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THE POLITICS OF BRIDGE BUILDING: THE LONG WAIT FOR THE TEES (NEWPORT) BRIDGE

Tosh Warwick© (University of Huddersfield)

tosh.warwick@hud.ac.uk

The Tees (Newport) Bridge officially opened in February 1934 to much fanfare and public celebration, the event receiving extensive local, regional and national media attention. The bridge provided a crucial link across the River Tees to the emerging industrial works on the north bank of the river and beyond, and similarly provided access to the industrial, commercial and retail businesses on the Middlesbrough side of the river. However, delays in the project meant approximately fourteen years had elapsed from initial discussions of a crossing to its fruition in the form of the world's largest vertical-lift bridge.

The social and economic context

The significance of the River Tees as a hub for industrial activity and the need for the area to maximise this facility has been evident since the early days of the area's industrialisation. At the close of the nineteenth century there were twenty one principal firms on and adjacent to the Tees in the Stockton and Thornaby area, with Middlesbrough boasting no less than thirty six firms.¹ The centrality of the Tees to the area's industry did however cause a problem, namely the crossing of the river, an issue that had hampered communication, travel and trading for centuries.² Some 600 years prior to the erection of Newport Bridge, the river was considered 'the major obstacle to speedy travel out of the diocese of Durham southwards', the fords, bridges and ferryboats proving particularly problematic in the winter months.³

In 1911 the Transporter Bridge had opened and had experienced a considerable increase in traffic during its initial decade. However, the bridge's moving car had a limited capacity and the bridge was closed to vehicular traffic at peak times.⁴ Moreover, "The Transporter" as it is locally referred to, was often dangerously overcrowded, requiring police assistance at times.⁵ At this time, the

only alternative for heavy vehicles and for vehicles looking to cross the river at peak times was the Victoria Bridge to the west of the Transporter. This bridge had also experienced a vast increase in use, with the number of passengers rising from 3.7 million per year in 1922 to 5 million in 1929 and to 5.3 million by 1930.⁶ However, Middlesbrough residents who used the Victoria Bridge to access the works on the north side of the Transporter Bridge would have to make a round journey of approximately eight miles for the pleasure. Such inadequate transport links led to costly delays in the activities of industry and travel and reduced opportunities for employment and consumption for those on both sides of the Tees.

The significant economic difficulties the Middlesbrough area faced during much of the 1920s and 1930s accelerated the need and desire for an additional crossing of the Tees among many quarters. Despite initial boom in the years immediately after the end of the First World War, contraction in demand for steel heralded the onset of economic strife. The recovery of Western European suppliers and unfavourable exchange rates contributed to a decline in the export of steel from Britain to the continent, whilst imports of iron and steel rose as British firms still recovered from the effects of war. These adverse conditions would characterise the 'difficult twenties'⁷ as Britain's place in the international market was changed forever, with rail and coal strikes doing little to aid the situation,⁸ with Middlesbrough enduring a 'severe period of depression'.⁹ Even though 1923 heralded signs of encouragement in terms of increased profits and the returning to blast of thirteen of the thirty-two blast furnaces belonging to Dorman Long, the town's major steel manufacturer,¹⁰ the decade continued to be turbulent. The company's collieries and iron and steel works were idle at the end of 1926, with only limited work taking place in the Construction Department and Sheet and Wire Works,¹¹ Dorman Long subsequently reporting a substantial loss in the aftermath of the General Strike and Coal Stoppage of that year.¹² Similarly, the town's other major firms, *South Durham Steel and Iron Company* and *Bolckow Vaughan* experienced the 'devastating effect'¹³ of both the strikes and the cost of maintaining idle works.¹⁴ Even despite the end of the Coal Stoppage in December 1926, the industry recovered gradually, with works slowly returning to operation.¹⁵ Dorman Long did however post a profit of £273,338 2s for the year

ending 30th September 1927, the latter part of the year wiping out the losses of the first six months under consideration.¹⁶ Despite 1928 showing increased profits for Dorman Long, the profits were a false dawn, the year having 'started well with the remains of the accumulation brought about by the stoppage in 1926', but with orders falling away later in the year.¹⁷ The Acklam Mill closed entirely, slackness in the shipbuilding trade saw orders at the Redcar Works reduce, whilst the low cost of coal coupled with relatively low amounts of coal raised saw the collieries make a loss,¹⁸ the low cost of too adversely effecting Bolckow Vaughan's 1928 profits.¹⁹

