

Thoughts on press coverage of the opening of Union Chain Suspension Bridge in 1820

by Professor Roland Paxton, *Patron, Friends of Union Chain Bridge*

In 2020, when promoting Union Bridge and its influence as an international long-span bridge landmark in our 'Spanning the Centuries' book, we included coverage of its opening from 'The Scotsman' newspaper in August 1820. Recently however, much more detailed coverage of the proceedings and splendour of this occasion has come to light in 'The Caledonian Mercury' article of 31 July 1820*, published five days earlier, which is a delight to read. It seems appropriate to share this 'find' with attendees at the Transport Trust's prestigious 'Red Wheel' plaque unveiling by John Home Robertson at the bridge today, 8th March 2024. Perhaps the 'three times three hearty cheers' of 26 July 1820 will come to mind?

* Communicated to me by early railways historian Robert Nellist from his search of old newspaper entries.

OPENING OF THE CHAIN BRIDGE OVER THE TWEED AT NEW WATERFORD

Published in 'The Caledonian Mercury', 31 July 1820

The opening of the Chain Bridge at New Waterford took place on Wednesday. At an early hour in the day various groups were observed hastening to witness the interesting ceremony, and by twelve o'clock the scene near the spot assumed a most pleasing and animating aspect. The river itself was covered with different parties in boats; its northern banks exhibited lines of carriages, horsemen, pedestrians, booths, and other places for refreshments, while the precipitous declivity on the south, occupied by numerous groups picturesquely scattered on its surface, produced the most delightful effect. Precisely at half-past twelve o'clock, Captain Brown, the inventor, crossed and re-crossed the bridge in a curricule followed by a vast number of loaded carts [9 or 10 weighing about 100 tons] amidst the loud cheers of the multitudes assembled, while the bands of the Berwickshire militia and the Northumberland local militia played 'God save the King'. Soon afterwards the committee of management, the trustees, and a large party of gentlemen, preceded by the band playing the King's Anthem, crossed from the northern to the southern end of the bridge, where, after three times three hearty cheers, they returned in quick time, to the "March of the 42nd" – The ceremony here ended, and the strength and fitness of this elegant structure being thus ascertained, the barriers were removed, and the public permitted to pass.

All the rank, beauty, and fashion, of the Borders were assembled on this occasion. A numerous company (84), amongst whom we observed Lord Howe, and many other persons of distinction, dined in a large tent, which had been erected near the bridge. Many loyal and suitable toasts were given, to which the bands played appropriate tunes, and the evening was spent with much conviviality and good humour. Amongst the gentlemen present we observed Professor Leslie of Edinburgh, and several other gentlemen of science, who admired very much this curious specimen of the arts, so nicely adjusted in all its parts, while at the same time, they considered it, in a national point of view, of much importance. This bridge is only to cost £5000; a stone bridge at the same place would have cost upwards of £20000, and it possesses this superiority over a stone bridge, that, having no pillars or support in the middle of the water, it will not be liable to be swept away by floods. It is obvious therefore that bridges of this nature will become general throughout the island, and it is hardly necessary to remark, how much they facilitate the internal trade and commerce of the country. To this quarter the advantages of the present bridge are incalculable; in particular it will save to an extensive district of country seven or eight miles in going for their coal and lime, and will render these articles accessible to them at all times of the year, and in all states of the river.

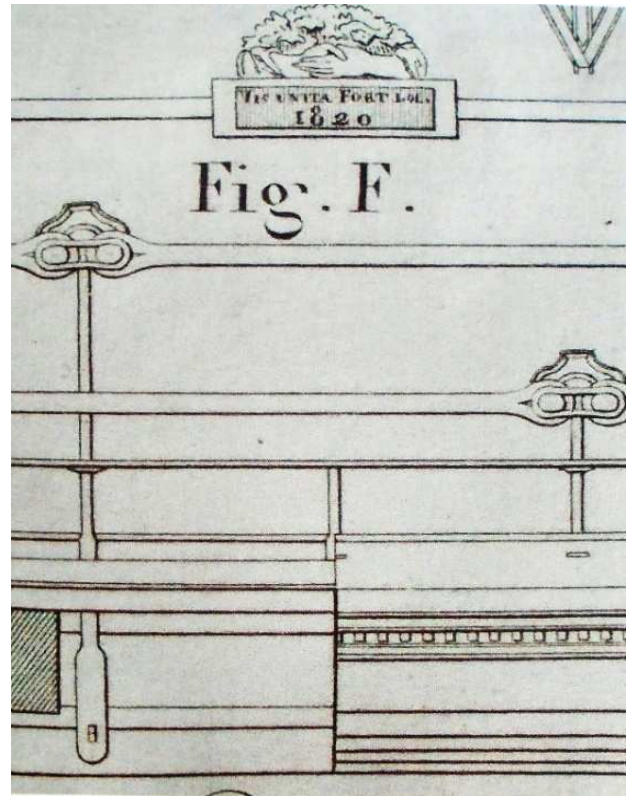
The extreme length of the suspending chains, from the point of junction on each side of the Tweed, is 390 feet, from the stone abutment or towers, 432. The platform or roadway is 360. The height of the bridge above the surface of the river is 27 feet. The weight of the chains, platform &c, is about 160 tons, but the bridge is calculated to support 360 tons, a greater weight than ever, in any probability, it can be subjected to. Although twelve months have elapsed since the work commenced, we can state, on good authority, that the workmen have not been employed above one half of the time; and with pleasure we add, that during

the progress, and on Wednesday, when the crowd was excessive [Drewry reported that the crowd of spectators numbered 700, with an estimated weight of 47 tons, broke through the toll-gates], and anxious to see so great a novelty no serious accident has occurred. In the centre of the bridge, on each side, is the following inscription: - VIS UNITA FORTIOR.

Note: This Latin can be translated as ‘United Strength is Stronger’, a truism undimmed by time as the bridge enters its third millennium of service to society and history.



Replica emblem on public display at ICE Museum along with some original ironwork not re-used © ICE Scotland Museum, Heriot-Watt University



Emblems of 1820 above footways of the bridge near mid-span. Dupin 1824. © Friends, Spanning the Centuries 2020, Pg. 13

This half-scale emblem (above left) was printed from an off-site 3D scan of the emblem taken from the English tower following its temporary removal, after water blasting and application of a primer paint coat. It was commissioned by Professor David McGuigan, Chairman and Secretary ICE Scotland Museum and the work under-taken by Psyber-Tech 3D Printing, Livingston. The painting was by Whitewash Studio, Livingston. The cost was generously co-funded by the Friends of Union Chain Bridge and the Spencer Group, the bridge work contractor.

The cast iron emblems were originally mounted as shown (above right), on the notional boundary line between England and Scotland. They depict clasped hands below foliage containing two thistles for Scotland and two roses for England. They were moved and re-fixed onto the English and Scottish bridge towers, possibly in 1891, where of the Scottish one, it is said that it resisted all attempts to remove it!

Other references: Stevenson, R, ‘Description of bridges of suspension’. *Edin. Philos. J.* April-Oct. 1821. 237-56. Drewry C.S. ‘*Memoir on suspension bridges*’, London, 1832

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