

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Bridges and their stories – spite, spate and explosives!

Dave Martin continues our voyage down the Sulby River and its tributaries looking at the built heritage used to cross the waterways, and stories associated with those crossings

In its lower reaches, the Sulby River flows through the softer sand, soil and gravel left behind by the glaciers, so as the banks eroded, the river spread leading to easily-forded shallows.

Last time we got as far as the Garey, where there has long been a ford; but a foot-bridge was later constructed to enable those on foot to cross dry-shod.

No doubt, if the tale told by the late George Quayle is true, one of those who would have been in favour of building such footbridges would have been the local parson.

One of the next fords was at Ballakillinghan; and in the pre-footbridge era, most folk crossed the river by wading across the ford; however, for a consideration, the couple who lived in a cottage just south of the ford would carry folk across the river on their shoulders.

In those days, the three top posts in the parish were the vicar, the captain of the parish, and the parish clerk – but all was not well twixt the clerk and the vicar.

One day, the clerk spotted the vicar being carried across the river on the woman's shoulders, and when she came back to the south bank, he asked if it happened often, and was told: 'Yes, when the vicar wanted to visit his flock on the north side of the river – but he was mean and would never pay.'

The clerk asked if she ever stumbled, and with pride, she answered: 'No.'

The spiteful clerk then said he had a silver shilling in his pocket and if she happened to lose her balance when bringing the vicar back that night, it would be hers.

That evening, the vicar



The new girder-framed replacement bridge at Ballakillinghan being tested in 1914, after being slid into place. Visible in the background is the 'handle' arch and sides of the 1878 'basket' bridge (photo: Manx Museum)

ended up wading ashore just like most of his parishioners had to.

The Manx Northern Railway (MNR) came to Ramsey in 1878; most of its route as it passes along the southern edge of the curraghs towards Ramsey, stays on the northern side of the current course of the river, running at times on an embankment. At Ellanbane, there was what looked like a pygmy bridge – which in

fact was dry underneath for much of the time, but when the curraghs flooded, this 'bridge' allowed the floods to run south under the railway line towards the Sulby river.

Lezayre station was built on the north bank of the Sulby opposite Ballakillinghan, home of Edward Curphey Far-rant MHK, who was a director of the MNR.

He built a footbridge across the Sulby from his house at Ballakillinghan to the new station on the opposite bank of the Sulby; philanthropically he opened this footbridge for all to use to get to the station.

The river takes a swing north just north of Sky Hill, where the only major bridge on the MNR between Kirk Michael and Ramsey was built to carry the line across the Sulby. The bridge had masonry abutments on each bank but crossed the river in a single span, without needing masonry piers mid-river.

The skeletal wrought-iron 'bowstring' side frames were arched, in the same style as



The Whitebridge now, still a location to be enjoyed

Ramsey swing-bridge; but whereas the Ramsey swing-bridge has strengthening ties directly across the top between the two sides, on the Ballakillinghan bridge, to give clearance for the rolling stock the tie between the sides was itself an arch, as can be seen in the background of the Ballakillinghan rail bridge picture. This construction of arched sides surmounted by another arch gave it the appearance of a trug basket, and hence its nickname of the 'Basket' bridge.

The basket bridge was removed in 1914 (by Isle of Man Railways who had acquired the MNR in 1904).

Interestingly, to minimise disruption to a still essential service, the new girder-framed bridge was constructed on-site alongside the basket bridge; lengths of railway line were laid along the river banks, the basket bridge was jacked-up and slid out of the way, and the new bridge slid into position and lowered onto its abutments.

Like many road bridges,

rail bridges were also exploited to carry services and utilities across streams and rivers, so as the 20th century progressed, it was not uncommon to find pipes clipped along the side of a bridge.

After the MNR closed, the girder-framed bridge was removed, and eventually a utilitarian pipe-bridge was constructed in the same place – effectively the modern version of an aqueduct.

The lower reaches of the Sulby are tidal, and that includes the area around Poyll



Pleasure boating by the Whitebridge

(photo: Manx Museum)



Lezayre Road TT bridge – the view not seen by TT riders



The bridge which carries the Milntown mill tail race under the Glen Auldyn road – only a couple of feet span but the bridge is effectively over 20 feet wide!



Roadway in Glen Auldyn washed-out by the great flood of 1930 (photo: Manx Museum)



Bridge across the Auldyn by St Fingan's, which replaced the 1890 bridge a little lower down that was swept away by the great flood



Fern Glen bridge

(photo: Manx Museum)

Dhooie, (the black pool), where there was a ford, and later a pedestrian bridge, known as "The Whitebridge".

