**The Bridge at Bampton over the River Batherm/Bathrum**

Christopher Saxton, with his map of the county of Devon1 published in 1579, was probably the first surveyor to record a bridge in Bampton. This is likely to be the same ‘stone bridge’ over ‘Bampton flu’ recorded by Ogilby in 1675 on his strip map of ‘The Road from Dartmouth in County Devon to Minhead in County Somerset ’ (Britannia, Plate 652) ; this bridge is later described as being of ‘five arches’ by Owen in revising Ogilby’s work in 1720 (Ogilby Improved, Plate 1703). However it is not until the early C19th that the bridge features in texts and maps in any detail.

A watercolour of c.18004 clearly shows a five-arched stone bridge that is both steep and narrow, with a pack-horse being lead across. The confluence of Shuttern Brook with the River Batherm is shown. About this date several Acts of Parliament, establishing the Turnpike Trusts and their responsibilities for upgrading existing and building new roads, cite Batherm Bridge as the termination of several turnpikes. For example, ‘over Bampton Down to the foot of Batham Bridge in Bampton Town ‘(Tiverton TT 1810 and 18115), ‘to Batham Bridge in the Town of Bampton in the County of Devon’ (Minehead and Watchet TTs 18216), ‘and from Batham Bridge in Bampton aforesaid to or near Lukes Park Nursery’ (Wiveliscombe TT, 18257). The implication of these references is that the bridge, being from the pack-horse era, was only of sufficient width for a pack-horse or mounted rider but not for carts and coaches. A consequence of this constraint was that passengers to and from the south (Tiverton, Topsham, Exeter and Plymouth) would disembark with their belongings to cross the bridge into the town. Could this be the true purpose of the ‘Bampton barrow’8, a small three-wheeled horse-drawn cart able to cross back and forth over the bridge carrying goods and chattels between carriages and the inns?

In 1812 G Coldridge surveyed a new route for a turnpike along the Exe valley9 for the Tiverton TT. This map shows the main streets of Bampton and a narrow bridge aligning with the north-east side of Brook Street with Shuttern Brook flowing down the centre. The construction of this turnpike in 1819 from Tiverton through Bolham and Cove to Chapman’s Bridge (Exeter Inn) and from there both to Exebridge and to Bampton bridge, did not seem to excite great press interest at the time. However, in August 1827 Samuel Johnson, Superintendent of Mail-coaches for the General Post-Office, announced10 during a visit to Exeter, that there were to be ‘alterations to the arrivals of the mails’ with the route from Plymouth, Exeter, Bristol to London collecting ‘bags for Cornwall and the north of Devon’. The GPO also surveyed the newly completed Wiveliscombe to South Molton turnpike as part of a route from Taunton to Barnstaple through Bampton. Options for the route of this turnpike had been surveyed by C Bailey in 182311 and 182412. His maps show additional detail of the town but lead to responsibility for the streets to the north-west of the bridge transferring from the Minehead and Watchet TTs to the Wiveliscombe TT13. The Wiveliscombe Trust proceeded to build a new road from the town to Stuckeridge Bridge and South Molton, completed in 1827. This avoided the old route through Tiverton and Rackenford with its 21 hills in 11 miles. On 25th September 1827 ‘a four horse Mail Coach’14 (the Royal Barnstaple Mail) was to arrive in the town inaugurating the daily service between Barnstable and London15. ‘The importance of this arrangement to the commercial world must cause it to be hailed with the highest satisfaction’ - North Devon Journal 7 Sept 1827. The same journal reported a year later (25 Sept 1828) that ‘the improvements on the new Wiveliscombe Road, in the towns and villages through which it passes, exceed the most sanguine expectation’16. The article goes on ‘Great praise is due to the owners, occupiers of land, and inhabitants of Bampton, who to forward the views of the Post-Office, and in expectation of a mail from Exeter through Tiverton to that village, have subscribed handsomely to erect a bridge of Bampton stone, over the Batheram ..... all anxious to assist in improving the line of country through which the road passes’. The bridge was reported complete at a cost of £654.00 to the Devon County Sessions 20 April 183017. Coaches could now enter the town from the south and the threat of north/south traffic preferring the new turnpike from Chapman’s Bridge to Exebridge, bypassing the town, was averted.

The new Barnstaple to London mail-coach service through Bampton was not well received in other towns. A mail-coach had direct and indirect economic benefits; besides a rapid and scheduled mail service, the mail-coaches introduced after 1735 displaced the single mount of the post-boy by teams of four horses, driver and guard. This impacted on employment in stabling, smithies, and inns. Following the establishment of the GPO in 1711, G Willdey had used Ogilby’s survey to define the mail routes in 1713; this shows the London-Barnstaple route as passing through Dulverton to the north of Bampton18. Such were ‘the unfounded reports of ’the exact distance saved by going the new Wiveliscombe turnpike in preference to the old and hilly road through Rackenford and Tiverton to Taunton’ that surveyors were privately commissioned to measure the two routes19. The saving, declared under oath in October 1828, was 2 miles 7 furlongs. Only in 1837 was Tiverton served by the Taunton, Tiverton and Exeter Royal Mail with Bath, Bristol and North Country letters being carried to mail-gig (a light two wheeled, one horse carriage) to/from Bampton to meet the Bristol and Barnstaple Mail20.

In 1842 the town was measured and surveyed by E Browne, appointed by the Landowners to submit to the Tithe Commissioners in accordance with the Act for the Commutation of Tithes in England and Wales21. His map22 shows the new wide bridge over the Batherm with the changes to the alignment and approach from Brook Street and the partial culverting of Shuttern Brook, all much as it is today.

**References/images (jpegs)**

1 Christopher Saxton:**DEVONIAE COMITAT 1575**

2 JohnOgilby: Britannia 1675

# 3 Emanuel Owen:Britannia depicta, or Ogilby improv`d 1720

4 Unattributed watercolour c.1800

5 51 Geo3 c48 1811

6 3 Geo4 c99 1822

7 6 Geo4 c93 1825

8 Bampton barrow

9 G Coldridge: Deposited plan 30 Sept 1812

10 Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 25 Aug 1827

11 C Bailey: Deposited Plan 30 September1823

12 C Bailey: Deposited Plan 30 September1824

13 6 Geo4 c93 1825

14 North Devon Journal 7 Sept 1827

15 North Devon Journal 25 Oct 1827

16 North Devon Journal 25 Sept 1828

17 Exeter Flying Post 22 April 1830

18 George Willdey: The Roads of England according to Mr Ogilby’s Survey: Map of Postroads in vicinity of London, 1713

19 North Devon Journal 9 Oct 1828

20 North Devon Journal 25 May 1837

21 Western Times 18 Jan 1842

22 Tithe Map of Bampton parish, Town inset