

Pomparles, Glastonbury.

BY JOHN MORLAND.

IN consequence of the settling of the foundations of Pons Perilis, as it is called in the list of county bridges, this bridge was condemned by the county surveyor and has now been once more rebuilt. It seems fitting therefore to collect together some of the accessible information as to bridges at or near this site.

In the Society's *Proceedings* (Vol. XXVII, ii, 43), there is a paper referring to an ancient road between Street and Glastonbury which runs nearly parallel with the existing "causeway" at about 45 yards eastward; the materials used in its construction showed that it was constructed from the Street end. It was carefully examined at a point close to the southern bank of the Brue, and found to consist of a timber structure of a massive character, made up of oak piles, and of transverse beams and sleepers, secured by longitudinal beams. Its structure suggested the approach to a wooden bridge substantially built. This road if continued northward in the same line to the foot of the hill would not strike it at the western end; it is therefore probable that it was connected with a track taking the line of the old road to Glastonbury, which here bends strongly towards the east. Reasons were given for believing that even if this road or trackway were originally of British origin, it was also used in the time of the Roman occupation.

From the configuration of the rising ground at Street and at Glastonbury, it appears almost certain that from very early times the crossing of the moor must necessarily have been made within a short distance from the present road, for there the moor is narrowest.

The history of the stone bridges on the site of the present bridge can be most conveniently traced backwards. The bridge of one span recently removed is referred to in Phelps (p. 559) as being built in 1826. Its foundations were supported by unsquared balks of elm timber resting on the peat.

The previously existing bridge is referred to by Phelps as "an ancient stone bridge of two arches over the river Brue, very narrow and evidently a Roman work, being connected with the *Strata Via* leading to Ilchester." "This bridge which was too narrow for a public road, and the arches too small for the passage of the flood waters in the river, was taken down in 1826."

Mr. Phelps fortunately inserts a vignette of this ancient bridge, evidently carefully drawn; it has been a great help in the interpretation of the remains found during the excavations for the rebuilding. This vignette does show a bridge of two arches, but the arches are certainly not of one period; the northern arch is pointed and is furnished with a single nearly flat buttress, whilst the southern arch is semicircular, rather narrower and has two stepped buttresses of good design. Under both the arches the water is distinctly penned back, as a short fall is indicated, and this more distinctly under the round arch. During the excavations the southern face of the northern wall of the pointed arch shown in Phelps' vignette was found to be nearly intact, but no remains of the supporting buttresses were found. The wall was carefully faced with squared stones and was 4ft. thick, the back built of rough masonry, this showing that no further arch had existed to the north. The stones of the facing were stepped so as to make a batter of rather more than 8ins. The floor of the arch was

paved with 4in. slabs of lias ; the height from the floor to the spring of the arch was 5ft. The lower tiers of masonry were tooled and of better work than the higher part of the wall, suggesting that at some period considerable repairs had been made to the arch. The mortar throughout was however of uniform character. The floor of this arch, over which the water flowed was more than 6ft. higher than the irregular floor of the waterway of the 1826 bridge ; indeed it was 8ins. higher than the spring of the arch of that bridge and only 6ft. below the top of the present river bank ; so that as these banks are 4ft. above the level of the meadows above the bridge, it is shown that the waterway under the bridge was only 2ft. below the present surface of the land. Referring once again to the description of the Romano-British road, we find that that road was from 18 to 24ins. below the soil, which would be almost the level of the bottom of the river ; it would therefore appear that the river was flowing in a very shallow course, and that it must have flooded the adjacent lands very frequently, as is indeed proved by the largely extended deposits of flood marl. The waterway of this arch was about 8ft. as shown in the sketch and confirmed by the excavations.

It did not seem probable that any remains should be found of the round arch shown by Mr. Phelps, or of its buttresses, as the northern end of the 1826 bridge coincided with the northern abutments of the round arch, whilst its southern abutment would be in the centre of the new waterway. Remains were however found to the south of the 1826 bridge, which appeared to be those of a terminal buttress running north and south ; these were of similar character in design to the stepped buttresses of Mr. Phelps' sketch. Their position as to elevation and distance from the mediæval arch, suggested that the buttress was the support of the southern abutment of a second round arch. The white mortar used in the building of this buttress differed from that used in the mediæval arch where the mortar was red from the admixture of red sand.

Close by this ancient buttress there was a portion of a retaining-wall splaying out so as to widen the roadway, and probably of the same date. I think we may conclude that originally there were two round-headed arches of about 7ft. in diameter and that later the pointed arch was added in order to increase the waterway. The direct flow of the stream, both during early times and recently, was through the site of the two round arches; so that when the pointed arch was added the waterway for this arch was excavated out of the northern bank.

No earlier stone-work of any description was found in the excavations, but there were a few piles of oak found at rather a low level. It was suggested that these might have supported a temporary bridge of wood, used whilst the long embankment, the "causeway" across the bog, was being made.

