Bridge, c. 1905 (NTM)

The old timber bridge had crossed the Severn at an angle. Its southern abutment (i.e. The Newtown bank) was situated under what would become the arch of the new bridge, but its northern abutment (the Llanllwchaearn bank) was located a few yards further downstream from where the new bridge met the bank, roughly at a point in front of the right-hand arch of the building seen opposite in this early twentieth century photo. In 1826, there were only a few cottages clustered on this side in a settlement known as Frankwell. The bridge met the roads from Llanfair and Bettws at the bottom of what is now Frankwell Street. Turning left off the bridge took the traveller along the road which hugged the river bank before turning away up hill to join what is now Milford Road. The new bridge clearly upset this arrangement and a new road across open pasture land was required. The order for the road was not made by the Magistrates until 1828. Explaining that 'Whereas a new county bridge has lately been erected on the place of the old bridge called Newtown Long Bridge, and whereas it became necessary to form a new line of road from the north end into the old road leading from Newtown to Bettws', Penson was required to 'to enter into a contract with the owner or owners of all or any of the land over which the intended new road is to pass and the persons interested therein for the purchase of such land'.²¹ The new road became known as Upper Bridge Street and connected with what

¹⁹ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 16 Feb., 1827

²⁰ QS 1826H61

²¹ *Ibid.* 1828E/SO/4/667

became Commercial Street and Milford Road at the junction with Crescent Street.

The completion of the new bridge in 1826 re-defined Newtown. On a simple level, the bridge acquired a new name. No longer 'Newtown bridge', it took on the title of 'Long Bridge'. The name first appears in an entry in the quarter session rolls of 1822 to distinguish it from the 'Short Bridge' over the Green Brook, which Penson was also working on at the other end of town.²² Newtown's principle street, what we now know as Broad Street, also acquired a new name. From the bridge down to the old market Hall which stood in the centre of the street, a little way up from the junction with High Street, became 'Long bridge Street', often shortened to 'Bridge Street'. Broad Street was restricted to the area between the market Hall and The Cross. It was only following the demolition of the market hall in 1856 that the entire length of the street gradually became known by its current name of Broad Street. More importantly than these changes in nomenclature was the impact that the new bridge had on the town's growth. Newtown's population had mushroomed as its flannel industry boomed. With the tolls now removed from the river crossing, the barrier to the town's expansion on to the north bank of the river was removed. As a result, within a decade of the bridge's construction, a new industrial suburb, named Penygloddfa, emerged where previously there had been only fields and a scattering of dwellings. Rows of back-to-back houses sprang up to accommodate the flannel workers who toiled in the loom floors literally above their heads. Thus, it is safe to say that the building of the Long Bridge had a profound and lasting impact on the development of our town.



Penygloddfa in the foreground with the Long Bridge and Newtown beyond. (NTM)

²² *Ibid.* 1822E30