YCCCART 2018/Y3

Congresbury Bridge: Documentary and photographic survey

YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)

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Congresbury bridge early 20th century. Courtesy of Congresbury History Group

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Abstract

Research has established that there was a bridge at Congresbury earlier than 1551. A new stone bridge was built in 1710, which by 1904 had a raised parapet and steel girders. This was replaced in 1924 by the current bridge.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Vince Russett for suggesting this project, John Wilcox for his excellent photographic work and Maureen Bews and Anne Dimmock for typing up transcriptions.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

Site location

Fig 1: Site location indicated by the red arrow.

Land use and geology

The current bridge (and the earlier) stand on the estuarine alluvium of the Northmarsh Solid geology at the site is of the Mercia Mudstones, which outcrop at the parish church to the west and in the High Street to the east.

The bridge is a light-controlled crossing of the river Yeo, part of the Weston-super-Mare to Bristol A370 road: before the construction of the M5 motorway, it was the lowest road crossing on the Congresbury Yeo.

Historical & archaeological context

The origins of the bridge in the sense of 'a permanent structure enabling one to pass over an obstruction, such as a river' are not clear.

There are certainly records of Roman bridges, but these would almost certainly not have lasted long in their entirety without repair and long-term management, although clearly some bridge piers did survive into the medieval period (see below).

One definite problem in understanding the early medieval construction and maintenance of bridges is that the OE term 'brycg' and its Latin equivalent 'pons' not only mean 'bridge' in the modern sense, but also 'causeway', so a 'brycg' may have been a causeway approaching the water, that would need a ford or ferry to actually cross it. The

evidence of the many '-ford' place-names implies this was a common way to cross watercourses, and some local place names such as 'Sandford', 'Mudford' or 'Langford' express the quality of those fords.

It is generally agreed that there were few bridges in England before the eleventh century, and even then, some records are clearly of stone Roman bridge piers continuing to be used, such as the maintenance of the bridge at Rochester in the eleventh century (Gardiner 2017).

Substantial initial investment would be needed to construct a bridge over anything bigger than a stream, and it would also commit whatever body provided that investment to future maintenance. The bridge would also by its nature impede water-borne transport, so commitment to build a major structure such as Congresbury Bridge was a decision that would not have been taken lightly, were any alternative available.

An initial scan of the medieval documents that survive for Congresbury has not produced any mention of a bridge so far, and the documents are mostly of a type (such as mid-14th century land exchanges, presumably as a result of the Plague of 1348-50) but work continues.

The potential date for the building of the first bridge, before 1551, may be a reflection of the orienteering of the economy of Congresbury towards Bristol, rather than Wells, as it had probably been in the medieval period.

The accounts of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital report several expenditures on the bridge, which was variously known as Congresbury Bridge and The Great Bridge. The most critical is the account in 1710, when 'full payment for building a stone bridge' of £35 was made to one John White, 10 shillings having previously funded two trips to Congresbury 'abt. the bridge' in the same year. The bridge seen in the 1828 drawing and 1890 photograph looks to be of early 18th century date, which would fit this account.

Fig 2: Drawing by Buckler 1828 (Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Collections)
The 1710 stone bridge by this time had been widened, in 1817 by Edward Lukins.

Fig 3: The Bridge c1890. Courtesy of Congresbury History Group. In 1791 John Collinson, in his book The History and antiquities of the county of Somerset, states regarding the Yeo: "This river has over it a stone bridge of two arches in the village of Congresbury".

An earlier bridge?

But what of its predecessor? The bridge must have been as high as the later, to allow passage of vessels to the quay at the Ship and Castle.

In 1648 'bords' were required for repair, and in 1650 the 'stays and rails' were mended, perhaps implying the bridge had wooden side rails. The surface of the road was certainly of stone: in 1648 'stones' were bought 'to lay on Congresbury Bridge'. Again in 1661, 'timber and stone' were hauled to the bridge. Stones sand and gravel were laid on it in 1678, 1679 and 1708. Its origin is unknown, as for the moment, is its date, other than 'earlier than 1551', the earliest reference so far found.

It is quite conceivable that before the first bridge was built, a ferry (perhaps sited above the mill weir at West Mill, of which a version was conceivably in place by c1050) would have been sufficient for the needs of those wishing to cross the river: foot traffic may even have been able to cross the weir itself, and crossing the leat within the grounds of the mill.

Local people, living in a marshland landscape, would be far more used to boats and rafts than today: it was everyday experience a century ago to move animals, crops and products such as peat by waterway.

18 and 19th century repairs

Repairs over time were evidenced by letters and dates on the bridge.

17 CB 76 referred to a repair in 1776. It was suggested that CB was the Corporation of Bristol but more likely it was the initials of the one who undertook the repair.

EL 1817 referred to Edward Lukins who in 1817 widened the bridge on the westward side.

It is also recorded that in the 19th century William Danger, Steward to the Queen Elizabeth's Hospital Trustees

..always ordered people off the Bridge if he found them cutting or sharpening knives on the Bridge...

By the end of the century the old bridge needed to be replaced. It was steeply ramped which made control of horse drawn transport difficult. Low parapets made it easy to topple over (In 1811 Mr Thomas an opulent grazier of Banwell was killed when he fell from his horse into the water at Congresbury Bridge). The crossroads immediately after the bridge on the south side would also have been obscured going downhill over the

hump backed bridge and the bridge was also narrow. No doubt there were queues at market time.