The ancient masonry at the southern end of the bridge abutted against the firm clay of this embankment, which of course is purely artificial, resting on the peat of the moor. In section the clay was of the form of a truncated triangle, and it carried a road about 12ft. wide. The clay used corresponds with that on the northern slope of Wearyall Hill.

The round arches and the stepped buttresses I am assured by Mr. Bligh Bond, might well be XII Century work, whilst the pointed arch was XIV Century or early XV Century. A part of the retaining-wall of the bridge on the east side at its southern end, together with a 5ft. culvert passing through it 50yds. to the south, are probably of the same date. I have heard that during the building of the 1826 bridge the water of the river was temporarily diverted through this culvert.

There are a few references to this bridge in ancient writings which are of considerable interest. The late Mr. F. H. Dickinson refers to some of these in *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, vol. 1, page 27.

The earliest reference I have since found in "Rentalia et Custumaria Michaelis de Ambresbury, 1235-1252," *Somerset Record Society*, v, 176-8.

It was one of the conditions of the holding of William Aurifaber that he should watch over all the waters between Street Bridge and Clewer, and between Mark Bridge and Glastonbury, watching for unlicensed fishermen, and also taking care of the Lord Abbot's boats throughout the aforesaid waters. The chief fishing was of eels and of pike, but there is reference also made to "white fish" which I think must be sturgeon, the royal fish, as half of a white fish was the Abbot's right.

The next reference occurs in a roll kept at Longleat of a Glastonbury Hundred Court of about 1415. An order is given to scour the Brue from "Pons periculosus to Prior's Weir." The Weir is still called "Priors" locally.

It is called Strete Bridge in the perambulation of Glastonbury Twelve Hides of 1502, contained in Hearne's "John of Glastonbury."

Leland's reference to this bridge is rather perplexing. (See "Leland in Somerset," *Proceedings*, XXXIII, ii, 75). "Briwetun River cummith from Briwetun x. Miles of to the West Part of the Toun of Glessenbyri and so rennith to the Mere a 2. Miles lower. Or ever the River cum to Glessenbyri by a Mile it cummith to a Bridge of Stone of a 4. Arches communely caullid *Pontperlus*, wher men fable that *Arture* cast in his Swerd."

Now it is curious that Phelps can speak of two arches only and Leland of four. It may be that the second round arch was then still exposed, and that he also counted in the culvert, or it may be that he counted in the bridge over the mill stream at Northover called "Bumbaley" Bridge on an old map, and I would suggest Bumbailiff Bridge as being a bridge where the bailiff might catch any culprit escaping from the town.

But this bridge is some 500ft. from Pomparles, and Leland is extremely careful in his description of bridges. He goes on to say, "The River brekith at this Bridge ynto 2. Partes, wherof

the principalle goith to *Glessenbyri*. The other goith thorough Morisch Groundē, and metith again with the principal streame or ever that it goith into the Mere.”

This might possibly refer to the artificial division of the river at Prior's Weir, which is however nearly half-a-mile up the river, but I rather incline to believe that it refers to a natural division of the river below the bridge before any embankment or straightening of its course had been attempted. One can still trace a natural valley of the river under Brides, or Chamberlain's Hill, and so round under Beckery to the present site of the railway station; whilst it is quite likely that much of the water of the river might find its way through the marsh. In connection with the sewerage works now in progress, this ancient river bed has proved a serious inconvenience.

This bridge is now called "Pomparles" simply, or incorrectly "Pomparles Bridge." It is "Pons Perilis" in the list of county bridges, and "Pons Perillous" in that of the sessions roll of 1765. I also see it miscalled "Pemperels Bridge" in an old map.

It has been generally supposed that the name had reference to the Roman origin of the bridge, but I would suggest another source. The name *Pomparles* suggests the Romance rather than the Latin language. *Pont-Perilus*, or slightly anglicized *Pontparlous*, would easily pass into *Pomparles*. Now in the mediæval romances "Sièges perilous" and "Castles perilous" are of common occurrence, but I had not met with the expression *Pont Perilous* till I found it used in the story of Sir Libeaus as related by Professor W. P. Ker in his charming introduction to *Mediæval English Literature* (Home University Library). Sir Libeaus showed his prowess at the passage of the Pont Perilous, and defeats the magicians of Sinodoun. Prof. Ker in writing tells me the oldest version of this romance, the French poem of R. de Beaujen, is about 1180 (?). The English romance is early XIV Century.

I would suggest that the builders of the earliest stone

bridge, or of the mediæval bridge, living in the age of romance, applied a name from one of their favourite romances to their erection. That it was really a name of romance is further confirmed by Leland's story of the casting away of the sword "Excalibur" here.

The bridge does not appear to be Roman in its construction, and the causeway to Street was a work of the middle ages. It appears to have been made from the Glastonbury end, probably with the clay excavated under "Wearyall Hill" in making the canal, from Northover to Glastonbury, which filled the Lord Abbot's fishponds.