



OLD BRIDGE OF FORTH, STIRLING. 2074 JV.

THE OLD BRIDGE, STIRLING.

THE OLD BRIDGE.

BY EX-BAILIE JAMES RONALD.

THE Old Bridge of Stirling is without doubt one of the oldest and most interesting erections of the kind north of the Tweed. It is older than the existing buildings of the Castle, and, with the single exception of the west portion of the Parish Church, the oldest building of any kind within the burgh. We believe Stirling owes much of its early importance and prosperity to the fact that for nearly four centuries the bridge was the only highway of communication between the south and north of Scotland. There are numerous indications through the centuries that our forefathers appreciated its importance, and we have no doubt that often, in the words of Prince Henry, they invoked

“God’s blessing on the architects who build
 The bridges o’er swift rivers and abysses—
 Before impassable to human feet ;
 No less than on the builders of cathedrals,
 Whose massive walls are bridges thrown across
 The dark and terrible abyss of death.”

Dating as it does in its erection from the beginning of the fifteenth century, it has now been nearly five hundred years in existence. Sir Robert Sibbald, in his “Fife and Kinross, 1710,” styles it “a stately bridge of hewn stone, consisting of four large arches, with an iron gate upon it, laid over the Forth from the south to the north.” And Robert Chambers, in his “Picture of Stirling, 1830,” characterises it as “by far the most noted structure of the kind in Scotland.” For us it possesses a point of still greater interest, in the extreme probability that it occupies and is built upon the site of a still more ancient bridge. In support of this statement, we find that when the ancient bridge ceased to be of service, soon after the battle of Stirling in 1297, a ferry-boat was introduced to carry people and goods across the river at Winchelhaugh Park. Had the bridge been at Kildean, one would naturally expect the ferry to be there ; but no, it is found in close proximity to the old bridge. This ferry continued in full operation till the bridge was rebuilt between the years 1400 and 1415. We ascribe its erection to Robert Duke of Albany, Earl of Fife and Menteith. The bridge is built of hewn stone, consisting of four arches nearly semi-circular in form, and each having different spans. The piers are strong and massive, being additionally strengthened by V-shaped triangular abutments or cutwaters. A massive hewn stone archway was erected where the present pillars stand, at the north end of the bridge. On this archway was hung a gate. It was constructed of iron, strong and massive, and at the same time ornamental, bearing as it did

upon its front the arms of the town—to wit, “the wolf upon the craig.” A similar archway existed at the south end, but it had no gate. The picture in the Council Chamber, which formed one of the panels over the door of the old Council Chambers in Broad Street, represents the bridge as it appeared previous to 1745. The south archway was taken down when the arch of the bridge was cut in 1745, and the present pillars were erected on the completion of the broken arch in 1749. The north archway remained till 1749, when the exigencies of trade required it to be widened and enlarged. This involved the removal of the iron gate. Some time after the iron gate was sold by public roup, and realised the sum of 109 lib. 4s. Scots money. After its removal a wooden gate was erected, which continued to be used for fifty years. But the old order was changing, giving place to new, and the wooden gate in its turn was swept away on the advent of stage and mail coaches.

From the fact that the bridge formed the only passage over the river Forth from the date of its erection down to 1769, when the bridges of Drip and Frew were erected, it can be easily conceived that it would occupy a most important and conspicuous position in history, and be the silent witness of many notable scenes and events. From the frequency of Parliaments held at Perth during the reign of James I., royal cavalcades would be constantly passing, and many a gay scene be witnessed. It comes into prominence with the escape of James V. from the Palace of Falkland, and from the restraint in which he was held by the Earl of Angus and others. In May, 1528, the King, having disguised himself, mounted with his two servants, and galloped during the whole night. At daybreak he reached the bridge of Stirling. It was defended by a gate, which the King, after passing through, ordered to be closed and carefully watched. At the Reformation, in 1559, the Queen Regent was impatient to throw a French garrison into Stirling, to possess herself of its bridge, which was the only one over the Forth. But the Earl of Argyll and Lord James Steuart, apprised of her intention, presented themselves at Stirling and thus forestalled the Queen Regent. It comes into prominence at the Rebellion of 1745, when the south arch was cut by Major General Blakeney to prevent the Highland army entering the town. The arch was rebuilt at the expense of the Government in 1749. In the interval the town was compelled to resume the communication by means of ferry-boats. With the close of the Rebellion the narrative of the bridge in history comes to an end. From 1745 down to the completion of the new bridge in 1833, its record is peaceful, busy, and prosperous; and from Martinmas, 1834, when it was closed against traffic, down to the present, it has enjoyed a well-merited rest. No one will grudge it that rest after long centuries spent in the public service.