Early 19th /20th concerns

Congresbury Parish Council wrote to the Somerset County Surveyor in July 1896 regarding the decaying arches and other deficiencies and the need for an iron girder bridge which would reduce the gradient.

Thos Smith, District Surveyor subsequently reported the decay of the stone arches, settlement, nine dangerous placing stones, which should be immediately removed, and the most dangerous west parapet wall.

The Local Government Act of 1888 established county councils in England and Wales whose responsibilities included the repair of county roads and bridges. Nevertheless, the owner of the bridge was considered by Somerset County Council to be the trustees of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital. Evidence was obtained from villagers N Vicarage, John Martin, John Lukins and Thomas Sheppy which indicated that as far back as any inhabitant of Congresbury could remember all repairs, both to the Bridge and also the road over the Bridge, had been executed by the order and at the expense of the Bristol Charity Trustees.

A county council document dated 10 December 1901 states:

For the protection of the public it has been suggested that the County Council should raise the parapet wall of the Bridge and the Council desire to be advised whether by doing so they will render Themselves liable for the future maintenance and repair of the entire bridge….The raising of the parapet referred to will be new work by adding to the height of the original structure (at a dangerous place) and will not be directly in the nature of repair.

The already dilapidated bridge received a further blow for on 1st January 1901 William Willcox, Somerset County Surveyor stated:

Mr Edwards letter caused me to go down this morning to see the state of things at the Bridge. It appears Weeks timber wagons were passing over the Bridge drawn by a traction engine about 4o/c in the morning. I can find no evidence to prove either or any of their vehicles struck the guard wall. At any rate about fifteen feet of the guard wall on the Bristol side of the Bridge has collapsed – taking some small part of the Roadway with it into the slip or watering place to the river.

The County Council met a deputation of the Charity Trustees on 7th May 1902 to discuss repairs to the bridge and subsequently the trustees sent the council this offer

The Trustees of the Bristol Municipal Charities .. are now instructed to inform you that in the event of the County Council removing the present bridge and erecting in its stead

a girder bridge in such a position and of such a character as our client's Surveyor approves they will be prepared on a certain definite understanding (1) to contribute 1/3rd of the actual cost incurred in the erection of the new Bridge not exceeding £250. (2) to give up a strip of ground of the width and area described at the meeting so as to enable the approach to the Bridge to be widened, the County Council setting back and re-erecting the boundary wall against the widened road to the satisfaction of the Trustees' Surveyor.

In June 1902 Somerset Council agreed to the offer and requested to provide a temporary fence to the road over the bridge and to prepare plans and estimates for the proposed new bridge.

On 2nd March 1904 the council called for their £250 from the trustees and confirmed that the changes to the bridge (which involved widening, raising the parapets and new steel bridge work) had been completed at a cost of £959. The contractor employed by the county council was E Chancellor & Sons, building contractor of Bath.

Fig 4: The bridge following the repairs & alterations. Courtesy of Congresbury History Group

According to the late John Walter the previous bridge to that currently in place (2018) was constructed by John Lysaght Ltd, Bristol. This was an iron and steel company established in Bristo l . Perhaps they supplied the iron railings shown in the photos above. It can be seen from the early photos (Fig 4 & 5) that the iron railings were only in place at the southern end of the bridge. The stone parapets can be seen to have been heightened.

The modifications undertaken were not sufficient to deal with the increase in motor traffic and increasing concern regarding safety, and this was noted by the local newspapers.

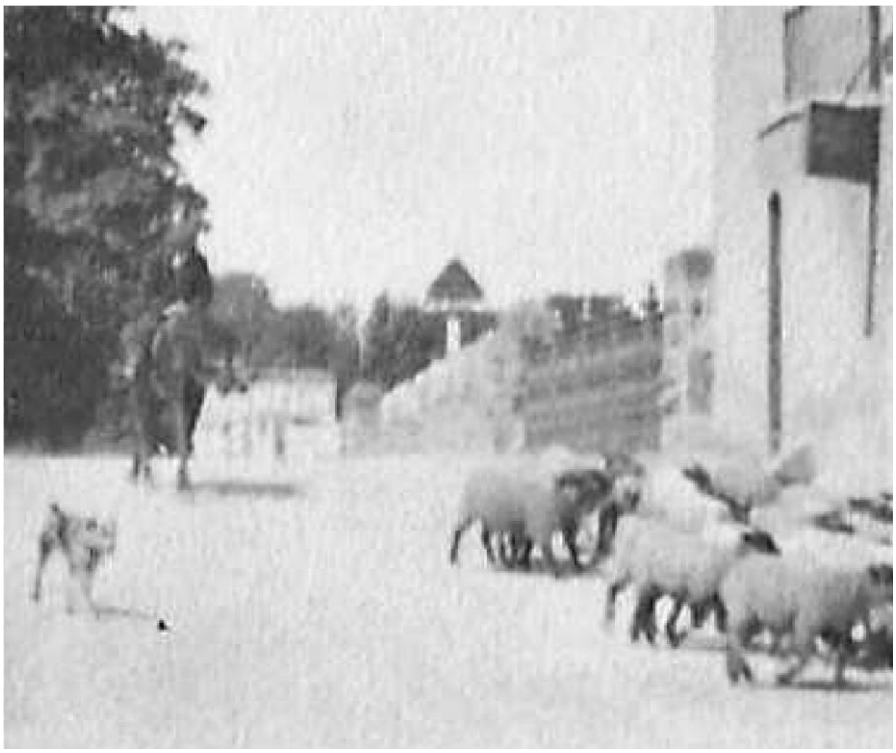


Fig 5: Bridge southern entrance – early 20th century. Note that the metal barrier is only on the section at the southern end of the bridge. Andrew Sheppy Collection.

