The 'Roman Bridge' at Scawby

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In a small copse beside the B1207 and just inside Scawby Park at grid reference SE 964063 stands a stone bridge which is reputedly haunted and which spans Scawby Brook. Although it is popularly known as the 'Roman Bridge', and has been ascribed a medieval date, it appears to belong to the late eighteenth century, and to be an ornamental structure — even a folly — which closes off the vista at the head of the artificial lakes in the park.

Decorative bridges of this kind, whether in Classical, Rococo, Chinese or Rustick style, were a commonplace in Georgian landscaping, although at Scawby the design is highly unusual, if not unique. Its intended effect, however, can no longer be easily appreciated. Whereas originally the lake extended up to and under the bridge in an unbroken sheet of water, the brook has by now deposited great banks of silt beneath the arches and in the head of the lake. This alluvium has been colonised by dense undergrowth, bushes and trees (as indeed has the bridge itself), and it has raised the ordinary water level in the stream under the bridge 1ft 6in above the surface of the lake below.

Since the bridge is threatened with destruction by works associated with the M180 motorway we surveyed it on behalf of the M180 Joint Archaeological Committee in November and December 1975, a process which involved both clearing much of the ivy and greenery which festooned its upper parts, and excavating considerable quantities of silt beneath it to explore its substructure and record the levels. The present report and drawings incorporate our findings.

The bridge is one sided: on the east, fronting the lake, it presents an ordinary three arched facade, but on the west the arches are blanked off and the space between them and the low embankment carrying the road is blocked with earth infill. The stream passes under the road and the infill through a twin culvert about 100ft long, to debouch into the southern arch of the bridge. The west wall, visible both under the bridge in the arch blanking and above the surface of the infill (Plate 3), is of large well-squared masonry in blocks of up to 3ft by 1ft but diminishing towards the wings, with four pilasters and at deck level an external string course. The east wall is very different: rough undressed stones laid more or less randomly in plentiful
Fig. 2 Scawby bridge east elevation, longitudinal section and cross sections.

Fig. 3 Scawby bridge plan and section.
mortal, again with pilasters and string course but in very crude form. Its appearance on this side is thus in the mock-
rustic or ‘ruinous’ tradition beloved of designers of
Gerty’say’s. At one point the collapse of some facing
has revealed the method of filling the spandrels: alternate
layers of dry stone and mortar, with hollows surviving
where round timbers of 6 to 8 in diameter had been laid in
a rectangular framework. Above, much of the parapet on
both sides has been filled by trees, ivy or vandals: the
highest existing portion stands to 2ft 6in above the deck,
and was once higher still — perhaps some 3ft including
the coping. The deck, when exposed, proved to consist of
the rough mortal stoned of the main structure, although
some loose metalling extends into the fields at either end.
All the stone seems to be the local inferior oolite, easily split
but friable, and probably emanated from a small quarry a
hundred yards to the north.

All this is in no way exceptional; it is underneath that we
find the curiosities. The first of these is an elaborate
longitudinal groined vault extending across, and even
beyond, the three transverse arches, which means that the
bridge rests, in effect, on eight piers. Presumably because it
was easier to build, all this vaulting is in brick, and because
the longitudinal vault rises from each end to a central
crown, the brickwork is complicated. The shaping is
achieved partly by tapering courses, partly by butt joints,
and partly (on the groins) by shaped bricks. Otherwise, in
straightforward areas, English bond is used. The bricks are
red, hand-made, and no doubt local in origin; they vary in
thickness from 2½ to 2½ in—consistent with a late eighteenth
century date. For such longitudinal vaulting under a
bridge we know of no real parallel. The nearest, though
only a single arch is involved, is perhaps the groined vault
at the east end of Lincoln’s High Bridge, which was added in
the thirteenth century to carry the Chapel of St. Thomas
above; in this case the cross vaulting was included to allow
access to the river from the High Street at either end of
the bridge. A possible purpose for the vaulting at Scawby is
discussed later.

The silting, and the raising of the water level, prevents
any certainty about the substructure. The pier foundations
broaden out on the inside, 2ft below the present surface,
but their depth has not been discovered. Probing found no
firm bottom at 6ft below present water level (4ft 6in below
lake level). Nonetheless, construction would have been
particularly difficult, assuming that it took place before
the lake was flooded; the stream is small enough to be
dverted away from the foundation trenches, although
pumping would have been needed to keep them dry.

