Newcastle upon Tyne is the northernmost city (in the British sense of the word) in England. Distance from the capital and a history of independence and rebellion have forged a distinct identity and a strong sense of local pride in the citizens of Newcastle, known since the nineteenth century as Geordies. The local accent, also known as Geordie, is one of the most widely recognized in England, and there is a long tradition of writing and performing in the local dialect. Newcastle built its prosperity and reputation on the industries of coal mining (“coals to Newcastle” has been used since the sixteenth century as a phrase to refer to supplying something already in abundance) and shipbuilding. Since the decline of these industries, the city has been reinvented as a center of culture and entertainment, and for the tourists who now flock there, the Tyne Bridge has become an essential background subject for selfies. *The Tyne Bridge: Icon of North-East England* tells the story of this bridge and the other bridges of Newcastle past and present within the context of their cultural importance and their contribution to the distinctiveness of the city and its region. Although technical details of the design and construction of the bridges are included, the emphasis is very much on the human stories associated with them.

The book opens with an account of an imagined rail journey from London to Newcastle. As the train crosses the Tyne, all eyes are drawn to the view of the Tyne Bridge. “For visitors, the first glimpse of the famous arch represents a heartening welcome to Tyneside. For locals—for Geordies—the familiar sight of the Tyne Bridge, like warm and reassuring arms, means we are home” (pp. 1-2). The “we” here identifies the author as a Geordie with a subjective view of the bridge’s importance, but this personal engagement with the subject does not detract from the credibility of his account, which is well referenced with citations from works of archaeology, local history, and local newspapers.
Following this introduction, the first chapter provides an account of the first known bridge over the Tyne, built by the Romans and named Pons Aelius in honor of the emperor Hadrian, whose family name was Aelius. To build Hadrian’s Wall, which marked the northern outpost of the empire, a crossing of the Tyne was necessary, and this bridge gave its name to the settlement that developed around it. The city of Newcastle thus owes its origin to a bridge. What we know about this early bridge is largely from finds discovered during excavations carried out during the construction of later bridges described by archaeologists such as John Collingwood Bruce (1805-92), and a certain amount of conjecture is used in this chapter to round out the account—the word “likely” appears three times in one paragraph on pages 12 and 13.

There is more historiographical evidence for the bridge that replaced the Pons Aelius in the thirteenth century and lasted until it was swept away by the Great Flood of 1771, albeit with multiple repairs and renovations over these five centuries. The account of this bridge in chapter 2 provides some details about the design and construction of the bridge, mainly drawn from the accounts of travelers and topographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, more space is devoted to the stories of those who lived and died on the bridge, which had houses and shops on it. Most of these are documented in histories or newspapers, but one story that Brown describes as “perhaps apocryphal,” that of a ring dropped into the Tyne and later found in the belly of a salmon, should have been treated with more skepticism (p. 24). Wendy Doniger notes that “the ring in the fish is one of the all-time top ten narrative hits, topping the charts since at least the time of the ancient Greeks.”[2]

Chapter 3 tells the story of the bridges built after the Old Tyne Bridge was swept away and before the current one was built. The first of these was the replacement for the Old Tyne Bridge, the Georgian Tyne Bridge, opened in 1781. As with the previous chapter, there is little technical detail provided, but much of interest in terms of people and events associated with the bridge, notably a local character known as “Tommy on the Bridge,” who stood begging on the Georgian Bridge every day until it was demolished to make way for the Swing Bridge, which opened in 1876. There are two photographs of Tommy from 1905, by which time he was plying a less lucrative trade on the Swing Bridge. This chapter is titled “A Place of Bridges,” because no less than six bridges across the Tyne were built between 1781 and 1906: the Georgian Tyne Bridge, the High Level Bridge, the first Redheugh Bridge, the Swing Bridge, the second Redheugh Bridge (replacing the first), and the King Edward VII Railway Bridge. The High Level, Swing Bridge, and Railway Bridge are still in use today, while a third Redheugh Bridge replaced the second in 1981. Chapter 3 gives a flavor of the rapid developments in industry and technology in this period, which both created the need for these bridges and nurtured the expertise required to build them. The chapter ends as it began, with reference to Tommy on the Bridge, this time to his death in 1907.

As befits a volume entitled The Tyne Bridge, the majority of chapters, 4 through 10, are devoted to the planning, design, and construction of the current Tyne Bridge and to its reception by the public. As with previous chapters, there is much human interest, but there is also more in the way of technical detail. Chapter 4 tells the story of how the idea of building a new Tyne Bridge came to be mooted, adopted, and financed. While the need for this new bridge came about as a result of a substantial increase in road traffic, another important incentive was the lack of employment opportunities on Tyneside. The decline of mining and shipbuilding had created unemployment among workers who had the skills required for building the new bridge. Conditions were therefore favorable for the adoption of the plan for a new bridge and
an act of Parliament was passed to provide financing from government funds.

