

HISTORY OF THE BUILDING OF POTARCH BRIDGE

David Younie and Malcolm Nicol

Why the need for a bridge at Potarch?

The 18th century was a time of significant change in Scotland, which led to increased long-distance, nationwide travel and, eventually, to improvements in transport infrastructure (roads, bridges and harbours). The main reasons for this were, firstly, the Jacobite uprisings of 1715 and 1745 resulted in considerable military activity and movement, and secondly major improvements in agricultural methods and production drove a need to access markets.

The general standard of roads during the 18th century was poor. They were made at a time when wheeled traffic was uncommon – goods being transported either by pack horse or sledge [1]. In fact, according to Dinnie, the first cart did not arrive in the parish until 1753 and they did not become common until some time after that [2]. Roads generally followed the high ground in order to avoid bogs, but this resulted in some steep gradients. Coupled with a poor surface, this made pulling a fully laden cart along them very difficult and so bulk transport was expensive [3] (to quote Anderson [3], writing in 1793, *'about forty or fifty years ago there was no road in this county on which wheels of any kind could be dragged: weighty burthens of every kind were of course carried on horseback'*.)

In mediaeval times the only roads which were in any way maintained were ones where local people had an interest, i.e. farmtoun to farmtoun, farmtoun to kirk toun, etc. Thus, the main local road through Birse parish followed the high ground from Finzean over Corsedarder to Marywell, the main settlement in the parish. From there it went either to Kirk toun of Birse or to Kincardine O'Neil (the most important town on Deeside at the time), the latter route via Torquhandallochy, Birkhall, Bandorie, Braeside and hence to the ferry and ford on the Dee at Boat of Kincardine (Carlogie).

After the Jacobite uprising of 1715 and the increasing militarisation of the Highlands, General George Wade was commissioned in 1724 to report on the threat of Highland insurrection, and as a result he recommended the upgrading of forts and building of new roads. The road between Whitestone on the Water of Feugh northwards to the River Dee was part of this network of military roads and is shown on the maps of Roy's Military Survey of Scotland, undertaken between 1747 and 1752 [4]. This became the main trunk route from the south of Scotland over the Cairn o' Mount, passing via Whitestone, down by Shooting Greens, to the Dee. On Roy's map the road is shown passing the ferry crossing at Boat of Inchbare (about half a mile below Potarch), continuing on the south side of the river onwards to Boat of Kincardine. From here it went across the river, through Kincardine O'Neil and onwards to Huntly and further north. On this map there is no significant road shown leading away from Boat of Inchbare on the north side of the river, suggesting that at this time the Inchbare ferry was a relatively local transport link and not the main crossing on the Great North Road. (The road from Kincardine O'Neil towards Aberdeen did not follow the river here, but passed by Craighlash, north of Sluie Hill). However, by the time of Taylor and Skinner's survey in 1776 [5], it would appear that the Inchbare ferry had replaced Boat of Kincardine as the main crossing of the Dee on the Great North Road. In the Taylor and Skinner map, the road towards Fettercairn is shown leaving Kincardine O'Neil on the north side of the river, heading towards Inchbare.

Returning to the quality of the roads in the late 18th century, Anderson [3] goes on to say that *'Every day the necessity of having good roads becomes more apparent and the propriety of having them carried in a direction as level as possible more obvious'*. There was clearly, therefore, a realisation of the need for better roads and bridges. In addition to the network of military roads built by General Wade and Major William Caulfield during the middle of the 18th century (1100 miles in all), towards the end of the century there was also growing demand

from landowners for improved communication routes to transport agricultural products. In 1795 a Turnpike Act was passed in parliament which gave approval for the construction of a turnpike road (i.e. a toll road) from Aberdeen to Kincardine O'Neil *inter alia*. A second Turnpike Act, passed in 1800, allowed the road to be extended to Aboyne [1].