In the Victorian era, when the tide was in, the broad reaches of the river between the Whitebridge and Ramsey's 'Stone Bridge' were a popular pleasure-boating venue.



Florry and Mabel Lindsay, daughters of the proprietor, in Fern Glen gardens (photo: Manx Museum)

Emptying into the Sulby just west of the Whitebridge is a major tributary – the Auldyn.

The Auldyn passes under the TT course immediately to the west of the junction with the Glen Auldyn road – but many who pass along Lezayre Road have no inkling they're crossing a bridge there.

Alongside the foot of the Glen Auldyn road lies the Milntown Estate; the mill at Milntown was water-powered, and the wheel still remains in situ. Water to power the mill was taken from the Auldyn and via the mill race to the wheel.

The tail race, which returns the water to the Auldyn, runs down on the eastern (Milntown) side of the Glen Auldyn road until just before the TT course, when it goes through a tiny bridge under the Glen Auldyn road to rejoin

the Auldyn river.

The road up Glen Auldyn shares the valley floor with the Auldyn. In September 1930 it is recorded that 4.3 inches of rain fell in the Ramsey area in 24 hours. The resulting 'great flood' and spate down the Auldyn eroded the bank adjacent to the road causing significant disruption.

Sections of road were washed away, as were bridges (public and private) and older fords as well. For a year the then Highway Board commissioned imported experts, who proposed a new location for the main bridge and a complete relocation of the route

of the road – meantime those who lived or had businesses in the upper glen were left isolated.

Eventually, against stiff local opposition, work commenced, but discussion and scrutiny in the House of Keys continued.

Under the banner 'Might shall prevail', the Examiner's leader on January 8 1932 said: 'the debate [in Tynwald] showed that there had been a certain amount of stupid determination by the Board to go on with their scheme regardless of consequences.'

The chairman of the Highway Board, Mr Southward,

even claimed in Tynwald that the inhabitants of the glen (the 'Auldyn Cossacks?') 'planned to blow up the new bridge'! – however it was completed and still stands today.

In the upper reaches of the glen were two 'rustic' bridges with similar purposes but different audiences. The eastern arm of the Auldyn valley was known as Fern Glen, where the Lindsay family constructed a pleasure garden, with café, putting green, swings for the children, and scenic walks – with a rustic bridge – for the whole family up through Fern Glen itself.

For 30 years, Fern Glen was a significant visitor attraction, and the Lindsays, who went on to run the Central Filling Station and Garage, ran their own charabancs and coaches in the summer to bring visitors out to Fern Glen.

All this activity at Fern Glen gardens was only possible because of access over road and bridges up the glen, but they and some of the pleasure-garden facilities, were casualties of the 1930 great flood, and the business never really recovered properly from its year of isolation.

Finally for this instalment is a bridge built for love in the 1930s. Whilst some TT bridges

may be famous because of George Formby's exploits in 'No Limits', another rustic bridge in upper Glen Auldyn was built privately by another Formby.

Roger Formby was a scion of the Formby family who held estates in the district of the same name just north of Liverpool.

The trains that, via Liverpool, took Formby asparagus to London, also provided all-too-easy access for a young man, recently invalidated out of the Green Howards when only 20 years old, to the bright lights and delights of London – from which, increasingly concerned, his father Jonathan took steps to try and distance Roger.

In previous centuries, Roger might have been sent to, say, manage a plantation on a Caribbean island, but – possibly so he could keep a closer eye on him – Jonathan 'exiled' Roger to the Isle of Man. Roger was set up with a house 'Far End' and land in the western arm of Glen Auldyn; Roger was defensive of both his privacy and estate, and a prospective MHK apparently blamed his failed candidature on being prosecuted for trespass on

Roger's land!

Jonathan Formby also bought flocks of sheep for Roger to manage, and made arrangements with local farmers to 'take Roger in hand'!

This was successful, but Roger still went to London, and his friends flew themselves into Ronaldsway and Close Lake (Hall Caine) airports. Roger, with a certain young lady in mind, set out to make his part of the Glen as attractive as possible, probably inspired by the now-abandoned Fern Glen to his east.

This included making paths through some of the grotto-like parts of the glen, and in one place necessitated a bridge over a small ravine.

The Folk Life Survey in the Manx Museum includes the recollections of a Mr Gill who helped construct Roger Formby's rustic bridge.

Mis-hearing, or perhaps unfamiliar with the term "Rustic", Mr Gill recollected asking Roger why he wanted to build a "Rusty" bridge for his sweetheart!

The bridge may have played its part, as on 23 August 1935, Doreen 'Beth' Lees-Evans married Roger in a private ceremony at 'Far End' in Glen Auldyn.

To be continued