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# THE TURNPIKE ROAD TO CRAMOND AND QUEENSFERRY

BARCLAY S. FRASER

**I**N TURNPIKE DAYS the road that linked Edinburgh with the narrows of the Firth of Forth and the Queensferry Passage was of great importance, carrying a very large part of the traffic between the capital and the north of Scotland. Its construction proved no easy task. Not only did it have to thread its way through rolling hills – Corstorphine, Leny, Craigie, Mons – but running as it did across the grain of the country, it had two more serious obstacles to negotiate, the Water of Leith and the River Almond, each flowing through a deep gorge. It took eighty years before the engineering problems were satisfactorily solved but towards the end of the turnpike period the short but sweeping boast in 1845 that it ‘cannot be exceeded in excellence’ was probably justified at least as regards the Midlothian section.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Midlothian Turnpike Act of 1751 responsibility for the construction and maintenance of the road was given to the Cramond District Road Trust for Midlothian and to the Queensferry Road Trust for West Lothian.<sup>2</sup> In 1821 a third trust, the Cramond Bridge Trust, was formed to administer a pontage to pay for a new bridge over the Almond.<sup>3</sup> By 1851 the debt had been paid off and there was a surplus in hand for a maintenance fund, so the Bridge Trust was wound up and responsibility for the river crossing reverted to the two Road Trusts. The Minutes of the Queensferry Road Trust of West Lothian not being available, only the work of the other two Trusts can be followed with certainty. Detailed minutes for the Cramond Road Trust do not start until 1757.<sup>4</sup>

The Cramond District Road Trust had other

heavy duties besides those connected with the Queensferry Road. In particular all roads between Edinburgh, Leith, Newhaven and Granton to the west of Leith Walk lay in their district. With the continuing spread of the New Town, and great harbour developments at Leith, Newhaven and later Granton, an increasingly complicated network of roads had to be made and administered in that area. These however do not concern us here.

The first task of the trust after 1751 was to bring the already existing Statute Labour roads from Edinburgh to Cramond Brig up to a suitable turnpike standard. Starting from the West Port at the end of the Grassmarket the road passed via King’s Stables Road to Kirkbraehead (now the West End), then by the present Queensferry Street and the steep descent of Bell’s Brae to the Water of Leith (now Dean) Village (see fig. 1). The bridge here was repaired and considerable work done on the difficult approaches at both sides. At the head of Dean Path, where stood what was then called the Dean Village, the road turned sharply to the west. Between the present Blackhall and Muttonhole (now Davidsons Mains) it ran straight along a line part of which now forms Corbiehill Road. It then turned along Main Street and continued west through the present public park, and so on well to the north of the present Queensferry Road to Old Cramond Brig. This bridge, originally medieval but reconstructed in the seventeenth century, was now extensively repaired. In West Lothian a similar remaking of the old road was no doubt carried out, perhaps along a line running in places slightly to the north of the present road, where indications of an older road can still be traced in



Fig. 1. Part of the Plan of Edinburgh and Adjacent Grounds engraved by A. Bell for the *Scots Magazine*, July 1759, from a large-scale survey by John Fergus and Robert Robinson. Note the toll at Kirkbraehead. (Courtesy of Andrew Fraser; photograph, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, C44915.)

Dalmeny estate. A branch road from Leith was started in 1758, which entailed straightening the road which ran from Old Leith Bridge to join the main road at Muttonhole.<sup>5</sup> The erection of milestones in 1766 on the Edinburgh and Leith to Cramond Brig roads may be taken as marking the completion of the Cramond District's stretch of road (see fig. 2).

This was however only the beginning of this work. The line of the road from Leith to Muttonhole, it is true, running straight over easy country, has been maintained ever since (Ferry Road), but the main Queensferry Road with its two river crossings was subject to continuing alteration.

