

JOHN CARTER AND THE SAVING OF THE SKERNE BRIDGE

This article on John Carter was first published in The Globe in July 2017,³.

Darlington Borough Council are nearing completion in their work to enhance the setting of the Skerne Bridge in Darlington and to create a cycle path linking the bridge to the town centre. In this timely article, Brendan Boyle explores the early days of the Skerne Bridge and the role that John Carter had in saving and possibly enhancing Bonomi's celebrated bridge.

The most evocative image of the early railways anywhere in the world is, without doubt, John Dobbin's *Opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825*, depicting the packed processional train, hauled by *Locomotion 1*, crossing Ignatius Bonomi's glorious Skerne Bridge. It was the source for many subsequent paintings and drawings - including that on the Bank of England £5 note from 1990 to 2002.

But is it wrong in a fundamental detail? Was the bridge, as painted, not actually Bonomi's design? Was it not really like that in 1825 - not that graceful?



Dobbin's painting of the opening of the S&DR in 1825 featuring Skerne Bridge

Darlington-born Dobbin, brought up a quarter-mile from the painting's viewpoint, surely witnessed the opening scene but he was only 10 at the time.¹ Rather oddly, despite becoming a landscape artist in his twenties he didn't record the historic event that took place on his doorstep until its 50th

anniversary in 1875.

He would have recalled clearly the excitement of the day, but for the details of the bridge and its setting Dobbin must have returned to his old vantage point. After all, the bridge's appearance was unchanged, wasn't it?

Well no, it wasn't actually. Apparently unrealised by railway and architectural historians, the Skerne Bridge showed signs of weakness just three years after being brought into use. Bonomi may have been the Surveyor for Bridges for Durham county as well as an architect but he had never designed a railway bridge before.² Nor could he have anticipated the volume of use it would get, and so soon.

His client, the Railway Company which had briefed him, certainly hadn't. It had, for instance, initially expected an export trade of coal from Stockton - all of it passing over the bridge - of around 10,000 tons,³ but in the year to 30 June 1827 that trade reached 18,000 tons, and in the following 12 months exceeded 52,000 tons.⁴ Meanwhile, passenger traffic, originally

forecast to be minimal, was estimated at 30-40,000 people by 1826-1827.⁵ With usage like that, the bridge - a crucial link in the line - would be under severe pressure. Literally.

By late 1828 or very early 1829 the Company had become concerned at detectable damage to the 'battery' or embankment⁶ of the bridge, to either side of its central portion. For a solution, they turned not to Bonomi, but to their part-time inspector of works and designer of buildings, John Carter.

John Carter

Carter was not a trained architect or bridge surveyor but an experienced stone mason with a good knowledge of the bridge, having acted as inspector of it for the Company during its construction.⁷

His age was the same as Bonomi's (both were born in 1787) but their backgrounds were not - Bonomi was the son of an Italian architect, his godfather was the Earl of Aylesford, he designed homes for the aristocracy and achieved a listing in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.⁸ Carter was a village man, a son of Heighington, born a mile and a half from the spot where in 1825 George Stephenson would place *Locomotion 1* on the rails. He designed for the S&D some of the oldest railway buildings still existing anywhere in the world - yet he isn't mentioned even in the histories of Heighington.⁹

He seems to have first come to the attention of railway historians in Bill Fawcett's excellent 2001 book.¹⁰ Readers of the last two editions of *The Globe* may remember me banging on about Carter being the man commissioned to design the S&D's three railway pubs, at Stockton (1826), Darlington and Aycliffe Lane (now Heighington Station; both 1826-27) - three of the first four railway pubs in the world and all still standing (albeit not all as pubs).

Bill also revealed that "the best-known of early S&D buildings, the so-called booking office at St John's crossing in Stockton" was another of Carter's designs.¹¹ The distinctive, canted-fronted building (1825-26) was actually the weigh house and office built to collect tolls at Stockton end of the line. It also still stands, just along from the Company's former pub.

