

A Brief Story of Wiveton Bridge

Wiveton Bridge is one of the defining man made structures of the Glaven Valley, and a study of it certainly leads to a fascinating picture of how the local economy and ecology has developed in the last seven hundred years. No one really knows what the valley and estuary looked like in mediaeval times, but a good guess is that it consisted of salt marshes, with a number of tidal channels running through them, and a few slightly higher islands, only flooded by the highest tides. The Marsh extended up to Glanford where "The King's Highway" crossed the river at or near the existing ford. To get a picture of what this marsh was like, probably the existing marshes at Stiffkey are quite similar, with their deep creeks and little raised sandy dunes.

The Glaven was certainly a very different river from the one which we know now, with the tides rising and falling all the way up to Glanford, and strong tidal streams. The freshwater stream itself was probably also much stronger too than it is today. In fact, near the bridge, there were two roughly parallel streams running past Wiveton, one on the Cley side, and one on the Wiveton side, which met before flowing out into Blakeney Harbour. (See chart 1) There is a good story, from a later date, 1580, recorded in court records, about rivalry between Wiveton and Cley over the use of one of the small islands between the two rivers, called West Marsh (Shown on chart 1) . People from Wiveton claimed the right to graze sheep on the island, however they complained to the court that "The People of Cley put them off so fast as Wiveton men did put them on". This suggests that the islands were quite high and difficult of access. They must have had a crop of rough grass, as do those existing today near Stiffkey.

Because of the good access to the rich (for those times) farms and sheep runs of Norfolk, the estuary became an important centre of commerce. Ships of 100 tons or more traded along the coast of England, to the Continent, and carried out fishing expeditions as far afield as Iceland. Fish was preserved in salt which was imported from France and Spain in return for grain and wool. Wiveton and Cley were both important sea ports, and ships were probably built at Wiveton.

It is important to understand that a seaport in those times did not have anything resembling modern wharves or dry docks, they were simply places where ships could take the bottom at low tide, and be loaded and unloaded by carts. Occasionally there might be a little quay where they might come alongside at high tides. One such quay existed at Blakeney. Especially important was access to timber and to people with the skills to repair ships, and to stores where food and supplies could be obtained. So we can picture the North sector of the Glaven in about 1250 with up to fifty or so ships some as much as up to 100 feet long sitting on the gravel or sandy bottom of the two streams, being tended by handcarts and horse drawn carts, the ships floating at high water and coming in and out on the flowing and ebbing tides. Almost impassable muddy salt marshes separated the streams. Where Wiveton Green now is there seems to have been a shipyard, where huge oak trunks, probably floated down the river, would be split or sawn into planks and built with incredible skill into sea going ships.

It was obviously very inefficient to have entirely separate communities at Wiveton and Cley, doing much the same thing, with the only satisfactory crossing between them upstream at Glanford. There was a crossing of the estuary and of the marshes further down river, where the bridge now stands, but it could only be crossed by men "At their peril after the ebb of the sea". Some time after 1292 and before 1340, probably about 1310, William Storm, a substantial merchant set about to bridge the marsh properly. What he built was a "state of the art" stone bridge with two arches, the easterly of which is the bridge we see today, and a more primitive wood and stone bridge with many small arches connecting this to the Cley side of the estuary. Nothing of this second structure remains apart from some flint foundations which you can sometimes see in the ditch alongside the Wiveton to Holt road.

Either at this stage or a little later a chapel was built on or near the stone bridge, which may have been a source of funds for its repair. Of this nothing remains, but you can still see on the south west side of the bridge a niche in which there was a statue of the Virgin. The stone bridge is built partly of local flint, and partly of brick, but the most interesting element is imported grey stone. Its origin is not known but it may have arrived as ballast for ships coming into the port. The structure is immensely strong, with huge wing wall buttresses. The arch is slightly pointed, following the contemporary fashion, unlike the semi circular arches of earlier Norman bridges. The deck is about 1 metre thick consisting of layers of chalk and flint alternated with layers of sand. An iron tie bar runs through the apex of the arch. A most beautiful feature, which appears in numerous other bridges of the period, is the stone ribbing underneath the arch, which being in compression, gives it great strength, and at the same time a kindness on the eye not seen in older, bulkier, bridge structures.

What were Storm's motives for building this very costly structure? He was reported by his son, Thomas Stone to have built it for the sake of the soul of his father, Hugh Storm, who had left William his fortune. This rings true, bridge building was considered as a holy work, as worthy as church building. However it is difficult to avoid the slightly cynical thought that perhaps William's extensive interests in the salt fish trade stood to benefit from the increase in prosperity that the improved communications would bring to the valley.