From the start the hill down Bell's Brae proved

unsatisfactory, partly from its steepness, partly because its maintenance was left to the Edinburgh Baxters in return for their freedom from tolls between the City and the Water of Leith Mills, an arrangement that resulted in continual disputes. In 1783 two alternative routes were investigated, and Bell's Mill (Belford) was chosen as the site for the new bridge in preference to Stockbridge (in spite of the name there was only a ford there in 1783, though probably with a wooden footbridge).<sup>6</sup> It proved an unfortunate choice. The approach road from the head of Bell's Brae gave much trouble. The bridge itself when first built was so unsafe that access had for a time to be prohibited, so that all that had been



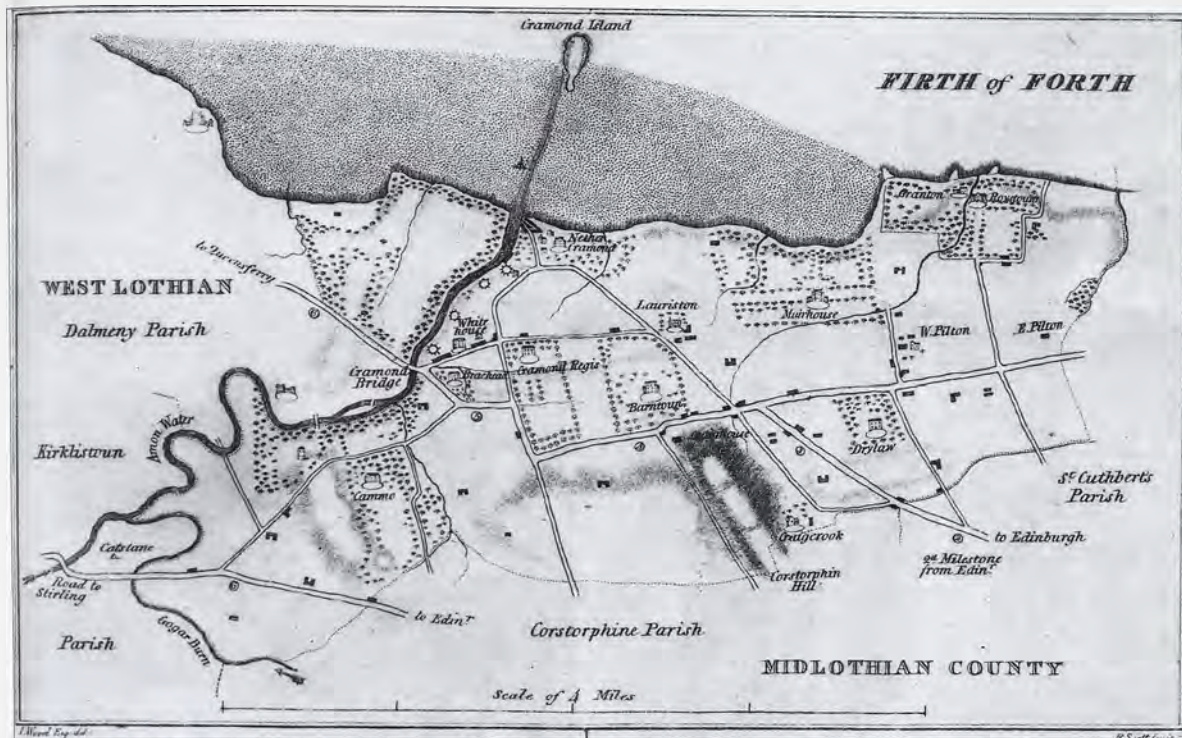


Fig. 2. Map of the Parish of Cramond, 1794, including the milestones along the turnpike road from Edinburgh to Queensferry. (From John Philp Wood, *Ancient and Modern State of the Parish of Cramond, Edinburgh 1794*; photograph, RCAHMS, D10350.)

achieved was the blocking of the ford previously used! At one time a complete rebuilding was actually contemplated and the surveyor narrowly avoided being sacked. Finally Captain Rudyerd, a military engineer, was called in and contrived to strengthen the new bridge effectively by 1788. But after five years and a much greater sum than the original estimate of £1000 had been spent on the work, Rudyerd's bill for alterations in itself amounted to £300 (this is not the present Belford Bridge which replaced the original in 1885-87). The approach roads to the bridge, following roughly the line of the present Belford Road and Queensferry Terrace, formed the main Queensferry Road until the 1830s when the Dean Bridge was built.