It would be the worldwide crash of the following year that would see the industry, locality and nation encounter severe economic hardship. Whilst the crash did not initially hamper profits, Dorman Long posting an increased trading profit of £405,045 for 1929,²⁰ the year would see a crucial local development for Dorman Long, Bolckow Vaughan and the locality as a whole with the amalgamation of the latter with the former. The amalgamation meant that in the space of three decades Bolckow Vaughan had went from having been 'the biggest British iron producer and possible the biggest steel producer in the world by 1900' to a company liquidated after finally succumbing to the multitude of difficulties it had struggled through during the previous decade, culminating in the bank forcing through the sale to Dorman Long.²¹

In the context of these struggles, it became increasingly apparent that it was of crucial importance to open up any new employment opportunities to the people of the area. The registered unemployed in Middlesbrough reached as high as 45% and no lower than 15% during the period 1920-1934 (the year of Newport Bridge's opening).²² The various iron and steel works and the Electricity Company on the north bank of the Tees already provided employment for thousands. Moreover, the development of Synthetic Ammonia and Nitrates (later ICI) on the north bank, which by the mid 1920s was already outgrowing its resources,²³ was seen as one of the 'most progressive Works in the World...that was expected to engage, eventually, 10,000 employees'.²⁴ Consequently, an additional crossing to the north bank of the Tees offered not only improved transport links for those already engaged in work that

required a journey over the Tees and those seeking new employment opportunities.

Discussions, investigations, recriminations and bridge building

The idea of a new link across the Tees formally emerged just nine years after the opening of the Transporter Bridge. In 1920 a conference was called on the preparation of future Town Planning Schemes in connection with the industrial development of the Teesside area. A suggestion for two Joint Committees, each made up of the local authorities on either side of the river, was put forward to consider, with a new crossing of the Tees for improved communication links between either sides of the river amongst the issues on the agenda. Yet it would be another four years before any significant progress was evident. As Preston Kitchen, Middlesbrough Town Clerk and member of the Joint Committee, later reflected:

Again and again meetings of these two Committees were held and the proposal for an additional crossing of the Tees discussed and argued. For a period of four years the Committees considered and reconsidered the nature of the crossing...the most appropriate site, and various reports of experts²⁵

The four-year period consisted of successive Joint Committee meetings characterised by disagreements amongst the representatives of the various urban and rural councils as well as concerns over cost. Despite the overwhelming bulk of the evidence confirming the need for a bridge, including the conclusive advice of experts (who identified that the best possible site for the crossing was that near Newport), the local authorities failed to unite behind a single way forwards. Eston Urban District Council, serving an area to the east of Middlesbrough, expressed its preference for a link easterly not only of the proposed Newport site but also the Transporter Bridge. Similarly, the representatives of Redcar Urban District Council, an area of growing industrial importance itself with the gradual shift of iron and steel production down river, considered the Newport site 'too far removed' from the coastal town²⁶. Eventually, despite the continued objections of those to the east to such a westerly location, the Newport site was eventually decided

upon by 5 votes to 2 (with 2 bodies remaining neutral) on the 30th September 1924²⁷.

