

SANDSTONE BRIDGES ON THE RIVER DIBBIN AND TRIBUTARY STREAMS

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The River Dibbin is one of the largest rivers on Wirral, for it may well discharge a greater volume of water than any other Wirral watercourse. It is associated with an intricate network of tributary streams, which serve to drain a substantial area of the Wirral Peninsula around 25 square miles in extent.¹ These tributaries rise near the villages and towns of Storeton, Heswall, Thornton Hough, Willaston and Ledsham (Figure 1). Initially they are little more than drainage ditches between fields, but as these ditches take on more water, significant streams are formed.

One major stream flows northwards from a point near Ledsham, incorporating a number of small rivulets along the way. Another complex system of subsidiary watercourses drain an area between Storeton and Willaston. The three tributaries of this network merge together at Raby Mere, after which the resulting river flows eastwards. The Ledsham and Raby Mere systems eventually combine, their confluence being at The Marfords, east of Dibbinsdale Road in Bromborough. From here their combined waters flow as the River Dibbin for another 3.5 miles, before entering the River Mersey at Bromborough Pool.

Some of the streams on this river system, in the townships of Bromborough, Poulton Lancelyn, Raby and Eastham, have excavated deep valleys through the boulder clay which covers much of the peninsula. The valleys are well wooded, and some of these picturesque tracts of woodland are regarded as ancient. These wooded dales are full of history and character, and many features of local historical interest may be seen within them. The most famous valley is Dibbinsdale itself, through which the Dibbin flows. The upper reaches

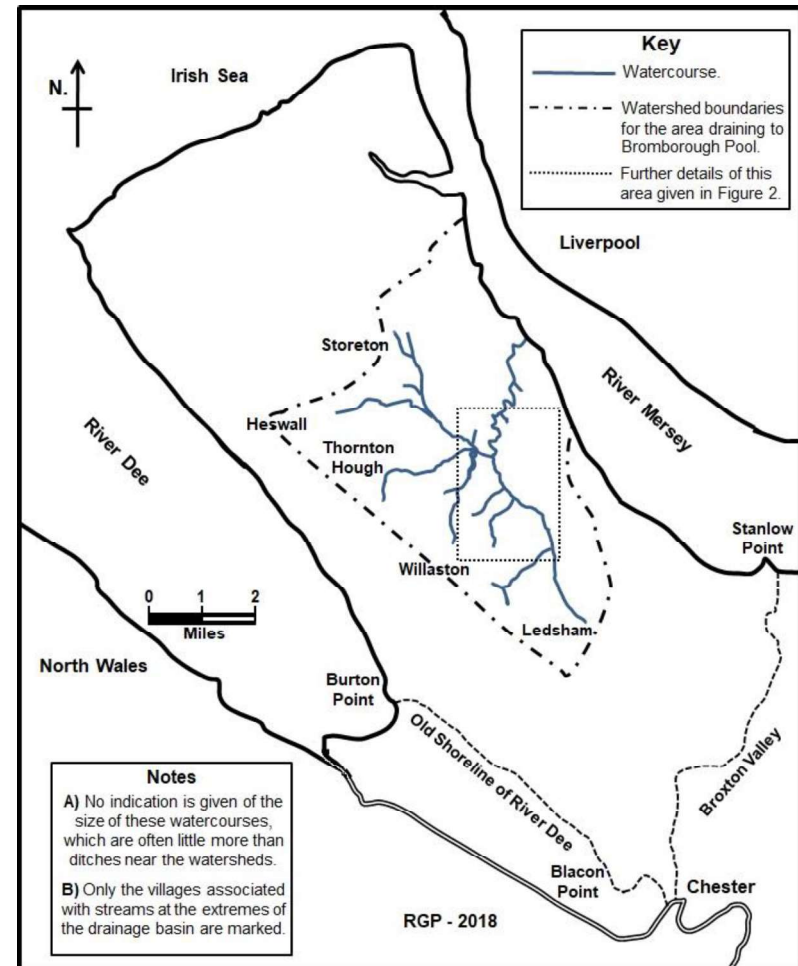


Figure 1: The location of the River Dibbin and its tributaries on the Wirral Peninsula, along with the catchment area which they serve to drain.

of the southern stream system feeding Dibbinsdale have also excavated a valley of their own, known as Plymyard Dale.