Ironically the rejected bridge at Stockbridge had in fact been undertaken in 1786 on a petition by the

inhabitants and had been completed in a matter of months at a cost of £500. Of this £250 was advanced by the Cramond District Trust – reluctantly because of their Bell's Mill commitments – on condition that the Middle District Trust should make the approach road from the corner of Queen Street and Frederick Street. This marks a change in attitude since the 1770s when the Cramond Trust concerned itself with, among other matters, the construction of Princes Street. The original intention, then, was merely to link the New Town with the northern suburb of Stockbridge, but in 1794 when Stockbridge had been connected to the main road at Blinkbonny by what is now Craigleith Road a new connection with Queensferry had been made (see fig. 3). This was a particularly useful route for stone carts from Craigleith Quarry supplying material for the New





Fig. 3. Part of the Plan of Edinburgh and Leith with the Roads Adjacent by Thomas Bonnar, 1811. This plan was produced 'for the express purpose of fixing the rates of charge for Hackney Coaches and Chairs which may be taken beyond the bounds of the City'; distances from the stand at the Tron Church are marked in miles (Roman numerals) and furlongs (Arabic). (Courtesy of Andrew Fraser; photograph, RCAHMS, D10496.)

Town. Incidentally both as a petitioner for the bridge and as an uncommonly hard bargainer over the purchase of land for this road Henry Raeburn, the artist, reveals himself as a man of keen business instincts.

After 1809 the main sphere of activity moved west. In that year the administration of the very inefficient and uncomfortable Queensferry Passage was reorganised and new piers and other facilities were provided according to plans by John Rennie. Although the coming of steam navigation required extensive alterations within a dozen years, the reforms of 1809 inaugurated a new era. It was

accordingly followed two years later by an Act which dealt with the West Lothian approach roads from both west and east.<sup>7</sup> The road from Linlithgow was given turnpike status for the first time and placed under the Queensferry Road Trust of West Lothian. The West Lothian section of the Edinburgh to Queensferry Road was at the same time to be improved. The next few years probably gave us the main lines of the Queensferry Road within West Lothian as it existed before the making of the Forth Road Bridge in 1964.

The question of the Cramond Brig now came to a head (fig. 4). From the start expensive repairs had





Fig. 4. Old Cramond Brig, 1965. (RCAHMS, ED/1019.)

