

Fyfield Bridge

A bridge has spanned the River Roding in Fyfield probably since mediaeval times, carrying the road from this village to the next as well as providing a link between the important local centres of village life: the church, the manor house, the water mill and villagers' homes. Early evidence for the existence of a bridge is largely circumstantial, being confined to references to the upkeep of a bridge and its need for renewal, rather than details of the bridge itself. From Quarter Sessions records and other sources, we get snap-shots of the condition of the bridge at specific dates and sometimes we are given clues to where responsibility for bridge maintenance was held to lie.

Although little detail of the bridge's structure has come down to us, we can be certain that it was a fairly substantial affair. A water mill has been operating here since at least as early as 1086 and the river had been widened for a considerable distance upstream to provide a reservoir for the head of water needed to drive the wheel. This challenged the first bridge-builders with a span of some thirty feet or more to bridge and, as Essex is comparatively poorly off for natural building stone, the bridge would have been constructed of wood. Rotting timber would have needed regular replacement and the bridge probably evolved rather like the apocryphal broom which, despite its several new heads and a number of replacement handles, continues to be regarded by its owner as the same old broom. Nevertheless, every century or so, the bridge will have needed complete reconstruction. The earliest recorded complaint about the poor state of Fyfield bridge was in 1598, when we read that Fyfield horsebridge and cartbridge is in great decay. Whatever patching up resulted from this indictment kept further formal complaints at bay for another eighteen years until, in 1616, Fyfield again found itself in trouble with the authorities "...for a default in that for the most part of the planks are so broken that no horse can pass over it without danger.....to be made good by Robert, Lord Rich in respect of his manor of Fyfield". Two years on and the villagers' despair at the continuing delapidation of the bridge echoes in the next report: "...a horse and cart bridge in Fyfield is in much decay in timberwork but by whom it is to be made they know not". Presumably the bridge was now rebuilt because the words suggest that it was far too rickety to have lasted until the next complaint, which was 42 years later, at the Midsummer Quarter Sessions of 1662. Here, the inhabitants of Fyfield were presented "...since July 15 they have not repaired the common horsebridge in the highway from Fyfield Church and Fyfield Street. Plea not guilty". The plea was to no avail and the jury found the inhabitants guilty.

We now jump forward more than a century, to the year 1777, when the Churchwardens, Overseer and other inhabitants of Fyfield petitioned the Quarter Sessions that "...your petitioners within the space of 24 years built a bridge over the River Roding in the said parish at their own expense over which there hath been great traffic of late years being now the constant thoroughfare between Hertfordshire and Essex and the road which the judges use to pass from one county to another that the bridge tho lately built in 1756 was become ruinous that your parishioners were obliged to take it entirely down and have rebuilt it in a most substantial manner at the expense of £67.16.6 which is so great a burden on your parishioners especially as they are tenants all at rack rents and contribute their portion to all county bridges and other necessary calls on them that they humbly hope your worship will take it into your consideration and either order it to become a county Bridge, as many others which have not the trafick path or the use there is to the public in general or order them such relief towards it as in your wisdom and goodness you may think proper." The petition was signed by W Lockwood, Rector; M Barwick and John Ash, the Churchwardens and Francis Barnard, the Overseer.

The history of a bridge is inseparable from that of the highway it serves and at this point it is appropriate to look at the reason for the extra traffic described in Fyfield's earnest petition. The story involves milestones on an old map, Fyfield Bridge and the Judges of Assize. The link between them is the River Roding which, in the eighteenth-century, dictated the routes which travellers took through this part of Essex. To understand all of this we must start with a puzzle.

Eighteenth-century maps and guidebooks to Essex show two routes leading north from Ongar, each eventually reaching Dunmow, via Takeley. The superior route, following the best roads and recommended by all the guidebooks of the day, left Ongar and passed through Moreton, Matching Green and Hatfield Broad Oak, before veering east to Takeley and Dunmow beyond. Running parallel with this route and only a couple of miles to the east of it, the other way passed first through Fyfield, eventually reaching Takeley by way of Abbess, then White Roding. The same guidebooks called this route a by-road and described it as "very bad". Bearing in mind the standards of the day, we can safely assume that the route north through

Fyfield was atrocious! Now here is the puzzle: the foremost maps of the same period, the eighteenth-century, all agree that the inferior route north, through Fyfield, was distinguished by an unbroken series of milestones all the way to White Roding but there were none on the better, Ongar-Moreton-Matching road. Why were the milestones there?