The aim of this article is to draw attention to a number of interesting sandstone bridges, which were noted whilst exploring the valleys of the River Dibbin and its associated streams. All of these bridges are small structures; some might have lain on long forgotten routes, whilst others served as access between fields. Despite their small size, these are all substantial structures, well-built from local red sandstone. No documents have been discovered which mention any of these bridges, hence their history is difficult to trace. However, it seems worth noting their existence, for they have previously gone unrecorded.

This study has been restricted to bridges on the network of streams feeding what eventually becomes Dibbinsdale, virtually all parts of this drainage system having been examined. It would be interesting to know of similar structures on other Wirral streams,² and indeed elsewhere in Cheshire. Comparison with other local bridges, of which more historical details are known, may eventually allow these examples to be dated. It must be admitted however, that bridges such as these are extremely hard to date, as such simplistic designs were constructed without alteration over many centuries.³

Plat: A Local Word for a Small Bridge

In Cheshire small access bridges such as these were known as a *Plat* or *Platt*. This is one of many local dialect words preserved in *An Attempt at a Glossary of some Words used in Cheshire*, published in 1820, a time when many such local terms were passing out of use. The definition is given as: '*Plat, a small bridge over a stream or gutter*'.⁴

Some examples of the use of this word may be found in the papers of the Bromborough Manor Court.⁵ In 1795 George Travis Clerk was found guilty of:

Not Laying a Plat at the Marld Hey Gate pursuant to the Orders of the Last Court for the Manor, and [we] do order him to Lay the said Plat and also to Cleanse his Ditch from said Plat to the Pitts of the Heath and we do Imerce [fine] him in the Penalty of Two Guineas if he shall make difault in the performance of this order.

A second example in the manor court papers is in 1846 when, it was said that: 'We direct Joseph Venables to lengthen the platt leading from his ditch adjoining acre field to the Rake Common or we fine him one pound'. Many plats would have been constructed of wood, but some examples such as those presented in this article, were evidently stone-built. The bridges discovered fall into two categories and are at three different sites, lying in Bromborough, Raby and Childer Thornton townships (Figure 2).

Clapper Bridges

The bridges in Bromborough and Raby fit the English Heritage description for clapper bridges:

A clapper bridge is a structure designed to carry a trackway across a river by means of one or more large, flat stone slabs, either resting directly on the river banks or supported on dry-stone piers. They are recognised in the field as monuments of dry-stone construction of simple form and include everything from a slab thrown across a stream to the 'classic' examples with slabs and piers of drystone construction.⁶

These bridges are on a much smaller scale than the famous clapper bridges of Devon, yet they match the definition, which even includes bridges just one slab in width. The bridge at Bromborough would originally have been two slabs wide, whilst that in Raby is a single slab's width. Clapper bridges are an obvious way to utilise slabs of stone in forming a crossing. Even though the largest examples are regionally restricted to specific areas, smaller examples must have