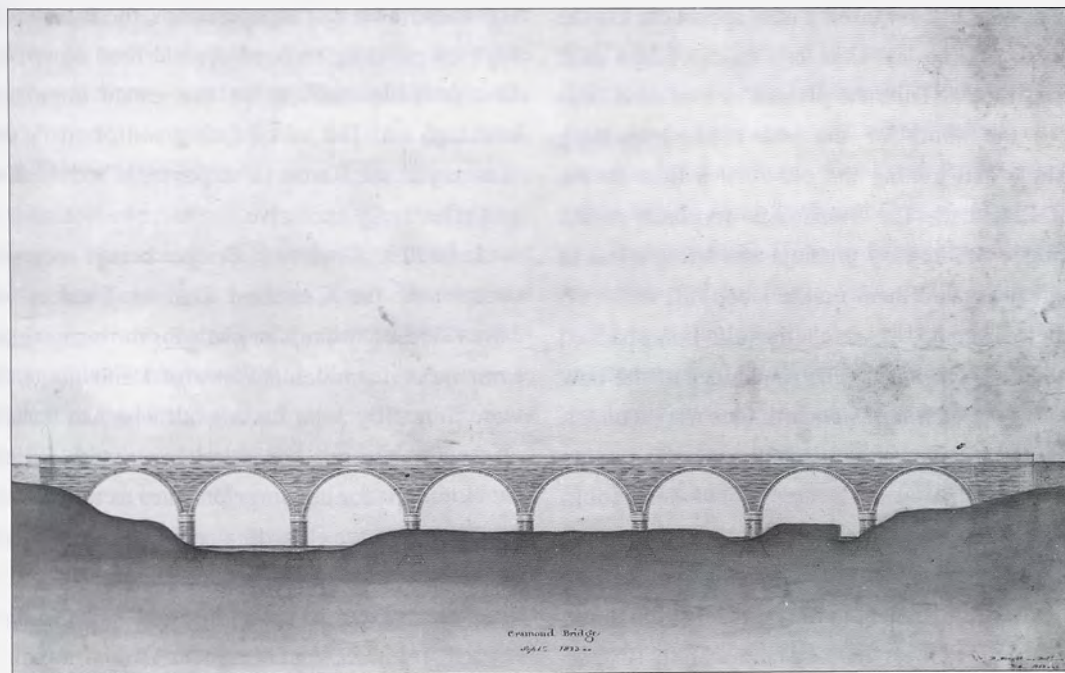


Fig. 5. Elevation of the new Cramond Bridge designed by John Rennie, drawn by D. Wright, 1823. (RCAHMS, ED/2783.)

been necessary every few years after heavy spates, because a bend in the river brought the current obliquely against the piers. Costs were shared between the two Trusts. In 1813 John Paterson of Leith reported that 800 to 1000 tons of stone would be immediately required to fill the cavity beneath the bridge and that for future safety it would be necessary to change the course of the river. In 1814 Robert Stevenson was consulted. In 1820 Stevenson and Rennie, investigating independently, each advised the building of a new bridge that would cross river and gorge as well. Rennie's stone bridge of eight arches was ultimately preferred to Stevenson's iron bridge, but on the site chosen by Stevenson, a little upstream from the old bridge, where the present bridge stands (fig. 5). As Rennie died in 1821 it was left to his son John to carry on the project, with James Milne as resident engineer. The total cost was about £13,000. As previously noted the bridge was under the control of the Cramond Bridge Trust from 1820 to 1851.

The new bridge required a new approach. On the Midlothian side no less than 2½ miles of new road were constructed. This, the present line of road, was made to the south of the old road, bypassing Muttonhole and joining the old road a little to the west of Blackhall. The immediate approach to the new bridge with its easy gradient and straight run in was a great improvement on the steep hill with two right-angled bends by which the old humpbacked bridge had been reached. The remainder of the new road was of equally high standard. One may wonder, however, why it was not made to curve round to rejoin the old road at the nearest convenient point. The new line, though admittedly straighter, cut across Corstorphine Hill at a higher point than formerly and immediately to the east had to dip down to a wide hollow near a flooded marl pit. A deep cutting through the hill and a 14 foot causeway over

the hollow today conceal the original difficulties of the terrain. The minutes record discussion as to whether to the east of the hill the road should go by Marchfield (as was ultimately decided) or by Craigcrook, but are silent on the not immediately obvious advantages of this new line which entailed also the construction of a connection with the Leith Ferry Road at Quality Street.

Whether the new line of road was in the public interest or not, it certainly was in the interest of the Ramsay family, owners of the Barnton estate through which both the old and new road passed. As far back as 1792 William Ramsay, the banker recently turned landowner, had entertained schemes for diverting the Queensferry Road to the south and since then lesser roads to the north and west had been pushed further north and further west, increasing the area of uninterrupted park land on the estate. The diversion of the turnpike road then – however brought about – fulfilled a long cherished policy of estate improvement by the Ramsays. It is perhaps significant that, during operations, the Barnton factor kept on pressing to have the old road closed at the first possible moment so that estate improvement could go on. The still existing wall, built in ashlar masonry at the Ramsays' expense, is both handsome and effectively exclusive.

In 1825, Cramond Bridge being successfully completed, the Cramond District Trustees asked James Jardine to prepare plans for the bridging of the even more formidable Water of Leith gorge. They were joined by John Learmonth who had feued part of the Dean estate across the river with a view to developing it for housing. Disputes as to who should design the bridge – Jardine or the architect Gillespie Graham – led to an appeal to Thomas Telford who finally consented to act as designer, with Jardine as resident engineer.<sup>8</sup>

The present Dean Bridge with its four arches and



its height of 106 feet was completed in 1832. The angle and gradient of the approach road from town were awkward – unavoidably so as the houses of Lynedoch Place were already built. Later attempts to alter the level of the road have left a difficult corner to this day.