Mr Fawcett touched on much of John Carter's work for the S&D (albeit not his work on the Skerne Bridge embankment) but said nothing about him as a person, or why, after being one of the most-named individuals in early Company records he disappeared from them around 1830. I have now found out much more about Carter and believe he is somebody who deserves proper recognition for his work on this pioneering railway.

John Falcus Carter was born in Heighington to parents who had married in Heighington and grandparents (or at least one set of them) who had done likewise.¹² His name seems to have been a tribute to a great-uncle, John Falcus, who was clerk of the Kirk Merrington Turnpike Road which ran through the village; a respected position requiring an educated man.¹³

Everything about Carter's personal life revolved around Heighington except for one thing: his wife Jean was Scottish - from Perthshire - a rarity in an English village at that time. As there is no record of their marriage in Heighington they presumably married in what some Englishmen then insisted on calling 'North Britain'.¹⁴

The couple had six - or probably seven - children baptised in Heighington between 1812 and 1828. John was described in their baptismal records as a mason, one of two listed in the village in Parson & White's 1828 directory. On some occasions, he was described as a builder. He must have stood out as someone literate and with good draughting and organisational skills to be taken on by the Railway Company as part-time Inspector of Masonry by 1824. Freemasonry connections with at least one of the founding Pease family

may have helped.¹⁵

Living so close to the new railway line will have been a considerable advantage as Carter designed and supervised S&D projects along its whole length, from Stockton to the Haggerleases branch beyond Shildon. He was probably the world's most frequent railway passenger in the 1820s...

Heighington wasn't a small village, with a population of around 600, but it was compact and John Carter made the acquaintance of its most famous resident, Captain William Pryce Cumby - a hero of the Battle of Trafalgar - after he retired to the village in 1815. Cumby was one of three magistrates for Darlington ward, responsible amongst other things for alcohol licensing, and when he heard that Carter was drawing up plans for public houses for the Railway Company - one of them just down the road at Aycliffe Lane - he must have mentioned that he had concerns.

Carter accordingly cautioned the Company about possible looming difficulties in a progress report on the Aycliffe Lane property, hinting also at a personal connection:

"I submit for your consideration whether it would not be advisable to consult one or two of the leading Magistrates to ascertain whether they would be disposed to license it as an Inn before any decision [about the final design of the building] is come to. If I can be of any service in that way [I] shall be glad to avail myself of the opnty. of being useful to the Co." (Letter from John Carter to the S&DR, 14 Feb 1827.¹⁶)

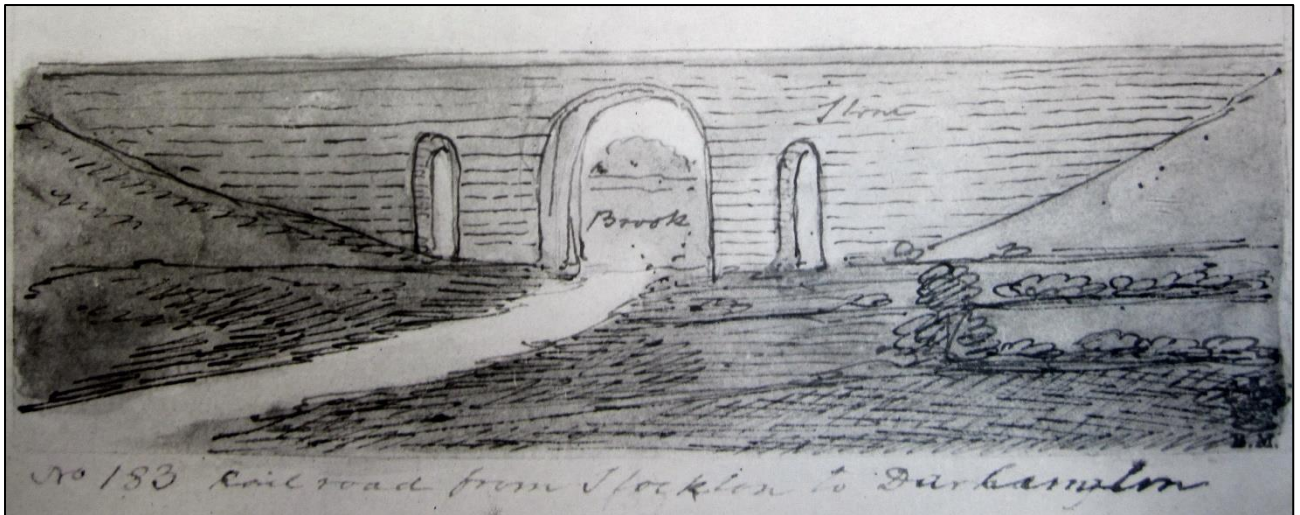
The Company went ahead anyway - and their applications for licences for their newly-built Aycliffe Lane and Darlington premises were duly refused by the magistrates in 1827, 1828 and 1829. Eventually, after a change in the law, the Durham appeal court found against Capt. Cumby and a fellow magistrate in October 1829 and granted licences.

