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MAISEMORE AND THE RIVER SEVERN

by Betty Chamberlayne

The parish of Maisemore lies to the northwest of Gloucester, and the village is little more than two miles from the centre of the city, but lying in between is that great and powerful barrier, the River Severn, and it is interesting to reflect on how in the past the people used it and overcame the problems it presented.

In early times, after rising at Plynlymmon in mid Wales, the Severn continued its course east and then northwards and flowed into the Dee and the Irish Sea. Later at the time of the Ice Age the water continued to flow down to the low ground where it was frozen, and afterwards when it was melted it formed a huge lake known as Lake Lapworth. The great pressure of the water eventually broke through the rocks at Ironbridge forming a gorge, and burst its way southwards to join the rivers Avon and Teme, and so into the Bristol Channel.

Over a long period the course of a river changes, and floods and the action of the tides have changed the Severn. With the help of borings and information gained when pylons were dug it has been possible to plot the buried channel. It was once much wider and had not divided and formed Alney Island.

Where the river meanders through flat land, erosion is increased on the concave curves, and the extra height of the water due to centrifugal force can cause a breach in the banks. The breach gets scoured by water pouring out of the river, and made deeper until water escapes when the river is at normal level, and a new route is made. This is probably how the Upper Parting and the Western channel came to be formed and at that time it is thought it joined up again with the Eastern channel at Gloucester, flowing near where the old Over causeway used to run.

This different course of the river meant that only a bridge over the Leadon was needed at Over to take the Roman road to the West. The route to the north is not so clear, and L E W O Fullbrook-Leggatt thought it may not have gone through Twigworth, perhaps the most obvious way, but kept to the west of the Severn, and crossed the west channel at Maisemore.

The old road which goes up over Woolridge was part of the turnpike road from Gloucester to Upton-on-Severn. It is shown on the 1885 OS map as Roman, and some recent excavations confirm that there was an ancient track on the west side of the village from Blacksmith's Lane to Murrels End, Hartpury that has been identified as part of the Roman road to Dymock, where there was a large Roman settlement, and where there is archaeological evidence of iron smelting. Alan McWhirr suggests in his book *Roman Gloucestershire* that there must have been several bridges over the River Severn in the vicinity of Gloucester, so maybe there was a bridge at Maisemore at this time.

But before anyone had been able to build a bridge, they would have crossed by ford, and a likely looking place for one is where the weir now is. An old lane, mentioned in documents, and shown on an estate map of 1780, leads to the river here, and could have connected up with what is now a stone farm track that lies to the north of the church, and so on to the old road.

THE BRIDGES

The earliest recorded bridge at Maisemore was built around 1200; an inscription on a cross that stood on it has survived. It was in Latin and Norman French which helps to date it, and in translation reads 'For the honour of our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for us William Fitz-Anketil of Lilten (Linton) made this cross and began the bridge of Maisemore'. Apart from the fact that he held land in Highnam, very little is known about William Fitz-Anketil, but the inscription tells us he was pious, and he must also have been wealthy and generous to undertake his great work as a blessing to the people of Maisemore.

Meanwhile at Over the southern end of the Western channel had broken into the River Leadon and joined the Eastern channel at the Lower Parting and so produced the route as it is today. The first reference to a bridge at Over is in the Perambulations of the Forest of Dean 1227/8 when it was referred to as one of the Bounds of the Forest and in 1229 it is called Ledenbrugge. L E W O Fullbrook-Leggatt takes this to be a bridge over the Severn.

In these early times Gloucester was strategically important

because it was the lowest point on the river that could be bridged, and this was made easier by the river dividing into two, and, in the medieval period, three channels. There was still the difficulty of getting across the low land of Alney Island, and the causeway from Westgate Bridge to Over is thought to date from Roman times. When Leland visited Gloucester in 1535 he called it 'a greate causey of stone forcyd up thrughe the low meds of Severn by the lengthe of a quarter of a myle. In this causey be dyvers doble arched bridge to the medows at flods'. There was also a causeway between Maisemore Bridge and Over.

During medieval times bridges were required to be maintained by local inhabitants, and sometimes people left money in their wills for this purpose. In 1545 Alderman John Faukener of St Michael's parish, a former mayor of Gloucester, left £10 to the repair of Maisemore bridge and the causeways belonging to it, and in 1578 Jean Goldstone, a widow, left £13 for it.

