

A MEDIEVAL PACKHORSE BRIDGE AT DOWLISH WAKE, NEAR ILMINSTER

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SUMMARY

Archaeological recording during flood relief work in 1995–1997 demonstrated that the present bridge of two small semi-circular arches is a 17th or 18th-century rebuilding of a late medieval bridge. This had two wide arches spanning twice the width of its replacement and had been constructed of ashlar of local Moolham stone, much of which was reused in the later structure. There was limited evidence of an earlier wooden bridge. The construction of the stone bridge in the later 14th or 15th century emphasises the importance of this crossing point at that time, linking the small town of Iminster with Windwhistle Ridge and the major routes which ran along it. It may indeed have been the main route from Iminster to Chard, prior to the turnpikes, canals and railways, all of which followed the route along the valley of the River Isle.

INTRODUCTION

Dowlish Wake, previously East Dowlish, is a small village one and a half miles to the south-east of Iminster in South Somerset (Fig. 1A). To the south of the village, the ground rises continuously and increasingly steeply to the top of Windwhistle Ridge. To the north it rises to a lower ridge that separates the village from Iminster. The Dowlish Brook flows east to west, joining the River Isle to the south-west of Iminster. Both east and west of the village it is fed by numerous springs and streams, having a wide catchment basin on the slopes of Windwhistle Ridge. Two medieval moated manors lie on the north-facing slopes of the ridge, at Chaffcombe and Cudworth. The latter was once a much larger village, and extensive earthworks can be seen to the east of the moat and church. Most of the present hamlets in the area are probably medieval or earlier in origin, but tend to be sited above the valley base, on the slopes of the higher ground to the north, east and south of Dowlish Wake. The course of the Roman Fosse Way climbs the slopes of Windwhistle Ridge only a mile and a half to the south-east.

The present village lies on both sides of the Dowlish Brook, though its early focus may have been on the higher ground immediately to the north, around the site of the manor and the parish church (Fig. 1B). The bridge and ford connect the two halves of the present village. The bridge comprises a footpath 1.4m wide between low parapets, over two round arches spanning the stream and approached by stone causeways from each bank (Fig. 1C). Just east of the bridge the stream runs in culverts beneath the road which in wet periods becomes a ford. In part because of the presence of the bridge, in severe weather the ford could quickly become deep and flood the surrounding areas. It was to prevent this and to keep the ford open

