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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC110

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90290);

Taken into State care: 1911 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STIRLING OLD BRIDGE



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STIRLING OLD BRIDGE

SYNOPSIS

Stirling Old Bridge is one of only a small number of medieval stone bridges surviving in Scotland. It was probably built c.1500 and remained the lowest principal crossing-point over the River Forth until 1832, when it was closed to wheeled traffic following the construction of the 'new bridge' nearby. The 'old bridge' continues in use as a pedestrian crossing.

The bridge, 82m long and built of squared rubble, is formed of four semi-circular arches supported on three piers with triangular cut-waters, above which are refuges on the bridge carriageway itself. Archways once guarded the approaches and the refuges were originally roofed.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1297 - the Scottish host, commanded by William Wallace and Andrew Moray, defeats an English army at the battle of Stirling Bridge (11 Sept), one of the most strategic crossing-points in medieval Scotland.
- 1361/91 - a ferry replaces the bridge, probably because of its poor condition.
- 1407 - the bridge is described as very ruinous on account of its great age.
- c.1500 - the present bridge (the Old Bridge) is built to replace the previous (timber?) bridge.
- 1502 - a chapel at Bridge-end, for use by sick folk, is mentioned in the *Exchequer Rolls*. This is very probably the 'St Roque's Chapel' mentioned as being at the Bridge-end of Stirling in 1503, and in which James IV gives two offerings in 1505.
- 1527 – James V crosses the bridge following his escape from Falkland Palace.
- 1571 - Archbishop John Hamilton of St Andrews is executed in Stirling. Local tradition has it he is hanged from a gibbet erected on the bridge.
- 1745 - General Blakeney, commanding the government garrison in **Stirling Castle**, orders the destruction of the bridge's most southerly arch to prevent Prince Charles Edward's Jacobite army from entering Stirling in the early days of the '45 Rising.
- 1749 - the destroyed south arch is rebuilt.
- 1831/2 - the bridge is closed to wheeled traffic following the opening of a new road bridge a short distance down-river, designed by Robert Stevenson.
- 1911 – the 'old bridge' is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- In 1905, the foundations of two piers from an earlier bridge were found a short distance up-stream. This predecessor bridge probably had a wooden superstructure.

- During repairs to the bridge following it coming into state care, excavations at the NE end revealed three earlier causeways underlying the existing road, possibly representing previous attempts to ease the gradient of the access.
- In 1997 – the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Stirling Bridge – two watching briefs on works in close proximity to the bridge revealed little of archaeological significance.
- 1990s – underwater survey undertaken by Colin Martin

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The Old Bridge is believed to date to the late 15th- / early 16th-century. It measures 82m in length, with a carriageway 4.5m wide. Built of coursed squared rubble, the structure comprises four semi-circular arches spanning the river, which are carried on three piers built on massive oval foundations. Each pier has triangular cut-waters. Those closest to the banks are finished with splayed tops about half-way up to the parapets, while those on the central piers continue up to the parapets in square form, where they serve as pedestrian refuges. The refuges were originally roofed, their walls continuing into crow-stepped gables. At either end of the bridge was an archway, fitted with gates (as illustrated in one of John Slezer's drawings). The arches were removed in the 1700s and replaced by the present small square pillars topped with pyramidal fins. The roofs of the refuges were removed around the same time.
- The bridge is extended at either end by abutments that run well back from the river bank and carry the approaches. The north abutment is partly built at an angle to the rest of the bridge.

Social Overview:

- The Old Bridge is an important and familiar piece of the town's cultural heritage. Though closed to wheeled traffic since 1832, it still provides a vital link for pedestrians and cyclists passing between the suburb of Causewayhead, to the north of the river, and the town's historic core (and to Sainsbury's superstore!).
- The bridge is intimately associated with William Wallace, although it wasn't the actual bridge associated in popular consciousness with his famous victory over Edward I's English army in 1297. This continues a historic trend, for an image of a stone bridge appears on the medieval seals of the burgh council.
- There is occasional low-level vandalism, particularly at the refuges mid-way along the carriageway.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is not known how the bridge was incorporated into the late medieval spiritual life of the town. However, the *Treasurer's Accounts* for 1506-7, and the Registers of the Great Seal in the 16th and 17th centuries mention a chapel dedicated to St Roque (also Rocco/Roch) at the Bridgend of Stirling. The legendary French-born saint (born c.1295) is associated with curing people during the Black Death. Stirling Old Bridge is the only known location of the saint's cult in Scotland.

- The bridge currently appears to have no spiritual use.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The bridge is an impressive structure, even without its archways and roofed refuges. The cobbled carriageway adds to the feeling of antiquity it exudes. The pointed pillars at either end serve as attractive framing devices for the walk across.
- The bridge is impressively set against the broad waters of the River Forth. Despite being close to the vehicular New Bridge to its east, the old bridge has only the minimum of noise disturbance. The dominant landscape is not urban but semi-rural, the green and woody river bank to north and south creating a pastoral immediate setting. Urban and suburban Stirling impacts only in the middle distance, and even here the view of central Stirling is one of the prettiest humanised vistas the bridge could have. The view to the NE, towards Abbey Craig and the Wallace Monument and the rugged hill landscape centred on Dumyat, is even more stunning.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When precisely was the bridge built? No records are known which help shed light on the mystery.
- Where precisely was/were the earlier bridge/s, particularly that which figured pivotally in the famous battle of Stirling Bridge? Further work is needed to confirm Colin Martin's underwater survey work of the 1990s to locate earlier bridges in the immediate vicinity.
- Where precisely was the chapel of St Roque?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The structure is one of the best-preserved late medieval bridges in Scotland, of which there are few.
- The bridge played an important strategic and economic role in Stirling's development. Until the construction of the New Bridge in 1832 (and then the Kincardine Bridge in 1934), Stirling Old Bridge was the lowest crossing-point on the River Forth.
- The location – though not the bridge itself - has earned lasting fame as the site of the battle of Stirling Bridge (1297), where William Wallace and Andrew Moray famously defeated the mighty Edward I's English army.

Associated Properties:

(*other locally related places*) - **Stirling Castle**; Stirling New Bridge.

(*other impressive Scottish medieval bridges*) – Auld Brig (Ayr); Brig o' Balgownie and Bridge of Dee (both Aberdeen); Bridge of Earn; Canongate Bridge (Jedburgh); Devorgilla's Bridge (Dumfries); Nungate Bridge (Haddington); Tweed Bridge (Peebles).

Keywords:

bridge; cut-water; pier; carriageway; refuge; abutment

Selected Bibliography:

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