The second curiosity is the small chamber under the
south end of the bridge. Apart from the lower courses on
the west, it is barrel-vaulted in brick clearly contemporary
with that in the rest of the structure. It can be approached
either from under the bridge by an archway 5ft 6in high, or
from the outside world on the east by another archway 6ft
2½ in high, which an external flight of rough stone steps
leads down from the bank above. In the south wall of the
chamber is an apsidal niche containing three stone shelves.
Slight traces survive of a wooden frame around the niche,
probably once carrying doors which made it a cupboard.
The chamber floor stands 2ft 11 in below present water level,
or 7in below the present lake surface. This prompts the
question, now unanswerable, whether the weir at the lake
foot has been raised, so that the floor was originally dry.

The stream enters the culvert some distance west of the
road by twin arches built of the same brick as the vaulting,
and emerges eastwards by twin openings, similar except for
their flat lintels, into the southern bridge arch. Here,
instead of spreading out immediately as it once did to fill
the whole of the area beneath the bridge, its meagre trickle
wanders northwards under the vaulting. Passing between
banks of silt which, piled up by floods to 1ft 6in above
present water level, completely block the chamber and
largely obstruct the arches, it enters the open air from the
northern arch and runs down through more silt to meet the
retreating head of the lake. This silting and the resultant
undergrowth was already well under way when the large
scale Ordnance Survey map was surveyed in 1886, and has
since increased markedly.

Following the death in 1788 of Edward Nethorpe and
the inheritance of Sir John Nethorpe the sixth baronet
(1744–99), the early seventeenth century Scawby Hall was
much ‘improved’, and at the same time the Park was
landscaped. A voucher in the estate papers records the
payment on 22 September 1790 of £30 7s to Thomas Clarke
and Thomas James (a Scawby mason) for ‘work done at
the Bridge’. This was very probably the ‘Roman Bridge’,
the only other candidate being a tiny arch at the lower end
of the upper lake. And on 2 March 1791 Sir John wrote to
Robert Vyner, ‘The water is not yet stopped, so that I must
not expect to see it completely filled this summer, yet I hope
there will be water enough for you to amuse yourself in a
cano;’ he was clearly referring to the filling of the lake. In
May 1791 he bought a punt and a ‘very neat Cutter’ for use
at Scawby. 3

It seems well-nigh certain, then, that the lake and the
bridge belong to a single project of 1790–91. What was the
bridge’s purpose? It does not carry the road, and there is
no evidence on the ground or in old maps that it ever has
done. The Scawby Enclosure map of 1771 1, a delineating
bridge and lake, marks the road apparently on its present
line, and implies that the stream passed under it in a short
culvert (the flow hardly demands a proper bridge); a stone-
lined culvert mouth surviving just north of the present
inglish ones might reflect this earlier version. The bridge,
therefore, would have carried no traffic other perhaps than
to service workers going from one part of the Park to another.
It certainly acted as an ornamental full-stop to the prospect
up the lake, but what about its elaborate design underneath,
which is invisible until one is almost inside? The chamber
with its cupboard has been interpreted as an ice-house, but
it is hardly capacious or well-insulated enough for that,
and the hall had a proper ice-house nearer at hand. Again,
the suggestion that it was a butter larder is rendered
unlikely by its distance from the hall, some 750 yards. But,
as well as its appellation of ‘Roman Bridge’, it has been
locally described as ‘part of a Roman boathouse’. 3 Is this the
clue to its vaulting? Did it serve as the boathouse for Sir
John’s punt, cutter and canoe, with access by water
through the arches and by land via the steps, chamber and
inner archway? And was the cupboard for storing a cold
collation for the midday refreshment of such boating
parties as disported themselves upon the lake? We can find
no better interpretation. It may even be, too, that the
soubriquet ‘Roman’ was not coined by popular ignorance,
but preserves a genuine memory of what the classically-
minded Nethorpes dubbed their creation.

Postscript. The bridge was demolished in early 1977.

Footnotes
1 Nikolaus Pevsner and John Harris, Lincolnshire, London, 1964,
p.352.
2 We are indebted to Col. R. Nethorpe for permission to survey
the bridge. We are also grateful to Keith Miller for help in the work,
and to Dr. Frank Henshorn for historical guidance, and to Miss Judith
Stevens for assistance at Lincolnshire Archives Office.

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3 These quotations were kindly supplied by Dr. Henthorn, who extracted them when the Nethorpe papers were still at Scawby. They are now in Lincolnshire Archives Office, but a prolonged search, guided by the catalogue, has failed to reveal the letters and estate vouchers of the relevant period. Their location is thus a mystery, and no other reference to their building of bridge or lake has been found.
4 Lincolnshire Archives Office, 2 NEL 7/1.