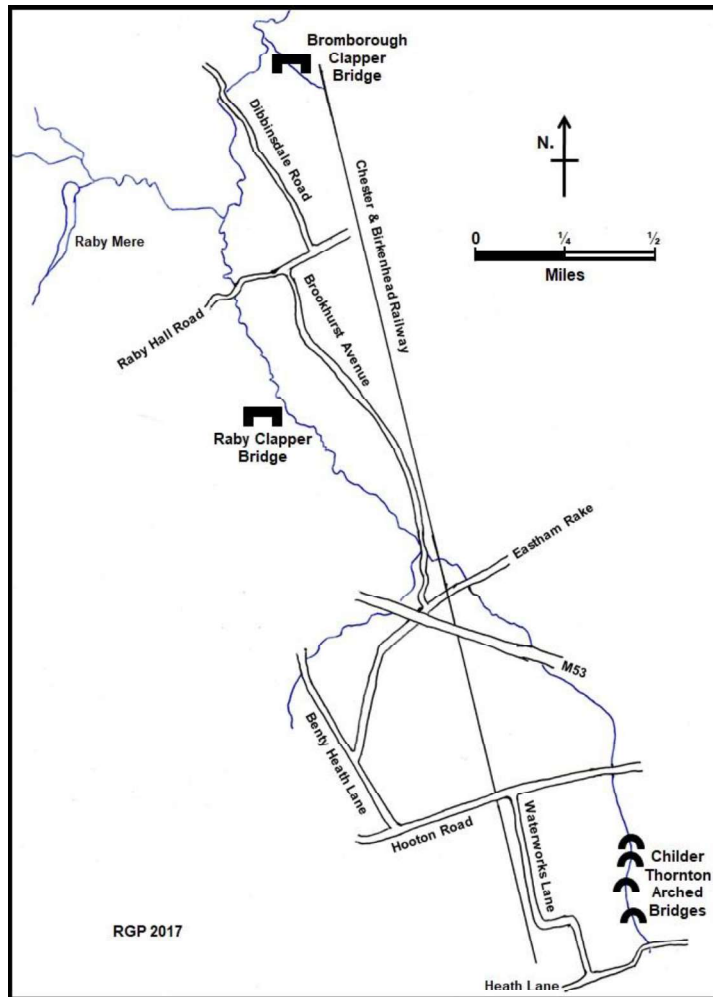


Figure 2: An expansion of the streams within the dashed box on Figure 1. The locations of the various bridges discussed in the text are indicated on these watercourses.

been utilised in many counties. Despite this, the author is not aware of many such bridges recorded in Cheshire, and knows of no other examples on Wirral.⁷

Bromborough Clapper Bridge

This bridge is much the larger of the two clapper bridges and lies on a very minor tributary of the River Dibbin. The stream is too meagre to have a modern name, although the valley it has excavated is fairly large. It may be traced back to a point north of Cunningham Drive, where it flows beneath the railway and enters Dibbinsdale Local Nature Reserve. The earlier reaches of the stream, to the east of the railway, have now been culverted beneath an urban area. The clapper bridge, of which about half still exists, crosses the stream in its upper reaches (Plates VII and VIII).

The missing half of the bridge was presumably dismantled so as to re-use the stone. The existing remains consist of two sandstone walls forming piers and supporting three large slabs of stone. These slabs each measure approximately 60 cm (2 feet) wide, 90 cm (3 feet) long and 20 cm (8 inches) thick. The stones are fairly roughly hewn, and the entire bridge is of drystone construction, no mortar being present. The piers are formed from three courses of blocks, a typical block being 25 cm (10 inches) wide and 75 cm (2.5 feet) long. The blocks of each course are successively thicker, such that whilst the first course are only 20 cm (8 inches) thick, the bottom course of stones measure 30 cm (1 foot) in thickness. These form a very substantial foundation and are also very crudely hewn, the upper course being more accurately squared.

There must originally have been a further two piers, making four in total. There would then have been a second row of slabs to span the full width of the stream. The supporting walls continue past the three slabs which are still in position, and some displaced slabs lie in the stream. It looks as though the bridge was originally probably at

least five slabs wide, but quite possibly even six slabs wide. This corresponds to an original width of 3.5 metres (12 feet) with a total span of around 1.75 metres (6 feet).

The width of this bridge is surprising, since the stream is so minor as to present no obstacle, being narrow enough to step over. The width must therefore have been in order to accommodate animals. It may have been on a route used by packhorses or cattle drovers. A large amount of effort must have been expended constructing such a substantial structure, suggesting it was heavily used in its day. The route served by the bridge must previously have been of some significance, although no path or road seems to be indicated here on any maps. An estate map of the Mainwaring family of Bromborough c.1755 clearly shows this stream, but does not mark a crossing.⁸ The lack of map evidence hints that the route was certainly not so widely used by the nineteenth century as it had been previously, and it had possibly even ceased to be much used by the mid-eighteenth century.

Raby Clapper Bridge

To the west of Brookhurst Avenue one of the brooks feeding the Dibbin runs through the well-wooded valley of Plymyard Dale. It is here that another clapper bridge is to be found, on the west side of the river (Plates IX and X). This area obviously has a complex history as there are township boundaries associated with Raby, Hargrave/Little Neston and Willaston along a short stretch of this western riverbank. The bridge is over a ditch/tiny tributary which acts as the boundary between Bromborough Golf Course and the lands of Hargrave House Farm. Very little water flows down here now, if indeed it was ever a natural stream. The channel is quite broad and straight, and must once have been much deeper. It may not even be natural, for it appears as if it could have been dug out to delineate a boundary.