Chapter 5 deals with the planning and design of the bridge, relating how the Hell Gate Bridge in New York provided the inspiration for the design of both the Tyne Bridge and the much larger Sydney Harbour Bridge, except that the Tyne Bridge differed in having a crescent arch rather than the spandrel arches of the other two bridges. This chapter also tells us about the engineers and entrepreneurs involved in the project. While the civil engineer most widely credited with drawing up the plans was Ralph Freeman, Brown rightly acknowledges the contributions of other engineers whose names have been forgotten, most notably Dorothy Buchanan, one of the first women to graduate in engineering and the first ever to be granted membership in the Institution of Civil Engineers.

Chapter 6 has much more in the way of technical detail than previous chapters, as it provides an account of the challenges involved in laying the foundations for the new Tyne Bridge. This involved the use of caissons in which workers spent long shifts at increasingly deep levels, leading in some cases to what was then called caisson disease but is now known as the bends. Twenty workers on the King Edward VII Bridge had been hospitalized with these symptoms, and Thomas Oliver, a specialist at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, had identified the cause of their symptoms and made suggestions for mitigating the risks. This, and the fact that many of the workers involved in sinking the caissons on the Tyne Bridge were former coalminers used to working at depths, meant that no instances of compression sickness occurred in the construction of the Tyne Bridge.

Chapter 7 provides an account of the construction of the bridge itself and the technical challenges involved in building the arch from each side of the river. The visibility of the men working high up on the bridge made for a spectacle that attracted crowds, and that was recorded in photographs commissioned by Dorman, Long, the company engaged to build the bridge. Several of these photographs are reproduced among the black-and-white images that appear between pages 84 and 85. Images of the workers were appropriated by a tobacco company in a newspaper advertisement cited here: “Men! The daily clangour of the work on the new Tyne Bridge is a community song of praise from sturdy men who chew and smoke ROBERT’S. In the yards on the Tyne and Wear, throughout all the North Country pits, the same song re-echoes. Nothing like ROBERT’S for Northern Men!” (p. 101). This is an early example of both the commodification of the bridge (discussed further in chapter 11) and the stereotype of northern English men as strong and hardy.[3]

Chapter 9 is concerned with the final stages of construction, but also tells the story of Nathaniel Collins, a scaffolder who fell to his death; John Carr, the boatman who attempted to rescue him; and Eileen McIntyre, the intrepid journalist who climbed the arch shortly after it was finished. Chapter 10 gives an account of the opening of the bridge by George V on October 10, 1928, and of the media coverage of this event, including two films of the occasion, one of which, made by Fox Movietone and marketed as “His Majesty’s First Talking Picture,” was shown in the United States and Australia.

Chapter 10 follows the fortunes of the bridge up to its golden jubilee in 1978, including tales of failed bombing raids during World War II and of suicides, attempted suicides, and protests on the bridge. Chapter 11 demonstrates how the Tyne Bridge has become a cultural icon of Tyneside, providing accounts of its prominence in films and television, and in media coverage of the Great North Run, the first mass-participation half marathon in the UK.

The final chapter, “The Pride of Tyneside,” is more diffuse, starting with an account of locations from which the bridge can be viewed. There is a
brief account of the seventy-fifth anniversary in 2003 and of the reminiscences of families of the workers who built the bridge. There is a section devoted to the colony of kittiwakes, an endangered and therefore protected species, who nest on the bridge. The chapter, and the book, concludes with a roll call of some 160 people, places, and things of which “Tyneside has much to be proud” (p. 192), the last of which is “the famous icon that stands above them all: the steel arch, the granite towers, the monument to industry, the signpost for home, the symbol of Tyneside, the icon of the North-East, ‘Wor Bridge’; the Tyne Bridge” (p. 193).[4]

This is an engaging book, which leaves the reader in no doubt that the Tyne Bridge truly is an icon of the Northeast of England. Paul Brown has previously written books and articles about English football, and references to Newcastle United FC and its players occur frequently in The Tyne Bridge. This is not inappropriate, given the importance of football and Newcastle United to the city’s identity (both the team and the city are colloquially known as “the Toon”), but explanatory footnotes would have been useful for readers from outside the United Kingdom. One example of this is the description of the rower Harry Clasper as “a genuine sporting legend and very much the Alan Shearer of his day” (p. 40). Any reader with an interest in English football will know Shearer as a former Newcastle and England player and current BBC pundit, but others will not. Likewise, the roll call at the end of the book will leave some readers puzzled or spending a considerable amount of time on search engines.

Notes


[4]. “Wor” is the word for “our” in the Geordie dialect.
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