Book Reviews


The relationship of church and lay society in England in the Reformation period is the theme of this collection of eight studies by specialists. They will be invaluable to students since they are primarily summaries and interpretations of current research and are provided with full bibliographical notes. The authors consider the implications of changes in the church which increased lay power, whether exercised by Crown or subjects, and which for the populace at large subtracted part of their traditional culture and provoked reactions.

Examining the royal supremacy, Clare Cross describes the various ways churchmen interpreted lay overlordship in theory and in practice. Christopher Kitching acts as guide through the formidable body of historical writing about the disposal of the monastic lands. Rosemary O'Day writes authoritatively on the effects of the redistribution of ecclesiastical patronage and explains how, though the Crown was the single largest advowson holder, under Elizabeth the choice of candidates for crown livings was delegated, at first mainly to churchmen and later to courtsiers and gentry. The economic problems of the clergy are examined and the bench of bishops is reviewed, showing the limitations on their power and their achievements. The bishops succeeded in procuring an educated preaching ministry but it could not produce uniformity of belief. A religion of the word replaced one of ritual observance and visual representation, leaving a vacuum in the lives of the uneducated, though sermons might provide urban entertainment. W. J. Shellis describes how a Puritan tradition was established in towns such as Boston, where the Corporation provided a preaching ministry by lay initiative.

The Handle and the Axe is a major contribution to the exciting rewriting by English Catholic historians of the history of post-Reformation Catholicism in England and complements John Bossy's The English Catholic Community 1570-1850 reviewed in Vol. 12 of this journal. The author applies the technique used in his studies of Yorkshire Catholics, building up his picture from countless individual case studies of families and individuals, vividly portrayed.

Discontinuity is the keynote of this history. Given only unbroken communion with the Pope, Catholicism was consistent with a bewildering diversity of characteristics and a constantly changing personnel. It was a religion of conversion and of apostasy, more often than a hereditary faith, and converts repeatedly found that the reality fell short of their ideal and sought to reform it accordingly. Individualism ran riot among the clergy and in the new English religious communities established on the continent in the 17th century, 'hotbeds of effulgent radicalism'. Only Mary Ward's Institute proved too modern and was suppressed by the Papacy in 1631. Diversity also resulted from the dependence of the Catholic community on the laity: first on the landed aristocracy and gentry and then on the new middle classes.

Whereas Bossy stressed the process of separation from society at large as essential to the formation of the Catholic community, Aveling shows that nevertheless Catholics did not live under the penal laws in segregation but were inextricably involved in local Protestant society, an involvement which often secured their preservation. Indeed 'church papists' who conformed occasionally in order to save their estates thereby ensured the survival of Catholicism.

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Faced with the sinister approach and unpredictable outbreaks of the choleratic epidemic in 1831-2, British society went into a curious variety of attitudes. The Privy Council recommended flannel belts and woollen stockings, the bishops fasting and prayer. The doctors argued the rival theories of contagion and miasma, or watched the sky for electric portents. The middle classes hoped the disease would be confined to the slums, and commercial communities denied that the choleratic had reached them when it palpably had. Parish authorities lit tar barrels in the streets, and the Methodists had an evangelical field day. The radicals knew that it was all a Malthusian plot (along with the 1831 census) to reduce the population, and the poor gave vent to their hatred of the body-snatching doctors.

After all this hot and footed air the epidemic did not reach disastrous propensions. Fewer people died than in the next outbreak, in 1848-9, and despite the occasional riot the British reaction was calm compared with the hysteria in some continental countries. When the mortality began to decline medical interest quickly subsided, leaving the public no wiser than before about the true nature of the disease.

Is this sufficient to make a book? Perhaps so, but not as R. J. Morris has made it. Had he undertaken a thorough survey of the progress of the epidemic in England and Scotland, and then drawn parallels both with contemporary European and with later British experiences, the result would have been a major contribution to knowledge. As it is he has given interesting insights into social, medical and religious behaviour in the early 1830s. But too often a breathtaking generalisation takes the place of rigorous analysis, while at other times he seems to be too close to his sources to be able to provide the wider context.

F. F. Cartwright, ranging from Empedocles to Aneurin Bevan, certainly offers a long perspective in his Social History of Medicine. With its emphasis on epidemiology and the treatment of diseases, including cholera, the book could perhaps have been entitled a History of English Medicine tout court. But he does devote some of his limited space to topics that are certainly of concern to the social historian — public health, hospitals, the creation of a national health service, and the changing status of the medical profession. (It is interesting in this last connection to learn that late eighteenth century Lincolnshire could boast five physicians, eleven surgeons and apothecaries, twenty-five druggists, sixty-three midwives, and forty quacks.) Mr. Cartwright is clearly in command of his material, and he concludes with a useful bibliography.

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