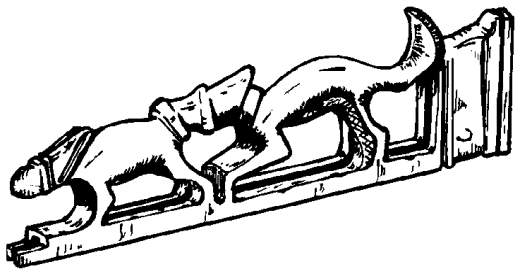
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Replacement of the Road Bridge Over the River Flit at Clophill March 2011

Kevan J. Fadden FSA

www.adalhs.org.uk

Clophill Bridge

In March 2011 it was brought to our attention that the ancient bridge at Clophill, which spanned the River Flit, had been demolished and was to be replaced by a modern structure.

It was well known that the bridge was in a poor state of repair and had been closed to traffic since 1957. Previously this bridge carried all the traffic of the A6 London to Carlisle road until 1937/8 when it was by-passed by a road straightening scheme cutting out a major bottleneck and an accident black spot. It remained however as a pedestrian crossing and a part of the village heritage, its sandstone structure and red brick repairs blending in with its surroundings to make a pleasant corner of Clophill close by the village pound and lock up.

Obviously such a bridge needs some maintenance, even though it carries no appreciable load, but to replace it seemed rather drastic for a river crossing that since the improvements to the A507 can never again be used as a highway. An elaborate foot bridge over the A507 has been erected which blocks it off.

The history of the bridge was briefly discussed in the *Bridges of Bedfordshire* by Angela Simco & Peter McKeague in 1997 where it was recognised to be an ancient crossing but they suggested the bridge was probably built in the 18th century with cutwaters on the piers both up and down stream. If the destruction had been monitored the structure could have been measured and recorded and its date possibly confirmed. When seen by the author it was only possible to photograph the foundations before the cofferdam holding back the water was removed.



Photo 1. Clophill bridge looking north prior to 1937 when it carried the A6 London to Carlisle traffic. A ford was retained on the east side, down stream.



Photo 2. Looking south, taken from the village green. All the traffic passed through the very narrow bridge, and it became an accident black spot.



Photo 3. The bridge in 1985 looking down stream. The piers are protected by cutwaters. The arches or voussoirs are sandstone with what appear to be repairs in soft red brick above while the parapets are of modern brick.



Photo 4. Similar view in 2011 before destruction, the parapet had been replaced by tubular railings. For ease of identification in this report the left arch springs from A, the two piers are B & C, the right arch springs from D, looking down stream.



Photo 5. Destruction under way, the voussoirs look remarkably solid and robust.



Photo 6. Similar view before the cofferdam was removed. The pier foundations, B & C are still visible.



Photo 7. Pier B looking upstream, very solid foundation made with good quality sandstone, probably quarried locally.



Photo 8. Pier B, a very definite cutwater which effectively protected the structure from the down stream current.



Photo 9. Pier C, looking downstream, no sign of a reverse cutwater, this suggests an early foundation.



Photo 10. Shuttering of the cofferdam holding back the embankment behind pier B.



Photo 11. Remains of pier B, showing solid sandstone foundations and evidence of red soft brick repairs. Looking down stream.



Photo 12. Replacement bridge looking down stream. February 2019.



Photo 13. New bridge looking south. The pedestrian way can be seen in the background effectively blocking any possible vehicular thoroughfare.



Photo 14. Bridge and village green from the pedestrian way. The red brick lock up is to the left of the picture.



Photo 15. The 19th Century Village lock up where wrong-doers were imprisoned until seen by the magistrates and the Pound for stray animals. The owners had to pay a fine to get them back. The modern bus shelter on the right is sympathetically designed and in keeping.

The Importance of the River Flit Crossing at Clophill

The River Flit is relatively small and hardly considered today but in the past it would have been a serious obstacle for any traveller going north or south through Bedfordshire. Undoubtedly the ford would have been known since earliest times and once established as a crossing point, it was the obvious site for a bridge, the ford was retained on the east side, possibly for watering animals and tightening spokes on cart and wagon wheels. In the 19th and early 20th century it was used to fill the tanks of steam traction engines. All road traffic used the bridge until it was bypassed by the A6 road straightening project in 1937/8.

It can be shown that the crossing point remained unchanged since the parish of Clophill was established by reference to the parish boundaries, Clophill, Maulden and Silsoe all meet at the bridge Fig 1. The Clophill Maulden boundary follows the the old A6 route towards Bedford. This almost certainly dates back to the 9th Century.

The general alignment of the Danelaw from Leagrave to Bedford probably ran through the Chiltern hills near Barton, again a formidable barrier, through Clophill following what was to become, the A6 route. The Danelaw certainly followed natural features e.g. the River Great Ouse through Bedford, so an existing road or track-way would have been used where no other feature exists.