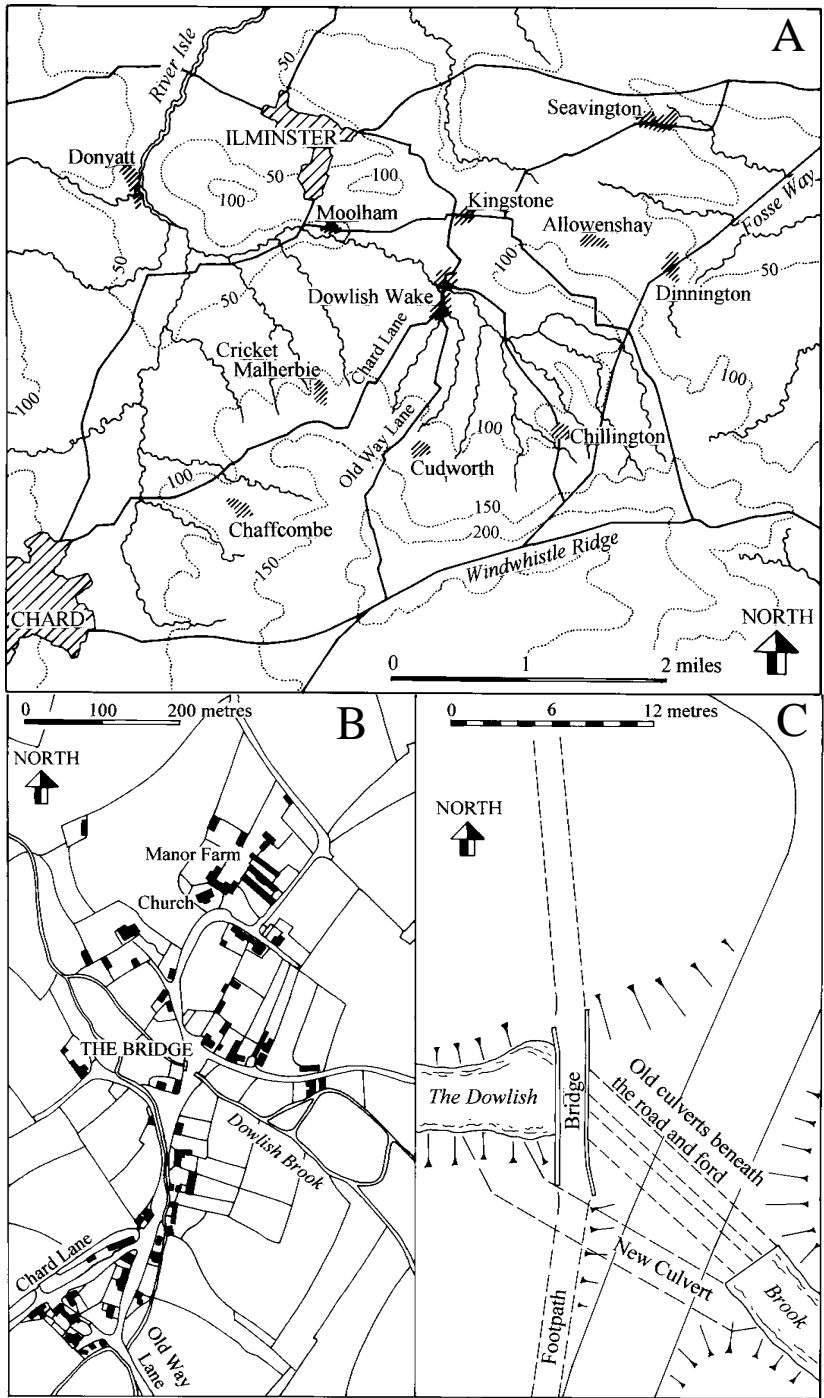


Fig. 1 Location maps. A: in South Somerset, contours in metres; B: taken from the 1842 Tithe map; C: plan of bridge and ford

to traffic that a scheme was put in hand to insert an additional two arches into the existing bridge and to put a substantial bypass culvert around its southern end. An initial archaeological survey of the bridge was carried out in December 1994, recording the visible fabric. Following the removal of earth banks against the bridge causeways and the trenching for the new culvert in July 1995, the complete structure could be recorded, with limited examination of layers exposed in the culvert trench. Two new stone arches were finally inserted into the bridge causeways in June 1997, and further archaeological recording took place at that time.

The initial survey and this report were funded by Somerset County Council with field work during construction funded by South Somerset District Council. The co-operation of both sets of contractors for the construction work is acknowledged. Documentary research was undertaken by Patricia Creed. Jo Draper identified the pottery sherds. The field record, comprising drawings, photographs and written description has been deposited in the Somerset Record Office.

THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The bridge barely exists in the documentary record. It is shown on the Dowlish Tithe map of 1840 (Fig. 1B) and on the first Ordnance Survey map of 1887. Otherwise, no reference to the bridge can be found. It is not noted in Pevsner (1958, 151–2) though in the Department of the Environment's *List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest* (District of South Somerset 1988) it was suggested that the bridge was 17th century. Patricia Creed's research, incorporated in the discussion below, has, however, provided a background of trade and transport against which the evidence of the bridge can be viewed.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The present stone bridge spans a stream bed some 4m wide in the base of a shallow flood plain (Fig. 1C). The flood plain is broader than the stone bridge and causeway and it is possible that the path to the bridge proper may have been carried on low earth banks across its margins. To some extent, despite road construction and landscaping, this can still be seen today. The bridge is 12m long, with two arched openings, each 1.65m wide, separated by a stone pier with cutwater 0.6m wide (Fig. 2). The semi-circular arches carry a pathway 1.4m wide at a height of *c.* 2.4m above the stream bed. The entrances to the bridge footpath are splayed and there are low parapets of chamfered blocks of Ham hill stone. Apart from the parapets, however, and the large blocks forming the central cut-water, the bridge is constructed of local limestone (Moolham stone: Prudden 2003, 33). Quarries are known to have existed at Moolham, less than a mile down stream. All masonry was originally bonded with fine lime mortar, though there are many areas of recent repointing and repair using a hard cement.

