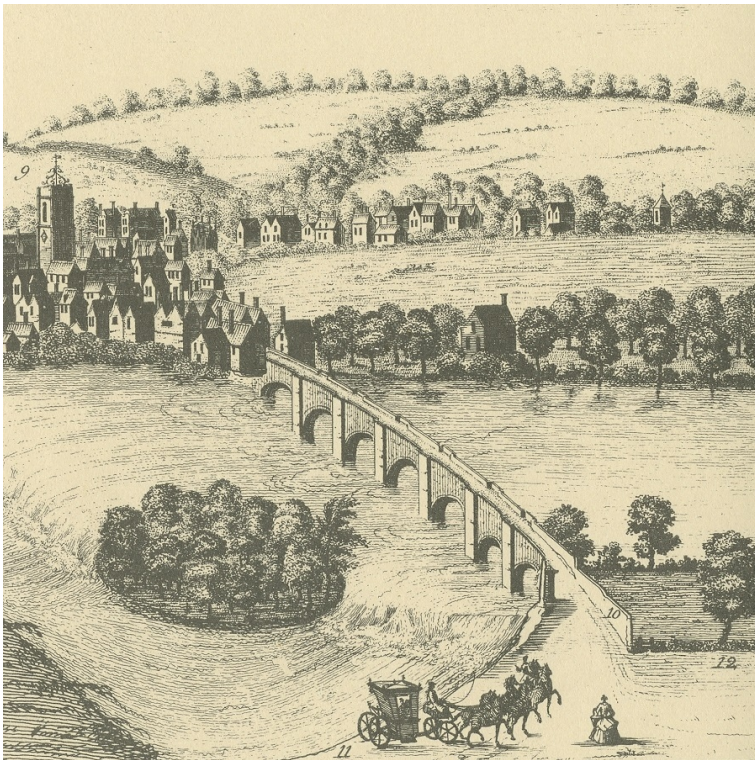


HOLME FORD

A glance at a modern large-scale map of Derby and its neighbouring villages reveals some twenty or more bridges of different sizes and purposes crossing the River Derwent between Allestree and Borrowash, yet for many centuries there was only the solitary St. Mary's Bridge in Derby. The bridge, as we see it today, was built between 1788 and 1793, but its predecessor, some ten yards downstream was notoriously narrow and quite unsuited for large volumes of traffic. William Hutton, the well-known Derby historian, wrote this account of the old bridge just a short while before its demolition in 1789:

All the Authors that ever wrote upon Derby are lavish with encomiums upon the beauty and elegance of St. Mary's Bridge, which is a proof they never saw it. Contradiction is an irksome task; but truth demands it. Its praise arises from its extraordinary elevation, which is one of its greatest defects; it is an arch upon arches; a mountain erected upon a river. Human infirmity and loaded carriages, drag up heavily; but all move over it dangerously, being so extremely narrow as to admit but one carriage; so that we may safely remark, it cannot be travelled two ways at once. The gravel is incessantly washed away, owing to the steep ascent, and the arches left naked. Perhaps a bridge over so cold a river, so much used, and so ill adapted for use, cannot be found.¹

Hutton, therefore, was far from convinced that the bridge was suitable for purpose and his view is confirmed by this illustration taken from Samuel and Nathaniel Buck's engraving of 1728 entitled *The East Prospect of Derby*, which shows just how narrow the old St. Mary's Bridge was.



The horse and carriage are on the east bank of the River Derwent, the church tower visible over to the left of the picture is St. Alkmund's.

