



*'Union Chain Bridge over the River Tweed' by Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840). Courtesy The Paxton Trust*

**Stephen Bunyan** looks at a new anthology, edited by Professor Roland Paxton, which celebrates the bicentenary of the famous Union Chain Bridge (1820-2020) near Berwick-upon-Tweed.

This handsome volume tells the story of the Union Chain Bridge built by Captain Samuel Brown, which crosses the Tweed a few miles from Berwick-on-Tweed, between Horncliffe and Fishwick. It does much more than that. It demonstrates how this bridge, built in an unlikely location, was to point the way to other important bridges and how a bridge, which seemed in a rural back water, was eventually realised to have immense interest. A few years ago, the bridge was on the point of closure, but fortunately its significance was recognised by a small group of enthusiasts who formed themselves into Friends of the Union Bridge and secured important support. Roland Paxton became Patron.

Samuel Brown (1774-1852) had developed the use of iron chain for ships in the Royal Navy and by 1811 they were in regular use.

He patented the procedure in 1817. By 1819, he was able to use wrought iron. His original iron works was at Millwall, but in 1818 he opened a second works at Pontypridd and it was from there that the iron came for the Union bridge.

By 1819 Brown had the contract for the bridge and with John Rennie as consultant and responsible for the masonry started to build the bridge. He decided to use chains with eye bar links. This cost £5,000, whereas a masonry bridge would have cost £20,000 and would have required piers in the water.

The bridge was recognised in the Guinness book of records in June 2020 as the world's oldest road suspension bridge and can still carry vehicular traffic. Its formal opening in 1820 was a major event with a large and distinguished audience. Brown demonstrated its capability by driving a loaded carriage as well as twelve heavy carts of stones over it. Its purpose was to convey Northumberland coal and salt to Scottish farms.

The bridge had an important effect. It inspired Telford in his construction of the Menai Bridge. Brown built other bridges, for example Ruswarp, over the River Esk near Whitby. By 1840 he had built twenty others and Brighton Chain Pier, which was destroyed by a storm in 1896. The Union Bridge inspired the construction in 1826 of an elegant

pedestrian chain bridge at Melrose. It was built by J.S Brown (Redpath and Brown) and designed by John Smith. It was restored in 1991.

In 2007, the Union Bridge was identified as a building at risk and closed to traffic. This caused local concern and a group of Friends was formed supported by Roland Paxton and Brian Whittle.

Plans were put in hand for its restoration which is now in progress. It was decided to celebrate its bicentenary on 26th July 2020 with a symposium at Horncliffe although Covid 19 put paid to that.

Roland Paxton, who had planned the celebration and driven the movement for restoration, has created this excellent book and included the papers which would have been given at the opening, as well as the programme for restoration. The result is a detailed account of international bridge building up to modern times. The book is richly illustrated with material relating to the Union Bridge and other iconic bridges. The first printing was greeted with wide acclaim.

*Spanning the Centuries* is available from the Friends of the Chain Bridge, Horncliffe, Berwick-on-Tweed, TD15 2XT, price £7.50 plus £2 p&p, or from Grieve's bookshop in Berwick-upon-Tweed. ISBN 9781527265233