

Selby's road bridge over the Ouse

The original wooden toll bridge of 1791 was replaced in 1969, tolls removed in 1991 and the 1969 edifice extensively modernized in 2011

The current bridge carrying the road across the Ouse has little to mark it out as special. However it sits on the site of a crossing that had national significance and whose design epitomized Selby's importance and played a crucial part in Selby's trading history. The story of that bridge takes up most of this document.

The River Ouse, which the bridge spans, was a vital East-West trading route, linking the manufacturing areas around Leeds and the agricultural areas around Selby and the City of York with eastern coastal towns of England and across the "German Ocean" to the Baltic ports.

Historical background

The main North–South trading axis was by road, linking Doncaster and the A1 with York and beyond. However, until 1791, the final permanent crossing of the Ouse before the North Sea was reached was at York: any lower down the river than that and one had to trust to the vagaries and of tides and the dangers and limited capacities of ferries. There was a ferry at Selby. It crossed the river a little above the present bridge. Originally owned by the Abbey, the rights to the ferry were sold off in the 1530s as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.

As the volume of trade increased, this restriction was clearly unacceptable, and a proposal for a bridge at Selby was put forward in the late 1780s. This proposal was hotly contested by local landowners, some river men and traders in York who felt their livelihoods would be taken away. After an extensive survey of traffic, it was determined a bridge would be "of great and daily benefit" to the people of Selby.



Bridge, river and Abbey, 2013

Requirements for construction

The construction of bridge had to meet strict conditions. It had to be able to open fully in under a minute to allow passage of river traffic, and the building and maintenance of the bridge would not be funded by the public purse. Despite these conditions, local landowners put up the money to construct the bridge, and the Act of Parliament that authorized the bridge meant that the owners of the Selby Bridge were able to extract a toll on all those who crossed to help defray this cost and the cost of upkeep. Toll proceeds were declared to be free of tax.

The construction of the original bridge shows that it was designed to be of the highest quality. Whilst it did not follow the originality of the 1777 cast iron bridge at Ironbridge, it did have an equally important technical innovation. Until this time, most bridges opened in the vertical axis, in some form of lifting. Selby's Toll Bridge rotated in the horizontal plane, and was one of the first bridges in the world to use ball bearings, or miniature cannon balls as a contemporary source had it, to help it rotate. The surface of the bridge had an equally high specification: to be made out of highest quality timber, protected by the best tarmacadam .

The demand that the central span of 31' (10 m) had to open in under a minute is a very reasonable one, given the tidal conditions that can exist around Selby. The effect of an incoming tide of up to 9 knots, allied to the narrowing of the channel by the bridge's supports mean that negotiation of the swing bridge is an expert task. Until 1970, this opening was carried out by muscle power and mighty cog wheels, two of which can be seen on the bridge house on the Barlby bank..

Tug 'Robie' approaches Selby Toll Bridge, 1930s



19th century developments

The Act to allow the bridge came in 1791, and it was open by 1793. For much of the next century it performed the task it was designed for well. There were a few complaints about the level of tolls, campaigns for residents of neighbouring parishes to be enabled to have free passage and rumours that not all of the tolls taken ended up in the coffers of the Bridge Company, but, by and large, the Toll Bridge was seen as a satisfactory development in Selby.

When control of highways was reorganized in the late 19th century, many bridges came into the hands of local highway authorities for their maintenance and upkeep. However, for reasons probably linked to the way in which the bridge was established, Selby's bridge remained a toll. This was fine until traffic on both road and river began to increase. As the 20th century drew on, there were more vehicles on the road, so there were more tolls to be taken, leading to delay. With the construction of more factories on the river bank, there was an increase in river traffic, causing the bridge to open more often, causing yet more delay.

20th century developments

A buy-out of the bridge company or a by-pass for the town were the obvious solutions, but local councils could not afford the price the bridge company asked, and no-one could agree on a route for a by-pass, or how to fund another bridge. Suggestions included use of the former rail bridge at Barmby when the Hull to Barnsley line closed, a second bridge by the Lord Nelson pub, a re-profiling of the bridge so that it was one arch, with no moving parts or a hugely widened 'inner ring road' along the current route of Scott Road, Millgate and Bondgate to a new bridge on the north side. None of these plans came to anything. From the 1920s the saga of Selby's Toll Bridge was a regular feature in the local paper, council chamber and in Parliament too.

