

The story behind South Brent's forgotten “new” bridge

Lily Style October 2021

This article draws on historic local press cutting to explore the history behind the construction of the “new” bridge at Brent Mill, South Brent in 1927, as well as the lives of local residents connected to the old Brent Mill bridge (an infamous accident hotspot) in the late 1900s and early twentieth century.

The “new” bridge spans the river Avon just after London Road (B3372) passes the “Welcome to South Brent” sign and the village’s first few cottages. Its low-stone balustrade is dwarfed on each side by crowding trees which conceal the little river so well that many present-day villagers are unaware that the bridge exists at all, despite driving to and fro across it every day.

It was a different story a century ago when residents flocked to the opening of the new bridge at 3PM on Monday 10th October 1927.



The new bridge, constructed over a period of twenty-months, was an eagerly anticipated safe bypass from “Brent Mill bridge, which spans the river Avon in the centre of an “S” bend, hidden on one side by a cottage [and had been] the scene of scores of accidents” of which only one had been fatal. The Times continues “After many representations, the County Council have at last removed the danger [by abolishing] the whole double bend”. (The Western Times 14th October 1927)

Before this, the hazardous little bridge at Brent Mill was, believe it or not, part of the main thoroughfare linking London to Plymouth. The local press is peppered with reports of accidents at Brent Mill Bridge prior to 1927. Totnes Weekly Times tells us that in August 1891 “Mr John Codd, butcher, met with a rather serious accident on Wednesday [19th] whilst driving his horse and trap across Brent Mill Bridge. The road is not level, and as the vehicle showed signs of tipping Mr Codd endeavoured to prevent an upset, but fell out the trap, and received severe cuts about the head and face. He was removed to a wayside cottage where he received medical attention.”

In June 1894, Mr Philips “who had attended a property sale at South Brent, and was returning in a pony trap with his wife and child” and fell foul of the cursed “S” bend when “in turning near Brent Mill bridge the vehicle upset, throwing the occupants into the road.” The unfortunate Mr Philips was knocked out and remained unconscious for some time. (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 29th June 1894).



Above: Brent Mill bridge today

At this same time, Brent Mill bridge hit the news for being scourged with salmon poachers. A man, signing himself only as “an Avon salmon license-holder. South Brent, September 5th, 1892”, wrote angrily to Western Morning News:

“Sir,—There were several salmon appeared on Sunday between Brent Mill Bridge and the mill weir ; one 12lb. and another 7lb. or 8lb. fish, just from the sea in the last flood. I am a salmon licence holder for the Avon, and have been waiting a long time in expectation of a flood bringing some fish up, so as to have some sport, and now I find, as soon as they come up they are all spotted and poached. There were dozens of poachers walking the banks of the river on Sunday, looking for fish, and I know several other fish that have been marked.

“Surely something can be done to prevent the wholesale slaughter of salmon in this neighbourhood. It is ridiculous to lay it all on the navvies working on the line, as the regular systematic salmon poachers are all natives of this place. The slaughter of salmon here last winter was tremendous. I know of one day when thirty were killed, and all of them spawning and unclean fish. Why do none of these things come under the notice of the inspector of fisheries?...” (Western Morning News 7th September 1892)

It seems the miffed words of “an Avon salmon license-holder. South Brent” may have been heeded by the inspector of fisheries, because the same paper printed a report of Totnes Divisional

Petty Sessions the following Valentine's Day, entitled "Salmon Poaching in the Avon" with the subtitle "SEVERAL CONVICTIONS" in which the aptly named G. Fishwick "in the employ of the Erme and Avon Fishery Board" brought forth charges:

"Richard Trudgeon, a labourer, of Brent, was summoned for using a spear for catching salmon in the River Avon, near Brent Mill, on 5th inst., and Charles Shillabeer and Francis Bird were charged with aiding and abetting Trudgeon. Trudgeon did not appear. P.S. Yendell saw Trudgeon attempt to spear a fish just below Brent Mill Bridge. He missed the fish, and the other defendants who were on the opposite side of the river, pointed out to him where the fish was.—Bird now said he was a stranger to Brent, and went down by the side of the river with a friend, who was pointing out different points of the river to him. On returning they met Trudgeon, who told them he was trying to catch a fish, and they simply went down to look on.—The Bench dismissed the charge against Shillabeer and Bird, and fined Trudgeon £5 and costs, or two months' imprisonment.