Despite this advancement, those favouring the developments, both those involved in the formal negotiations and the local press, were all too aware of the costly delays. Subsequently, the General Purposes and Parliamentary Committee of the Middlesbrough Corporation received a letter from Durham County Works Committee expressing the view that unless Durham County Council and Middlesbrough Corporation acted, little progress would occur. With constant delays having hindered progress, Middlesbrough and Durham joined together to partly fund crossing plans and estimates, the Ministry of Transport contributing 50% of the cost.²⁸

Further complications soon arose about the type of bridge that was to be adopted. Despite the 'Report on the proposed Tees Bridge' by the esteemed bridge engineers Mott, Hay, Anderson proposing the adoption of a 'Vertical Lift Type...the most suitable for the large span and the heavy loads to be carried',²⁹ ideas for a more costly tunnel began to gain support. By 1928, the frustrations over the delays to the project and the significant economic and social costs to Middlesbrough reached the House of Commons. Miss Ellen Wilkinson, the Labour MP for Middlesbrough East brought the issue to the Minister of Transport, asking:

Whether he had received any report with regard to a new crossing of the River Tees by bridge or Tunnel from Middlesbrough to the north bank [and] whether he was aware that there is great congestion across the present transporter; and whether, in view of the importance to Middlesbrough of the new industries on the north bank of the Tees, he will cause some inquiry to be made which will facilitate progress in the matter?³⁰

It will come as no surprise that consistent with the lack of advancement, the Minister of Transport considered the Teesside authorities 'capable of investigating the needs of their area without my holding an inquiry'.³¹

Another year ended without any sign of a bridge as negotiations with the firms and authorities affected by the proposed bridge rumbled on. It was not until August 15th 1929 that the project moved forward significantly, at least legislatively. Several months after the General Election of that year – which saw the election of a Labour government - a letter was received from the Ministry of Transport expressing their willingness to contribute 75% towards the approved cost.³² Realising the need to act and capitalise on this offer, the ‘Tees (Newport) Bridge Bill’ was deposited in Parliament the same year. Unfortunately, further objections were forthcoming in the form of seven petitions raised against the Bill, with the familiar economic self-interest evident. The South Durham Steel and Iron Company and Dorman Long expressed concern at the disruption caused to their industrial activities both by the construction and subsequent use of the bridge. In the case of Dorman Long this would encompass disruption to ‘traffic by rail, river and road to and from the said works’.³³ South Durham Iron and Steel Company too centred upon the consequences of the bridge’s approach roads and their usage, arguing these would effectively divide their land and hinder planned future developments that they had not developed owing to the depression. However, the legitimacy of such claims was questioned by the Joint Committees and both South Durham and Dorman Long were probably concerned that the bridge would not significantly assist their works east of Middlesbrough.³⁴

The technology of the vertical-lift design was also called into question in the various petitions. South Durham expressed concern that the bridge could be a ‘very serious impediment to the navigation of the river and thus cause considerable injury to your Petitioners’ business’, expressing concern that business would suffer ‘if any defect should occur in the machinery or equipment for raising the vertical lifting span’.³⁵ Stockton Borough Council were also concerned at the adoption of adopting such a model given the ‘little or no experience in this country of a bridge with a vertical lifting span’, with the potential delay in the lifting of the bridge’s span owing to heavy traffic amongst their fears.³⁶

Furthermore, a slight degree of protectionism can be detected in the petition of Stockton Borough Council, their petition stressing the need not to hinder the ‘new industries which will provide work for the

population of your Petitioners' Borough'.³⁷ The concern was a reasonable one, especially given that Stockton's unemployment levels had risen dramatically at the end of the 1920s owing chiefly to the closure of the shipyards and Blairs Engineering Company. In fact, unemployment had increased from around 25% in 1929 to approximately 67% of the male workforce by 1932, one of the highest unemployment levels in the country.³⁸ Similarly, the Tees Conservancy Commission's petition had underlying tones of objection to the erosion of their power, expressing concern that the passing of the Bill would allow 'works to be placed in the river or on the banks or foreshores...under your Petitioners' jurisdiction without your Petitioners' sanction'.³⁹

