

THE BUTTERFLY BRIDGE

CROSSING THE GENERATIONS

THE BUTTERFLY BRIDGE & CLOCKBURN FORD

The Butterfly Bridge, one of the best known bridges on the River Derwent, spans the river at a location that has served as a crossing through the ages. The bridge here links the east and west banks of the river, between the settlements of Whickham and Winlaton Mill, at a site that has provided local people with access across the Derwent via a ford or bridge for centuries - if not millennia.

The current right of way has existed since Norman times and it may even have been in use during the Roman occupation. The ford was long used as a means of crossing the river and it formed part of the principle north-south route between Durham, Northumberland and beyond for hundreds of years; this route continuing from here, to cross the River Tyne via a ford at Newburn. This was the road taken by the heavy artillery unit of Cromwell's army which forded the Derwent on 15th July 1650, on its way to the Battle of Dunbar, during the English Civil War.

There have been at least four bridges on or near the site of the current bridge dating back to the 18th century, which on old maps was named Eel's Haugh. The most recent 'old' Butterfly Bridge, constructed in 1950, was destroyed by the great flood of 2008, when, after two days of torrential rain, on 4th and 5th September, the bridge fell victim to a flood that, not for the first time, turned the river into a raging torrent.



From Hadrian's Legions ...

Acknowledgements for Images: Photograph T.H. Dickinson courtesy of Chris Hamilton; Illustrations Peter Wright

The first 'modern' bridge on the site was constructed in 1842, in part, by local strongman and stonemason John English, who was known as 'Lang Jack' or the Tyneside Samson. This bridge was destroyed by a flood in 1902. The central stone pier - from the first stone-built bridge - was retained in the construction of the 1950 bridge, but this was lost in the September 2008 flood. The current bridge was installed in June 2011.

The Butterfly Bridge's iconic local reputation is based partly upon its name, indicating the highly regarded environmental status of the lower Derwent valley since Victorian times. The bridge is named because of the rich wildlife of the Derwent valley, a haunt of Victorian naturalists and in particular, butterfly-collectors. Families escaping the urban deprivation of the period had a comparatively short journey to reach such a point in the valley where, free from the gross industrial pollution of the time, they were able to enjoy the pleasures of an idyllic rural countryside. Today the bridge still carries an important right of way across the River Derwent and retains a strong cultural profile.



The Butterfly Bridge in 1904 - this bridge preceded the one washed away in the flood of September 2008



... to Cromwell's Army

The Butterfly Bridge – Crossing the Generations was a joint initiative between the five local history societies (in Sunnyside, Swalwell, Whickham, Winlaton and Winlaton Mill), located respectively on the east and west banks of the River Derwent, that collaborated to deliver this project. Building bridges between societies around the work of telling the story of the Butterfly Bridge.

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For more information: www.butterflybridge.co.uk