

Bell Bridge and Twiss Road Bridge

Did Bell Bridge Exist Before the Royal Military Canal?

Introduction

The question is whether there is evidence that a bridge known as Bell Bridge existed before the Royal Military Canal was built.

In the early nineteenth century, a small wooden structure called Bell Bridge spanned the Royal Military Canal near the line of what later became Twiss Road in Hythe. By the 1830s it was already a recognised local landmark. At that time, Twiss Road itself was little more than a narrow track mainly used by soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Twiss.



Twiss Road, Hythe, about 1874.

Twiss Road, Hythe, about 1874.

There is also evidence from 1857 referring to Bell Bridge crossing the canal. This raises the possibility that, when the canal was first constructed, any bridges built over it may have been simple wooden structures designed to be easily removed in the event of a Napoleonic invasion.

The local significance of Bell Bridge is illustrated by a 1857 newspaper report concerning the death of Mary Haddon. Her body was discovered in the canal near the bridge by her brother-in-law, George Halke, who drew it to the bank and sent for a surgeon, though she was already dead. An inquest subsequently concluded that she had drowned herself while in a state of insanity. This account confirms that Bell Bridge was a well-known and established crossing by the mid-nineteenth century. (Ref MH)

The Possibility of an Earlier Bell Bridge

Another possibility is that the original “Bell Bridge” was not actually the canal bridge at all, but an earlier bridge crossing the local stream near the Bell Inn.

Later, when the stream was culverted and the original bridge disappeared, local people may simply have transferred the familiar name “Bell Bridge” to the nearby bridge over the canal. The canal bridge itself may not originally have had an official name, and locals continued to refer to it as Bell Bridge.

In fact, records suggest that even as late as early 1900’s, it was still being called Bell Bridge, with the name “Twiss Bridge” only appearing much later.

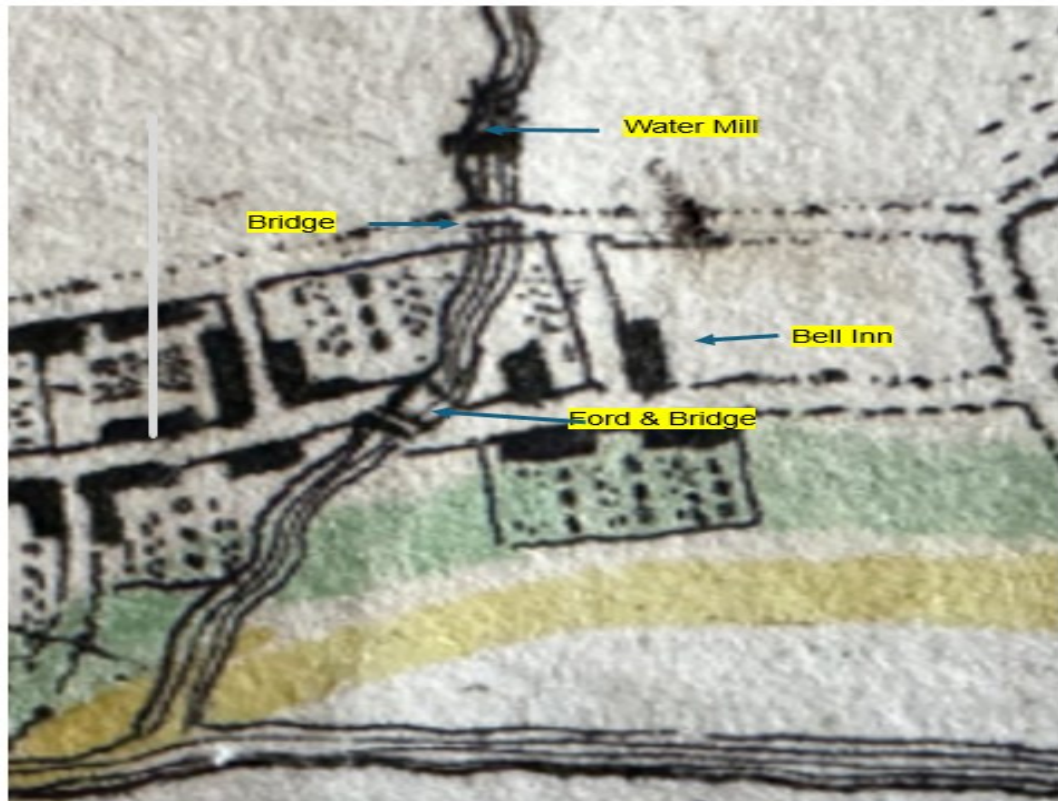
Evidence from Early Maps

Early maps appear to support the theory that an earlier Bell Bridge may have existed before the Royal Military Canal.