"James Smith, a labourer of Brent, was charged by Water Bailiff Fishwick with having a spear and gaff in his possession for killing salmon at Brent on 6th instant... The same defendant, with Francis Rowalnd and James Trudgeon, were also charged by Fishwick with assaulting him on the 6th inst. at Ugborough... During this struggle with Trudgeon he kicked Fishwick twice in the back. Eventually they were handcuffed and taken to Totnes and locked up. On searching Smith, the bailiff found two dynamite cartridges and a small piece of fuse..." (Western Morning News 14th February 1893)

When a South Brent Parish Council meeting, chaired by Mr Kingwell, was held in the schoolroom in February 1898, concerns about drainage at Brent Mill, and the conditions off the road surface of the bridge, dominated discussion:

"it was reported that at Brent Mill a drain leading from Mr White's premises and ending in an open drain had a tendency to cause a nuisance.

"It was decided to call the attention of the sanitary inspector to the matter.

"Mr Kingwell reported an interview with Captain Gamble relative to a sign at the Brent Mill turning in the road...

"Veale spoke of the bad conditions of the road over Brent Mill Bridge, and it was decided to mention the matter to the County Inspector..." (Totnes Weekly Times 26th February 1898)

The condition of the road at Brent Mill bridge was sorry enough to prompt someone, signing themselves "BRENT MILL", to write to Totnes Times nine-months later, on Halloween 1898:

"Sir,—I was much amused this morning watching a man facing the County boundary stones at Brent Mill Bridge ; one on the main road and the other on the one leading to Glazebrook. I thought to myself it would be far better if the County Council faced the roads instead between the two points ; as at present they are disgrace to any Surveyor or contractor. They are a perfect quagmire and I believe if Mr Acock had to walk his wife over them to church on Sundays he would very soon make Mr Cole (not our vicar), the contractor, mend the roads and give the folks at Brent Mill a decent path to church. Trusting this may stir up the authorities a bit, especially as the winter is coming on, is my excuse for thus troubling you.—Yours truly,

BRENT MILL

October 31st, 1898." (Totnes Weekly Times 5th November 1898)

If the frequently quagmired road at Brent Mill wasn't enough, a record flood, reported in Totnes Times in February 1900, required local residents to be evacuated:

"At Brent Mill some of the cottagers had to be removed and carried to the houses of neighbours on higher levels. The 4.5 p.m. train from Brent to Kingsbridge was unable to proceed and from that time pended."

And, perhaps to the reporter's mind, worse still:



Above: iron cramps still visible in the parapet of Brent Mill bridge today

"Miss May's gardens at Rock House, South Brent, were seriously injured, hundreds of young shrubs, roots, plants, and flower pots being washed away." (Totnes Weekly Times 17th February 1900)

At South Brent Parish Council meeting in September that year, "the Sanitary Inspector reported the work at Brent Mill was not done, but steps were being taken to carry out the improvements needed." (Totnes Weekly Times 22nd December 1900)

A notification of infectious diseases, in March 1904, noted "three cases of enteric fever had occurred in South Brent, one case at Brent Mill being an imported case, which I regret to say terminated fatally." Further, "it was found necessary to close the Schools at South Brent and Rattery in consequence of epidemics of measles..." (Totnes Weekly Times 5th March 1904). So closing schools to halt the spread of infectious disease had taken place, matter of factly, in South Brent over a century before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to quagmire, flood and enteric fever, the pesky bridge in the "S" bend of Brent Mill was still claiming casualties. In May 1905, Western Times reported the bridge's first motorcar accident (which was into a herd of cattle):

"Between four and five o'clock last evening a motor-car, No. P475, belonging to Mr. J. O. Hunt. of Addlestone, Surrey, and conveying three gentlemen to Noss Mayo Friar, Plymouth, had a narrow escape from a terrible smash over Brent Mill Bridge into the River Avon. The road approaching the bridge has a nasty curve or two, and a down gradient. The car came around the corner rather fast, and met with a drove of cows belonging to Mr. W. J. Goodman, at the adjoining farm, with which it collided. One of the cows was injured, and the man in charge of them, Jervis Lang, narrowly escaped. The car, in trying to avert a collision, smashed against the thick parapet wall, and dislodged the structure underneath the coping stones. Fortunately these were strongly bound together with iron cramps, so that it restricted the stock. The car was much damaged." (Western Times 10th May 1905)