The evidence recovered during the work shows clearly that the existing bridge was probably built in the 17th or earlier 18th century, Period 2 in this report, and was a rebuilding of an earlier bridge with two wider spans of Period 1. This was probably a late medieval bridge, perhaps built in the late 14th or 15th century, but there was also evidence of an earlier timber bridge on the site.

EVIDENCE OF A TIMBER BRIDGE

Following the trenching across the south end of the bridge for the new bypass culvert it was possible to examine the northern section of the trench. Because this work was commenced

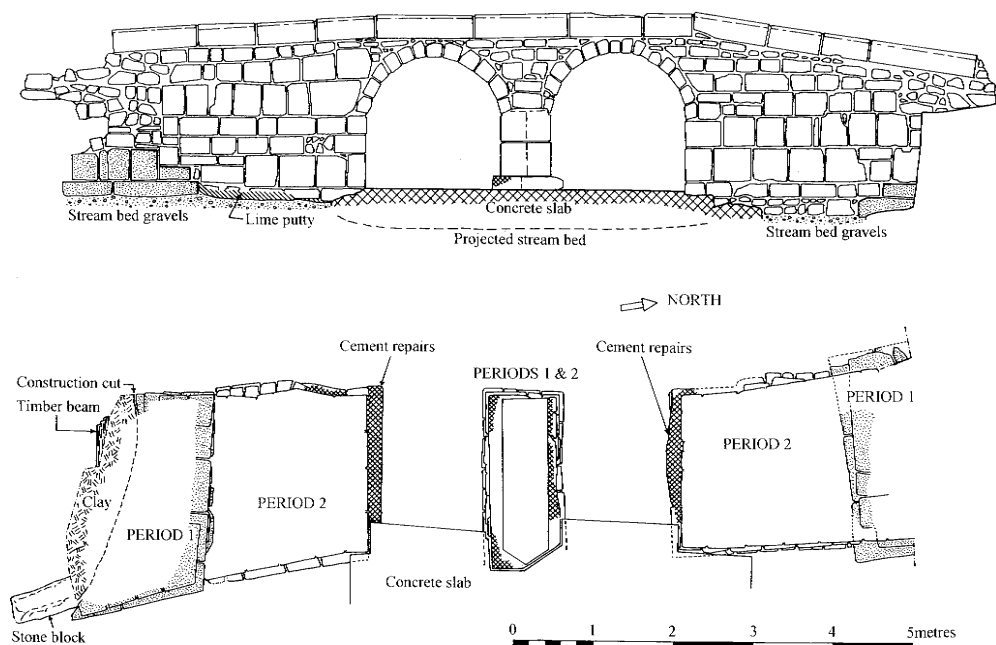


Fig. 2 Above: eastern, upstream elevation; below: plan, Period 1 masonry stippled

without notice, the actual digging of the trench was not monitored and what may have been removed by machine is not certain. The structure of the medieval bridge does not, however, appear to have been disturbed except for the uppermost courses which had already been recorded in the initial survey.

The section examined showed the construction cut for the southern abutment of the Period 1 stone bridge as a vertical edge cutting down through a sequence of earlier layers (Figs 2 and 3). At the base of the sequence was a hard blue-grey clay, probably an element of the underlying geology of the valley. Its surface undulated and it was overlain by a thickness of 0.5m of compact, striated sandy gravel which contained fragments of stone overlain in turn by a compact, brown clay up to 0.4m thick

Covered by the gravels and embedded horizontally in the surface of the blue clay was a timber beam approximately 150mm (6 inches) square. Its damaged western end was exposed and limited excavation showed that it ran approximately parallel with the Period 1 stone abutment. In addition, a large, unworked block of Moolham stone lay within the gravels close to the east side of the bridge. Both these features could be parts of a bridge or causeway predating the Period 1 stone bridge. The use of timber sole plates, mortised to take the ends of trestle uprights of a timber bridge is known in the medieval period (Nenk *et al* 1994, 231; 1995, 262).