THE SCENE OF MANY ACCIDENTS Western Daily Press January 24th 1920

Some important subjects came up for consideration at the monthly meeting of the Axbridge Rural District Council, held yesterday, Mr R Board, J.P. C.C., presiding.

Some surprise was evoked in connection with the forwarding by the County Council of a report from the county surveyor as to the notorious "death trap" on the Bristol-Weston Road – Congresbury Bridge. The surveyor in a report .. pointed out that the Axbridge District Council expressed sympathy with the request of the Congresbury Parish Council that the bridge should be widened, thereby preventing congestion of traffic and had requested the County Council to remedy the complaint. Having mentioned that the County Works Committee had twice decided on December 1913 and March 1915 to take no action in the matter, the surveyor expressed the opinion that with ordinary care the approach was reasonably safe for traffic. He thought the matter could stand over. Mr HC Marshall CC …observed that the bridge was a source of greater danger than anything else in the whole district. Not only should the structure be widened considerably but it should also be lowered. Mr W Wear is representative of Congresbury said two or three accidents occurred every week, and the remaining traffic was "squeezed" by charabangs. It was eventually decided that the clerk should address a further letter to the County Council calling attention to the serious danger involved by the existing conditions.

The Western Daily Press in January 1921 in reporting this meeting said that would be difficult to find, in the whole of Somerset, or in any other county, a more awkward bit of main road for any sort of vehicle to negotiate and a census taken on a bank holiday last year showed that in the course of one hour 700 vehicles passed over the bridge. At holiday

times a policeman has to be stationed near the bridge continuously to guard against serious mishaps.

A new bridge

Finally, the County Council agreed to a new bridge.

In January 1924 it was reported that it had decided to remedy the notoriously dangerous Congresbury Bridge by the construction of a new 40-foot bridge, and to divert the course of the river, at a total estimated cost of £5,500 helped by contributions by the Ministry or the local authorities immediately concerned.

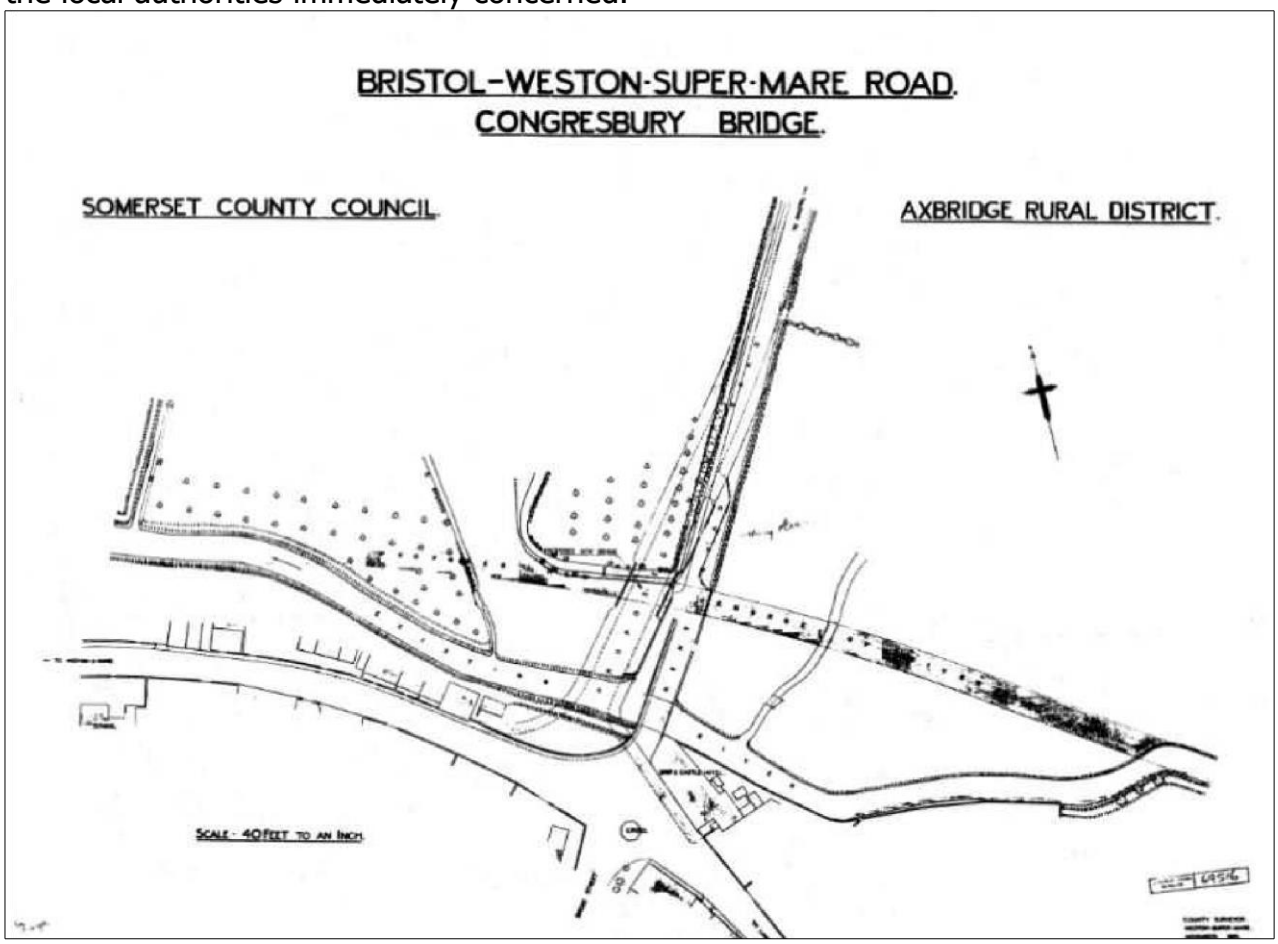


Fig 6: Plan of the new road layout 1924. Courtesy of North Somerset Council Highways Department