South Brent Parish Council's meeting in July 1907 recorded, despondently "No further development of the Brent Mill sewage improvement was reported. Tenders for the repair of the sewer over." (Western Times 19th July 1907)

The mood was altogether more jubilant the following year, in 1908, when:

"South Brent showed a spirit of advancing with the time, when on Saturday the inhabitants joined on a function in connection with the opening of the new gas works built by the Devon Gas Association for the lighting of the town, which has hitherto only had oil lamps. Messrs. Willey, Exeter, were the engineering contractors, and Messrs. Veale, South Brent, the building contractors. The works are situated in the valley, near the Brent Mill Bridge, with a beautiful rising gradient to the town. The chief officials and interested gentlemen of the neighbourhood were met at the works by the various representatives of the Devon Gas Association. The building and apparatus being inspected, Mr Rew explained the workings of the various parts to about fifty persons present, who afterwards adjourned to the Anchor Hotel for luncheon." (East & South Devon Advertiser. 9th May 1908)

Sadly, residents proved less happy, than had maybe been hoped, following the grand, pre-luncheon tour for "interested gentlemen" of the new gas works. Top of the agenda for the Parish Council meeting of November 1908 was the issue that:

"the insurance of officials had been effected.—Captain Stokes having refused to connect his property with the public sewer at Brent Mill... A petition from several inhabitants of Brent Mill was presented, complaining the nuisance caused by burning refuse in proximity to their dwellings, and it was decided to draw the mill owners attention to the matter..." (Western Morning News 17th November 1908)

The press, however, were keen to draw attention to the gentle classes residing in South Brent:

"Mr. J. W. B. Cranch, of South Brent, secured a fine trout from the River avon, by Brent Mill Bridge, on Wednesday evening. It weighed 1lb 4 1/2 ozs..."

"South Brent, on the Southern slope of Dartmoor, is full of visitors, who appear delighted with the neighbourhood. In addition to the resident encampment of the Plymouth, Devonport, and Stonehouse Boys' Brigade, and the present encampment by the special permission of the Misses Carew, of the Dartmouth Boys' Brigade, which is perhaps the only one to act as a "Guard of Honour" to the King, on his recent visit to Dartmouth, there are in Brent at the present time Admiral Bingham and family (Whinfield), Mr. Clark Hook and family (The Firs), Mr. Young (Wolmer), Mr. Daw (Green Bank), Com. and Mrs. Hasley (The Bungalow), Mr. Langford (Badworthy), Mr. Collam (Craig Moor), Dr. Thompson (Shipley), Mr. Webb and family (Corringdon), Capt. Tuke (Brent Moor House), Misses Jewel (Avoncott), Col. Adye (Wrangaton Manor), Col. Doyne (Mannamead, Avonwick), Mr. Douglas (Rock Cottage, Avonwick), Misses Lees (Clobell), Dr. Ryan (St. Michael's House), Prof. Butler and family (Noland House), Sir Kingstone James (Avonwick), Sir J. Stewart (Whitoxen), Messrs. Boswarva Foot and Hambly (Aish), and Dr. Knox (Bishop of Manchester), at the Vicarage. (Totnes Weekly Times 14th August 1909)

The spring of 1913 saw both a major fire at Brent Mill, and yet another accident on the infamous bridge.

In a report headlined "FIRE AT SOUTH BRENT," Exeter and Plymouth Gazette explain:

"Early yesterday morning a fire was discovered at Messrs. Chatworthy and Co.'s mills near Brent Mill Bridge. The factory consists of three blocks of buildings in a triangle. The middle block, where the fire occurred, was built about two years ago, and contained new machinery... between six and seven o'clock on Sunday morning smoke was seen issuing from the centre building. Some of the employees, who resided near by, were soon on the scene, but only to find the interior in a mass of flames. Mr. Goos, the local manager, and the Brent Fire Brigade, in command of Capt. Parnell, were present within half an hour. A considerable time elapsed before the pumping apparatus could be got into working order. Meanwhile, the fire had gained to such an extent that it was useless to try to save the block of buildings. Mr. Goss saw the position, and turned the whole of the mill leat into the

burning building. The roof and flooring, with some heavy machinery, fell with a crash. This inflammable addition caused the flames to leap higher. The fire engine had little effect on the burning furnace. The fire will not, it is hoped, have any effect on employment. The buildings saved are full of stock.” (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 14th April 1913)



Above: detail from old post card showing Brent Mill bridge and Ugborough Beacon. The presence of telegraph poles dates the photograph to post-1924.