Eventually, six of the seven petitions were addressed by means of agreement and protective clauses, leaving only Stockton in objection. Yet the ensuing Select Committee on Private Bills held in April 1930 was not without its problems, this despite the confidence of the Joint Committee beforehand. The *North Eastern Daily Gazette* dubbed the proceedings a 'Lively Duel',⁴⁰ a clash which brought recriminations of implied self interest from the Stockton camp, who pointed out that Dorman Long, by this point synonymous with bridge building, had advised on a bridge ahead of the tunnel Stockton had favoured. In response, Thomas Gibson-Poole, former Mayor and Member of the Tees Conservancy Commission and Ferry Committee, who had strongly favoured the bridge approach to the 'large industrial areas that had sprung up',⁴¹ dismissed Stockton's objections, declaring such a tunnel would have encompassed a cost of £3,500,000 to £4,000,000 and would have also entailed a detour for users.⁴²

The following day the Bill was approved to the delight of the promoters and local press. Indeed, the local press had long expressed criticism at the 'tedious and torturous path of circles' that threatened the 'real needs of the community', the *Northern Echo* having at one point called for central intervention to overcome the problematic 'local prejudices'.⁴³ From this point on progress was more tangible, with Dorman Long, having submitted the lowest tender at £436,913.11.3, winning the contract to build the bridge and subsequently ensuring the vast majority of the work remained local. Work commenced in May 1931, with a trial lowering and raising of

Newport Bridge's lifting span occurring shortly before Christmas 1933.⁴⁴ The bridge was finally opened within nineteenth months of the laying of the foundation stone, in turn providing a link to the north bank's industrial opportunities to those on the south bank, whilst also providing easier access to those on the north to Middlesbrough's commercial and retail sectors. In total, the bridge cost £512,000 and was declared open by the Duke of York on 28th February 1934 in what was a rare royal visit to the area which brought Middlesbrough to a standstill.⁴⁵ Notably, the event's Official Opening Brochure, in the self-promoting manner commonplace in celebratory texts, declared 'the history of Teesside in the past hundred years is a story of remarkable industrial and commercial development and of far-seeing, progressive local government!'⁴⁶ The irony of this statement notwithstanding, the bridge went on to receive considerable interest from various bodies. Locally, the Middlesbrough Council of Boys Clubs to the Scientific Society of Constantine College were amongst the groups that paid the bridge a visit, whilst enquiries as to the workings of this curiosity of civic civil engineering were forthcoming from as nearby as Spennymoor to as far a field as Sydney, Australia,⁴⁷ The national press too hailed the new landmark spanning the Tees, the 1935 *Daily Telegraph Supplement: Teesside and its Industries* declaring:

Typical of the spirit of enterprise associated with all phases of Middlesbrough's life are the two remarkable bridges which link the town with the Durham side of the river. The Transporter Bridge, with its travelling platform, was opened in 1911, and is much the largest of its kind in the country. No less unusual is the Tees (Newport) Bridge, of the vertical lift type, opened in 1934, and the largest vertical lift bridge in the world. The latter structure is built of Middlesbrough steel and stands as a worthy example of the capacity of Teesside's engineers and steel manufacturers.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The bridge no longer operates as a vertical-lift bridge, having finally been raised for the last time in 1990, the decision to no longer maintain the lifting mechanism having been reached owing to the associated costs and the need to lift the bridge for large river traffic having diminished. Nevertheless, the Newport Bridge remains a

significant Teesside landmark and important link across the Tees in spite of the emergence of the A19 Flyover, and continues to be used far more frequently than the more celebrated Transporter Bridge further down the river.

In conclusion, the eventual fruition of the project brought both industrial opportunity and symbolic pride to an area that had endured significant economic hardship. However, the key fact remains that a combination of local rivalries, bureaucracy, economic self interest and political self preservation at various points by a plethora of municipal, private and commercial bodies resulted in a crucial link across the Tees having been delayed by over a decade, in turn having far reaching consequences for the people of the area in terms of living standards, health, employment, retail opportunities and social activities.⁴⁹