The Somerset County Council plans for the new bridge (Fig 6 above and 7 & 8 below) show the new layout. The river was diverted away from the Ship & Castle Inn and a new bridge constructed further towards Weston super Mare.

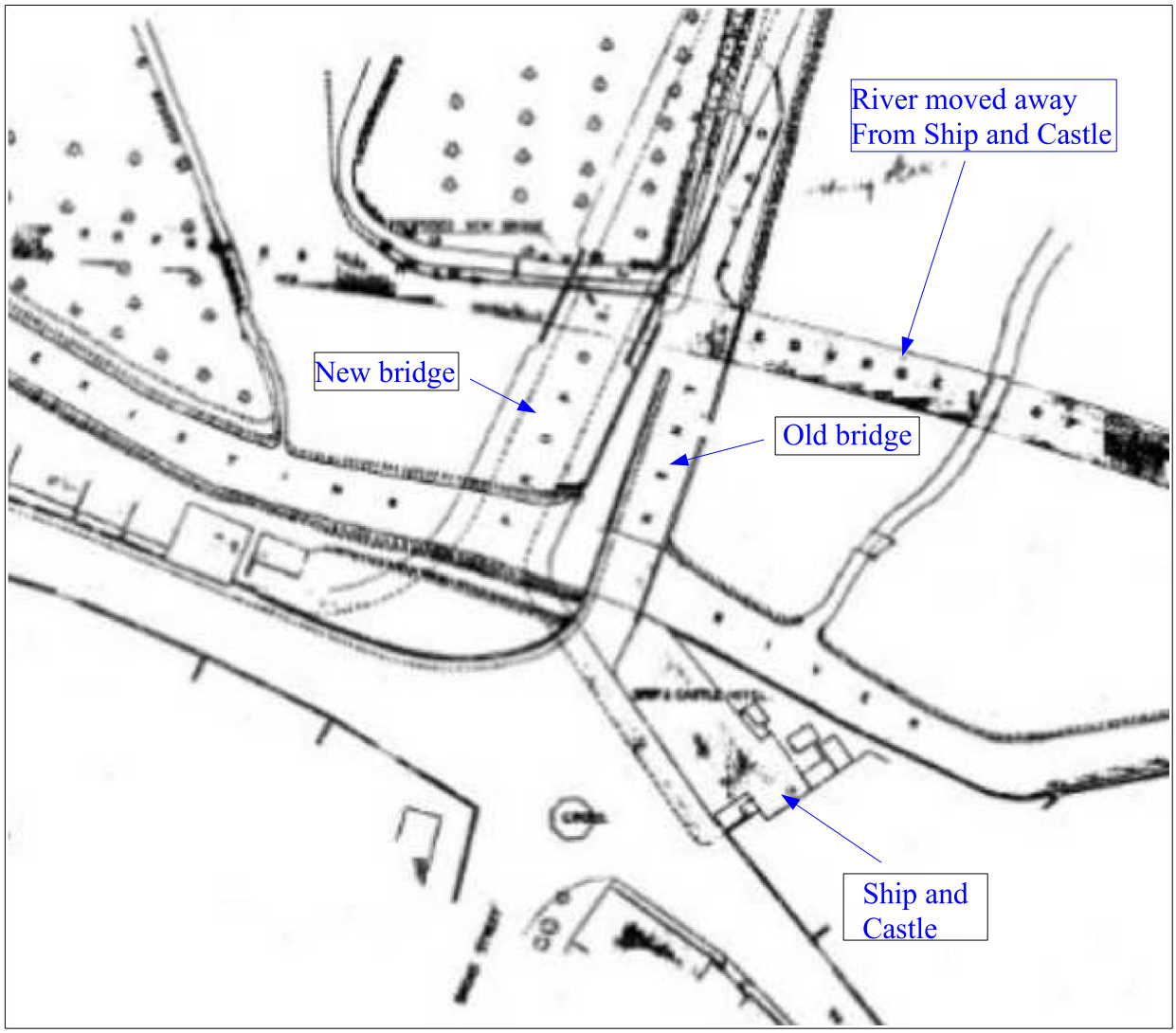


Fig 7: Enlarged section of Fig 6 above

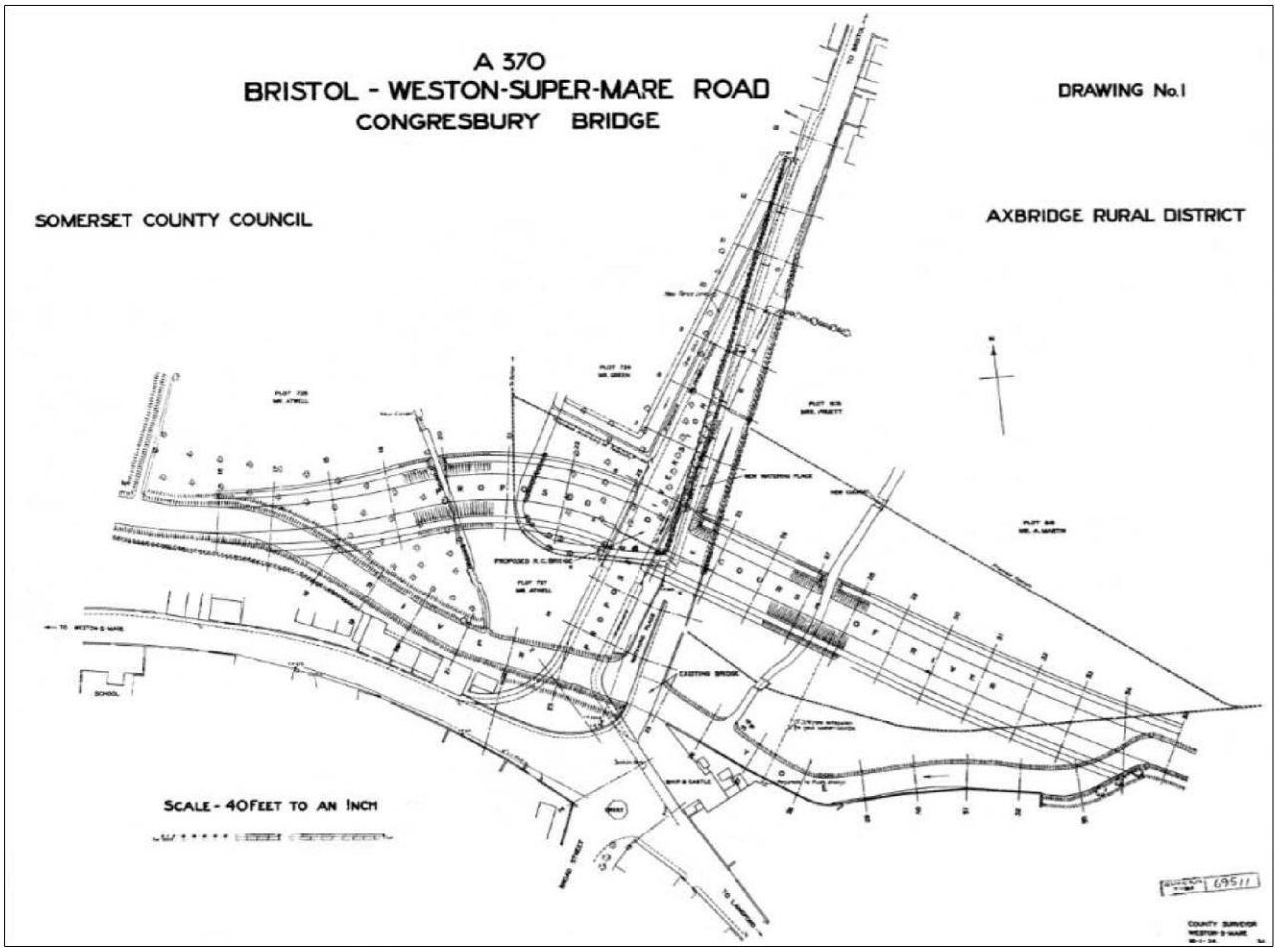
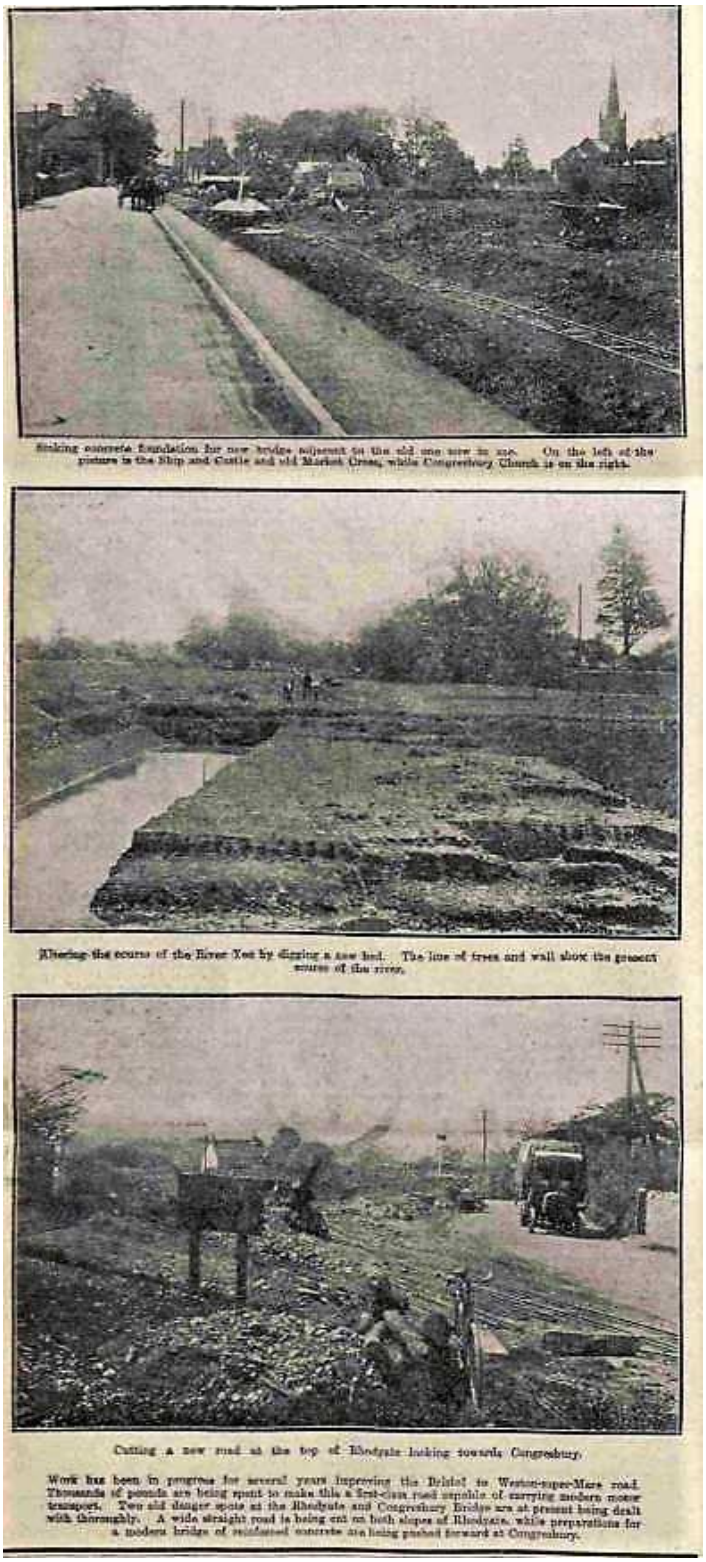


