

THE STORY OF THE BERNERA BRIDGE *THE BRIDGE OVER THE ATLANTIC*

It is almost certain that if the bridge to Bernera had not been built, there would be nobody living in Bernera today. There are many small islands around these shores that once had a thriving population, but are today uninhabited. As the population declined with many of the young people seeking work on the mainland, there were fewer able bodied folk to undertake the arduous work of carrying all goods off and on to the island. When you consider that everything not procured on the croft had to be brought in (peats, paraffin, dry goods, mail, livestock, looms, agricultural machinery) and everything to be marketed had to be taken off (tweeds, livestock, fish) it is easily understood that strength of body was required. There were no roads other than cart tracks and on many a day the weather made a crossing impossible.

The Campaign

It was after the first World War that the Bernera people began asking for some permanent connection to the Lewis Mainland. The men who had left to serve in the forces, and the girls who had been nurses realised how isolated Bernera was for want of a link. Lewis at that time came under the Ross and Cromarty Council area, which felt almost as remote from Bernera as Edinburgh or London.

Various committees of Bernera residents petitioned for a solution. Proposals for a causeway, new boat slips and a bridge with one span to allow boats a passage through were rejected. Local feeling was that the landowners were more concerned about the salmon runs than the convenience of the people. With the election of a Lewisman, Malcolm Macmillan, to Parliament, the profile was raised. It was in fact the subject of his first question in the House. In the 1930's approval of the construction of a bridge was agreed. A big effort for fundraising had been done locally, and things were progressing well until the outbreak of the Second World War when everything had to be put on hold.

Once the men and women returned after the war, things were again pursued with even more vigour. Eventually in 1951 a telegram arrived in Stornoway saying that the Ministry of Transport had authorised work on a bridge for Bernera. It was finally agreed that a bridge should be built at public expense. The private funding previously raised was used to upgrade the gravel road to Bosta to provide easier access to the cemetery.

The Construction

One of the great benefits of building the bridge was the work given to many local men. (One of the engineers became a local by marrying a lass living on the south side of the bridge. Their marriage was the last to cross to the church in Bernera by boat. It was a double wedding with two sisters. The first wedding to cross over the bridge was some months later when another sister married.)

The method of construction was interesting in that it was the first pre-stressed concrete bridge to be built in Britain and was of great interest to many engineers. The system was developed in Belgium and France. One of the advantages was that only a quarter of the steel for reinforcing would be used in this method. This was quite a consideration at a time of shortages after the war.



A temporary bridge was made and the beams for the deck were to be run out on rails across this structure. 3 pillars of concrete would support the deck. Each beam was 8 ft long and 4ft square, and they were cast on the mainland side of the site. The 8ft lengths were linked by a foot of concrete. A solid block of concrete was fitted at either end and the beam was then pre-stressed. 4 sections, each composed of 32 wires were then passed through the entire length of the beam and stretched to a tension of 9,500 lbs.

As the first beam was being rolled out, the temporary bridge settled into the boulder clay, causing the beam to snap in half. One piece fell into the sea and was only recovered recently when divers were inspecting the piers for signs of erosion. The temporary bridge was strengthened and the work continued. Bill Eadie the chief engineer was very co-operative about allowing folk to walk across the bridge even before the surface had been laid, and people realised very quickly what a boon it would be.

The Benefits

The first sheep were walked across to the moor, a far easier job than loading them into and off boats – less stressful for both man and beast. The SPCA man, (known throughout the island as the Cruelty) was allowed to cross to attend a sick cow. The first bus came with a load of schoolchildren, and many Lewis people came to see the wonder from the Earshader side, bringing picnics with them. It was at this stage that the wedding party mentioned above became the first to use the bridge. The villagers of Tobson and Croir who were running short of peat banks and had hitherto to cut peats on outlying islands and transport them home by boat, began to rent banks on the moor between Garynahine and Stornoway, and on the road to Uig. They could then be carried home by lorries in a fraction of the time.

It is difficult, even for those now living in Bernera to envisage life with these constraints. Today almost every house has access to at least one car, there are mobile shops, library and bank, and a doctor's surgery twice a week. Mail is delivered by post bus instead of by foot or latterly horse and cart. Coal and oil for heating delivered to the door have now largely replaced the hard labour of cutting a years' supply of peat, supermarkets giving choice and a journey of under an hour to the hospital or to work in Stornoway, all encourage people to stay in the island of their birth.