The Heighington connection wasn't enough to persuade Cumby to commission Carter to design the grand new home he wanted: he turned to Bonomi for what became Trafalgar House. Meanwhile Carter was making sure Bonomi's bridge over the Skerne didn't collapse...

John Carter and the Bridge

Bonomi's design for bridging the Skerne seems to have been a simple one, according to the only known contemporary image: he filled in the valley from slope to slope with masonry except for three arched gaps - a wide central one for the river to pass through and narrow pedestrian passageways on either bank. It was more a viaduct than a bridge.

The image in question is a quick sketch made by a journeying cleric, the Rev. John Skinner, on 26 August 1825, a month before the railway's opening. Some have scoffed at it as an 'unlikely likeness' on the basis that his bridge didn't look like Dobbin's. But why would Skinner have sketched something he didn't see? Yes, the arches are exaggerated vertically and the sketch doesn't show details such as string coursing, but Skinner was perceptive enough to notice, as Dobbin did later, that the east bank was wider than the west - and he turns out to have been a prodigious sketcher.¹⁷



Skinner's sketch of Skerne Bridge (Source: Centre for Local Studies at Darlington Library)

The sketch seems to be confirmed by a map of c.1828 which shows the railway passing across the valley on a straightforward, straight-sided structure.¹⁸ Compare that with Joseph Sowerby's map of 1847¹⁹ which depicts pronounced, concave-curving walls flanking the central portion of the bridge and holding back sturdy earth ramparts - perfectly reflecting the structure that Dobbin painted in 1875.



Left: a map dating to c.1828 of Darlington Township. Right: Joseph Sowerby's map of 1847. (Source for both maps: Centre for Local Studies at Darlington Library)

These flank walls were Carter's solution to the weakening of the bridge's 'battery': they supported the earthworks which in turn bolstered Bonomi's now-hidden approach-embankments. The work was due to begin early in 1829 but was delayed by bad weather, as he reported to the Company:

"Geo. Chapman of Aycliffe promised me to commence leading stones for the Flank Walls of the Skerne Bridge last Tuesday. I ordered lime for the same, but should ask if possible not to begin the work for a month, the weather being so precarious at this season, the sinking and piling the Foundations would run the risk of more damage to the Battery than can possibly happen as it is at present (there is no danger of the main body of the Bridge)." (Letter from John Carter to the S&DR, 20 Feb 1829.²⁰)

As it turned out, the delay was a couple of months longer:

"The Flank Walls of the Skerne Bridge we may now properly proceed with and do it as quick as

possible."(*Letter from John Carter to the S&DR, 28 May 1829.*²¹)

I believe it was these - Carter's - essential, concave, flank walls, curving gracefully down to the ground, that turned an elegant but pared-down Georgian viaduct (built with a mind to Quaker disapproval of ornamentation) into a bridge of artistic distinction.

