

Six centuries ago the construction of a stone bridge across the river Ogmore marked the birth of the town that now gives its name to Bridgend County.

The Bridgend Bridge

The modern-day town of Bridgend it will come as no great surprise to learn, originated as a small settlement on the eastern end of a stone bridge erected over the river Ogmore sometime during the early decades of the 15th century. Prior to this travellers crossed by a ford linking two small settlements some distance from the river's edge and known respectively as Oldcastle and Newcastle. Again the names are significant, for both were the site of early Norman fortresses standing on rocky outcrops overlooking and commanding this stretch of river.



The Old Bridge with Newcastle church and castle on the hill in the background.

Their construction, within a decade or so of the Norman invasion in 1093, is indicative of the importance of the road which crossed here, for at this time it was the main highway linking Cardiff to Neath. Research by the late Mr H. J. Randall of Bridgend supported by that of Professor J Beverley Smith has also shown that prior to the middle of the 12th century the area under direct Norman control beyond the river at this point extended only as far as Laleston and Tythegston. To the west, as far as Briton Ferry and Neath, the land was in the hands of Welsh Lords who, despite acknowledging the authority of Glamorgan's Norman rulers, effectively exercised a semi-independent authority within their own borders. For some fifty years therefore as well as being an important ford this was also in effect a fortified boundary between the two peoples.

Oldcastle and its hamlet of Nolton stood on the eastern side of the river in the Norman lordship of Coity, and the castle (of which no trace now remains) stood perched on a rocky cliff high above the river in the vicinity of Nolton

church. Further upstream Newcastle occupied the summit of a rocky eminence on the opposite bank and unlike today the main road, having traversed the ford, climbed this hill to the fortress before continuing westwards to Laleston and the lands beyond.



Nolton church and the site of Oldcastle.

About 1145/6 the Normans brought the area between Newcastle and the river Afan fully under their control, consolidating their grip by founding a castle and town at Kenfig. Whilst the course of the main highway remained unaltered as late as the end of the 12th century it was subsequently diverted to the south to cross the river some distance further down stream, though when exactly this occurred is still something of a mystery.

In contemporary records the earliest mention of “Bryggen Eynde” comes in 1444, and it is assumed that the bridge itself had been constructed about twenty years earlier. Significantly this was the period during which the town at Kenfig, which hitherto had been the market town for the district, was abandoned due to flooding and sand encroachment. Quite possibly therefore it was Kenfig’s demise that precipitated both the construction of the bridge and the creation of this new market centre on its eastern side – an enterprising development on the part of the Lords of Coity Castle within whose manor it stood.



The Old Bridge (photo by Cyril James)

Originally the bridge had three arches actually standing in the water with smaller ones at either end. The latter have now been buried by encroachment of the banks, and two of the river arches were amalgamated following the destruction of one of the bridge piers during a flood in 1775. This gives the bridge its present rather lop-sided appearance, but essentially it is the same structure that was first erected here nearly six centuries ago.

The establishment of the market at the eastern side of the bridge ensured the success of the new settlement which developed along the lane connecting it to the village of Nolton. Only some fragments, known as Elder Lane, survive today, and it has always amazed me how this narrow alley accommodated hucksters with their stalls and farmers with their livestock on market days yet still continued to carry any 'through' traffic! Perhaps indeed we have here the reason why the main road was diverted a mile and a half downstream enabling travellers to avoid this congestion.



Elder Lane today

This second ford is now marked by a bridge called “Newbridge” indicating that it was erected subsequent to the one at Bridgend, though architecturally the two are rather similar. Locally it is known as “The Dipping Bridge” from the fact that it was formally used by local farmers for their annual sheep dip - washing the fleece of their flocks by pushing them into the river from the two holes in the parapet on the downstream side.



The Dipping Bridge.

Its similarity to the Bridgend bridge seems to indicate that this southern route, if not already in being as a ford at the time Bridgend was founded, was certainly in place not long afterwards. Once established it then became the

main highway and the settlement at Bridgend was effectively by-passed. In the days of the Royal Mail Coach, passengers and traffic for the town had to be transhipped at Ewenny until, in 1832, the main highway was (at great expense and no little controversy) once more diverted into Bridgend across Waterton Moors.

Despite not being on the main highway, the 15th century settlement at Bridgend flourished thanks to its markets. Over the centuries that followed it has expanded to absorb the older communities of Newcastle and Nolton which became part and parcel of the town. Even today Bridend is continuing to grow in every direction and has completely submerge the rather sleepy market town many of us recall from our youth.



The eastern end of the Old Bridge today.