THE PERIOD 1 STONE BRIDGE

An earlier period of construction was identified beneath both ends of the existing bridge during the recording of the elevations (Figs 2 and 3). This comprised masonry of ashlar blocks, stepped out slightly from the line of the existing bridge and set on a wider base course of ashlar slabs (Figs 4 and 5). During the insertion of the new arches, the east-west faces of this

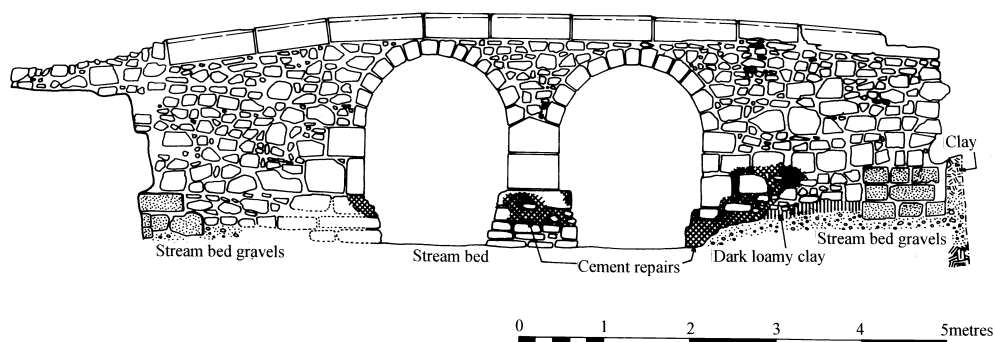


Fig. 3 Western, downstream elevation; Period 1 masonry stippled

masonry were exposed, the lowest two courses surviving to the north with elements of three courses on the south. In addition, a foundation of unshaped blocks was exposed beneath the southern abutment. Within the masonry forming the three faces of the abutments, there was an infill of mortar, loam and rubble. The southern abutment seemed clearly to have been built against the face of a vertical cut through earlier stream bed gravels (Figs 4 and 5).

The distance between the abutment corners, which were not parallel, was 8.3m on the east, narrowing to just under 8m on the west. Two arched spans are likely, so a central pier would have existed, and it is possible that the lower courses of the extant pier belong to Period 1. These included a single large slab of Ham hill stone, 0.88m wide, which had been partially shaped as a cutwater by the removal of its north-east corner (Fig. 2). This slab, in contrast to the two narrower blocks above it, was heavily eroded and split, with many areas of cement repair. It was set on at least three courses of masonry, all eroded and heavily repaired in cement, founded in the stream bed. A likely maximum span for each of the arches of the Period 1 bridge would therefore have been about 3.7m (12 feet). The form and height of the arches is unknown.

A single sherd of pottery from a glazed, strip-decorated jug, was recovered from the gravels against which the southern abutment was constructed. This can be dated to the 14th century and the construction of the Period 1 stone bridge is unlikely to be earlier than this. It compares well with other bridges of the later 14th and 15th century in the county.

THE PERIOD 2 STONE BRIDGE

The fate of the medieval bridge is uncertain but it probably collapsed or became unstable, necessitating its clearance and rebuilding. The fact that it was rebuilt emphasises the continuing importance of this route for pack animals.

After clearance of the site, short stone causeways were built over the remains of the earlier abutments extending onto the gravels of the stream bed. These formed the abutments of the new bridge with a distance of just under 4m (13 feet) between them, with a central pier supporting two arches, each with a span of 1.7m (5 feet 6 inches) (Figs 2 and 3). The lower elements of the pier have been described above, as they may be a surviving part of the Period 1 bridge. The upper part of the pier consisted of two large blocks of Ham hill stone, 0.56m wide, 0.4m deep and crossing the full width of the bridge, with a pointed cutwater at their upstream, eastern end. The top of the upper block has been shaped to form the springing of the two arches, which are semi-circular and constructed of small, closely fitting, ashlar blocks.



