

Destructor Bridge, Bath

An Historic Survey

Kirsten Elliott
58 Minster Way
Bath BA2 6RL



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KIRSTEN ELLIOTT

Historic Home Research

kirsten@historichomeresearch.co.uk

Tel: 01224 310364

Why I am seeking the listing of Destructor Bridge.

In trying to get the bridge listed to save this much loved structure, I do not seek to block the plans by Crest Nicholson, but to move to it another site which already features in its history, when, in 1905, various sites were suggested for it.

Bath and North East Somerset council wishes to develop both sides of the river at what it calls North and South Quays, which includes Newark Works. They therefore need a bridge. A proposal has been made by the Newark Works Preservation Group, which, it is calculated, will be considerably cheaper than a new bridge. We would like to move the Destructor Bridge yet again, restore it, and use it as the bridge from North to South Quays. Two cabinet-members appeared to support this idea. But English Heritage needs to convince Crest Nicholson that this is a bridge worth saving. As will be seen, it is already a well-travelled bridge, having been transported from Derby to Bath, and then along the river to its present site. Another move would not be out of keeping with its past.

If English Heritage will list it but allow it to be moved, on the grounds that part of its history is that it has been recycled once and could be so again, then this will encourage developers to look at historic structures more kindly. It is also very good for the environment.

Presentation of the Facts

In order to present all the facts in a logical sequence and to explain why the history of this bridge after 1905 should not be ignored, I have presented the facts as a time line.

The time line begins a new page for every event in the bridge's history.

Source references will be found in the text. Mostly they come from Bath Chronicles of the time, but there are also documents from the Bath Record Office.

Contemporary photographs are by Dr Andrew Swift and Charlie Dancey. Old photographs are from the Akeman Press Archive.

Destructor Bridge – A timeline of its history.

This bridge was originally constructed to provide road access from the Lower Bristol Road to the Midland Station. The report carried out by English Heritage in 2007 states that it was erected in 1870, but this appears to be incorrect. Thus our timeline begins in 1869.

1869.

When was it built?

The Midland Railway Station in Bath opened in August 1869. Although the report in the Bath Chronicle makes it clear it was not fully complete, with finishing touches still in progress, it was open to traffic. A report in June 1868 tells us that the railway bridges were being constructed, and an advertisement for a sale of land on the Lower Bristol Road in March 1869 suggests that the road bridge was also complete. It refers to a new suspension bridge, which the destructor bridge is not, but this appears to be a misunderstanding. It describes the bridge as new and leading to the new Midland Station, and there is no other candidate. So it appears that what we now know as the Destructor Bridge was in its original position by 1869 and was probably built and possibly erected in 1868. Indeed, it would be essential for the company that it should be, for they did not yet have permission to open up the road from Queen Square. All materials coming from the south-west would almost certainly thus have come over this bridge, to avoid using the Old Bridge.

Who were the makers?

The makers of all the ironwork and bridges was Messrs Handyside of the Britannia Foundry, Derby, where the structures were prefabricated and brought to Bath.

What was its original appearance?

The Bath Chronicle report of February 1869, which contains this information also describes the large scrolls that were fitted to No 1 bridge – that is, the railway bridge just beyond Green Park. These were to have central panels ‘delineating natural history’. Sadly, No 1 bridge no longer has these scrolls but the Destructor Bridge still has two on the north side. It probably only ever had two, and they would have been on the south side acting as a grand gateway to the station. Photographic evidence from 1905 suggests this to be the case – see page 4. It was in fact, literally a gateway, with what were described in

1902 as ‘ponderous wooden gates’ where the roadway met the Lower Bristol Road. The entire roadway from the Lower Bristol Road to the station belonged to the railway company, and the gates were often closed.

The bridge continued in use for traffic and pedestrians travelling to and from the station, still in the ownership of the railway company, but by the turn of the century there were problems. the next episode in the bridges history commences in 1901.

1901 – 1905.

1901.

By 1901, the council proposed taking over the bridge from the railway company and improving it. The gates on what the Bath Chronicle referred to as the Surrey side (the south side of the river) were a great inconvenience, and there were concerns about the condition of the bridge. There was also, by then, a pressing need for more road bridges across the river. The inhabitants of the newly developing Oldfield Park protested against this proposal, saying they needed a new bridge crossing near the Green Park Tavern (then called the Green Tree.) A public meeting was held to express the local views. (Bath Chronicle 28th February, 1901)