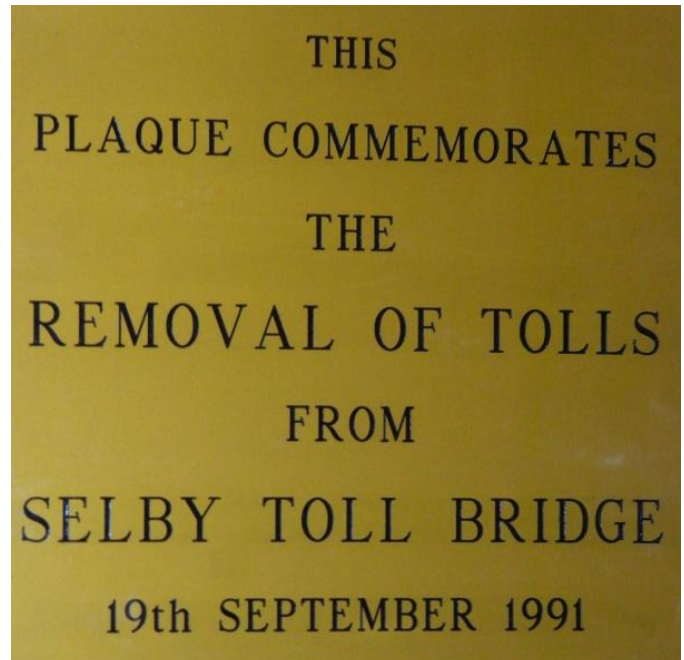
The bridge remained the only major road crossing of the Ouse below York into the 1960s - and holiday traffic funnelled into Selby. And queued. And queued some more. Delays of 30 minutes to cross the bridge were commonplace on summer Saturdays, and this was not the only scandal. It was claimed - although vehemently denied by the bridge owners, The Company of Proprietors of Selby Bridge - that the collection of the untaxed tolls was little more than highway robbery. Whilst nothing was ever proved, it was certainly the case that a share in the Selby Toll Bridge Company latterly had a value of over £100.

Given the level of shipping that passed through the bridge, and the difficulties of navigation, collisions were commonplace. In 1929, the bridge was knocked off its bearings by a barge that hit it broadsides on or 'athwart'. A ferry guided by a wire replaced the bridge whilst repairs took place.

The wooden structure could not continue to withstand such incidents, and following a collision in 1968 it was decided to dismantle the original structure and build a more modern one – essentially the structure seen now, with the opening of the span controlled by electric motors. The 2011 refurbishment was a replacement of the decking, repainting and insertion of piles into the river to ensure craft only ventured through the middle span.

Whilst the 1969 bridge was more robust, it remained a toll bridge – and delays continued to mount. Negotiations continued between local government and the Company to agree an appropriate price to buy out the tolls. A figure was eventually agreed, and the bridge was made toll-free in 1991, the last vehicle to pay a toll being a suitably-decorated 18th century stagecoach.

Problems still remained as busy traffic and large lorries all funnelled into town to cross the bridge. A bypass was needed. Having been promised one in the 1920s, the Selby bypass was opened in July 2004 so that after 213 years, Selby's river crossing was no longer a point on a major north-south trunk route.



Plaque in reception at Selby Town Hall

Today river traffic has declined greatly and through road traffic uses the bypass. The horizontal swing of the decking remains an elegant, smooth but increasingly rare spectacle.

Taking it further

Should you wish to read the extraordinary lengths to which MPs for the local area went to, to try to get tolls removed – and the amazing prevarications of the mandarins in Whitehall to prevent this - read the speeches in Hansard of Paul Bryan, Sir Leonard Ropner and Michael Allison.

A chapter of "A History of Transport through Selby" is devoted to the trials and tribulations of the bridge. This is available at Selby library, along with reference copies of other monographs and reports on matters concerning the bridge.

Inspection of past copies of the 'Selby Times', on microfilm at Selby library shows that the state of the bridge has been a regular topic of discussion since the 1870s.



Replacing fenders at swing bridge, 2009.