Then, one month later:

“An accident of a serious nature, although not attended by bodily injury, occurred at the Brent Mill Bridge, South Brent, on Monday evening [11th May]. A motor-bicycle with side-car attached, and a motor car, should have cleared each other on the bridge. The drivers of both cars, trying to avoid accident, came into collision with the parapet of the bridge. The side-car escaped serious injury, but the motor car, occupied by Mr. H. F. Brunskill, was disabled and caused an obstruction the road for some time. A portion of the parapet of the bridge was knocked down, and fortunately, owing to the iron bands to the coping stones, the motor car was prevented from falling with its occupants over the side into the river some 15 feet below...” (Western Times 16th May 1913)

In their conclusion to the above report, The Western Times say, “until the bridge is widened and the parapets made higher, will the spot be regarded as in no sense safe. The parapets are so low that children can lean-over with unfortunate results in the past.” However, according to Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, a letter –whose authorship was not recorded– produced during a South Brent Parish Council meeting in January the next year “respecting the proposed improvement to Brent Mill Bridge stated that if the parapet were increased in height the danger would be greater than it is now.” (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 13th January 1914)

The next Brent Mill bridge accident, reported on 6th March 1914, headlined "OVER THE BRIDGE" and sub-headed "SOUTH BRENT DANGER SPOT" begins with a detailed description of the bridge's known-danger, and a note that the County Council had received a "strong representation" to deal with it:

"Brent Mills [sic] Bridge, which spans the River Avon just below the little town of South Brent, has long been before the local Council as a dangerous part of the thoroughfare. The bridge itself is narrow, the side walls very low, and the approach at each end is hidden by a bend in the road. The traffic is heavy, and all crosses the river over this bridge. Accidents are continually occurring, and many persons have had marvellous escapes. The Parish Council recently made a strong representation to the County Council to take the matter in hand to prevent any fatal result. Another serious calamity happened there the other night, when a motor cyclist, named Geo. Westlake, of 17, Paris-street, Exeter, was thrown over the bridge wall, and fell on the rocks about twenty feet below. His fall was, happily, broken by bushes and brambles, or he would have probably been killed instantaneously. Mr. Westlake and his brother-in-law, Mr. Charles Holland, of Exeter, had been to Plymouth, and were on their way back to Exeter. Mr. Westlake was riding in the side car. On turning the bend approaching the bridge the lights of Brent were in full view across the valley. This, apparently, made a peculiar reflection on the bridge. The driver did not know the road, and, consequently, crashed with force into the parapit [sic] wall. Mr. Westlake was tossed over the wall/ Mr. Holland was not much hurt, and called for assistance, as he could not find his companion and did not know what had become of him. Mr. Luscombe Wakeham, who had just passed the motor in the road, heard the smash, and came back. Mr. Edmunds and Mr. T. Rowhands were also there in a short time. By the aid of a lantern they searched about, and found the injured man among the big rocks in an unconscious state. Mr. W. Crocker also rendered assistance, and they got the unfortunate man out of the awkward position, and took him to the residence of Mr. Crocker near by, where he was attended by Dr. Style" (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 6th March 1914)

Pressure on the County Council to remedy the peril of Brent Mill bridge is mentioned again, in 1917, in a report in Western Times, entitled "A THRILLING FALL" subtitled "Horse and Rider's Miraculous Escape at South Brent":