Probably this was the bridge that was 'cut down' by Col Nicholas Myn in 1643 at the time of the Siege of Gloucester. Col Myn was a Royalist in charge of Irish troops, and destruction of the bridge made it difficult for Parliamentary supporters who were established at Hartpury to get to Gloucester. Whatever their sympathies the Maisemore people must have been very provoked by the loss of the bridge which caused them considerable inconvenience. Presumably it was soon replaced, but by 1709 it was in a bad state, and at the Easter Quarter Sessions the inhabitants pleaded guilty for not keeping it repaired, and a fine of £200 was set on them. In 1710 the landowners complained that it was a great burden for them to keep the bridge repaired with timber and to keep up the long causeway which was about a mile in length, and they made an agreement with a man named Henry English to rebuild 'with several arches of stone and brick and to make the causeway 10 foot in breadth from one end to the other fitt for carts and other carriages to be halled which before was only for a single horse'.

The City and the County generously assisted with the cost of building but the landowners still said they could not afford to keep it in repair and Henry English agreed to do this in return for the use of the land between the causeway and the river. He was described as a bricklayer which does not seem to be an adequate qualification for bridge building and later it was said that the bridge was not sufficiently strongly built, and eventually it was 'totally destroyed by equinoctial tides and a great flood'.

TOLLS TO PAY

A temporary wooden bridge was then put up by certain persons at their own expense, and an Act brought before Parliament in 1777 for Trustees to be appointed to build a new bridge of stone and other suitable material on the site of the old bridge. The Trustees had to be owners of freehold land and 205 were named, but five or more were allowed to act.

They agreed to buy the temporary bridge from the owners for £503.1s. 5d. and were empowered to erect a toll house and exact tolls which went towards the new bridge.

For every horse, mare, gelding, mule or ass, drawing any carriage.	3*d.*
For every horse, gelding, mule or ass not drawing.	1*d.*
For every score of oxen or neat cattle.	10*d.* per score
For every drove of calves, sheep, hogs or lambs	5*d.* per score

The inhabitants of Maisemore were not to pay tolls when going to their land on the islands, and the inhabitants of Maisemore, Hartpury, Ashleworth, Corse, Hasfield and Tirley only had to pay tolls once a day.

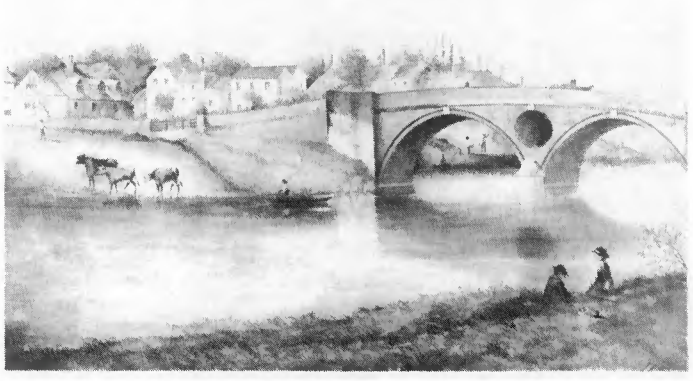
AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BRIDGE

On June 25 1777 at the first meeting of the Trustees or Commissioners as they were usually called it was ordered that advertisements were to be placed in various newspapers for plans and estimates for a new plain strong bridge of one or two arches and not less than 18 feet wide. On November 1 1777 various plans that had been received were referred to a sub committee and on February 2 1778 the Commissioners decided on a plan for a bridge with three arches, and possibly using bricks made locally. Mr Thomas Dadford was appointed surveyor of the work.

At later meetings the Commissioners disagreed about the design and there was a great deal of acrimony, mostly stirred up by the wealthy eccentric John Pitt, later MP for Gloucester. He wished to have the bridge built in a Greek or Roman style, using bricks 18" long 9" broad and 6" thick, which were, he said, the exact dimensions of those used in the Pantheon at Rome, and he was willing to advance £4000 if his plan were chosen. It was not. He told his friends, in order to see to the execution of it, that he was determined to take a lodging at the Star at Maisemore (now Greenfields) and continue it till the bridge was completed. John Pitt was a cousin of the Rev James Pitt of Maisemore Court.

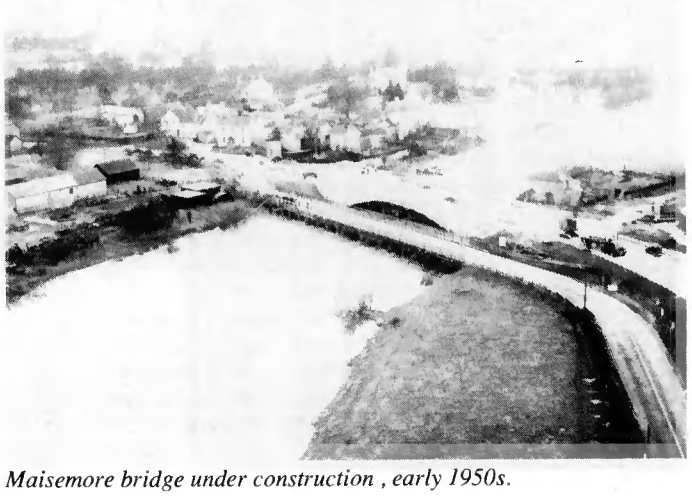
Nothing much happened during the next six years, except that the temporary bridge had to be repaired several times.

