

OXYGRAINS OLD BRIDGE, RISHWORTH, CALDERDALE.



Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge; this unpretentious but attractive little packhorse bridge, probably built in the early 17th century spans Oxygrains Beck near to Rishworth in the Ryburn Valley. To the rear is the huge stone bridge that carries the A672 Oldham to Ripponden road. February 2010.

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Beneath a scouring, steel-eyed early February sky threatening a fall of sleet, Alan and I found ourselves stood on the icy wastes of Blackstone Edge, where he was enthusing over the Aiggin Stone, an enigma of a medieval wayfarers guide stone set at the side of an important trans-Pennine packhorse trackway that follows the causey stoned route of an arrow-straight road known hereabouts as the 'Roman Road'. Nearby, there was a cairn, a mountain in miniature of piled-up Millstone Grit rocks and stones that during frequent rain and misty weather act as a guide for weary hill walkers.

Alan pointed over to a mass of craggy boulders strewn about the foot of some forbidding-looking high cliffs, Robin Hood's Bed. "That's where we're heading up onto the top

of Robin Hood's Bed", he said. "Come on lass, let's roll. From the top of the 'Bed', it's only a couple of miles to Oxygrains Old Bridge". The old packhorse bridge spanning Oxygrains Brook was our destination, for we wanted to carry out one of our bridge-spotting sessions and to take some photographs for my book.

As we set off to clump over the frozen tundra of the barren moorland, looking all around me, I noticed that the boulders and rocks of Millstone Grit were all of a sombre black colour. I thought, no wonder this desolate Pennine moorland on the high watershed between Oldham and Rochdale on the Red Rose county side – and on the White Rose side, Ripponden and Rishworth in Calderdale – was known as Blackstone Edge.

JAGGERMEN'S BRIDGES ON PACKHORSE TRAILS



Sighted on the breast of the steep incline at the top of the 'Roman Road' stands the Aiggin Stone, a Medieval Period wayfarers guide stone fashioned from a rough slab of local Millstone Grit; crudely carved onto one face of this is a cross; beneath are the letters 'IT' . February 2010.

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After us both picking our way like mountain goats around massive, weather-rounded gritstone boulders and tramping knee deep in crisp snowdrifts, we finally made the stiff climb onto the top of the brooding, dark cliffs of Robin Hood's Bed. **"By golly, Christine, I haven't been up here for well over forty years"**, exclaimed Alan breathlessly. Then suddenly, the smiling face of the sun burst through the clouds to brightly bathe the surrounding moorland in fabulous, welcoming sunshine.

From our high eerie looking west we could see the sparkling, sun-lit waters of Hollingworth Lake and behind, the dark-grey urban sprawl of Rochdale, Oldham and further still the panoramic

spread of Greater Manchester.

Celia Fiennes, an intrepid traveller who having trekked over the heights of Blackstone Edge was certainly in awe of the wilderness, for in 1698, she wrote:

"Then I came to Blackstone Edge, Noted all over England for a Dismal high Precipice and Steep in the Ascent and Descent on Either End; its Very Moorish ground all About and Even just at the Top, tho' so High (she mentions the causey stoned trackway) that you travel on a Causey wch is Very Troublesome as its a Moist ground soe as is Usual on these High Hills; they Stagnate the Air and hold Mist and Rains almost Perpetually".

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In August 1724, Daniel Defoe also journeyed from Rochdale over Blackstone Edge into Yorkshire and conveyed in this extraction below, his highly atmospheric description of his experience:

“Here, (in Rochdale) for our Greater Encouragement, though we were but at the Middle of August and in some places the Harvest hardly Gathered in, we saw the Mountains covered in Snow, and Felt the cold Very Acute and Piercing; but even Here we Found, so in all these Northern counties is the case, the People had an Extraordinary way of Mixing the Warm with the Cold very happily Together; for the store of good Ale which flows Plentifully in the most Mountainous parts of this country seems Abundantly to make up for All the inclemencies of the Season or Difficulties of Travelling, adding also the Plenty of Coals for firing, which these Hills are Full of.

We mounted the Hills, Fortified with the same Precaution, early in the Morning, and thought the Snow which had fallen in the Night lay a little on the Ground, yet we Thought it was not Much; and the Morning being Calm and Clear, we had no Apprehension of an uneasy Passage, neither did the People at Rochdale, who Kindly directed us the Way, and even Offered to Guide us over the first Mountains, Apprehend any Difficulty for us; so we Complimented ourselves out of their Assistance, Which we Afterwards very much Wanted.

It is not easy to Express the Consternation we were in when we came near the Top of the Mountain; the Wind Blew Exceedingly Hard, and Blew the Snow so Directly in our Faces, and so Thick, that it was Impossible to Keep our Eyes open to see our Way. The Ground also was so Covered in Snow, that we could see no Track, or when we were in the Way or When out; Except we were Showed it by a Fearful Precipice on one Hand and Uneven Ground on the Other.

In the Middle of this Difficulty, and as we Began to Call on one Another to turn Back Again, not knowing what Dangers might still be Before us, came a surprising Clap of Thunder, the First that ever I Heard in a Storm of Snow, or, I Believe, Ever shall; Nor did we Perceive any Lightning to Precede the Thunder as must Naturally be the Case; but we Supposed the Thick Falling of Snow must Prevent our Sight.....