"Another marvellous escape occurred on Wednesday at Brent Mill Bridge, South Brent. Mr. Hicks, of Plymouth, was riding restive horse into Brent, when, on crossing the bridge spanning the river Avon, the horse [fell] over the wall of the bridge into the river, some 25 feet below. Fortunately the water was deep, and restricted dashing on the rocks. Both Mr. Hicks, and the horse were unhurt, beyond the effects of a cold bath. The County Council's attention has been drawn to this dangerous bridge on several occasions, the side walls being only about two feet high." (Western Times 27th April 1917)

Post WW1, as for the 1914 accident reported by Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, Dr Style came to the aid of victims of Brent Mill bridge, this time reported by Western Times:

"At Brent Mill Bridge, 17 miles from Plymouth, on Tuesday [8th June] an Army motor-car, containing two soldiers and two nurses belonging to Plymouth Asylum, near Brent, failed to negotiate a sharp bend in the road, and jack crashed over the bridge parapet into the Avon. The river being low, the car fell on the rocks at a distance of 15 feet. The car stuck on the rocks in a vertical position, the engine pointing downward. One of the soldiers, Pte. Selwood, was badly cut about the legs and head. The driver (James Lucas) was not much hurt. One of the nurses was cut about the legs and arms; the other escaped with only minor injuries.

"Dr. Style and P.S. Tulpin was quickly on the scene, and rendered all possible assistance. About twenty tins of petrol were thrown in the river, and will seriously affect the trout, as the water is very low at present." (Western Times 11th June 1920)

An article in Western Morning News, 19th April 1924, entitled Post Office Telegraphs, provides notice "hereby given, pursuant to the provisions of the Telegraph Act, 1863 to 1920, that his Majesty's Postmaster-General...INTENDS TO PLACE A TELEGRAPHIC LINE... FROM BRENT MILL BRIDGE TO A POINT NEAR LITTLE BRENT MILL, LINHAY, VIA AISH LANE END."

A 13th May 1924 article headed "DANGEROUS DRIVING" tells of "a motorist heavily fined at Totnes":

"Vivian Graham Lloyd, of London, was fined £10 and had his license endorsed... for driving a car to the public danger at South Brent on April 20[th]. P.C. Mitchel said he was near Brent Mill Bridge, when defendant drove a two-seater car round the corner on the right-hand side at least at 40 miles an hour... There were 13 previous convictions for various motor offences... Maj. Conman said this was a most dangerous place, and the general opinion of motorists was that at this spot motors should not go faster than between five and six miles per hour." (Western Morning News 13th May 1924)

The same paper, in the November 1924, recounts historic accidents at Brent Mill bridge, adding:

"More recently a farm hand was riding a horse to Brent market, when meeting a motor on the bridge, the animal plunged and threw the rider headlong into a deep pool over the bridge.

Last Saturday night a lorry or heavy car ran into the bridge wall and knocked 30ft. of it into the river and then escaped unidentified.

The County Council, it is understood, have had this dangerous bridge under their improvement programme for a long time." (Western Morning News 19th November 1924)

July 1925 saw yet another motor accident on the bridge:

"MOTORIST OVER BRIDGE

Headlong Fall Into River at South Brent

Brent Mill Bridge, South Brent, yesterday, added another marvel to the numerous accidents occurring there. The bridge is narrow, with low-lying walls, and situated between two blind corners, being in the angle of an "S". A motor-cyclist was coming from the direction of Plymouth, and in turning the bend found himself faced with a car on the bridge. Swerving to avoid a collision, the machine dashed against the wall, throwing the rider headlong in over the river. The bicycle was badly smashed, but beyond a bath the rider was not much the worse for his experience. It's understood the County Council has long since decided to improve the very dangerous spot." (Western Times 10th July 1925)

As we've seen, construction of the new bridge finally started in February 1926, with its long-awaited opening taking place at 3PM on Monday 10th October 1927. Western Times reports:

"REMOVING A DANGER

Opening of a New Bridge Over the Avon at Brent

...After many representations the County Council have at last removed the danger by building an additional bridge, with an open vision, some yards further down the river. The work commenced a year ago last February is now completed. The new bridge is a real art of workmanship as well as in design. One large span covers the river and there is a smaller span on each side, one of which provides a roadway by the riverside, and the other is spare in case of flood or other emergency. The whole of the double bend is now abolished. The opening ceremony took place at three on Monday." (Western Times 14th October 1927)



Above: view of Brent Mill bridge from the new bridge.