Storm's bridge has certainly stood the test of time, and today still carries normal traffic up to 18 tons weight. Some might say it is an early case of over engineering, as no vehicle of anything like the weight and speed of modern farm and commercial vehicles can possibly have been imagined when it was built. However, then as now, it was subject to frequent damage, and as no one was officially responsible for its upkeep it often fell into disrepair. There are pages of records of how these were carried out, how the money was found, and how it was spent. The first of these, dated 1380 includes an estimate of 40 shillings for the wooden bridge and 20 marks for the stone one. Obviously the revenues of the chapel (if they were indeed applied to this purpose) did not go far.

As the marshes gradually became enclosed, and tidal flows consequently reduced changes to the estuary and its bridges took place. Some time after 1482 (when it was repaired) the chapel was destroyed, and some time after 1586 the western arch of the stone bridge was taken down as it was no longer needed, due to reduced river flow. No doubt the stone was used for building material elsewhere. There is no record of when the wood and stone bridge over the Cley side of the marsh was replaced by the present causeway, but it was certainly after 1693 and before 1752, when the wooden bridge was gone. Obviously the Eastern part of the river had ceased to flow by then. At some point (possibly in 1739) a small wooden bridge known as Eson's Bridge was built further down river, probably almost opposite Cley church where a track still runs down towards the Glaven. By this time the river upstream of Cley was no longer suitable for sea going ships. This bridge seems to have been a light structure, possibly a footbridge only, and to have been impassable at high tide. Indeed in 1789 it was damaged when a higher than normal tide, probably driven in by a North wind, drove the ship Abacore into Eson's bridge and she smashed right through it, landing up on the mud half way up to Wiveton bridge itself. A costly repair was needed for the bridge and the ship.

Wiveton Bridge as it stands today is an immense source of pleasure to locals and to visitors, who all have difficulty in crossing the bridge without looking down into the river below. Maybe a trout, maybe, if they are lucky, an eel, certainly a moorhen, or in spring some ducklings. In summer a few flowers manage to take root in the structure of the bridge and bloom in defiance of the traffic. Often at dusk a barn owl hunting the marsh to the South. Yet the bridge still carries a great volume of cars, vans, trucks, and tractors across the Glaven, giving hundreds of people a little taste of what our wonderful valley is all about. Storm's structure has survived now for 700 years, it is one of the oldest bridges in England still carrying commercial traffic. Surely his ambition for the soul of his father is fulfilled.

(Thanks are due to the Blakeney Historical Society for help in compiling this brief article. A good detailed account of the bridges appears in Issue 4 of their journal published in June 2001)