Fig 8: Plan of the new road layout 1924 Courtesy of North Somerset Council Highways Department

Progress was reported in the local newspapers as below



Sinking concrete foundation for new bridge adjacent to the old one now in use. On the left of the picture is the Ship and Castle and old Market Cross, while Congresbury Church is on the right.

Diverting the course of the River Yeo by digging a new bed.). The line of trees and wall above show the present course of the river

Cutting a new road at the top of Rhodyate looking towards Congresbury.

Work has been in progress for several years improving the Bristol to Weston-super-Mare road. Thousands of pounds are being spent to make this a first-class road capable of carrying modern motor transport. Two old danger spots at the Rhodyate and Congresbury Bridge are at present being dealt with thoroughly. A wide straight road is being cut on both slopes of Rhodyate, while preparations for a modern bridge of reinforced concrete are being pushed forward at Congresbury.

Fig 9: Construction work. Western Daily Press 22 May 1924

Fig 10: 1924 construction looking towards Cadbury Hill.
Courtesy of Congresbury History Group

Fig 11: New bridge construction 1924. Ship & Castle inn in background
Courtesy of Congresbury History Group

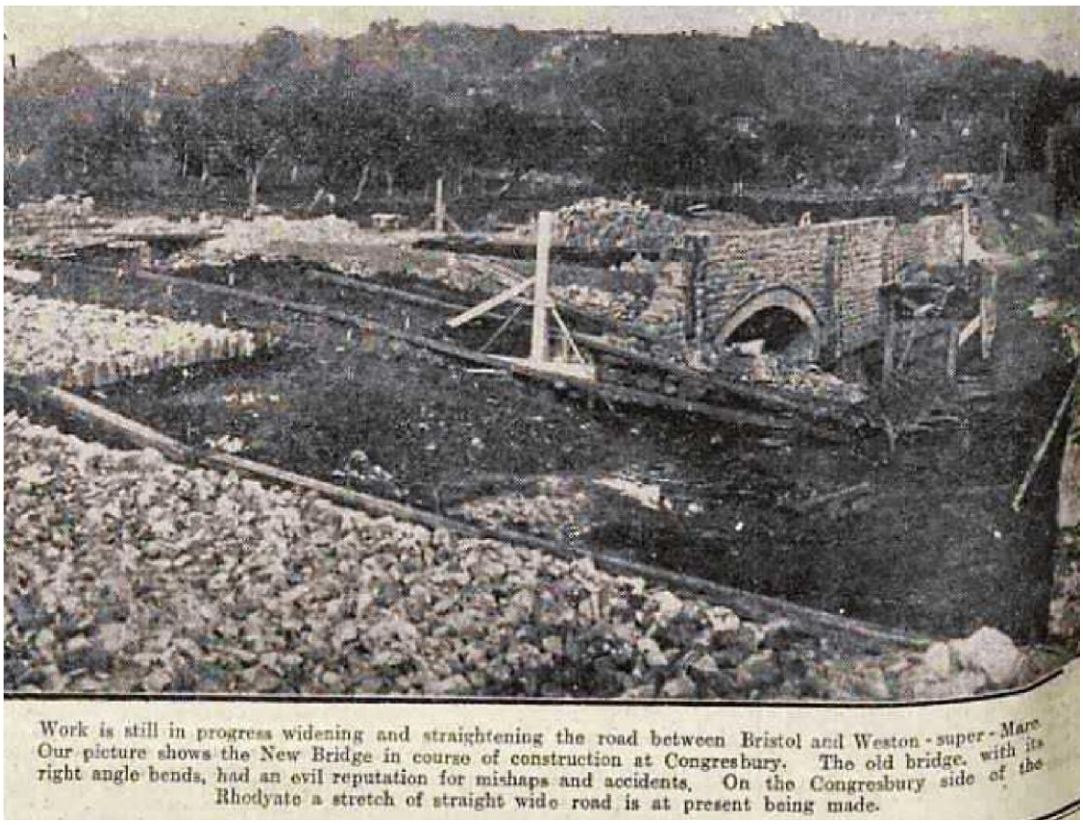


Fig 12: Work in progress. Western Daily Press November 15 1924

Work is still in progress widening and straightening the road between Bristol and Westonsuper-Mare. Our picture shows the New Bridge in course of construction at Congresbury. The old bridge, with its right angle bends, had an evil reputation for mishaps and accidents. On the Congresbury side of the Rhodyate a stretch of straight wide road is at present being made.