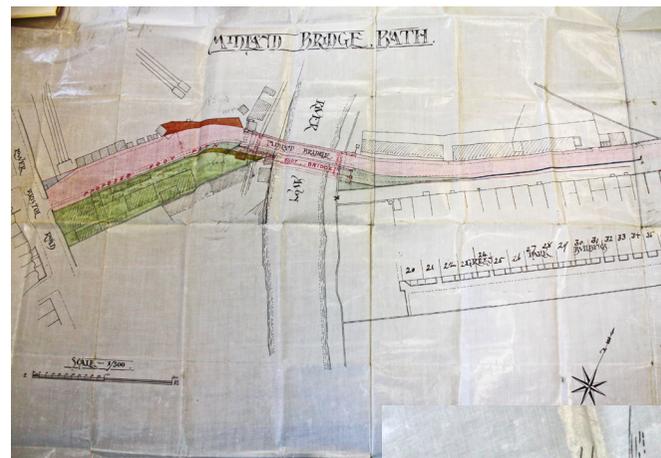
From this we get some idea of how well-used the bridge was, though with traction engines using it, there were serious concerns about its safety. A report was commissioned from civil engineer Francis Campin of London (Bath Record Office, accession no. 0107/1/17). This stated that the bridge was 'quite unequal to any City traffic of the present time; and in fact its carrying capacity of 70 lbs per foot supr. of live load is too little for any ordinary road bridge.' The report also stated that, in addition to dangers from structural weakness, 'the bridge is very much out of repair, loose rivets, corroded plates, it bears every appearance of neglect.' He recommended a new bridge.

The council had already considered adding a footbridge, in plans drawn up in July 1901 by the city surveyor, and the plan was amended to show a new bridge. (Bath Record Office, accession no. 128/7/22). This plan is of interest because it shows:

1. how narrow the entrance was from the Lower Bristol Road, although the roadway widened out immediately after the gates.
2. the proposed footbridge, the drawing amended by the word 'abandoned' and the whole new bridge.
3. that the south side of the bridge had a more elaborate entrance than the north side.

1902.

The council had taken over the bridge, widened the footpaths and given them proper kerbs, the lighting improved, and the gates removed. The changes were 'greatly appreciated by the stream of working folk who reach and leave the city by this approach'. (Bath Chronicle, 20th March 1902.)



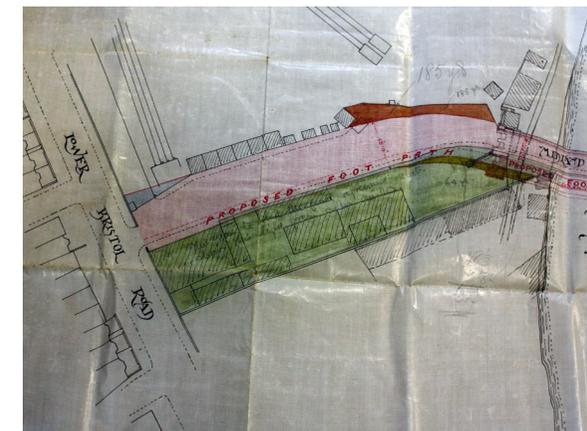
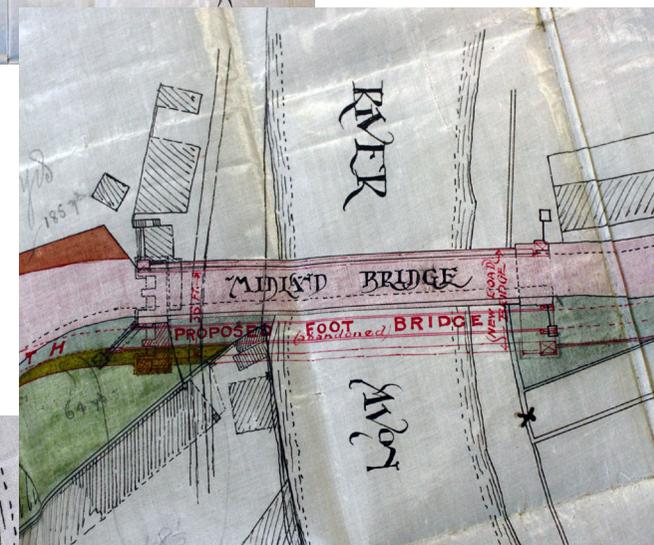
The plans for the bridge in 1901.

Left. The whole plan.
Below, clockwise.

1. The full bridge.

2. The road junction at Lower Bristol Road.

3. Detail of the west end of the bridge.



1903.

The Electric Tramway Company made an offer in July to pay towards the bridge being rebuilt and the Bath Chronicle of 22nd October 1903 reported that the council seemed likely to accept this offer.

1904.

On 12th May 1904, the Bath Chronicle reported that the surveyor had obtained quotations from Messrs Handyside and Co for the erection of a new bridge, work beginning on 1st June.

