

THE CLASSICAL BRIDGE HOUSES ON THE GLOUCESTER AND SHARPNESS CANAL.

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The classical-style bridge-keeper's houses along the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal are a delight to the eye with their Grecian porticoes, but it has never been certain who was responsible for designing them, when they were built or why they are found only at certain bridges. Trying to establish the relevant facts has proved a fascinating study.

There were originally sixteen road bridges crossing the canal, and eight of these sites have classical-style houses. All of these have a basic plan in the shape of a Greek cross, although most also have later extensions. One arm of the cross is the front porch or portico, and this has a pediment supported by two Doric columns and in some cases also by short side-walls. When viewed from the canal, all appear to be single-storey buildings, but four have lower floors built into the rear slope of the canal bank. Who then was responsible for these distinctive buildings?

In his Gloucestershire volume in the Buildings of England series, (1) David Verey accepted that the bridge houses were probably designed by Robert Mylne, the original engineer for the canal who was also well known as an architect. This view was based on a discussion in Tom Rolt's biography of Thomas Telford, (2) the engineer supervising the final stages of the great enterprise. Rolt did not believe Telford had designed the houses, and in lieu of any other obvious candidate he concluded that Mylne was most probably responsible. The difficulty with this is that Mylne was dismissed in 1798 and died in 1811 when construction of the canal was in limbo and excavation was less than half complete. It seems hardly credible that his drawings would still be around and be used by those responsible for completing the canal over fifteen years later.

It was necessary, therefore, to look elsewhere for the man responsible, and initially clues were sought in the minute books of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal company who must have commissioned the buildings. A search of the earlier volumes revealed a recognition in 1827 that houses for the bridge-keepers would be needed but no evidence that any were built. Then a curious entry was spotted for 5 December 1827, a few months after the opening of the canal, recording that the Committee ordered suitable sentry boxes to be provided at Parkend and Cam Bridges. (3) If these were intended as shelters for the bridgemen, it opened the possibility that the bridge houses were not built until later. It soon emerged that the bridge houses are not shown on the parish Tithe Maps, (4)

indicating they must date from after the surveys carried out around 1840.