Milestones are valuable indicators to the modern historian of the importance to past travellers of a particular route. They were not haphazard: there was always a reason for them. With the growth of turnpikes through the eighteenth century, milestones along the main routes from one part of the county to another became a legal requirement, ticking off the distance from London as well as indicating the name of and distance to the nearest town in each direction. They were expensive, both to install and maintain, and they were not placed on non-turnpiked roads without some compelling reason. Neither of these two roads north from Ongar were then, nor later, ever turnpiked. So why were milestones placed on the inferior, Fyfield route, rather than the superior road through Moreton? Indeed, why were milestones installed at all? After all, the principal route from London to Dunmow went via Chelmsford and, later, that was the road which was turnpiked. Finally we can ask, having installed milestones, why did they start only at Fyfield and go no further north than White Roding?

The answer to all these questions starts with the position of White Roding, where the northern-most milestone of the series is sited. White Roding lies on what is now the main west-to-east road between Hertford and Chelmsford and this was an important route in the eighteenth century, being part of the circuit taken by the Judges of Assize then and for several centuries before. The problem which they and other travellers faced on the journey east was encountered at Leaden Roding where a wooden swing-bridge over the river served only pedestrian traffic. Wheeled vehicles had no option other than to follow the bed of the river for a quarter of a mile which, depending upon the mood of the Roding, held the promise of a miserable experience indeed! Bad as the road down through Fyfield might have been, there was a substantial bridge over the river which made it preferable to the aquatic alternative at Leaden Roding, so that is the option the judges chose and other wheeled traffic followed their lead. At White Roding, guided by the milestones, they turned south, ploughed through the ruts in Summer and the mire in Winter and on reaching Fyfield, they passed along the Street, sharp left over Fyfield Bridge and on through Willingale to Skreens, thence Chelmsford and the Assizes. So the milestones were there to indicate, not the route north from Ongar, but to guide travellers south, along the only servicable route from Hertford to Chelmsford.

It seems likely that the judges paused in their journey, first at Barrington Hall just above Hatfield Broad Oak and, after passing through Fyfield and Willingale, at Skreens, reaching the assizes on the third day out from Hertford. They were encouraged to take this route by the Bramstons of Skreens, which family was influential in the politics and judiciary of the eighteenth-century and who probably maintained the series of milestones from Fyfield bridge all the way to Skreens. Evidence suggests that the milestones which went beyond Skreens, to Chelmsford, were less conscientiously maintained.

Thus it is understandable that the petitioners of Fyfield thought that the county should adopt their bridge but it seems their appeal fell on deaf ears. The next year, 1778, Fyfield "horse bridge and cartbridge" was still "greatly in decay for want of repair" and two decades on, in 1800, the bridge was still not included in the list of county bridges. Perhaps this state of disrepair accounted for the preferred route through Fyfield from Chelmsford to Ongar bypassing the village and running directly from Witney Green through Cannons Green and Tun Bridge at Herons Lane. The bridge was missing from the list again in 1830, when it was widened from nine feet to ten, while the Victoria County History reports that in 1835 "the occupier of Fyfield Hall estate, with the assistance of the neighbouring gentry, had recently erected a bridge at Fyfield from plans and specifications by George Bridges, a London builder". By this time, "part of the bridge appears to have been a county charge. In 1858 the county surveyor noted that the bridge was built of oak and that in 1856 it had been widened at the expense of the county which was responsible only for the additional width".

A quarter of a century later, the Vestry, forerunner of the modern Parish Council, resolved to build a new iron bridge and a London firm of builders was consulted on the proposed design. Correspondence was exchanged throughout 1883, with cost the principal issue. The county surveyor urged the matter along on the basis that the state of the bridge was so bad. Meanwhile, the Vestry debated whether to accept the designer's advice and raise the main girder to clear flood water. Eventually, they decided against so doing because there had never been a flood to reach that height and it would save them "a good deal of expense as regards materials for raising the road". It was finally agreed that the £275 needed (later reduced by £5), and

of which £60 was to be paid by the county, would be borrowed and repaid over the next five years. This was the bridge which carried the Willingale Road over the Roding into the twentieth-century, the road over it being metalled in the 1920s and it is the bridge shown in old postcards. It lasted nearly a century until cracks appeared in 1981 and it was condemned. By this time, of course, responsibility for all roads and bridges had been removed from the parishes and the only problem that the rebuilding would cause local residents was the lengthy detour they and the many motorists who now used the bridge regularly would have to take until the new bridge was opened. Village lore recalls how the problem was solved ingeniously by the late Robert White, of Fyfield Hall, who extended the track at the back of the Hall across his field to the river and built a temporary bridge, next to the concrete footbridge, to bring cars out opposite the appropriately named Bridge House, on the Dunmow Road. Three months later, the bridge we use today was opened. Fyfield Bridge now comprised two separate bridges: a carriageway for vehicles and a narrow pedestrian bridge. This separation of local pedestrians from the general vehicular traffic is a symbolic reminder of the similar distinction which was made nearly two-hundred years ago, when the county then agreed to contribute only that proportion of the cost of Fyfield Bridge which was due on account of the extra traffic generated from outside the district.

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