
Mystery “Aqueduct”

Mike Chapman

The watercolour painting of an arched structure reproduced on plate 1 was presented to the Bath Industrial Heritage Centre some while ago in the belief that it was an old industrial feature which no longer existed. It is annotated on the back with the title ‘View on the Wells Road, near Bath’, dated 1840, and credited to Thomas Barker - a member of a famous family of painters in Bath during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

On the suggestion that it might be a picturesque view of an aqueduct, it was shown to members of the Somersetshire Coal Canal Society in the hope that the exact site might be identified. The SCC is the only canal in the neighbourhood of Bath towards Wells and indeed had several aqueducts nearby (e.g. at Dunkerton). However, allowing for artistic licence, details on the painting did not fit well with any of the likely candidates. Although of the right scale for an aqueduct, the construction is crude and out of character with the more elegant engineering designs which appeared along the K&A and SCC in the 1790s.

It was not until some time later that another picture with a similar title, shown on plate 3, provided a plausible explanation. This was a lithograph print by

William Hardwick (another Bath artist well known for topographic studies) published in about 1839, and entitled ‘Bath from the Wells Road’. The road shown is not actually the Wells Road itself but the viaduct, still recognisable today, which crosses Lyncombe Brook at the bottom of Entry Hill before the ascent to Combe Down. The Wells Road mentioned in the title was presumably the then newly built Wellsway, just out of view at top left. Not only is the heavy buttressing on each side of the viaduct arch common to both pictures, but the coincidence in title and date suggests that the two artists may actually have taken a field trip together along the main road looking for nearby picturesque views.

Old though it may have appeared to Barker and Hardwick in the 1830s, the viaduct nevertheless remains an imposing feature today. Standing over 30 feet in height to the top of the parapets, about 100 yards in length, and carrying two lanes of traffic with footwalks on each side, such a structure is unlikely to have been built without the resources of the Bath Turnpike Trust, perhaps some time in the early 18th century. Not only is the viaduct identifiable on the map of the Trust roads surveyed by C. Harcourt Masters in 1786, but Entry Hill was among the earliest of the roads in the district to be covered by the Turnpike Acts for Bath.



Plate 1 'View on the Wells Road, near Bath', 1840 by Thomas Barker

Bath Industrial Heritage Centre

Attention was first drawn to Hardwick's print as a result of research into a neighbouring farm. Originally the road had to negotiate a steep ravine where it crossed the brook (presumably by means of a stone bridge or ford), at which point it was joined by an ancient trackway from Barracks Farm which once stood beside the stream further up the hill to the south. Because the viaduct was built along the south side of the old road, the tunnel was required to allow right of access along this track as well as providing a culvert for the stream. The animals depicted in Barkers painting are presumably entering the northern portal of the tunnel on their way up to the farm.

Also shown in the painting, upper left, is the remnant of the old road on the east side which apparently continued to serve as a slipway down to the stream. Today it is only visible when the undergrowth has died back, but at that time may have still provided a watering place for passing traffic. The farm track through the tunnel certainly continued in use into the 20th century, although various alterations to strengthen the viaduct seem to have been carried out. The archway now projects outward from the northern face, to support additional buttresses, and the interior of the tunnel seems to have been repaired with an extra lining of masonry, thereby reducing the size of the aperture. Following the demolition of the farm in more recent times (to make way for a golf course)



Plate 2 North portal of Entry Hill Viaduct, Bath

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Plate 3 'Bath from the Wells Road', c1839 by W.N. Hardwick

Bath Central Library

the tunnel has since been stopped up and converted to use as a storm drain, involving much disturbance to the floor and approaches.

Further confirmation of these conclusions would be welcome, particularly from among the records of the Bath Turnpike Trust. However, it would also be in-

teresting to know how many similar examples of early engineering lie beneath the roads which we take so much for granted. Our railway system in this area is famous for many structures still in use which were built some 160 years ago, but our roads could also claim to have been models of pioneering technology in their day.



Plate 4 The same view today of the south eastern approach to Entry Hill Viaduct

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