By 1832, then, so excellent a road linked Edinburgh to the Queensferry Passage that only the easing of a few gradients remained to be done. In the 1840s however, the Queensferry Passage ceased to be the main gateway to the north. Granton and Burntisland harbours were built and soon linked to the chain of railway communications. Before the end of the century the first Forth Bridge made the Queensferry narrows, though not the Queensferry Road, important once again. When at last the Forth Road Bridge (1964) restored to the Queensferry Road its strategic importance, the West Lothian part of the old turnpike road was replaced by a dual carriageway. The Midlothian section, however, was of such a remarkable standard that it has so far [written in 1970!] contrived to accommodate both the through traffic and the local traffic from the suburbs which now enclose it. Rennie's bridge has given place to something wider but less beautiful, and Telford's masterpiece is now a bottle-neck for the rush-hour commuter.

In the absence of the early Cramond Trust Minutes and any West Lothian Trust Minutes the exact dating of the erection of the first turnpike-gates is impossible. Three however in the early days were sufficient to command the strategic points, the exits from Edinburgh and Leith and the bridge over the Almond. There was never a gate at Queensferry, perhaps because all through traffic was controlled at the North Queensferry toll. Later the increasingly complicated network of roads at the approaches to Edinburgh and Leith necessitated the setting up of further gates at the Edinburgh-Leith end of the road.

At the exit from Edinburgh a toll-house existed at Kirkbraehead by 1756 (see fig. 1). It was moved to the junction of Bell's Mill Road and Bell's Brae in 1803. In 1844 to improve access to the Dean Bridge it was moved to the site of the house still called Drumsheugh Toll at the head of Belford Road.<sup>9</sup>

In 1766 a bar was erected at the ford at Stockbridge to deal with cattle trying to evade the Kirkbraehead toll in connection with All Hallows Fair, held that year in the enclosures to the east of Kirkbraehead. Next year it was made permanent and a house was being suggested in 1783, three years before the opening of the bridge.

In 1804 Blinkbonny toll was erected with a house and bars across both the Bell's Mill and the Stockbridge roads (see fig. 3). In 1822 a checkbar was erected further east on the Stockbridge road to prevent evasion by stone carts from Craighleith Quarry.

After the building of Telford's Dean Bridge tolls were levied 'at the Dean Village across the new road', i.e. at the top of Orchard Brae and where the Bell's Mill road joined the new road (at Queensferry Terrace) there was a toll-house. There were also three bars across the road at Comely Bank, one at the junction of Ann Street and Dean Park Crescent and other bars at Dean Park and Comely Bank.

The exit from Leith to Muttonhole was guarded by a turnpike-bar to the west of Old Leith Bridge. In 1758 a tollhouse was agreed on. In 1773 it was moved west to north of the churchyard, and in 1813 further west to Leith Fort, 'because openings into the new docks gave opportunities for evasion of tolls'.

The Cramond District Minutes contain a reference to an account to be paid for a toll-house at Cramond Brig in 1773. This may have been a contribution to the West Lothian Trust as contemporary maps shows one only, on the west side. In 1804 a bar and house were erected on the east side.



With Rennie's bridge a pontage toll-house was built at the south end of the bridge and a new West Lothian toll-house at the other end.

Many relics of the Water of Leith crossings still exist. The first is represented by the single-arched bridge in the Dean Village; Bell's Brae and Dean Path show the lines of approach to it. The house at the top and some at the bottom of Bell's Brae were part of the scene when the trust began work there and the Baxters are commemorated in seventeenth-century carvings at the east end of the bridge and above the 'tolbooth' door.

A road leads up from the old ford situated a little upstream of the one section of the second road – via Bell's Mill – that has not been overlaid by the present Belford Road. The house called 'Drumsheugh Toll' at the head of Belford Road indicates the final site of the toll house. The difference in level of pavement and road in Lynedoch Place suggests the extent of excavation required to connect with Telford's Dean Bridge. That bridge itself is best appreciated from below.