Sadly construction involved loss of life when a labourer from Lower Claverham suffered a fit, fell in the water and drowned.

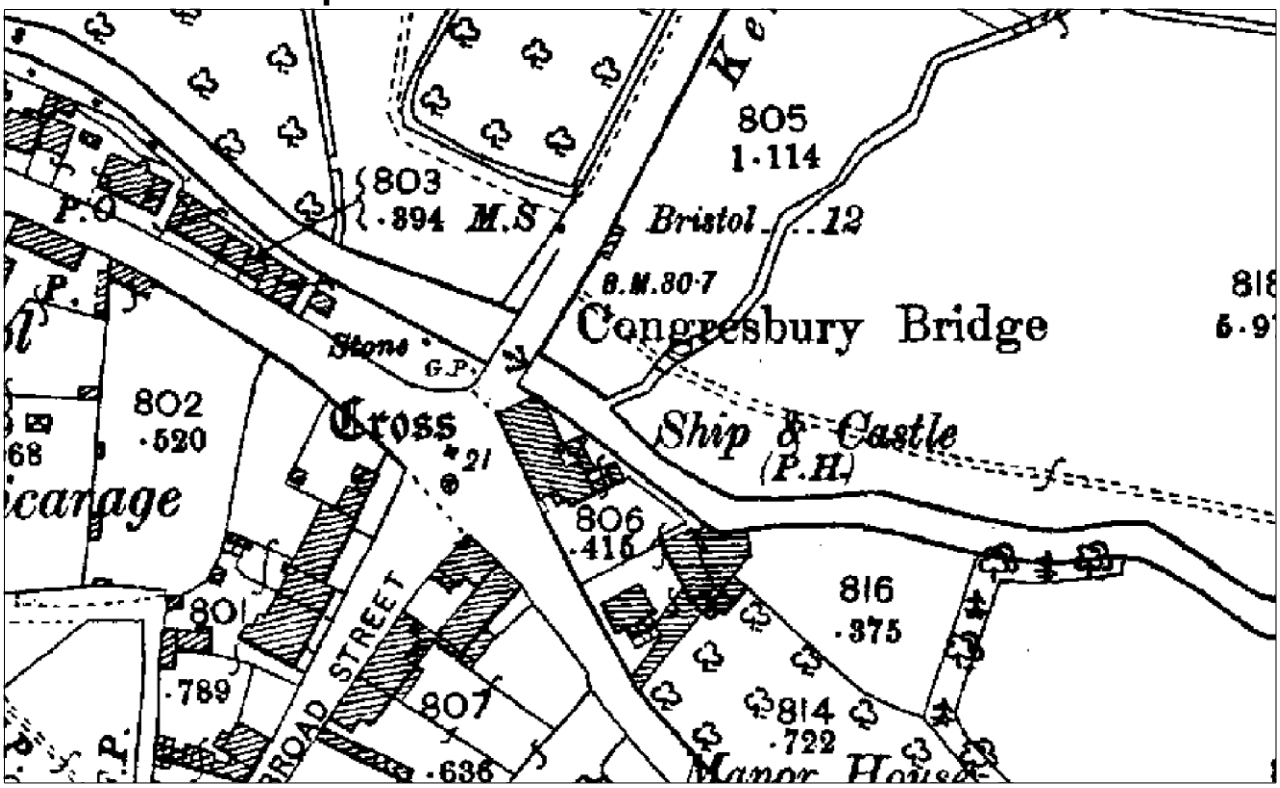
The Wester Daily Press reported (9 June 1924):