Olgilby's Route Map of 1675 (Fig 2) shows a stone bridge at Clophill with four arches obviously a significant land mark.

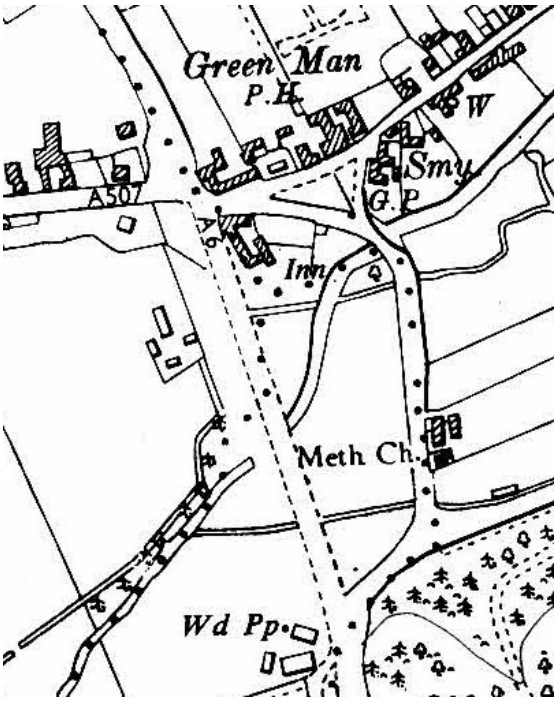


Fig 1. Parish boundaries (dotted) of Clophill, Maulden and Silsoe.

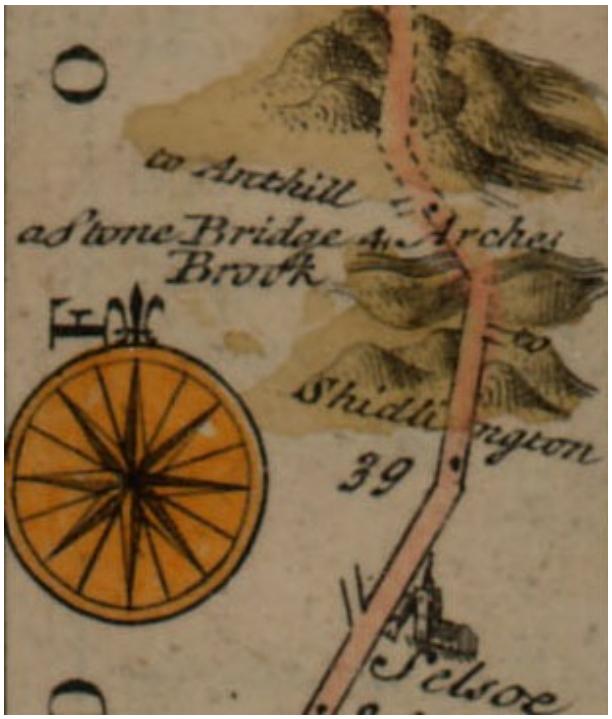


Fig 2. Detail from Olgilby's Route Map of 1675.

A turnpike ran along the same route in 1727 between the toll gate which was near the Pulloxhill turn, south of Silsoe to a gate at the "Hawnes" (Haynes) junction.

With the designation of "A" roads (Originally roads radiating from London) in the early 20th century the A6 ran from London to Carlisle, a major road which carried a considerable amount of traffic. This all passed over the old road bridge at Clophill until the road straightening project in 1937/8.

Angela Simco & Peter McKeague suggested that the bridge was built in the eighteenth century comparing its style with Chicksands bridge further down stream. Half pyramid cutwaters were recorded on the up stream elevation. "There were formerly cutwaters on the opposing face but these are now unidentifiable."

Careful investigation on the piers, evident following the destruction of the bridge showed no sign of cutwaters down stream, this could suggest there was a stone bridge on the site in the medieval period, all bridges on major routes were repaired and sometimes rebuilt.

Whether the bridge should have been replaced or just repaired in 2011 is open to debate. What is certain is that an opportunity to thoroughly investigate a bridge on a major road in Bedfordshire was missed.

References *Bridges of Bedfordshire* Angela Simco & Peter McKeague ISBN 0 9531531 0 X.

www.clophillhistory.mooncarrot.org.uk

www.adalhs.org.uk Reports Rail Points Revealed. Kevan Fadden

Turnpike roads and Toll Gates of Bedfordshire F.G. Emmison BHRS Vol. 3

Photographs

1 & 2 From Old Postcards source unknown.

3. The late John Dyson of Clophill.

4 & 5 Taken from You Tube > *Old Clophill Bridge,* Photographer unknown.

6-15 The author.

Fig 1. Detail from OS Map Crown Copyright. Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey®.

Fig 2. Detail from Olgilby's Route Map of 1675.

Kevan Fadden.

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