Although in the 13th century the Durward family, Lords of Coull (Aboyne) and Kincardine O'Neil, had built a wooden bridge at Kincardine O'Neil to connect with their lands south of the river, this bridge did not survive for long, and in the 18th century there was no bridge across the river at any place between Banchory and Ballater. The Dee was crossed by ford and ferry at Inchbare, at Kincardine O'Neil, and at Aboyne. The need for a bridge at Potarch was recognised many years before the bridge was eventually built. In the First Statistical Account of the Parish of Birse, published in 1793, Smith [6] states that *'in no place is a bridge so much wanted, nor could one be built that would accommodate this parish, and the public in general, so much as Pot-arch, over the Dee, near Inchbair. ...there is no other place on all this rapid river, where a bridge could be erected at so little expense, and at the same time be of such public utility. Nature has pointed out the spot where it ought to be.'* In addition to its strategic location on the north – south route, there were significant topographical attractions of Potarch as a location for a bridge: a) the river is narrow at this location, b) the banks are relatively high and c) there is a rock mass in the middle of the river which could be used for supporting a bridge.

The name Potarch is said to refer to a pool in the Dee at this spot ('poll tairbh' or 'bull's pool' in Gaelic) and was referred to by name in documents dating back to the 16th and 17th century [7]. However, another possible derivation is from the Gaelic word 'poiteag' (pronounced potack), meaning 'small pot'.

Raising the funds to build the Bridge

The first formal attempt to raise a subscription to fund the building of a bridge was made by the Road Trustees of Kincardine O'Neil district in 1796, but this came to nothing [8]. The possibility of a bridge came closer, however, after Thomas Telford was asked by the Treasury in 1802 to survey and report on roads and bridges in the Highlands. Following his report, the Parliamentary Commissioners on Roads and Bridges in the Highlands were established in 1803. They had Government funds at their disposal and were charged with constructing new roads and bridges, to supplement the military roads of the mid-18th century. They funded 50% of the cost of these improvements, the other 50% being provided by the local district.

In June 1810, the Commissioners were approached by a number of local landowners about building a bridge at Potarch. The memorial, from Alexander Brebner of Learnie, John Gordon of Craigmile, Lewis Innes of Balnacraig, John Douglas of Tilquhilly and others, made the following case for a bridge: *'The great military road leading from Brechin by Fettercairn, Kincardine O'Neil and Boat of Forbes (on the Don) to Huntly, and which is commonly called Cairn O'Mount road, has long been very much frequented by travellers and by the military in their passage to and from Fort George, and in general is of the greatest consequence to the commercial interests of a large district of country to the northward, in so much as the distance from Brechin to Huntly is thereby shortened by at least twenty miles. This road is intersected by the River Dee near Kincardine O'Neil, and by the River Don at Boat of Forbes. Both rivers are large and rapid, particularly the Dee, and either, when in flood in the summer and autumn months from heavy falls of rain, or in spring from melting of the snow in the upper district, or in winter, when gorged with ice, the passage of Kincardine O'Neil is rendered extremely precarious, and often impractical altogether for days. The interruption occasioned to, and the danger incurred by, travellers on this road from the want of bridges on these rivers has long been severely felt, and for more than a century past it has been in contemplation to build a bridge over the Dee at a place called Potarch, a little below Kincardine O'Neil.'* [9].

The memorialists proceeded to raise half the estimated cost – funds were paid into the Bank of Scotland on 26 November 1811 [10].

Building the Bridge

In August 1810 the Commissioners directed Thomas Telford to survey the site at Potarch and produce plans and specifications for a bridge. The survey, plans and cost estimate were completed on 18 February 1811 and a contract to build the bridge, at a contract price of £3500, was awarded to William Minto of Alford, who had already built the Bridge of Keig and the Bridge of Alford [10]. The design of the bridge is described by Telford as being of *three arches, the middle arch being seventy feet in span, the other two sixty-five feet each.*, i.e. a total length of 200 feet. The principal pier of the bridge was built on a prominent '*singular mass of porphyry (rock) near the middle of its channel*'. [11] Hume describes the bridge as '*A handsome 3-span bridge with dressed-stone arch rings and piers, and coursed-rubble spandrels. There are triangular cutwaters extended up to form semihexagonal pedestrian refuges.*' [12] It is 17 ft wide between parapets. The work was started in November 1811 and was contracted to be completed by 1st October 1813. [8, 10].