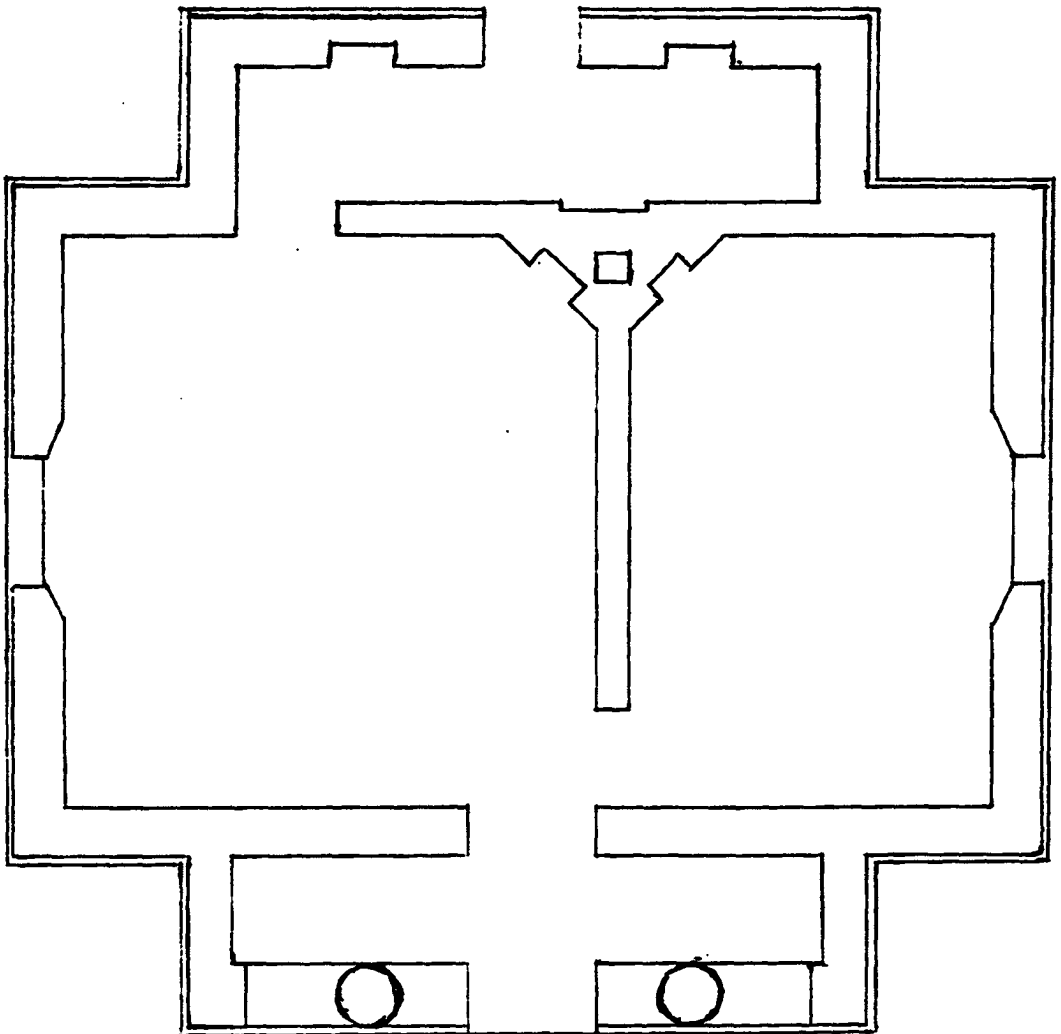
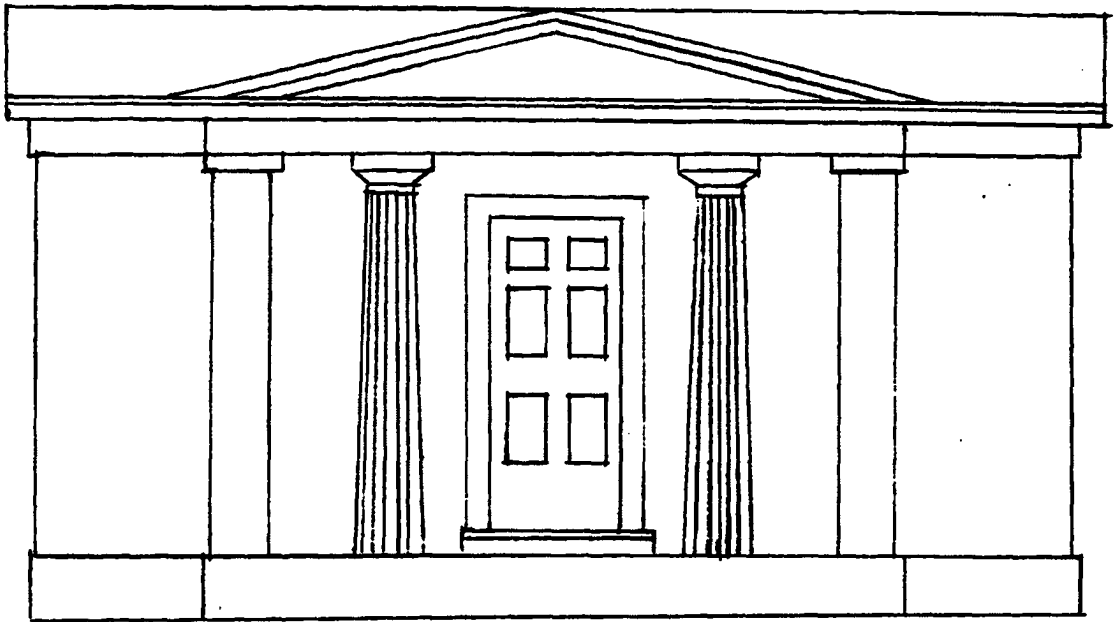
Another line of enquiry was to look into the origins of the lodge in the grounds of what is now the Hatherley Manor Hotel as this appears to be almost identical to the bridge houses. The hotel was formerly the big house of the village of Down Hatherley, three miles north-west of Gloucester, and sale particulars of the estate in 1857 described the lodge as "newly built". (5) Since 1844, the house had been occupied by Anthony Gilbert Jones, and one of his descendants who has studied the Jones's family history provided a vital clue: Anthony Gilbert Jones's sister had married none other than W.B. Clegram, clerk of the Canal Company and son of William Clegram the company's engineer. (6)

