

Valley of Invention: bridges within the Ironbridge Gorge

Roger White, IICH, University of Birmingham

Abstract

While The Iron Bridge is justly celebrated as a monument with World Heritage significance, few realise how important the other crossing points within the gorge were to the development of the technology of bridge building from the 18th to the 21st centuries. This was especially the case with the early cast iron technologies pioneered by the Iron Bridge itself. The aim of this paper is to examine the range of bridges, extant, planned and lost, which have spanned the unstable banks of the River Severn within the Ironbridge Gorge. In such a testing environment, bridges had to be adaptable to a locale whose instability has only recently been fully understood and was certainly not understood at the time when most of the bridges were constructed. In considering the bridges, both planned and constructed, the gorge itself will be a focus of the paper, drawing out the significance of the ferries that predated the fixed crossing points provided by the bridge and concluding with reflections on the continuing importance and significance of the bridges of the gorge. In particular, the bridges will be used as a way to explore how the gorge itself was seen as a means to connect or divide the communities on either side. This paper also forms an introduction and contextualisation of the tour of the surviving bridges of the gorge which will form a feature of the conference.