Upon this We Made a Full Stop, and Coming all Together, for we were three in

Company, with two Servants, we began to Talk Seriously of Going back again to Rochdale, but just Then one of our Men Called out to us and Said He was Upon the Top of the Hill and could see Over into Yorkshire, and that there was a Plain way Down on the Other side”

In fantastic, bright sunlight, we set off from Robin Hood's Bed and headed across a wilderness of semi-frozen peat and dead heather to the watercourse called Rishworth Drain. As we walked through a drift of slowly melting, deep snow, suddenly, quick as a bullet leaving a gun barrel, we were fortunate to witness the extremely rare sighting of a white hare as it raced across the moorland. With the wintry sunshine rapidly thawing out the frozen tundra, we decided to contour around the north east side of Green Withens Reservoir and to head off down into shallow Green Withens Clough. Passing a natural grouping of gritstones, Castle Dean Rocks, we eventually reached Oxygrains Clough, whose little beck acts as an overflow drain for the expansive Green Withens Reservoir.

Looking south westward from our high moorland plateau, we could see the bright sunlight glancing off the windscreens of the countless cars, vans and huge juggernauts frantically hurtling along the carriageways of the incongruous trans-Pennine M62 motorway. On us reaching the A672 road, not only could we clearly see the massive volume of traffic using the motorway, but the cacophony of ear-splitting noise, we both agreed, utterly destroyed the peace and tranquillity, that but for the last few minutes of our trek over the moorland heights, had been serenely pleasant.

Choosing each step carefully, we gingerly picked our way through a porridgy mess of sun-melted snow, ice and mud on the banks of Oxygrains Beck until we reached the huge stone bridge that carries the A672, the Oldham to Ripponden road. Beneath the bridge, the fast flowing water appeared to be about eighteen inches deep, but undaunted, both of us by now sporting cold, wet feet, by stepping onto semi-submerged rocks, we made our way under the bridge to emerge into bright sunlight that bathed the snowy sides of the clough. As ever, Alan was around fifty yards in front of me, and as I squelched through deep, soaking wet peat up the side of the bank of the beck, I suddenly heard him excitedly shout, **“There's your Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge, and what a bonny little bridge it is!”**

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Notwithstanding, the awesome clamour of twenty first century traffic resonating in our eardrums, we were both indeed delighted to reach ancient Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge which we found to be consisting of a simple segmental arch of Millstone Grit that spanned the gurgling beck in a leap of around sixteen feet. The arch itself comprised twelve roughly hewn, gritstone voussoir stones set on either side of the massive key stone. There were no parapets, and the eight feet, six inches wide trackway over the top of the arch consisted of no other than the surface of the outwards protruding voussoir stones; the whole structure being crudely constructed, but nevertheless extremely attractive. On the side nearest the A672 road, a crudely-built staircase of

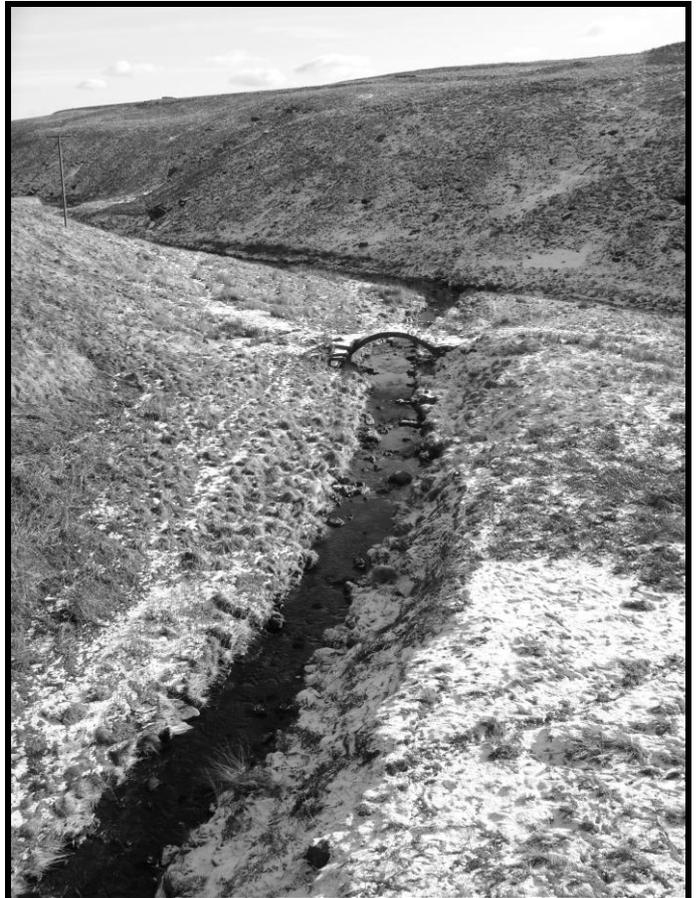
huge, roughly squared gritstone slabs affords access onto the bridge for foot traffic and in times gone by for packhorses.

Following us measuring and photographing Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge, we searched across the rough moorland grass to the south west with the hope of establishing the whereabouts of the old packhorse trackway. Unfortunately however, there was virtually no evidence to be seen.

From what I have read, evidently, the original packhorse trackway climbed up the western flanks of the Pennines from Oldham to cross Oxygrains Beck on the little parapet-less bridge, thence down into Ryburndale to eventually reach Halifax.



Crude, stone slabs form access onto the top of Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge. February 2010.



Oxygrains Packhorse Bridge across Oxygrains Beck. February 2010.

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