This information paved the way for a major step forward during a visit to the British Waterways Archives Collection in Gloucester. Archivist Roy Jamieson produced two drawings showing the plan and side elevation of the nucleus of the existing bridge houses without the later extensions. (7) One drawing had initials and the other had a date, but neither were clear. The initials looked like a capital M and a lower case e, but with the Clegrams in mind, it was also apparent that they could be an elaborate WC. Roy Jamieson soon produced other drawings with William Clegram's full signature, and these provided confirmation that the man responsible for the bridge houses had been identified. The date appeared to be June 1876 with the third digit unclear, and so in spite of the progress, there was still a puzzle to be solved.

Further enquiries established the existence of a third drawing in the local British Waterways office. (8) This showed the front elevation of a bridge house, including the distinctive pediment supported by two columns and side walls, and it was clearly dated January 1845.

A parallel study using the census registers (9) indicated that the houses were not all built at the same time. Some of the houses are mentioned by name in the 1851 census, but it appears that at least two had not been built by then as the bridge-keepers were clearly living elsewhere. For details of where the bridge keepers were living around that time, see Appendix 1.

The census registers also indicated that the Harbour Master's house at Sharpness was not built until the 1840s as in 1841 he was living at Sharpness Cottage, the house associated with the well-known Pleasure Grounds. As the Harbour Master's house has a classical portico very like those on the bridge houses, it is reasonable to assume that it too was designed by William Clegram.



Elevation and ground plan of Classical bridge house, traced from drawings in the British Waterways Archive Collection.

Returning to the bridge houses, the similarity to the lodge at Hatherley Manor is so marked that it is tempting to think that William Clegram must also have designed that. However, the lodge was built in 1835, (10) whereas Clegram's link to Hatherley was through the Jones family who only moved there in 1844. Thus it appears more likely that Clegram saw the lodge during a visit in 1844 and took measurements on which to base his own drawings for the bridge houses. Who designed the lodge is still a mystery.

A renewed search in the minute books of the Canal Company did not find a specific authorization for the bridge houses to be built, but it soon became apparent why they were needed in the 1840s. Competition from the new railways was seriously affecting the tow owners who operated regular carrying services between Bristol and the up-river towns. In the early days of the canal, vessel movements had been restricted to daylight hours, but in the face of this new threat, the tow owners were pressing to use the canal at night so they could match the tides at Sharpness. The matter came to a head in March 1844 when, in response to a request from Pickford & Co, the committee agreed to night working provided that the state of the tides required it. (11)

It seems that the original bridge keepers were recruited from men who already had somewhere to live nearby. However, some of them turned out to be rather unsuitable characters who had to be dismissed for drunkenness or stealing coal from vessels on the canal. (12) In order to be able to appoint reliable bridge keepers and have them convenient to their bridges at all hours, it made sense to provide appropriate housing. Thus the houses were built over a period of several years as the specific needs arose and as money was available.

As things turned out, only eight of these classical-style bridge houses were built. At the other bridges, use continued to be made of existing local houses, at least while William Clegram was in charge, and when new bridge houses were required in later years, they built to the needs and fashions of their time. For information about the other bridges houses, see Appendix 1.