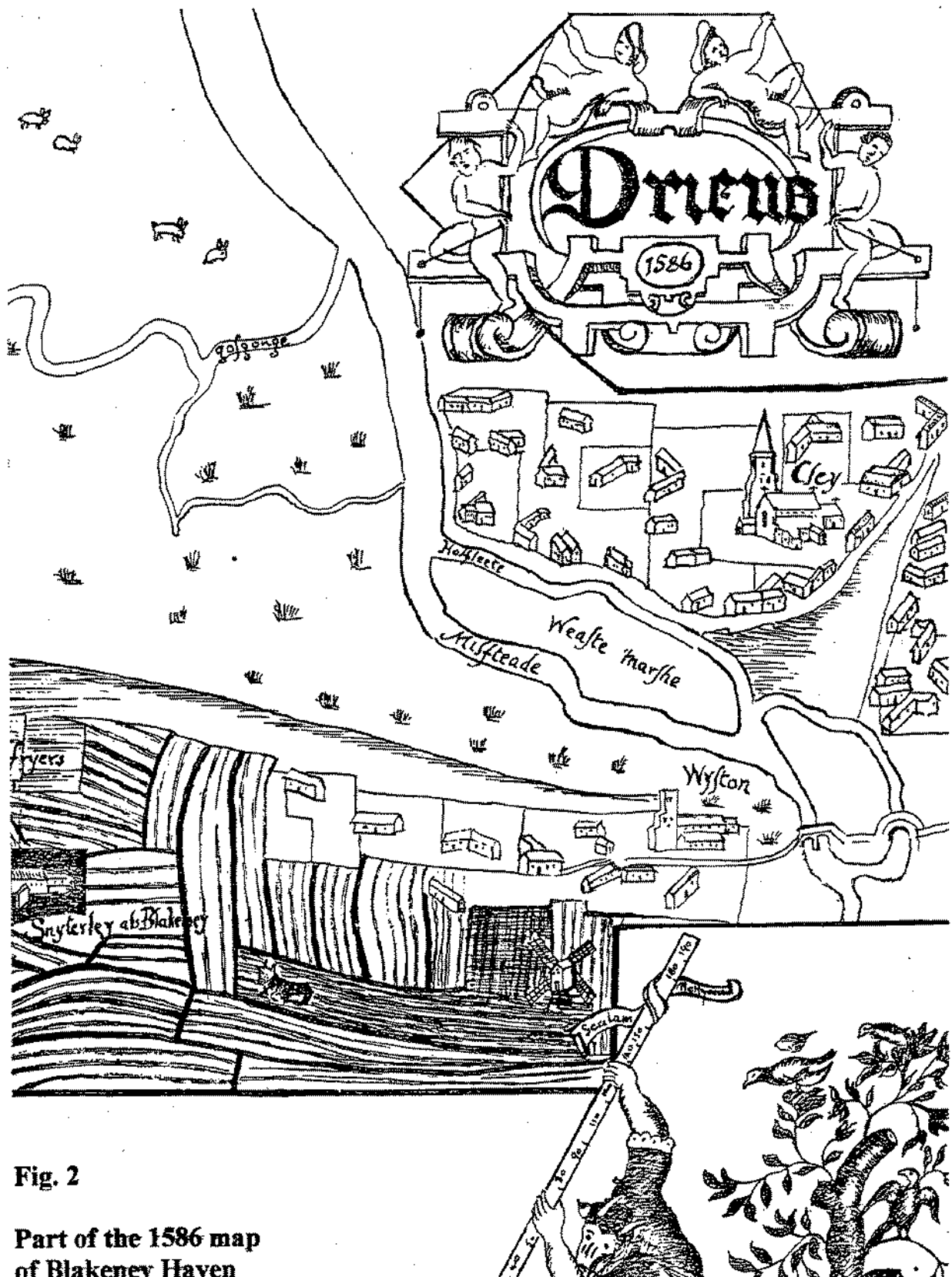


Fig. 2

Part of the 1586 map
of Blakeney Haven

Chart 1. 1586 chart showing the two bridges crossing the separate arms of the Glaven. The Eastern bridge seems to be wrongly shown as a single span. In fact it was a multi span stone and wooden structure.

