

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE OLD STONE BRIDGE

It is late in the seventeenth century and a new structure is taking shape in a Brandon field. Men working on the structure know it will benefit the town's economy once completed, but what they don't know yet is this new structure will begin a shift in the town's location and will have an impact to this present day. The structure has four stone arches spanning over sixty feet in total length, on top there is a road almost ten feet wide with walls to prevent travellers falling from it. It is clearly a bridge, but what is it doing in the middle of a field?

Town Street has a bridge crossing the river, but it is now unusable and beyond repair. Another bridge to the east, made of wood, was never built to last forever and it is here that a sturdier stone replacement, with high arches allowing the passage of barges under it, is being built. The question of its location is answered when the bridge, about a hundred yards south of the river, is completed. Workers dig a wide channel through the field, taking it under the bridge and carefully connect both ends to the river. What they have done is successfully divert the river to run under the bridge and away from its previous natural course of thousands of years.

The new bridge brings more travellers and cargo into town, at a time long before the railway did so. Bricks and tiles are offloaded, which are used in the construction of large houses nearby, such as Connaught House and Oak House, along with the construction of large maltings buildings. There is a boom in coaching inns and the area, known as Ferry Street, a nod to a time before the bridge was built, flourishes with increased commerce and industry, and eventually becomes known as High Street. Meanwhile Town Street, where the bridge was not replaced, falls into a steep decline, all because its bridge was not replaced.

In its lifetime, the bridge will also benefit the nation's war efforts. In the Napoleonic era, gun flints are exported under the arches; huge horse-drawn carts laden with timber for use as pit props travel over it in the Great War; but it was perhaps the war of 1939-45, that it is held in highest regard by the military who declare it worthy of fighting to the last man for and is the main reason defences are drawn up around town, not to protect the civilian population but to keep the bridge operational. However, at that time it was also noted the bridge was falling into disrepair, not helped by local youths throwing loose stone and brick into the river, so a temporary wooden bridge was constructed alongside it to share the load. The bridge was also noted for having a crooked arch, the second arch on the Norfolk side had sunk in the years soon after it was completed. In 1954 the bridge was replaced once again; this time modern techniques allowed it to be replaced on the same site as the old bridge. That replacement still stands today.

*Based, in part, on Bernard Lingwood's 'Brandon Notes'.