The earliness of the additions, the use of the same ashlar stone - probably laid by the same masons and tying perfectly into the original - and the designer's skill in not just shoring up the failing embankment but doing so in a way which framed and echoed Bonomi's arches, all together fooled everyone who came later to retrospectively-depict the opening day into thinking that what they saw was what had existed in 1825. But it wasn't: this was no longer 'Bonomi's bridge', it was 'Bonomi and Carter's'.^{*}

(*I have to confess here that there is *just* a chance that somebody other than Carter - perhaps Bonomi, perhaps Stephenson - designed the flank walls and simply left the execution to Carter. I doubt it - the S&DR didn't like spending money if they could avoid it - but I have more research to do at the National Archives before I can be 100% sure. Readers of *The Globe* will be the first to know!)

Unfortunately, the 1829 curves can no longer be seen. They were replaced - presumably in response to ever heavier railway traffic - in the late 19th or early 20th centuries by the chunky, rusticated walls and buttresses of non-matching stone that flank Bonomi's unaltered central portion of the bridge today.

John Carter - The Epilogue

The last date I have found for John Carter in the S&D files at the National Archives was 26 December 1829. He may have simply fallen out of favour with the Company but illness more likely played a part. He certainly had intimations of his mortality by October 1830 as - at the age of just 43 - he made a will (the S&D's solicitor Francis Mewburn was one of the witnesses and probably drafted the legalese).²² He died on 23 January 1831 and was buried where he was baptised, at St Michael's church in Heighington.

Capt. Cumby was one of the executors of the will and Carter left at least three houses in the village to be sold off "with all convenient speed after my decease". The executors were to invest the proceeds and:

"to pay the interest dividends and annual produce... into the proper hands of my dear wife Jean Carter for... [her] benefit... and for the maintenance education and bringing up of my children".

The houses can't have raised a fortune, however,²³ as the Carter family went on to live simply: Jean became a grocer; their eldest daughter Jane married a Darlington blacksmith (she called her first son John Carter Lightfoot); and his youngest child William became a trooper in the Horse Guards. John's fifth-born, Caroline, did go on to become a member of one of the wealthiest households in England - but only as a housemaid.²⁴ Not a mason, an architect or a saviour of a railway line among them: John himself had been the lot.

Notes

1. Dobbin was brought up in Weaver's Yard, off Northgate; see Wikipedia, John Dobbin.

2. George Stephenson was originally commissioned to build the bridge in iron and stone but had trouble with the foundations and the Company eventually asked Bonomi if a stone arch could be designed; by November 1824 he was giving advice on its construction. It is known that the bridge had to be strengthened at the sides seven years later. See 'Ignatius Bonomi of Durham, Architect', JH Crosby, City of Durham Trust, 1987.

3. See 'A Report Relative to the Opening a Communication by a Canal or a Rail or Tram Way, From

Stockton, By Darlington, to the Collieries' (the 'Overton Committee'), 1818.

4. Actually 18,588 tons by June 1827, which the S&DR directors said in a report to the Company general meeting of 10 July 1827 "surpassed their most sanguine expectations". And 52,290 tons by June 1828. From *'The North Eastern Railway: Its Rise and Development'*, WT Tomlinson, 1915, p136.

5. Tomlinson, p131.

6. This use of the word battery is archaic now but was common then; e.g.. in 1822 George Stephenson drew up a 'Specification of Cuts and Batteries Intended to be made by the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company' (National Archives (NA) file RAIL 667/276).

7. See 'A History of North Eastern Railway Architecture, Vol. 1: The Pioneers', Bill Fawcett, North Eastern Railway Association, 2001; p13, based upon NA RAIL 667/30, 17 Dec 1824.

8. See 'Bonomi, Ignatius Richard Frederick Nemesius (1787–1870)', Peter Meadows, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004.

9. Such as 'The Parish of Heighington, A Thousand Years of History', Hilary W Jackson, WEA Darlington Branch, 1990.

10. Fawcett, above.

11. Fawcett, p13.

12. John Falcus Carter was christened in Heighington in 1787; no date is given but the order of the parish record suggests it was probably late May or early June: Durham Diocese Bishop's Transcripts, Heighington parish 1765-1821 (familysearch.org). His parents were not named in the summary transcript but were almost certainly Thomas Carter and Ann (nee Blakey) who married at Heighington in July 1786. Ann's parents - Carter's grandparents - Thomas and Margaret Blakey (nee Falcus) had married in Heighington in 1761. Marriage information: 'Marriages from the Heighington Registers (1570-1837)' (<http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/Transcriptions/DUR/HEI.html>).