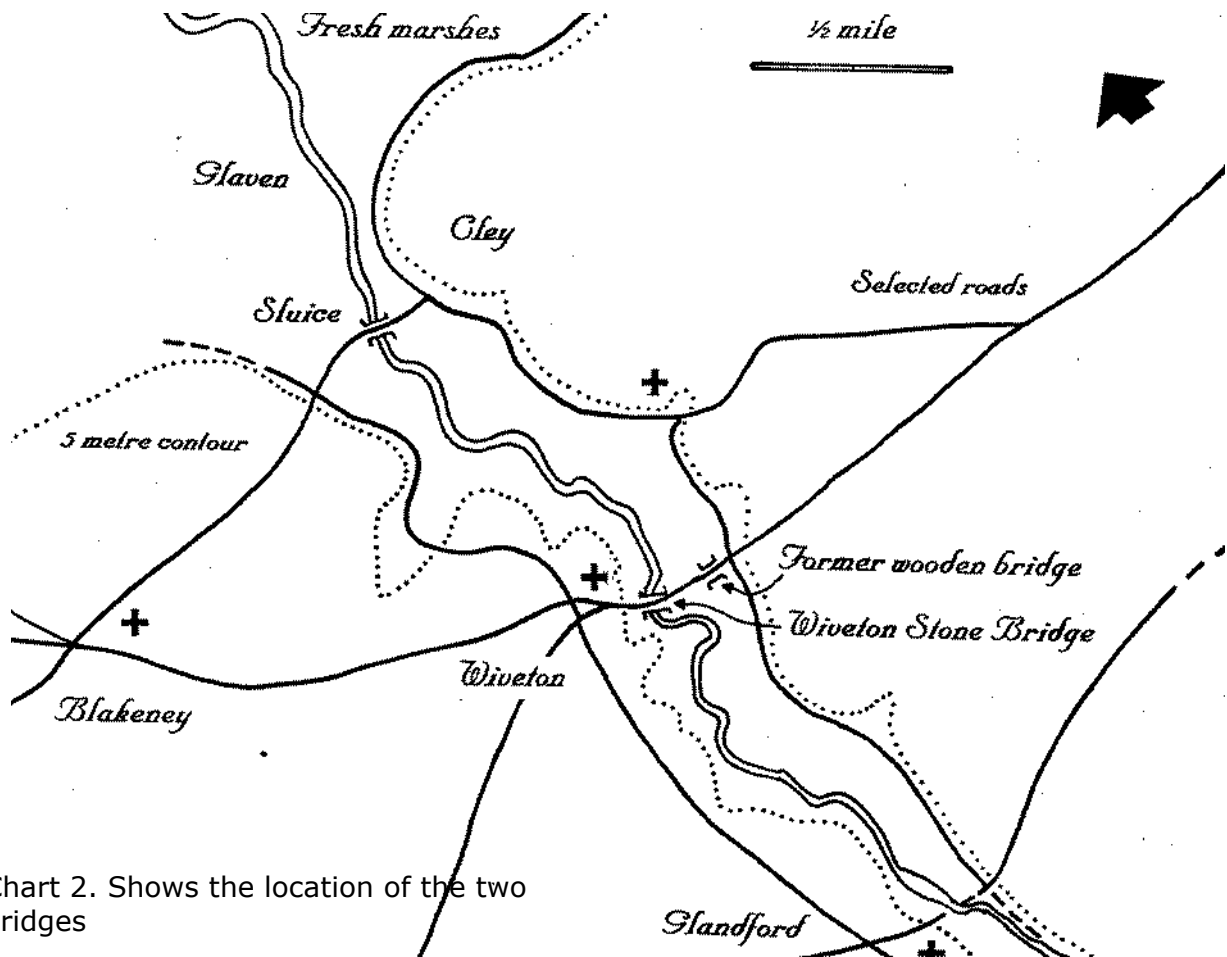
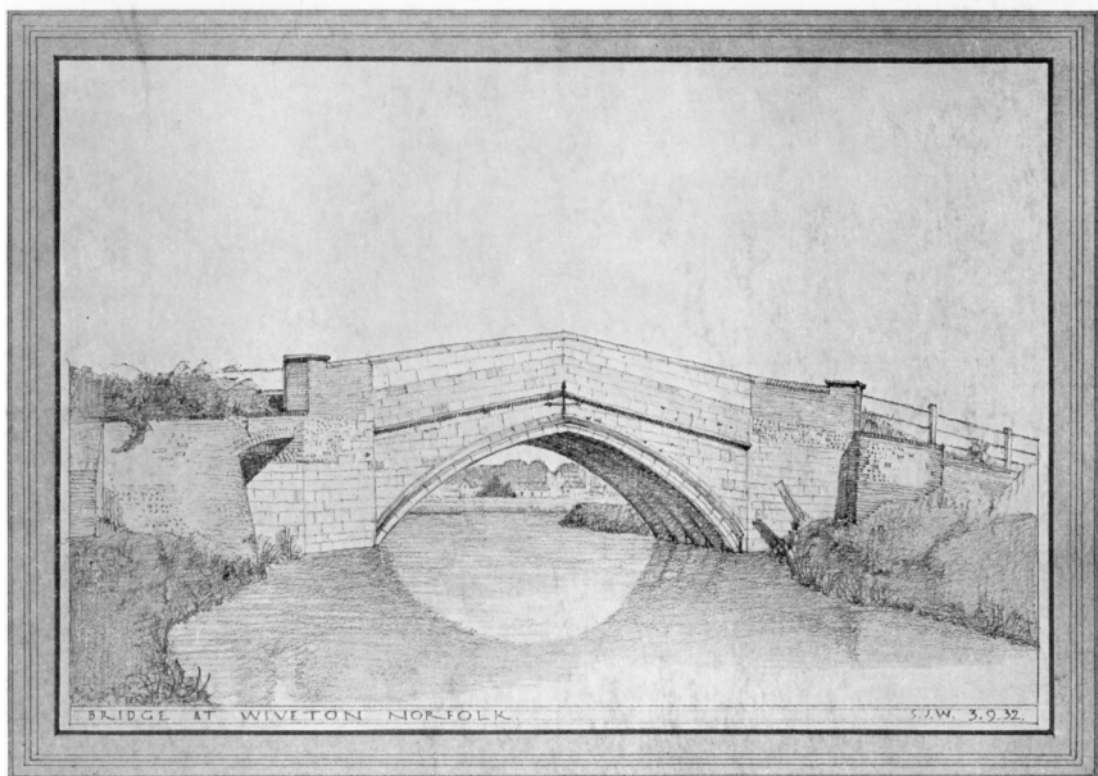


Chart 2. Shows the location of the two bridges



Pencil drawing. Shows the bridge from the South. The niche on the left of the picture probably contained a statue of the Virgin. Note the stone ribs beneath the bridge.