On the Midlothian stretch of the Queensferry Road four imposing milestones are to be seen on the north side – near Queensferry Terrace, Columba Road, Quality Street and the Drum Brae respectively; the first of these is on the road from the Dean Bridge, and therefore unlikely to ante-date 1832. The five-mile stone, in a different style and with an inscription explaining that the distance is measured from the GPO 'to regulate the post horse duties payable by hackney coaches' (erected 1824, restored 1923), is on the south side beyond the junction with the Maybury Road and seems to measure the old Bell's Mill route from the General Post Office, which was then in

Waterloo Place.<sup>10</sup>

The old road that ran west from Main Street, Davidsons Mains, can be traced as a slight depression at the top of the hill in Davidsons Mains Public Park. It is to be clearly seen where it zig-zags down from Braehead to old Cramond Brig supported on its embankment by a retaining wall that has obviously been raised above its original level. A well constructed culvert emerges on the river side of the road. Haughpark Cottage, though altered at one end in brick, looks as though it might well have been the toll-house erected in 1804 on the Midlothian side of the old Brig. On the parapet of the Brig itself are the dates of some – not all – reconstructions and repairs. The present bridge and embankment on the main road mark the site of Rennie's Bridge.

The West Lothian turnpike road has largely been obliterated for the first mile and a half by the approach road to the Forth Road Bridge, except where it mounts the hill by the cutting at the Edinburgh Gate of Dalmeny. There are indications of an old road on the right that went over instead of cutting through the hill there. Beyond the junction with the Kirkliston Road the wall on the north side is a relic of the turnpike road and now above and now below the present road gives a good idea of what the old gradients were. There are milestones on the north side at NT 177757 and at NT 151777, but none between, though one is marked on the 1965 Ordnance Survey 1 inch map.<sup>11</sup>

The west end of the Hawes Inn belongs to turnpike days and the garage was once the stables. Immediately opposite is the most important of the piers – altered for later use – with a charming lighthouse by Rennie.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

**Editorial Note:** This paper was prepared in 1970 by the late Barclay Fraser in connection with his work for the Lothian Turnpike Research Project organised by Basil Skinner in the Department of Extra-mural Studies of the University of Edinburgh. It has recently been recovered from old files relating to the work of that Research Group and is now published for the first time. Mr Fraser's work derived almost entirely from his researches into the Minute Books and other records of the Cramond Road Trust, now deposited in the Scottish Record Office (SRO). The history of road administration before the Midlothian Turnpike Act of 1751 is outlined in R. G. Heddle, 'Road Administration in Midlothian in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC)*, 34 (part 3 1983), pp. 105-118.

- 1 *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. 11 (Edinburgh 1845), Parish of Queensferry, p. 9.
- 2 24 Geo. II, c.35 (Local Acts).
- 3 1&2 Geo. IV, c.120 (Local Acts).
- 4 SRO, CO2/6/1-26: Trustees for Turnpike Roads, Cramond Road Trust Minutes (including Minutes of the Trustees of the Queensferry District, Edinburgh), 1751-1883. Volume 1 (1751-81) actually commences in December 1757, with only occasional references to the earlier years, of little consequence. CO2/6/9: Minute Book for the Cramond Bridge District, 1821-51.
- 5 For the straightening of the Ferry Road north of Warriston, see Zella Ashford, 'The Lands of Warriston', *BOEC*, New Series 3 (1994), p. 1 and fig. 3.
- 6 Cumberland Hill, *Historic Memorials and Reminiscences of Stockbridge*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh 1887), pp. 1-4.
- 7 51 Geo. III, c.63 (Local Acts).
- 8 Basil C. Skinner, 'The Origins of the Dean Bridge Project', *BOEC*, 30 (1959), pp. 166-168.
- 9 The present 'Drumsheugh Toll', designed by George Washington Browne, replaced the original toll-house on the north side of the east end of Belford Road in 1891.
- 10 Bonnar's Plan (reproduced here as fig. 3), and the accompanying 'Regulations for Hackney Coaches' and tables of distances (from the Tron Kirk) and fares agreed by the Town Council in June 1811, are included in *The Original Edinburgh Almanack, and Universal Scots Register* (Edinburgh 1816), pp. 44-49. The fact that the 5-mile stone is less than a full mile from the old 4-mile stone at Drum Brae may reflect the shortening of the route when the Dean Bridge was opened.
- 11 Sheet 62.