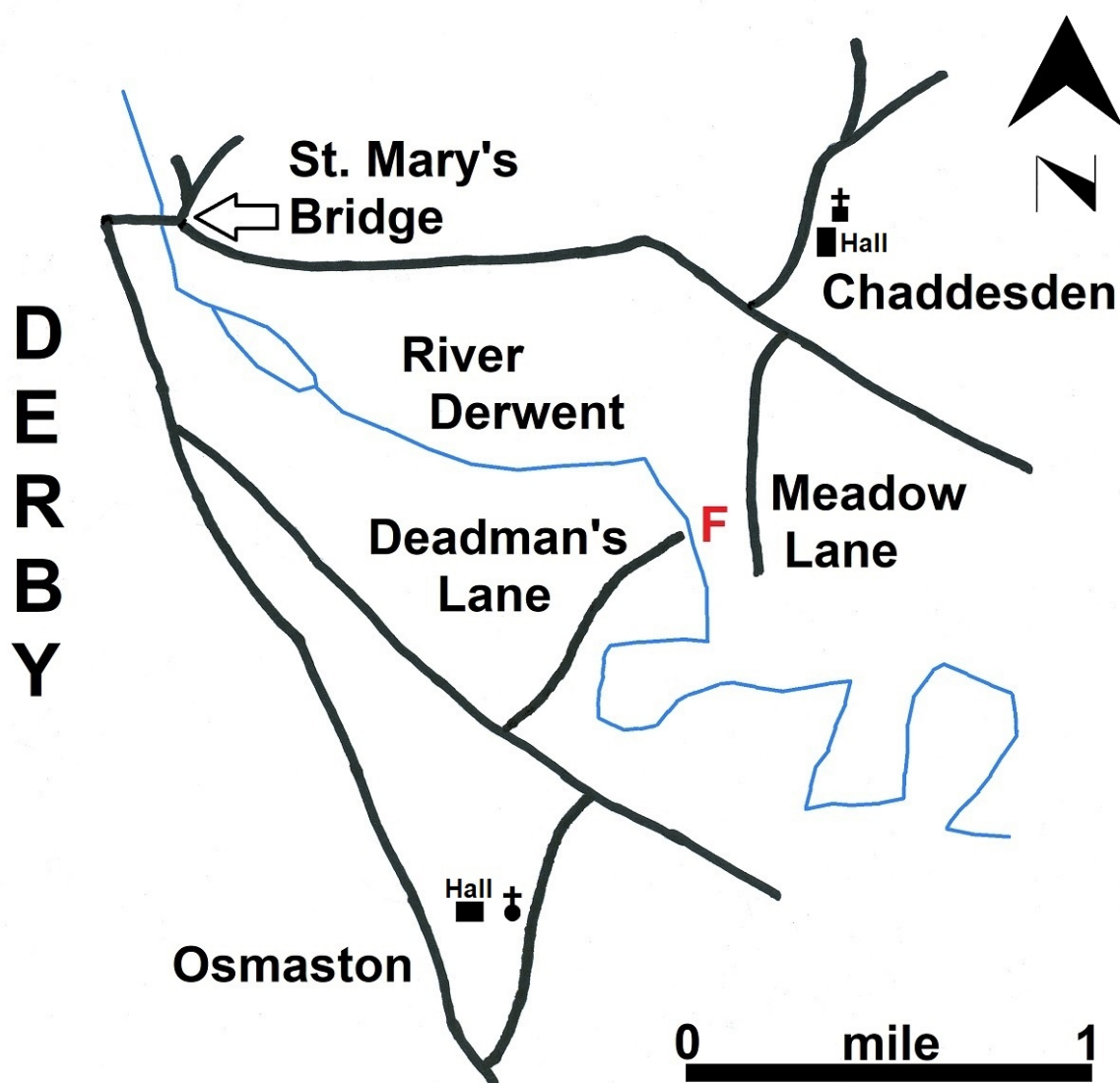
Before it was rebuilt, St. Mary's Bridge was clearly not a viable option for many of the travellers and carriers who needed to cross the river, so instead they had to rely on various fords scattered up and down the length of the Derwent. The ancient Holme Ford between Chaddesden and Osmaston was the first of such river crossings below Derby, and could be reached from the Chaddesden side of the river simply by walking or riding down Meadow Lane, heading upstream for a short distance and then venturing across the Derwent, which was perhaps some 70 feet wide at this shallow point. Once on the far bank, it was then a three-quarters of a mile trip along the track that later generations would call Deadman's Lane and through the pleasant countryside of

Litchurch and Osmaston parishes, before finally crossing the London road and Litchurch Green in order to reach the little village of Osmaston.²

The name *Holme*, by the way, actually derives from the Old Norse word *holmr* or *holmi*, meaning 'isle, small island, water-meadow, low-lying ground near a river,' and forms a common place-name element in our part of Derbyshire, with other examples at Derby, Spondon, Alvaston, etc.

- ¹ William Hutton, *The History of Derby from the Remote Ages of Antiquity to the Year MDCCXCI*, London, 1791, pp.34–5.
- ² A 70-acre field called *The Holme* adjacent to the River Derwent is marked on a 1631 map of Litchurch drawn up by William Senior (S. Mastoris, *The Welbeck Atlas, William Senior's Maps of the Estates of William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle 1629–1640*, Book & CD, Thoroton Society, 2017, Book: p. lv; CD: Derbyshire image no.30/37).