There was one bridge which never had a house in its immediate vicinity. This was Pegthorne Bridge which used to stand on the track leading north-west from Packthorne Farm, north of Westminster. The bridge-keeper occupied a Canal company cottage over half a mile to the south on the site of Whitminster Mill (761088) where part of his duty was to watch over the weir for supplying the canal with water from the River Frome. (13) To give him some shelter when he was on duty at the bridge, he was provided with a small brick-built hut which still stands beside the canal today. It is 7 ft by 6 ft with a small fireplace, a door and two 5 inch square squint holes so he could watch for approaching vessels.

Finally, It is appropriate to note that the footbridge across the canal at the junction with the Stroudwater Canal was operated by the lock keeper who lived in the house beside the junction and also served as a toll-collector there. Although the nearby lock was on the Stroudwater Canal, the lock keeper was employed by the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company because they built the lock when it was necessary to raise the local level of the Stroudwater Canal to match the level of the later ship canal.

References

- 1 Verey, D., 1976, Gloucestershire - The Vale and the Forest of Dean (The Buildings of England), Penguin.
- 2 Rolt, L.T.C., 1969, Thomas Telford, Longmans.
- 3 PRO RAIL 829/6 p18.
- 4 GRO Tithe Maps and Apportionments for the canal side parishes.
- 5 GRO D177 Box 42.
- 6 Information from Commander Brian Jones of Slad.
- 7 British Waterways Archive Collection BW 95/91 and BW 96/91.
- 8 Information from Brian Lewis. The drawing is now in the British Waterways Archive Collection with BW 95/91.
- 9 Glos collection. Microfilms of census registers for the canal side parishes.
- 10 Glos collection 8295. In the Goods of James Wood Deceased Vol. 11 p 343. (Thanks to John Mortimer for this reference.)
- 11 PRO RAIL 829/8 p446.
- 12 PRO RAIL 828/6 p21 & RAIL 829/7 p181 for example.
- 13 PRO RAIL 829/7 p66.

Appendix 1

Where the Bridge-keepers were living in 1841, 1851, and 1861.

Based upon the Census Registers, the Tithe Records, the Canal Company minute books and BW drawings. An asterisk indicates the site of a classical bridge house.

Bridge	Census	Residence of Bridge- keeper
Llanthony	1841-51	Canal Company house on west side of bridge
	1861	Canal company house on east side of bridge (now part of National Waterways Museum site)
Hempsted	1841-61	Lodge to Hempsted Court 70 yards up Hempsted Lane (New House nearer canal built c1960)
Sims	1841-61	(Worked with Rea Bridge - wooden cottage built near bridge towards end of 19th century)
Rea *	1841	House in Elmore Lane now called Aston Cottage
	1861	Rea Bridge House
Sellars *	1841	Lodger at the Pilot Inn
	1861	Bridgeman's Cottage
Hardwicke *	1841-51	Lodger in Church House opposite Hardwicke church
	1861	Bridgeman's Cottage
Parkend *	1841	Not identified
	1851-61	Parkend Bridge (House)
Pegthorne	1841-61	Canal Company's cottage on site of Whitminster Mill (Replaced by a new bungalow nearer the road c1962)
Sandfield	1841	Probably as 1851
	1851	Whitminster Lane, Frampton
	1861	Saul (possibly house attached to nearby stable block as used later)
Fretherne *	1841	Canal company's cottage south west of bridge now called Canal Cottage
	1851	Dunhalls (possibly as above)
	1861	Saul (possibly as above or present bridge house)

Splatt *	1841	Probably Frampton St, Frampton on Severn
	1851-61	Splatt Bridge (House)
Cambridge Arm*	1841	Not identified
	1851-61	G & B Canal/Bridge House
Shepherds Patch	1841	Not identified
	1851	Churchend, Slimbridge
	1861	Shepherds Patch (probably in lane near Patch Hotel) (New house on canal bank built c1969)
Purton Upper*	1841	Not identified
	1851-61	Purton (possibly present bridge house)
Purton Lower	1841-61	(Worked with Purton Upper)
Sharpness	1841-61	(Presumably worked by the gate gang at the entrance)