They show a watermill on the stream west of the town, with a bridge on the road below it, probably present-day Mill Road. The next road south appears to be Seabrook Road, close to where the Bell Inn stands today. To the west of this, there seems to be either a ford or a narrow footbridge. The map markings suggest flowing water crossing the road, and the bridge shown there is noticeably narrower than others marked on the Hythe map.

The stream appears to run south-west around the edge of the town before eventually reaching the sea near what is now Fisherman’s Beach. Victorian maps reportedly show a depression in the shingle at this point, which may indicate the former outlet of the watercourse.

**J Andrews - A Topographical Map
of the County of Kent 1769**



The Stream Diversion Theory

In later years, the stream seems to have been culverted beneath Bell Inn Road and Twiss Road, re-emerging east of Twiss Road further south. This would fit with research suggesting that streams were redirected during construction of the Royal Military Canal.

It is therefore possible that, during the canal's construction, the stream was temporarily diverted to flow directly south to the sea. If so, a new bridge may have been required near the Bell on Seabrook Road. Later, once the stream was placed into a culvert beneath the road, that bridge would no longer have been needed.

The Destruction and Reconstruction of Bell Bridge

The bridge's history took a dramatic turn on New Year's Day 1877, when an exceptionally severe gale caused the sea to surge into Hythe, flooding the town centre and destroying several structures. Among the losses was the small wooden Bell Bridge at Twiss Road.

The destruction of the bridge coincided with, and helped accelerate, a broader programme of redevelopment. By this time, the demolition of Fort Twiss and the eastward expansion of the town had increased the importance of Twiss Road, which was expected to become a key route to the seafront. The improvements were also intended to support new housing, particularly for visitors and wealthier residents, including army officers.

In 1878, Hythe Town Council formally approved plans to modernise the area. The scheme included rebuilding and widening the bridge, as well as enlarging Twiss Road to a width of forty feet, with footpaths on both sides and proper surfacing, kerbing, and drainage.

The project involved significant financial and engineering considerations. The Seabrook Estate Company agreed to contribute £485 towards the total cost, which exceeded £1,000, on the condition that these improvements were carried out to a high standard.

However, complications arose at the junction with the High Street. While Twiss Road was to be widened substantially, East Street—the connecting route—was only twenty-two feet wide. To avoid creating a bottleneck, the Council agreed, after considerable debate, to widen East Street to thirty feet, which was the maximum possible without demolishing existing buildings.

Work progressed over the following years, and by 1881, the reconstruction of the bridge and the associated road improvements were complete. The new structure replaced the earlier Bell Bridge and formed part of a significantly improved route linking the High Street with the seafront.

Bell Bridge as a Local Landmark

By the late nineteenth century, the canal near the bridge had also become a focus for winter recreation. During the severe frost of 1895, the Royal School of Musketry used a fire engine to flood a section of the canal, creating a smooth surface for skating.

Visitors came from outside Hythe to take part, and contemporary reports suggest that as many as five hundred people gathered on the ice between Seabrook and the Bell (Twiss Road) bridge.

Thus, the crossing evolved from a modest wooden structure serving a military track into a substantial bridge forming part of an important route, while remaining a familiar and enduring landmark in Hythe.

Conclusion

If this interpretation is correct, the original Bell Bridge may have pre-dated the canal entirely, with the name later being applied to the canal crossing that eventually became known as the Twiss Road Bridge.

Sources and Information

Newspapers

maps

Information and research supplied by (HLHG) Anne Petrie, Helen Severs, and David Paton.

Reference: Denise Rayner, unpublished manuscript, c. 2000.

THE SOUTH EASTERN GAZETTE, TUESDAY, JULY 7, 1857.