Claverham Labourer's Death: Tragedy on Congresbury River diversion scheme

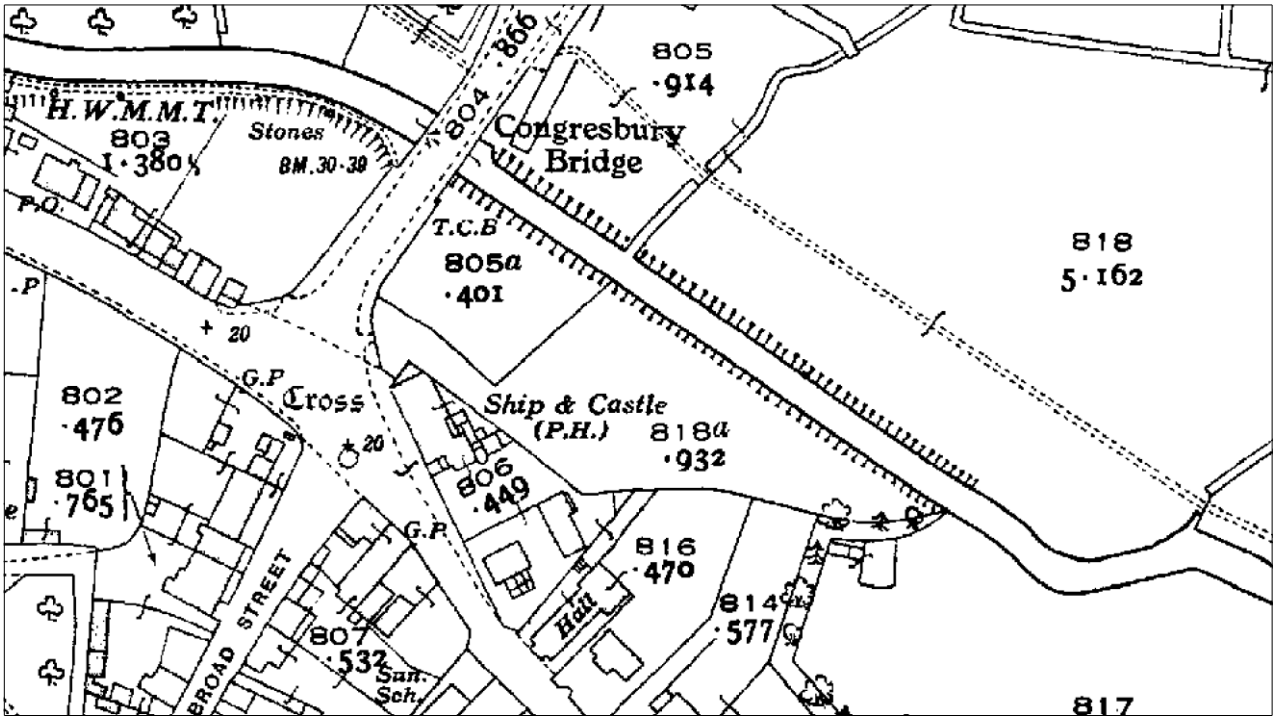
The tragedy at Congresbury, Somerset last Thursday, which resulted in the death of Albert Winmill (22), a general labourer, living at Lower Claverham, near Yatton... William..Winmill, of Kingston Seymour, identified the body as that of his brother who... had suffered from fits.. at the time of his death he was working for Mr Ernest Ireland, contractor, of Bath. Albert Close... was engaged upon the work of a new river course through Congresbury. The deceased was engaged.. carrying water for the concrete mixer. He dipped out the water with a spare bucket attached to a rope. (A witness) heard a splash... and found Winmill lying at the bottom with his head under the water. Artificial respiration was applied until the doctor arrived, (but) he thought the man was

dead when he arrived. The jury returned a verdict... that the deceased died from drowning after falling into the water whilst in an epileptic fit

Before and after OS plans



Before 1903



After 1930

Fig 13: Ordnance survey maps illustrate the changes.

Fig 14: Alf Sampson photo of new bridge looking south. According to John Walter the first person to drive over the bridge was"Lucky" Stevens who lived by the Elms

Fig 15: New bridge c1924 looking north

Plaque on current bridge

EDWARD STEAD, A.M.I.C.E

COUNTY SURVEYOR

1924

Fig 16: The plaque on the bridge 2017. Photo by Mike Bews

Stead's name (he was an Associate Member of the Institute of Civil Engineers) appears on many bridges in historic Somerset rebuilt during the 1920s in response to the heavier nature and increased volume of road traffic. It is sometimes recorded as Edward J Stead, and in later inscriptions, County Engineer. It is not clear if he was the same person as Temporary Lt Col Edward Stead, of the Royal Engineers during WWI, but he was recorded as living in Weston-super-Mare in 1920-1, so may well have been. The surveyor was referred to as 'Mr' in 1922, however, and so the names may be a coincidence. The plaque was turned to face inwards during WWII, and only reverted in the 1970s.

Despite the new bridge the area continued to be a danger.

In November 1934 it was reported that nine Bristol motorists had been fined 10 shillings for going from two to six feet to the wrong side of the white line in the middle of the road and in 1939 a young Cliftonian motor cyclist died on the bridge after a collision with a car.

Floods

The bridge has had to withstand traffic and floods. In July 1968 the village was hit by a serious flood.

Fig 18: July 1968: Derrick Cox left & J Walter centre

And the river was high in 1978

Fig 19: 28 January 1978. Left is Mike Phippen

Flood Defences

On the 13th August 1982 the Weston Mercury reported that

The works included constructing or raising 4600 metres of flood banks and a similar length of flood berms. Berms are ledges in front of flood banks over which the river spreads when flooding occurs. In effect the river carries several times its normal flow within the flood banks before controlled flooding over farm land occurs well down-stream from the village. The banks on the village side of the river are now about half a metre higher than the opposite side so any extreme flow of water will be directed away from the main village area if ever the level rises to such a degree.

So far (at April 2018) the defences have been successful.

Fig 20: September 2012

Fig 21: View east from the bridge 2017. Photo by Mike Bews

Plans to strengthen the bridge

Increasing use of heavy lorries led to consideration being given to strengthening the bridge.

The Bristol Evening Post of 16 December 1997 however reported that plans to spend £300,000 strengthening the bridge had been scrapped. North Somerset Council had intended to strengthen the bridge to cater for abnormal loads weighing more than 40 tonnes. The work would have closed half the bridge (an official abnormal load route) for three months while a concrete 'saddle' was put in place. Action was postponed after warnings about the huge amount of congestion it would cause.

It was said that the current structure was capable of carrying 40-tonne lorries. Any strengthening would therefore only be needed for abnormal loads. Over a 12-month period, only one such load occurred.

Fig 22: The Bridge today

The current bridge now has three lines of traffic. Traffic on the lanes going south can be stationary for a while waiting for traffic lights to change. This means that several heavy lorries are stationery on the bridge at one time.

How long will it be before a new bridge is required?

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