Construction proceeded well and it might have been finished before the end of 1812, '*two of the arches having been turned and the (timber-framed) centering of the last being fixed*' [13], but the half-built structure was severely damaged on 19 October 1812 by floating timber [14]. The floating of timber down the Dee was a common practice at the time. In this case, however, the accident was caused by '*placing single trees near the river that they might find their way down without any conductor by means of the first flood which might occur (sic). An imperfect knowledge of the impending danger had transpired in July last and a proper caution was then given to all the parties concerned in the sale and purchase of timber above the bridge.*' [13].

The Commissioners of Roads and Bridges complimented the contractor William Minto for his efforts and diligence in rebuilding the damaged bridge [13]. His contract price of £3500 provided for no unforeseen contingencies and he later raised a civil action against the owners of the timber and received £1200 in damages. A public subscription raised the sum of £283 to indemnify him for the loss and the Commissioners contributed a similar sum [8].

As a result of this incident, the Commissioners, with a view to the future protection of bridges from similar accidents, recommended to Parliament '*a Law which was passed in July 1813 whereby the liability of those who float timber is more precisely established and extended so that the Procurator Fiscal of any County may sue for and recover damages in the case of all Bridges in Scotland hereafter destroyed or injured by that practice.*' [10].

Completion date for the building of Potarch Bridge

Although some literature sources (e.g [12]) give the completion date of the bridge as 1813, there is sufficient evidence to allow a conclusion to be drawn that it was completed formally in 1814. Paxton and Shipway [15] and Fraser [8] state that the bridge was completed in summer 1814. These authors do not name their sources, although it may have been Thomas Telford himself. In his autobiography, Telford writes that, after the incident with the floating timber, the contractor '*proceeded with great energy in repairing the damage, and completed the bridge in the summer of 1814*' [11]. Telford also gives here the final cost of the bridge, which was £4067. Further evidence for 1814 is in the list of William Minto's works, published in his biographical notes. In this list, Potarch Bridge is stated as being undertaken between 1812 and 1814 [16]. However, the most conclusive evidence can be found in Appendix C of the Seventh Report of the Commissioners for Roads and Bridges in the Highlands [10]. The main body of the report states that the bridge was *rebuilt* (after the destruction caused by the floating timber in 1812) *within the year 1813, and a coating of gravel has lately* (the report was published in April 1815) *been laid upon its roadway and immediate approaches*'.

Appendix C, however, is much more specific about the formal completion date. This Appendix is an '*Alphabetical list and description of roads, bridges and harbours shewing measurements, dates and other particulars*'. In this Appendix are listed in detail, for each of the works completed by the Commissioners, the name of the surveyor, the date on which the survey was completed, the name of the contributors, the date the payment was made by the contributors, the name of the contractor, the date by which work was to be completed and the date on which the contract was actually completed. In the case of Potarch Bridge the date given for the completion of the contract is June 1814.

Another piece of evidence which points to the completion of the Bridge in spring or summer of 1814 is a public notice which was placed in the weekly Aberdeen Journal (forerunner of the Press and Journal) during several weeks in July and August 1814, intimating that the October 1814 market, which had previously taken place at Marywell, was to be transferred to Potarch [17]. There would also have been a market held in May, as it was every year, but there is no notice in the Aberdeen Journal about transferring the location of this market, so it could be concluded that in 1814 the May market was to be held at Marywell, as previously, the bridge being not yet completed. The announcement regarding the October, or Michaelmas, market reads as follows:

'Michael Fair of Birse:

The Market of Marywell of Birse, which was heretofore held in that village, is this year, and in all time coming, to be transferred and held on the Muir at Bridge of Potarch, being a more convenient and central situation. It takes place on the same day as formerly, viz. in October, the first Thursday after Michael Fair of Aboyne, under the denomination of MICHAEL FAIR of BIRSE, for cattle, sheep, horses, and will be custom free for this and the following year. Balnacraig, June, 1814.'