NEWINGTON NEXT HYTHE.—SUICIDE OF A LUNATIC.—On Wednesday last, T. T. Delasaux, Esq., held an inquest at the Bell Inn, in this parish, on the body of Mary Haddon, a single woman, aged 45 years, when the following evidence was adduced:—George Halke stated that on the previous morning, about half-past 4 o'clock, in consequence of information which he had received, he proceeded to the canal, and there saw the deceased in the water. He immediately procured a broom-handle, and got the deceased out of the water; and having left the body in charge of a man named Ashman, he ran for a surgeon, who was quickly in attendance, but life was quite extinct. The deceased was his wife's sister, and he had known her all his life. During the last 16 or 17 weeks the deceased had been under the care of a surgeon, in consequence of bodily illness, but latterly by reason of her sufferings from depression of spirits. When the deceased made her escape from witness's house, she was under the care of a nurse. He had attempted to procure her admission into a Lunatic Asylum, but in vain.—Caroline Archer had known the deceased from her birth, and had recently had the care of her, in consequence of being subject to depression of spirits. Witness remained with the deceased all Monday, and until midnight, when the deceased got out of bed and wanted to go out of the house. Witness prevented her doing so. About 3 o'clock witness fell asleep, and while dosing the deceased made her escape from the house. On awaking, witness found the deceased had gone, and had shut all the doors after her; she must have got over the garden wall, as the gate was fast. When the deceased was born her mother was an inmate of a lunatic asylum, and had been so for some time.—The jury returned a verdict to the effect that the deceased drowned herself, while in a state of insanity.

Ref MH

THE HYTHE REPORTER, SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 1905.

The Twiss Bridge.

Is being transferred from a wooden structure to one of ornamental brick. We are referring to the sides not to the bridge itself, which is still intact. The design of the brickwork is very pretty, and is divided into panels of yellow brick, the rest of the wall being of red and blue bricks. However artistic a wooden railing may be, it has the disadvantage of requiring renewing every twenty-five years. The work is being carried out by Messrs. Scott Bros., to the plan of the Borough Surveyor.

FOLKESTONE EXPRESS, AUGUST 24, 1889.

There will soon be a topic which will cause considerable discussion in and out of the Town Council. We understand that the South Eastern Company have offered to take the Canal from Seabrook to the Bell Bridge, and to maintain the same in order for a term of years. Of course the cry is raised by some "What do they want it for? What is their motive?" We should think, considering the trouble there is every year in cleaning out the Canal, and its incidental expenses, the town would be rejoiced to hand it over to a company, who, whatever they do with it, will make a thorough work of it. There is room for large sums of money to be expended on this property, which the corporation are unwilling to lay out. When a company like the South Eastern offer to take a large and most important portion of the canal off the hands of the corporation, they should haste to close with the bargain, and sing a Te Deum of thankfulness that they are relieved from so much care and responsibility.

MAIDSTONE & KENTISH JOURNAL, MAY 24, 1869.

HYTHE.

FRIENDLY BENEFIT SOCIETY.—The Hythe Friendly Benefit Society celebrated their thirtieth anniversary on Monday last. Headed by the Sandgate drum and fife band they walked to St. Leonard's Church, where divine service was performed. They afterwards partook of an excellent dinner in the Town Hall. H. B. Mackeson, Esq., acted as chairman in the absence of the Mayor (J. Watts, Esq.), who, for many years past, has presided at this anniversary festival.

SUICIDE.—A journeyman carpenter, named Charles Bailey, of Hythe, committed suicide by drowning himself in the canal, between the Ladies' Walk bridge and Bell bridge, on Thursday morning last. He was spoken to and seen last at about a quarter past eight, and his body was found at ten minutes to nine, in the middle of the canal. His head was buried in the mud, and, excepting his legs, was the only part of his body under the water, which was unusually low, having been recently drawn off. Mr. F. Fagg and Mr. J. Hackney, surgeons, as soon as the body was taken out of the canal, tried every means to restore animation, but without effect. The deceased left his hat and coat on the bank of the canal with a piece of paper, on which he had written, with bad spelling, a few words, which would leave the impression that he destroyed himself on account of being in great want. The deceased had a wife and four sons. The jury, at the inquest, held on Monday, before W. S. Smith, Esq., borough coroner, returned a verdict that the deceased threw himself into the canal whilst in an unsound state of mind.

More Seats

Ald. Scott complained of the lack of seats on the canal bank between Hythe and Seabrook.

Ald. Jeal said it was abominable to think that people living at Seabrook had not the means of sitting down on any seats, and yet they had to contribute towards the better seats at Hythe. He moved that six extra plank seats be immediately placed between Seabrook and the Bell Bridge, and that the broken seats be replaced.

Cr. White seconded.

The Surveyor said ten seats had recently been erected, but none of them had been put beyond Cannon Gate Bridge.

Cr. Tunbridge moved that the Surveyor bring up a report showing the quantity of timber estimated for use in North Road, and the quantity returned to store, because he was satisfied the whole of the timber had not been used in making the seats.

The resolutions were carried.