On November 13 1784 Mr Dadford's plans and estimates were again produced and recommended for consideration by the Justices at the next Quarter Sessions. They agreed to find the money from the County Stock for rebuilding the bridge, which was to be repaired out of the tolls and then the bridge was to become free, and in future repaired by the County. At last on July 2 1785 it was ordered that a new bridge of two arches should be built with the central pier having a large circular orifice for flood relief purposes. The work was finished by the middle of the next year. It became a well known landmark for more than 150 years until it was taken down in 1941, and was known affectionately as 'the bridge with the hole'.



Maisemore's new bridge, 1786.

By the 1930s the traffic had begun to make it dangerous. It was narrow and due to the angle of the approach roads there was a bend at each end of it. Despite its design the fact that it held up water 18" deep in time of flood helped the County Council to decide to rebuild. Plans were passed for a new single span bridge and in 1939 a temporary wooden bridge was put up downstream which was meant to last 2 years, but with the outbreak of war the work had to be postponed and it was in use for 17 years. Sadly a few months before the new bridge was completed a car skidded on the icy road and crashed through the wooden railings into the river below. The bodies of two people from Hereford were recovered later.



Maisemore bridge under construction , early 1950s.

The new bridge has a skew span of 150 ft and is built of reinforced concrete faced with Cotswold stone at a cost of £50,000.

It was opened on June 28 1956 by the Duke of Beaufort. Because the first bridge had a cross on it it was thought fitting for there to be one on the new bridge, and this was approved by the Parish Council. However the County Council thought it would be a hazard to traffic, and suggested that it should be put in a bay at the Gloucester end of the bridge. At this time the Church of St Michael at the Cross in Gloucester was being taken down and a small cross on the roof above the East end of the building was rescued and mounted on a stone base with an inscription recalling the history and circumstances and so recalling that there had been seven bridges over the Severn at this place, since the admirable William Fitz-Anketil had 'begun the bridge at Maisemore'.

THE FLOODS

Apart from getting across the river, the people of Maisemore also have to contend with the floods, which in 1624 must have been serious as the two tragic entries in the parish registers and transcripts show:

> Anne Smart a maiden was buried on Christmas yeave
> Isabell Sanders wife of William Sanders was buried 23 Januarie last both being drowned with ye flud in Maisemore Ham this last year past 1624

When the meadows are flooded, there is a very strong current between the two channels.

In the early part of this century the floods often occurred once or twice a year. The road into Gloucester became impassable and the houses near the river were flooded, the people in them having to live upstairs and cook on an open fire, or with an oil stove until the water went down. Some were used to drinking river water. The men who worked in Gloucester went in in the lock keeper's boat which was taken diagonally over the river because of the strong current. Before the water had got too high the gates in the fields would have been opened and tied back so that the boat would not be damaged underneath.

In later years when there were buses it was usually possible to get into Gloucester by going through Hartpury and Highleadon and on to the Newent road, and even in 1947 the year of the very big flood, lorries with diesel engines were able to get through at Over and take milk from the farms. When it got too deep for buses, for a time people went to Barbers Bridge to get on a tram from Newent, and when that could no longer go they had to go to Oakle Street which was on the South Wales line. There had been exceptionally deep snow at the end of January, followed by frost for about five weeks in 1947, and then warm rain. The snow and ice melted quickly and caused the biggest flood since the great flood of 1770. Eleven houses had water in them, varying from a few inches in the kitchen of the White Hart to 5 feet in the cottage opposite the Jolly Waterman.

Some people had to be evacuated from their houses because of the difficulties - and the electricity was not safe to use.

RECENT WATER MANAGEMENT

It has been mentioned that the old bridge held back the water as much as 18 inches in time of flood, and of course the temporary bridge was much more of an impediment. Also in the severe winter of 1940 large pieces of ice caught in the structure and men with long poles were employed to break them up to prevent damage to the bridge. Now that the new single span bridge has been built there is no such obstruction and the crown of the arch soffit is 6 inches above the March 1947 flood level.

Since 1947 there have not been so many floods, which can be accounted for mainly by the natural cycles of the weather. The Llyn Clywedog reservoir above Newtown in mid Wales holding 11,000 million gallons was built as a balancing reservoir. It is managed so that it is low at the beginning of winter and full by May allowing water to be discharged into the river during the summer to keep up the supply needed to be taken out by industry and for domestic use. This does make a great difference to the flooding.

