**EXETER’S IRON BRIDGE**

Exeter’s Iron Bridge was constructed as a means of transgressing a deeply sided valley known as Longbrook Valley. It was often known as The Pit due to its steep sides and depth. For want of a better word, the ‘road’ located in this valley was one of the means of access to and from the City. The road was extremely narrow and particularly difficult for horse drawn vehicles.

The construction of the bridge was commissioned by the Improvement Commissioners, a body formed around 1810 to ensure a more rational approach to town planning in Exeter, a forerunner to our Town and County Planners, but it was at a meeting of the General Commissioners held in May 1834 that a resolution was passed to proceed with its construction. The bridge was to be built parallel to and on the left side of Lower North Street and it so happens that the design blocked two of the lower floors of the public house known as The Crown and Sceptre and thus the only future use of these floors would be as if they were cellars. The construction of the bridge also effected another inn, located on the other side of the road from the Crown and Sceptre, then known as The Barnstaple Inn but subsequently part of it becoming the St Anne’s Well Brewery.

There was some differing of opinions as to what type of bridge was to be built; whether of cast iron or a suspension bridge, echoing the one in Bristol. The former prevailed and the bridge was cast in 1834-5 at the iron works of Russell and Brown of Blaina, Monmouthshire, at a cost of £3,500. The width of the bridge was eventually settled at 26 feet as a result of a declaration made to the Trustees of the Exeter Turnpikes by the Commissioners. The cast iron shafted piers support joists from which spring six rows of arched guiders of traceried spandrels and Gothic cast iron balastrades on which the road is carried. This would give a road length of eight hundred feet.

The cast iron parts were brought by sea from Newport, along the Exeter Ship Canal and unloaded at the canal basin. The finished bridge was now wide enough and flat across the valley from St David’s to the City. The cost of the construction kept rising and by 1836 the accounts showed a cost of £10,461.14s 8p, including the cost of ancillary works and compensation paid for some land compulsorily acquired. The new bridge made it a lot easier for travellers, either by foot or by driven vehicles, for access to or egress from the City. There is a flight of steps leading down from each side of the bridge to the road/ground below. The doors of the Crown and Sceptre were now wide enough to take the six-horse coaches from Barnstaple.

The life of the bridge continues to evolve, despite it being described as late as 1840 by some as being a *lasting monument of folly and wasteful expenditure.* In 1909 the cast iron plates of the roadway were covered in concrete and in 1984 these were replaced with reinforced concrete. Because of the growth of traffic using the bridge towards the end of the twentieth century a weight restriction was put in place at each end of the bridge along with traffic calming measures to restrict the number of vehicles using the bridge at the same time.

A passing reference must be made to a cast iron post, at the top of which is a weather vane. This is located at the end of the bridge nearest to the St Anne’s Well Brewery and is over forty feet in height. It was installed in 1898 to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. Whether the positioning of this post was influenced by the construction of the then relatively new bridge is a matter for conjecture.

*SOURCES:*

*Exeter Memories Website – The Iron Bridge;*

*Exeter Flying Post – Thursday 1 May 1834;*

*Grace’s Guide Website https://www.gracesguide.co.uk– Iron Bridge, Exeter;*

*The Buildings of England, Devon by Nicholas Persner & Bridget Cherry. Second Edition 1989.*

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