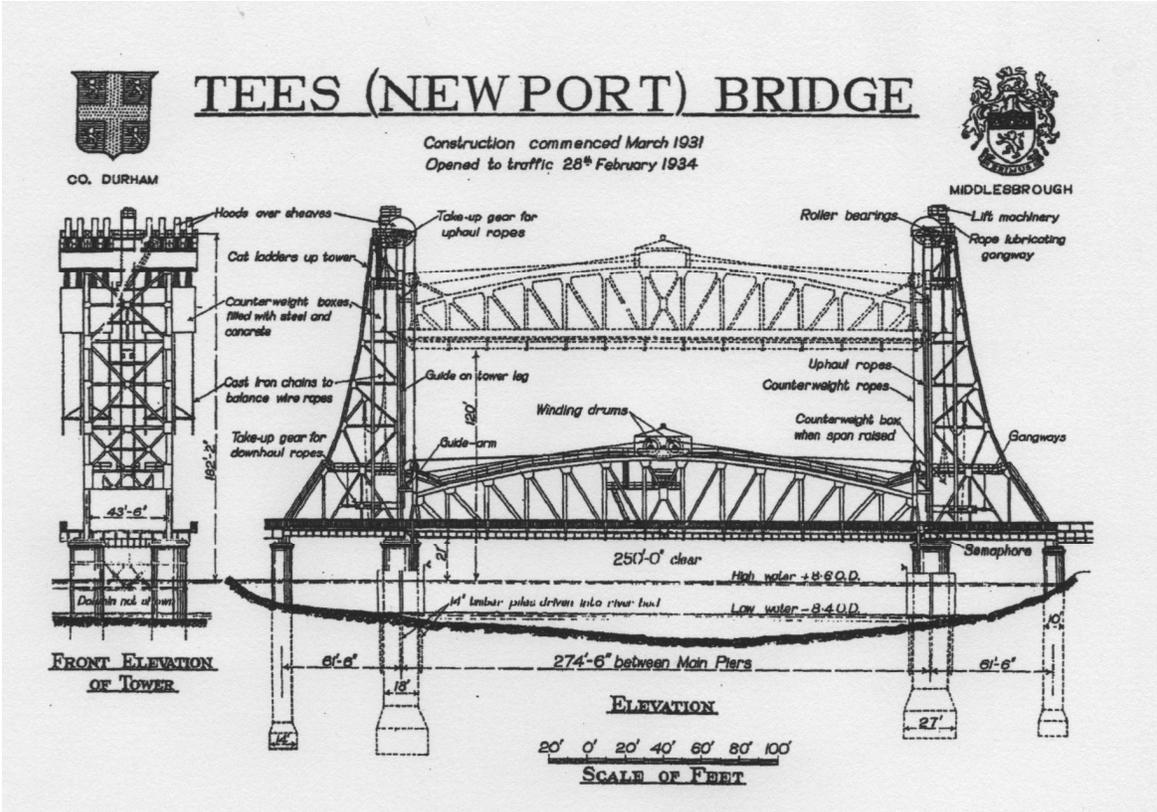


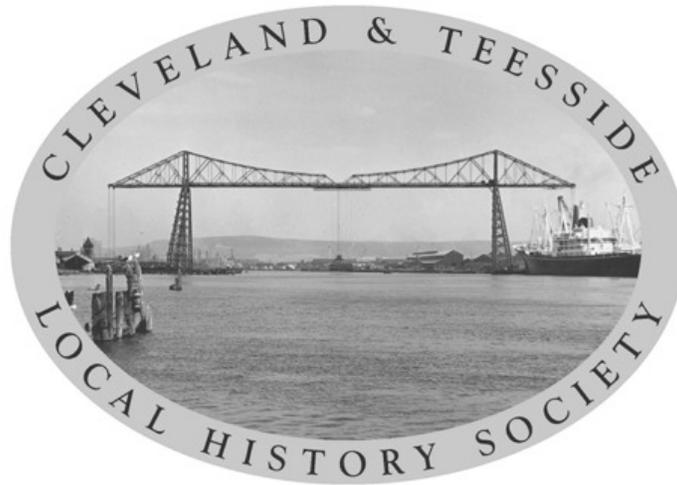
Illustration - Middlesbrough Council Website, sourced September 2009

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