At the far end of this ditch/stream right next to the river, is a tiny red sandstone bridge of drystone construction. This bridge is 1.2

metres (4 feet) wide with a span of 75 cm (2.5 feet). It is formed from two sandstone piers with two large slabs of sandstone resting across them. The slabs are 15 cm (6 inches) in thickness and measure approximately 60 cm (2 feet) by 75 cm (2.5 feet). The piers continue past the two slabs, hence it appears that the bridge may once have been three slabs wide. In some ways this structure is more curious than the bridge in Bromborough, which at least crosses a gully of sorts. This ditch is extremely insignificant at the point the bridge crosses it, much more so than the stream at Bromborough. A single slab's width would be quite adequate for a person to cross, so the fact the bridge is multiple slabs wide, may again suggest use by animals.

No history has been traced concerning any paths passing down the west side of this river. A Shrewsbury estate map of Raby shows the area in 1788.⁹ The ditch which this bridge crosses is here represented as the boundary between the fields named 'Six Acres' and 'Musk Field'. No track is marked passing through these fields alongside the stream. However, this is not surprising since the estate map only indicates roads of a reasonable size, not showing paths. If it was on a route at all, the size of this bridge suggests it lay on a small path rather than a roadway. A number of similar small gutters and ditches drain into the west side of this stream, some to the north and some to the south of this bridge. If the bridge was on a pathway, then similar structures might be expected over these other ditches, but no evidence of any seems to exist. Possibly this bridge was built simply to serve the landowner or occupier in moving livestock around their land, rather than being on a specific route between two places.

Arched Bridges at Childer Thornton

The bridges present at Childer Thornton are rather more elegant than a clapper bridge, these being arched bridges with a single span. They lie on the same river which eventually runs through Plymyard Dale, at a point south of Hooton Road and north of Heath Lane. This is an early section of the stream; little more than a large ditch, it runs through

agricultural land. This is no wooded valley, unlike the sites of the previous bridges, the trees here having long since been cleared to make way for farmland.

These bridges gave access between the fields on either side of the stream, and remarkably there are traces of four bridges crossing a section of river scarcely a quarter-mile long. Moving south from Hooton Road, the first two bridges are completely ruined, with only a few courses of stonework left on the riverbank. Of both bridges there are five courses left on the eastern bank, around 1.5 metres (5 feet) in length. A modern bridge formed from wooden planks still does service at the site of the second bridge, and the remains of the earlier structure are hidden beneath. Fortunately we know how these two bridges must have looked originally, since the third and fourth structures are complete (Plates XI and XII).

These bridges are very substantial and well built, both being constructed to the same design. In each case it has taken some 12 courses of stonework to form the arch which spans the banks of the stream. The span of both bridges is 2.75 metres (9 feet) and the internal diameter of the arch is 90 cm (3 feet), with a wall thickness of 90 cm (3 feet). The only major difference between the bridges is their width, the third bridge south of Hooton Road being 2.5 metres (8 feet) wide, whilst the fourth bridge is 3 metres (10 feet) wide. These are the original widths, for the bridges appear to be as constructed, with no evidence of any later modifications. There are traces of mortar binding the stones, although this is fairly minimal and some of it appears to be modern. It does appear however, that these were built as mortared structures, rather than being drystone as in the case of the clapper bridges. The width of the bridges also makes them more than simple footbridges. They must therefore have been built to cater for the movement of livestock and agricultural implements.

These bridges represent a skilful and carefully executed example of traditional, small-scale stone masonry. They must have

taken some labour to construct, and possibly also some expense. The cost incurred was presumably borne by the landowner, the bridges being built for the convenience of tenant farmers. In the mid-nineteenth century the fields bordering the stream were largely owned by William Massey Stanley of Hooton, but these bridges are not shown on the tithe map for Childer Thornton township *c.*1847. A Stanley estate map showing some of this part of Childer Thornton in 1825 also fails to show the bridges,¹⁰ but that cannot be taken as any kind of evidence that they were not then in existence. The complete absence of any of these 'plats' on maps shows that map evidence cannot be relied upon as a means of dating these structures.

It seems possible that the Childer Thornton bridges were built by the Stanley family, when this agricultural land was improved in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. The stream here could easily have been crossed using a wooden construction, but these rather elaborate bridges have formed more long-lasting monuments.

Conclusions

This article hopefully demonstrates the value of local historical fieldwork. Fieldwork can result in the identification of structures which are indisputably of age; however, as is the case here they cannot necessarily be satisfactorily dated as they might not easily be matched to any written evidence. Yet, even if they remain undated, these bridges are interesting examples of vernacular architecture built to serve local access needs in rural agricultural communities.