13. A John Falcus of Heighington, clerk, published official notices for the turnpike trust between at least 1767-89: see Newcastle Courant 6 June 1767, 25 Jan 1777, 27 Mar 1779 and 31 Jan 1789, and Newcastle Chronicle 5 Mar 1774. He died in 1790. He seems to have been a gardener at Walworth Castle when younger in 1759 (property sale notices in the Newcastle Courant 23 June to 28 July 1759), which suggest he could have been born in the 1730s. John Carter's grand-mother Margaret Blakey (nee Falcus) was likely to have also been born in the 1730s or c.1740 in order to have married in 1761. The rarity of the surname in the village and apparent similarity in ages suggest that John and Margaret were closely related - perhaps brother and sister.

14. Jane, 'first daughter of John Carter, native of this parish, by his wife Jean Stuart (sic), native of Dunning, County of Perth, North Britain', was born on 12 June 1812 and baptised in Heighington on the 19th: Bishop's Transcripts, parish records as above. Jean Stewart was the daughter of Alexander Stewart and Jean Marshall of Dunning, born 26 Dec 1788: Scotland Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950 (familysearch.org).

15. John Falcus Carter's gravestone is one of the most elaborate in St Michael's churchyard in Heighington, heavily embellished with symbols which appear to a layman to go beyond stone masonry into freemasonry. Although Quaker beliefs - the core religion of the S&DR's founders - are not normally considered compatible with Freemasonry the website of Darlington Freemasons' Restoration Lodge says with pride that: "In the early days many men of note have been members... members of the well-known Pease family were in the Lodge, including one who was a founder of the Stockton and Darlington Railway." (www.restoration111.org/history.html).

16. NA RAIL 667/994.

17. The Skinner sketch, entitled 'No 183 Rail road from Stockton to Darlington', although rudimentary and to date unheralded, is of huge historical importance as the first and - despite its flaws - most accurate image of the world's oldest continuously-used railway bridge. Skinner (1772-1839; see Wikipedia) was a vicar from Somerset and an amateur archaeologist and antiquarian who made numerous tours of Britain, keeping journals and sketching furiously as he went. He drew the bridge on a journey by coach from York to Durham - it would have been hugely prominent across open land from the turnpike road. He left his papers (146 volumes of them) to the British Museum (now British Library) and most, including the relevant one here 'Record of a Journey Through the North of England', remain unpublished. Somehow, the Darlington historian Norman Sunderland came across

the sketch and mentioned it in his 'History of Darlington', 1967 (republished 1972), p60 - "this must be the first picture of this historic monument" - but he didn't reproduce it, instead donating a copy to Darlington library where it remains. The first publication of the sketch seems to have been in the Northern Echo of 31 May 2000 when it featured in Chris Lloyd's Echo Memories. Chris wasn't impressed by its likeness then - but we should all be now.

18. Township map of Darlington c.1828 which is from a batch of undated maps used in the 'Report to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary Inquiry into the sewerage, drainage and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the town of Darlington in the County of Durham' by William Ranger, 1850. The maps were printed by Standidge & Co, Litho., London. The class reference in Crown Street Library is U418q, accession number E810085075.

19. 'Plan of the Town of Darlington in the County of Durham, By Joseph Sowerby, 1847'; scale 40" to 1 mile. The concave walls are also shown on Thomas Dixon's similarly-titled map of 1840. Copies of both are at the Centre for Local Studies at Darlington Crown Street Library.

20 & 21. Both NA RAIL 667/1010.

22. The will is in the North East Inheritance database of Durham University (familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/nei/data/neisearch.php).

23. The estate was valued at probate at £300.

24. The later family details come mainly from Censuses 1841 onwards. In the 1851 Census Caroline Carter was one of thirteen staff in the Westminster household of the banker Henry Hoare and his wife Lady Mary.

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