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The historic bridges of the River Aire

In recent years, investigators at Historic England have been exploring the stock of bridges within the catchment of the River Aire, mostly in West and North Yorkshire. There is increasing awareness that bridges across water, in particular road and foot bridges, face a variety of threats (from flood, traffic damage and proposals for strengthening and widening, if not all three) and are a particularly vulnerable but under-appreciated and poorly recorded class of heritage asset. The project was initiated after recent high-profile cases of bridges collapsing during flood events.

In the course of the project we visited a large sample of bridges, of all periods and regardless of designation status, in order to incorporate first-hand knowledge of their design and evolution into the process of assessing structural development and historical significance. This paper will discuss our methodology, results and conclusions, including discussions about:

- the ways in which the significance of historic bridges is assessed;
- how these structures are researched and listed; and
- how they can be best protected for the future.

Marcus Jecock and Lucy Jessop are Senior Investigators at Historic England in York, specialising in landscape archaeology and architectural history respectively.

The case of Tadcaster Bridge

On 29 December 2015, following record rainfall amounts deposited across much of northern England by Storm Eva a few days previously, a sizeable portion of the historic, Grade-II listed, bridge across the River Wharfe at Tadcaster, North Yorkshire, collapsed. The event, and the subsequent need to inform decisions about its future, exposed how little was actually known about the history and significance of the bridge, and how little information resided in either of Historic England's two national datasets – the National Heritage List for England (NHLE) and the National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE) - or the local Historic Environment Record (HER).

This paper will explore the ways in which investigators from Historic England researched the history and development of the bridge, using evidence from the fabric of the bridge itself as well as extensive archival and published resources. Our work revealed the importance of this crossing point of the Wharfe as the historical entry point into the Ainsty - or outer borders - of the city of York, making each of the succession of medieval bridges that have stood in this position a place of ceremony as well as a practical structure. In particular, we considered the forerunners to the present Tadcaster Bridge and the successive campaigns of rebuilding and extension which created the bridge we have today. Our resulting report brought together all of these strands into a synthetic report which is helping Historic England, the county Highways Authority and local groups make key decisions on the bridge's future.

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