Before the war the Severn Catchment Board carried out a scheme to help the flow of water in the Western channel, and so relieve flooding. A great amount of dredging was done and large quantities of soil were taken across the Maisemore road on a track and used to raise the level of some of the meadows. The Milestone meadow was raised 18 inches. Besides, the level of the road was raised, so reducing the number of occasions when it was impassible.

The Maisemore Hams always used to be farmed as grazing land and when a flood was imminent any cattle there had to be quickly got out to safety. Nowadays some fields are put down to cereals or potatoes and if any of the crops are lying under water for more than 3 weeks they can be severely damaged and may have to be replanted as in the spring of 1990.

In spite of all these inconveniences and the financial loss that the floods can cause, the people of Maisemore have reason to be grateful that they do occur from time to time. If they did not the village would long ago have been joined up with Gloucester!

EROSION

A problem for farmers of land near the river arose during the 1950s. This was the erosion of banks in certain places. Erosion happens naturally, but severe damage began to occur at Maisemore and upstream, the main cause being the motorised traffic on the river, and especially the barges carrying petrol. A cottage on the Ham, which on the Ordnance Survey map of 1924 was shown as 45 feet from the river, was by 1955, five feet from the water and unfit for habitation. After pressure for several years by the National Farmers' Union and the County Landowners' Association when no one would take responsibility, the Severn River Board and the Transport Commission eventually agreed upon a programme of work on the eroded bank estimated at a cost of £130,000. A substantial part of this came from a government grant. In time a pipeline was built for the oil, and there were no petrol barges to cause trouble.

NAVIGATION IN THE RIVER

The Romans were not known for their prowess on water, but they did use the river for trade from time to time to transport timber, lead and copper. The Danes are said to have sailed up when they raided Worcester and Bridgnorth in 894 AD. It would have been much easier to carry heavy loads by water than on poor roads, and there is a tradition that Tewkesbury Abbey was built of Caen stone brought up the Severn.

The trows, which were first heard of in 1411, were sailing boats with a very small draught, and especially constructed for use on the River Severn so that they could cope with the conditions at low water. They were from 40-80 tons, and their power was assisted by gangs of men hauling them, a system which lasted until horse towing paths had been constructed and given a right of way by an Act of Parliament in 1811. The Severn was a free river throughout its navigable length and no one was allowed to levy tolls until the early 15th century when Worcester claimed the right, in order to defray the cost of maintenance of bridges. There was a great deal of trouble from the men of Bewdley who had formed a kind of Mafia and refused to pay, and later in the reign of Henry VI the townsfolk of Tewkesbury complained to Parliament that

> 'their barges of wheat, malt, flour and divers other goods were set upon by the men of Dean with great riot and strength, not only despoiling their merchandise, but destroying their vessels, and even casting the crews overboard and drowning them'.

The complaint was dealt with by an Act of Parliament in 1430 when it was ordered that because the Severn is common to all the king's liege people those offending shall be proceeded against according to the course of common law. Records do not show that the men of Maisemore were so unruly but they do relate that there were a significant number of vessels passing through and carrying a variety of cargo.

The trows could be held up for weeks in times of drought, and were sometimes delayed and grounded by bars of sand across the river. To get over this problem two boats were used, one on each side of the bar, and the load, possibly of coal or hay, was carried across the obstruction to the empty boat. Fosbrooke in his *History of Gloucester* in 1819 records that Mr Mules, an engineer from Stourport, had put forward a plan for improving navigation on the River Severn by means of locks at the Upper and Lower Partings. This was never carried out, but later weirs and locks were built. The weir at Maisemore was built in 1871, and is a dam of masonry 12 feet below and 9 feet above the bed of the river. It crosses the river diagonally and does not increase flooding. The lock was 7 foot 6 inches wide, and an adjoining house was built for the

lockkeeper, who operated until 1941, when the lock was blocked off.

The coal business has been in the hands of only two families for nearly 150 years. They were the Stephens, who first appear in the parish registers in 1848, and carried on until the 1st World War, and the Youngs who bought it from them and still run it. They were also boat owners, and would take hay up to the collieries, some to be used there, and some to be delivered locally, and then bring coal back down. A tug, belonging to the Severn and Canal Company, also brought down coal, drawing three long-boats, one being put off at Hasfield, one at Ashleworth and one at Maisemore. The one for Maisemore was cast off at the Upper Parting, and guided through the lock and down the stream to the coal wharf near the bridge by men on the bank, with ropes. The coal was unloaded on to hand barrows and carried along a plank off the boat. This was very hard work especially when the river was low, but it was sought after by local men as a means of earning extra money. By the 1930s the coal was no longer brought by barges, and when the lock was closed all traffic on the West Channel ceased, leaving the river very quiet.

Although we now have a well designed and elegant bridge which does not impede the water, and the level of the road has been raised, the river is still indomitable. It can rise and overflow and still be that great barrier between Maisemore and Gloucester.

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