

Trent Ford Road, North Muskham

Context

In the Middle Ages and later, the River Trent was considered the boundary between northern and southern England. Newark became known as the “Key to the North” because it was at the strategic point where the River Trent turned north for its final meander to the sea. The land immediately north of Newark Castle, across “Trent Bridge” is an island in the river and was impassable for much of the year.

For most of the year, travellers from west and south would enter Newark and follow the river around the northern turn to the safe crossing at North Muskham. Cross from the Newark side and you land in North Muskham; in “The North”.

Trent – The Trespasser

Through the millennia, the Trent took many different routes through the valley. It is now believed that it was in the 14th Century that the Trent changed course to flow between North Muskham and the village at Holme. (The 14th Century was a time of terrible weather and there were a number of vast floods taking out the bridges along the Trent from Nottingham to the sea). Even so, there are many paleochannels (dried up river channels) between Holme and North Muskham and the two villages were one Parish until well into the 20th century, with children from Holme being rowed across the river twice daily to attend the school in North Muskham.

It was a wide and tidal river and changed its route between the two villages on many occasions. Some of the nearby water-meadows or “Holmes” are still grazed under the medieval system of Gaits.

The current route eventually settled by around 1780s, as the industrial potential and the Trent Navigation came into being, controlling the banks and beginning to tame the river. The Trent crossing, however, was vital. It was the pack horse route to and from all points north and west. Even today, you can see the routes fan out west to link with coal roads, salt roads, drover’s routes, etc. These fan out across Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The alternative was to go by sea, or risk being robbed the dangerous forests to the west.

Trent Ford Road

Trent Ford Road began, as it is today, as a short stretch of road travelling due east from Main Street, North Muskham. On the south side of the junction was the way marker, “Muskham Cross”, as it is today. About 50 yards along east was the beginning of the great river crossing which, in 1536 was said to be so wide that four score (80) horsemen could ride abreast across it. This was at the time of the uprising, known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. Although the Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire uprising fizzled out, 30,000 troops were heading south from Yorkshire and Henry VIII’s troops were stationed to guard the ford.

Over time, the crossing point gradually moved southeast and Trent Ford Road became lengthened and dog-legged. This is clearly evidenced by the 1735 map of the area.

Whilst most of the original length remains, making a pleasant walk between Main Street and Dickinson Way, also giving a circular walk around the wildlife area, much of the dog-leg section was lost by [illegal] gravel extraction in the 1960s, though it all links up again along the Trent bank.

Although the stage coaches used the new turnpikes, the ford remained in use for commercial and farm traffic right up until around 1910. In 1911, a lock was built at Cromwell and, since then, the

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river through Muskham has ceased being tidal and is too deep for fording. Trent Ford Road however, remained as a used route into the very late 1970s when the landowner, who had extracted the gravel, began to develop a fisheries and used aggressive tactics, including the threat of firearms, to stop access. Even around 1978, a storm drain was laid along Trent Ford Road to carry storm water from the Wilcon built Grange estate.

Demand for Footways

In the late 1950s, early 1960s, there were a few scattered houses along the main street of this straggly A1 village. When the towpath was no longer actively used, the Parish Council failed to respond when asked if it should be retained as a footpath and the stroll along the riverside to Cromwell lock fell into disrepair. With the village quadrupling in size, the demand to re-open the riverbank led to a series of campaigns; one still ongoing.

In the 1980s, Malcolm McKenzie, a village resident and member of the Ramblers' Association, backed by Cllr. Des Whicher and others, tried to re-open the blocked riverbank route. Somehow, this attempt failed as the campaign never managed to bring out the facts and the entire process became highly politicised. On that occasion, the village voted to support Cllr. Bob Beard who [claimed to] own part of the route.

The current campaign began in the some 10 year ago, again started by a well known rambler and teacher, Mrs. Anne Heathcote. Naturally this concentrated on the riverbank route to Cromwell, part of which was Ferry Road, a minor route to the small rowed ferry some 400 metres south of the ford, known as Ferry Road.

At some point, and for no discernable reason, Trent Ford Road and Ferry Road, the riverbank route, became linked together as "Byway No. 7" [now restricted Byway No. 7]. The logic of this is difficult to fathom as Trent Ford Road went east/west and Ferry Road ran south along the western bank. After the [illegal] gravel extraction, these two roads did not even touch, apart from the width of Trent Ford Road where it crossed the riverbank.

When the land around the old gravel pit went for planning consent to build the Lake View residential development, NCC insisted that both these roads, and an ancient footway, remained in existence and instructed the developers that they should continue in existence.

Byway No 7

Over the last 3-4 years there has been considerable issues surrounding Restricted Byway N0 7 leading to numerous hearings in Newark Magistrates' Court, a Public Inquiry, and a High Court ruling. Taking into account all parties time and costs, probably in the region of £500k has been spend; over half this by the objectors from whom NCC hope to be able to claim costs if the proposed order is successful when it returns to court.

With all concentration on the riverside route, the community did not realise that NCC planned to permanently stop up Trent Ford Road. The Senior Definitive Maps Officer, Dr Tim Hart, freely admitted that, when he made that decision he was unaware of the historical significance of the route, or the existence of the scheduled and listed Muskham Cross.

Within North Muskham and the surrounding area, the historic research and news coverage has awakened enormous interest in the history of Trent Ford Road and this most vital river crossing. In fact, North Muskham almost certainly came into existence because of the river crossing.

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After the Public Inquiry decision, Ferry Road was forced open by 3 Section 130A notices being served on NCC. Despite initial demands from the community, NCC took no action to unblock Trent Ford Road. Eventually, Section 130As were served on NCC by to force them to open up Trent Ford Road.

Despite requests from the community, NCC are still proceeding with their aim to block up the wanted, used and necessary (legal terminology) stretch of Trent Ford Road. This is despite a promise from NCC to deal with the two ancient roads separately and to undertake wider local consultations.

The remaining parts of both Trent Ford Road and Ferry Road are now open and both are well used public routes. In many respects, the village has achieved this part of its objectives, though it would be logical to stop up the stretch of road lost to gravel extraction.

If NCC continue to go for the complete stopping up of Trent Ford Road it will cause great resentment in the village. The community plan to challenge any such Order in the Court. This will make NCC appear remote and unresponsive to community wishes and, if the NCC Order fails the community will still have its historic routes but NCC will have no chance of recovering their costs incurred with the various inquiries and court procedure.

In Conclusion

Trent Ford Road is necessary for:

- ◆ Its historical context.
- ◆ To appreciate the “Muskham Cross” in its original context.
- ◆ To give off-street access in an expanded village with limited public access.
- ◆ Because the vast majority of the community wish it to be open.
- ◆ Because NCC would look profligate if, having spent very many thousands of pounds to prove it exists, they stopped it up in the face of community opposition.
- ◆ Because it is a great tourist story for the area, and could help sustain local jobs.