The discovery of all of these bridges within a few miles of each other, and on the streams of one river system, suggests that there must be other similar structures hidden elsewhere on Wirral. If examples are known then the author would be very interested to hear of them, especially if they can be related to documentary evidence. It is also intriguing to see, from the manor court papers, that the local word 'plat' had currency in Bromborough near the Dibbin valley.

Further examples of this word, its use and distribution in the written records of Cheshire, would make for a stimulating study. Perhaps one day more details will come to light concerning the bridges which have been described.

Acknowledgements

I must acknowledge the generous help of Susan Nicholson who first drew my attention to the interesting word 'plat', and who kindly provided me with the examples of its use transcribed from the Bromborough Manor Court papers.

References

¹ W. Hewitt, *The Wirral Peninsula: an Outline Regional Survey* (Liverpool, 1922), p. 68.

² For an excellent account of Wirral's rivers and streams which pays special attention to any historic significance, see E. H. Rideout, 'Wirral Watersheds and River Systems and their influence on Local History', *THSLC*, LXXIV (1922), pp. 92-127.

³ W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1955), p. 245.

⁴ R. Wilbraham, *An Attempt at a Glossary of some Words used in Cheshire* (London, 1820), p. 50; E. Leigh, *A Glossary of Words Used in the Dialect of Cheshire* (London, 1877), adopted Wilbraham's glossary, then revised it and expanded it with additional entries. This gives a slightly altered definition, p.156: 'A small bridge or passage made over a ditch or gutter as an approach to a gate. w'. The 'w' is supposed to signify that the definition is unchanged from Wilbraham's version, yet this exact definition is not that in either the 1st or 2nd edn. of Wilbraham's book.

⁵ Bromborough Manor Court papers, 1706-1846: CALS, DMB/231/1.

⁶ Monuments Protection Programme, Monument Class Description, Clapper Bridges, February 1990.

⁷ The Merseyside Historic Environment Record (MHER) records a clapper bridge on a public footpath near The Farm, Landican; see : <<<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record?titleId=2909983>>>. When this site was examined by the author in 2017 the stream had a course of sandstone walling on either bank. On the north bank was a large square slab of sandstone, which may once have been part of a clapper bridge. However, this now supports one end of a wooden footbridge which crosses

the stream. The site does not conclusively suggest a definite clapper bridge. It would be interesting to know if such a bridge was intact when the HER was compiled.

⁸ Mainwaring estate map of Bromborough, c.1755: CALS, VPH/5/BROM/1.

⁹ Shrewsbury estate map of Raby, 1788, 'A Survey, Valuation and Plans of the Several Manors Townships and Estates belonging to the Right Honourable Charles, Earl of Shrewsbury in the County of Chester made in the years 1788 and 1789': CALS, Mf 397

¹⁰ Childer Thornton Tithe Map: CALS, EDT 99/2; Stanley estate map, 1825, 'Map of the Manor of Hooton and lands in the Townships of Childer Thornton and Little Sutton...belonging to Sir Tho. Stanley Massey Stanley Bart': CALS, D293/8.



Plate VII: Bromborough clapper bridge as viewed from the bank of the stream it once crossed. The three large sandstone slabs are only wide enough to cross half of the stream. Two piers, which have now entirely disappeared, must once have supported a further row of slabs in the foreground.



Plate VIII: The remaining section of the Bromborough bridge, as seen when looking downstream. The two sandstone piers which support the slabs are now visible. The pier in the foreground extends well past the extant slabs, showing the bridge to have once been wider. In the background some slabs which probably once formed the top of the bridge, may be seen lying out of context in the watercourse.



Plate IX: A front view of the Raby clapper bridge, taken looking up the ditch which it crosses. The bridge is two slabs wide, although the slab in the background is partially buried and has a tree growing upon it.



Plate X: Raby clapper bridge as seen when looking across the ditch. At the right-hand end, one of the piers may be seen protruding from beneath the slab it supports. The bridge lies in very close proximity to the river.



Plate XI: This is the third arched bridge to the south of Hooton Road. It is also the first intact example, for only a few courses of stone remain of both the previous bridges. The stonework inside the arch fits together beautifully and is very well-dressed.



Plate XII: The fourth bridge to the south of Hooton Road in Childer Thornton. Its design is identical to the previous bridge. The arch is three feet across, which gives some indication of the narrow width of the brook it crosses.