

This is the Sixty-First of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE BUILDING OF THE NEW BRIDGE WHICH REPLACED THE FORD NEXT TO THE WATERMILL

Introduction

It is hard to imagine today how dangerous the ford across the Wensum next to the watermill could be when the river was in spate, and what a blessing the new bridge proved to be for travellers.

The first plans for a bridge were drawn up in August 1830 as part of a proposed new turnpike

At a meeting of Magistrates and others held by advertisement at the King's Arms, Dereham, on Thursday 26 day of August 1830: Lord Suffield in the chair,

It was unanimously resolved,

That it is highly expedient to make a turnpike road from Dereham to Aylsham, and to build a bridge over the river at Swanton Morley.

That in consequence of a Plan of a Road from Dereham to Aylsham having been made recently in the last Session of Parliament by Messrs. Platt and Warren, by Swanton Street, and the same being laid before this meeting, Mr Warren be directed to survey the road from Dereham to Swanton Morley by Hoe, and that the same be shown on the Plan.

That the dangerous state of the Ford by Swanton Morley renders it necessary that the opinion of an engineer should be taken as to the best plan and site for a Bridge to be built at that place, and that Mr Thorold be directed to examine the same, and to report thereon to the chairman at the Shirehall in Norwich at twelve o'clock on the 23 day of September next.

At the same meeting a subscription was entered into by some of the Gentlemen present, with a view to secure the construction of a bridge over the Ford by Swanton Mills, in case the contemplated turnpike road should not be made.

Norfolk Chronicle, Saturday 28 August 1830

There was a further meeting at the King's Arms on 6 November 1830

(This was after the scheme to build a turnpike road from Dereham to Aylsham had been abandoned.) This time it was resolved that "A bridge should be erected over the dangerous ford near Swanton Mills" and that this should be paid for by voluntary subscription. Among the subscribers were Edward Lombe, Esq. and Rev. Henry Tacy. It was agreed that work on the approaches to the bridge should commence immediately and that the bridge should be built early in the following Spring.

The Norfolk Chronicle, Saturday, November 6th 1830

To illustrate the urgency of the project, here is an account of how a gig was swept away crossing the ford at Swanton Morley in November 1830

“On Wednesday last, as Mr Mayes of Blickling was crossing the ford at Swanton Morley, in a gig, on his way to Dereham, the animal was overpowered by the force of the current, and Mr Mayes was washed out of the vehicle into the stream and must have perished had he not been observed by two of Mr James Rump’s servants, one of whom dashed into the water and succeeded in rescuing him from his perilous situation. He was conveyed to Mr Rump’s house in an exhausted state, where he was put to bed and had every requisite attention paid to him, and in about six hours he was able to proceed on his journey. We are glad to learn that it is intended in the spring, if sufficient funds can be raised, to erect a bridge over this stream, which is frequently very dangerous to pass.”

Taken from the Norfolk Chronicle, Saturday, 20 November, 1830

Sufficient funds must have been raised because the bridge was indeed built the next year.

The foundations were laid in July 1831

“As the foundation for the bridge over the dangerous water at Swanton is now laid under the direction of Mr Stone, the County Surveyor, all those persons who have at any time declared their intention to contribute specific sums, and all others who are aware of the accidents which constantly occur in passing through the ford, should pay their voluntary contributions now. The ford will remain passable as usual whilst the works are going on.”

It was noted that Mr Michael Jackson of East Dereham and his men are now employed on the bridge. We shall hear more about him in a later article.

From the Norwich Mercury of 30 July 1831

It was accepted as a County Bridge in October 1831

“It was reported by the county surveyor that Swanton Bridge had been completed to his satisfaction. It now became a County Bridge.”

Norfolk Chronicle, Saturday, 29 October, 1831

This agrees with the date of 1831, inscribed on the bridge.



The bridge as it appears today

Looking from the site of the old watermill