Fig. 4 South end of bridge, 0.5m scale stands on base course of Period 1 bridge; view west

Each of the extended abutments was constructed in coursed, large, ashlar blocks on two sides, with a stone rubble construction on the third, western side. Clearly the new bridge was to be seen mainly from the east, by users of the ford, and the ashlar is likely to have been salvaged from the old bridge (Figs 2 and 4). The walls had been built onto the gravels of the stream bed, with stepped out lower courses, with, in one case, a layer of pure lime putty as a bedding layer. The abutments were infilled with loam, mortar and rubble. Several sherds from the base of a pottery bowl were recovered from the infill of the northern abutment. This is a glazed, earthenware bowl from the nearby Donyatt potteries and dates to the 17th or 18th century. The reconstruction of the bridge is unlikely therefore to be much earlier than about 1700.

Whether the parapet belongs to this period of construction is uncertain. The chamfered ashlar blocks are of Ham hill stone, and some, but not all, have iron cramp holes. It appears that the upper part of the bridge has been extended to north and south at some time using a rubble construction. The ashlar blocks of the parapet, which are of Ham hill stone, are above this and could easily be a 19th-century addition to the rebuilt bridge. The significance of the Roman numerals CMLIX carved into the top of one of the blocks is unclear. Throughout the 20th century, repair and maintenance of the bridge has taken place, frequently with the inappropriate use of hard cement mortars.

DISCUSSION

The work has clearly demonstrated two periods of stone packhorse bridge at this crossing point of the Dowlish Brook and there was limited evidence of an earlier timber structure. The first stone bridge was probably built in the later 14th or 15th century and comprised two arches each with a span of up to 3.7m (12 feet). It was at least 11m long carrying a path up to 2m wide, depending upon the presence or not of a parapet. It may have been approached along an earthen causeway though the contemporary profile of the valley is not certain; the many years of use of the ford to the east of the bridge may well have flattened what were originally much steeper stream banks as is evident further downstream today. This late medieval bridge is directly comparable with other bridges of this date in the county. The road bridge



Fig. 5 South end of bridge, 0.5m scale stands in front of Period 1 abutment; view east

over the Parrett at Hazelbury, just east of Crewkerne, is probably later 14th century in date and has two 3m spans with pointed arches. The packhorse bridges at Pill Bridge over the Yeo just west of Ilchester and Bolters Bridge over a tributary of the Brue near Castle Cary are longer bridges of three and four spans respectively, but the latter in particular gives a sense of what the Dowlish Bridge may have been like. It has four slightly pointed arches each spanning about 3.5m, with upstream cutwaters and carries a pathway about 2m wide, without parapets. All these bridges were finely constructed of local ashlar.

The medieval bridge at Dowlish Wake, did not, however, survive, but collapsed or was demolished prior to its rebuilding with two narrower arches in the late 17th or 18th century. This narrowing of the spans was itself probably a major cause of the dangerous flooding of the upstream ford that the recent work addressed. It is not known who may have had the first bridge built nor who maintained it during its long period of use.

The construction of a stone packhorse bridge reflects the contemporary importance of the route and the crossing. In its day, it was probably an important north-south route linking Ilminster and Taunton with Windwhistle Ridge, there connecting with the east-west routes joining Crewkerne, Chard and Axminster. It may indeed have been the main route from Ilminster to Chard, avoiding the very wet ground of the lower Dowlish valley where it meets the River Isle (Fig. 1A). Of the maze of small lanes connecting the hamlets of this part of Somerset, Figure 1A shows Chard Lane and what was probably known as Old Way Lane being the two through routes that used the bridge at Dowlish Wake. The transport of raw materials and finished goods for the flax, hemp, wool and leather industries, all important medieval and later industries in South Somerset, was essential and a dry, all weather route from north to south may have attracted and generated trade. From 1361 until the 19th century, there was also White Down Fair, held every Whitsun on Windwhistle Ridge, and considered one of the most important livestock fairs in the region, attracting dealers from Dorset, Devon and Somerset, and cattle from South Wales (Hamer 1968). The rebuilding of the bridge in the later 17th century clearly indicates its continued use and importance to local trade and from this date, coal was also a common packhorse load. The importance of the Dowlish Wake packhorse bridge and the route it served probably only disappeared with the coming of the turnpike road and later the canal and railway in the mid 19th century that joined Chard and Ilminster along the valley of the Isle.

AUTHOR

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