The oldest part of the present hotel at Potarch was built around the same time as the bridge was built and the markets were transferred from Marywell (although there could have been an inn at this location for many years before this). According to Dinnie [2], writing in 1865, the inn was built in 1813, but there is no conclusive evidence of the exact date of its construction.

References

[1] Patrick, J. (1982) *The Coming of Turnpikes to Aberdeenshire*. Centre for Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, pp56

[2] Dinnie, R. (1865) *An Account of the Parish of Birse*. First published by Lewis Smith, Aberdeen; later republished by Birse Community Trust, Finzean, 1999.

[3] Anderson, J. (1794) *A General View of the Agriculture and Rural Economy of the County of Aberdeen drawn up for the consideration of the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement, Edinburgh*
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=8j9KAAAAYAAJ>

[4] Roy, W. (1747-1752) *Military Survey of Scotland, Highlands*
<http://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/>

[5] Taylor, G. and Skinner, A. (1776) *Survey and maps of the roads of North Britain or Scotland*. Plate 54, The Road from Aberdeen to Braemarr & from Aberdeen to Durris & Banchory Ternan by the South side of Dee River.
<http://maps.nls.uk/atlas/taylor-skinner/detail.cfm?id=1095>

[6] Smith, Rev J. (1793) *First Statistical Account of the Parish of Birse*. First published 1793, republished by Birse Community Trust, Finzean, 2001, pp1-25.

- [7] Alexander, W. M. (1952) *The Place-names of Aberdeenshire*. Printed for the Third Spalding Club, Aberdeen
- [8] Fraser, G.M. (1921) (re-published 1980) *The Old Deeside Road*. Aberdeen Natural History and Antiquarian Society.
- [9] Anon (a) (1811) *Fifth Report of the Commissioners for Roads and Bridges in the Highlands of Scotland, Appendix L*, April 1811. Published in 'Reports from Commissioners, Session 1 November 1810 to 24 July 1811', p393
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=wTJbAAAAQAAJ>
- [10] Anon (b) (1815) *Seventh Report of the Commissioners for Roads and Bridges in the Highlands of Scotland, Appendix C*. Published April 1815 as Paper no. 76 in the House of Lords Sessional Papers Vol 74, (1814-1815), p151
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LK5bAAAAQAAJ>
- [11] Rickman, J (ed.) (1838) *Life of Thomas Telford, Civil Engineer, written by himself; containing a descriptive narrative of his professional labours*. Printed by James and Luke Hansard and Son, London, 1838, p401
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=xkVVAAAAcAAJ>
- [12] Hume J.R. (1977). *The industrial archaeology of Scotland, 2, the Highlands and Islands*, London.
<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/120081/details/bridge+of+potarch/>
 (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)
- [13] Anon (c) (1813) *Sixth Report of the Commissioners for Roads and Bridges in the Highlands of Scotland*, July 1813. Published in 'The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany' Vol 75, page 587
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=4V4AAAAAYAAJ>
- [14] MacConnachie, A.I. (1900) *Deeside*. Re-published 1972 by EP Publishing, Wakefield
- [15] Paxton R. and Shipway, J. (2007) *Civil Engineering Heritage: Scotland - Highlands and Islands*, London
<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/120081/details/bridge+of+potarch/>
 (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)
- [16] Skempton, A.W. (ed.) (2002) *A Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland, Volume 1 – 1500 to 1830*. Page 446-447
<http://books.google.co.uk/books?isbn=072772939X>
- [17] Anon (d) (1814) *The Michael Fair of Birse*. Announcement in Aberdeen Journal, issues 13/7/1814, 20/7/1814, 3/08/1814, 24/8/1814. On microfilm, Sir Duncan Rice Library, University of Aberdeen.

Ballogie
 April 2014