By August that year, questions were being raised about what to do with the old bridge. The surveying committee suggested that it could be moved to the Destructor Works. Handysides themselves were contracted to take down, remove and re-erect the bridge. The report in the Chronicle of 24th August quotes the surveyor's report as stating this would mean dealing with it in a very different way than if were just to be knocked apart for demolition. He stated then that this was a cheaper option. Not only that, it would enhance the value of neighbouring council properties and facilitate the removal of surplus material from the Destructor to the other side of the river. Because most bridges were toll bridges, and because of the long route round, it was costing the council a considerable sum to remove refuse, and the surveyor calculated the cost would drop by three-quarters.

It was also pointed out that this would make it much easier to get refuse into the Destructor yard, and allow the workmen an easier journey home avoiding 'the temptation of the public houses'. Another suggestion was that cottages could be built for the workmen, thus improving their living conditions.

Not everyone was in favour. Mr Bright was very much opposed on the grounds it was taking money from elsewhere. He and others therefore called a meeting at the Guildhall to protest. It was poorly attended – the Chronicle headline of 9th September is 'Amusing fizzle at the Guildhall.' But it was at this meeting that someone suggested putting it across the river near the Camden Flour Mills. This is very close to the position where the Newark Works Preservation Group would like to place it. Other suggestions in the Widcombe vicinity were made at council meetings – these are minuted in the council minutes held in Bath Record Office.

As we know, building did go ahead at the Destructor, the abutments being built by W. Webb. A photograph in the Akeman Press Archive shows

the deconstruction of the bridge taking place. It shows that the old bridge was being taken apart apparently in two pieces. All but one of the supporting arches have been removed, the bridge having been jacked up and presumably shifted to one side. It looks possible that they were going to get wheels underneath the side pieces to move them. It also shows a number of other notable features.

1. There do not appear to have been any scrolls at the city end, as as-



sumed by the EH report of 2007. Indeed, there are flanges where the alleged 'missing scrolls' are supposed to have been. It looks more likely there was a barrier of some description attached to the bridge, and this is suggested by the map of 1901. If the bridge had been moved by road, as appears likely, then what had been the city side of the bridge would have become the Twerton side, as the bridge was swung round. Therefore the scrolls now are exactly where one would expect to find them. As stated earlier, these are now the only surviving scrolls from the Bath Midland Station, which gives them considerable historic importance and shows they really must not be allowed to go to the scrap yard.

2. The bridge is intact. It has never been shortened, contrary to what the EH 2007 report tells us. Quite where this assumption came from is unclear. It is possible to count the girders and see that this is the case.

However, the bridge was not, at first, the advantage everyone thought. For that, we move to the next stage in its history.

The effect of two world wars.

Prior to the first World War, there had been numerous complaints, reported in the Bath Chronicle, that the Destructor Bridge was not available as a public footbridge. Whenever the council considered making it a free bridge, they were threatened with legal action by the proprietors of the other tollbridges. A typical account is in the Bath Chronicle of 9th April 1908, when it makes it clear that there had been frequent letters threatening such action, were the bridge to be made free.

However, in World War I, a concession was made to Stothert and Pitts men on war work, allowing them across the bridge, as they were engaged in munitions work. (Bath Chronicle, 17th July 1915.) It is possible, indeed likely, that material coming into the yard such as coal, having arrived by train, would have been brought over the bridge.

The bridge was closed after the war to other traffic, to the irritation of local residents. In September 1934 the Chronicle carries a report of an alderman asking for it to be open on Sunday mornings for milk floats. The request was refused. Just a month later, the surveyor described the Destructor Bridge as being in 'a condition which leaves much to be desired, and it is definitely not safe for uncontrolled traffic as a public bridge.' By March 1939, Government funding was in place to rebuild it. (Bath Chronicle, 11th March 1939.)

Bizarrely, the war saved the bridge. In April 1949, the Chronicle reported the abandonment of the Destructor Bridge scheme. So the old bridge went on to serve the public for another 64 years, carrying people and light traffic, even being two way in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Future?

It seems that, after all the faithful service this bridge has given, merely to destroy it at the whim of a developer is unfortunate. Though it may no longer be in its original position, it has a fascinating history. How many prefabricated bridges have been erected by their original builder – and a builder of note – twice in their history?

Even after moving, it continued as part of the industrial life of Bath. In Bath, only this month, (July 2013) Dr Simon Thurley stated more must be done to conserve industrial buildings and structure. It has the only surviving decorative scroll details from Bath Midland Station.

The Newark Works Preservation Group is anxious to give this bridge a new home where it would be loved and cherished. Many people in Bath want it kept. It should be listed.