This simple sketch plan shows Holme Ford (marked 'F') located on the River Derwent between the parishes of Chaddesden to the north and Osmaston to the south.



Of course, Holme Ford wasn't only used by people wanting to cross the river to get from Chaddesden to Osmaston and vice-versa, as a late sixteenth-century document makes abundantly clear. In 1589 the ford featured in an action brought before the Duchy of Lancaster Court by Clement Leaper of Derby and others against Robert Newton and Henry Scattergood, both of Chaddesden, concerning a dispute involving the right to a watercourse and the highway to Osmaston Piece over Holme Ford. A brief outline of this suit was provided some years ago by W. H. Holden as follows:

Queen Elizabeth was lawfully seized in fee in right of her said Duchy of Lancaster of and in the River Darwent in the County of Derby and also of a parcel of ground in Osmaston called Osmaston Peece ... there hath always been a ford or passage leading over the said river called Holme ford leading between the town of Osmaston standing next to the town of Derby unto and from the town of Chaddesden which ford leadeth by and through the said parcel of ground called Osmaston piece, by and through which said ford or passage over the river your orators and the inhabitants of the said towns (i.e. Osmaston, Litchurch, Normanton, Sinfin, Swarkeston, Stanton, Chaddesden, Barrow, Twyford, Stenson, Melbourne, and Newton) have at all times had free passage unto the town of Nottingham, co. Derby and the market there for the buying and selling of household necessaries as also unto the coal mines called Morley Pits, Henor Pits, Denby Pits, and Hallon Pits for the fetching and carrying of coals. Duchy of Lancaster Pleadings. (*Clement Leaper & ors. v. Robert Newton and Henry Scattergood*. Vol. 147. L.16).³

³ W. H. Holden, 'A Miscellany of Place-Names', in *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 70, 21–34, pp.31–32.

So from this we learn that in Elizabethan England, Holme Ford was something of an important river crossing enabling the residents of Derby and the many villages to its south and south-east as far away as Melbourne to travel to Nottingham market as well as to access the coal-mines of the Ilkeston – Heanor – Denby area. Unfortunately there is no description of the ford, so we have to imagine that on both sides of the river there was a relatively gentle slope leading down to the water, perhaps a pair of posts sunk into the river bed on each side of the Derwent to mark the line travellers and their horses and wagons should take as well as acting as gauges to the depth of water, and just possibly a paved stone causeway across the river bed that would help prevent heavily laden wagons from becoming stuck in the mud!

By the time of the seventeenth century Holme Ford must have been frequently used by the Wilmot family, for after the death of Robert Wilmot of Chaddesden in 1638, his two surviving sons and their descendants ultimately ended up in possession of large estates at Chaddesden and Osmaston, with both branches of the family building or enlarging halls in their respective villages. Several generations of Wilmots would therefore have used the ford as a short-cut when visiting their cousins on the other side of the river, unless of course they happened to be in a particularly expensive carriage, when the longer route via St. Mary's Bridge in Derby would no doubt have been preferred.



< Chaddesden Hall



Osmaston Hall >

Fords were always vulnerable to erosion caused by heavy floods, which might scour the river and wash away its shallows, rendering a popular crossing unusable. Even water-borne traffic with shallow-draught vessels could also easily damage or destroy a ford, and as Derby's trade flourished more people were tempted to try using the River Derwent to transport their goods, although journeys of any length were always problematical owing to the convoluted course of the river and carefully-guarded access rights. Despite such difficulties it is interesting to read that by the middle of the seventeenth century there was at least one boat-yard in the town. In August 1646, the Mayor and Burgesses of Derby leased to Nathaniel Bate of Little Chester various properties for the term of 21 years including 'the yard or crofte called "the Boate Yard."' ⁴ A painting of c.1700 in Derby Museum & Art Gallery entitled *East View of Derby* clearly shows a few vessels on the River Derwent up as far as St. Mary's Bridge, proving that at least some use was then being made of the river for local commerce. ⁵

In the event a ford became impassible due to lack of maintenance and the parish(es) responsible were slow to put things right, they would be 'presented' to the Quarter Sessions as in this example of 1658 relating to Duffield:

We present the Inhabitants of ye parish of Duffield in ye County aforesayd for not repaying and mending a Foarde in ye River of Derwent called Duffield Foarde used for all Carts & Carriages being in ye sayd Parish in great decay, & ought by them to be repayed. ⁶

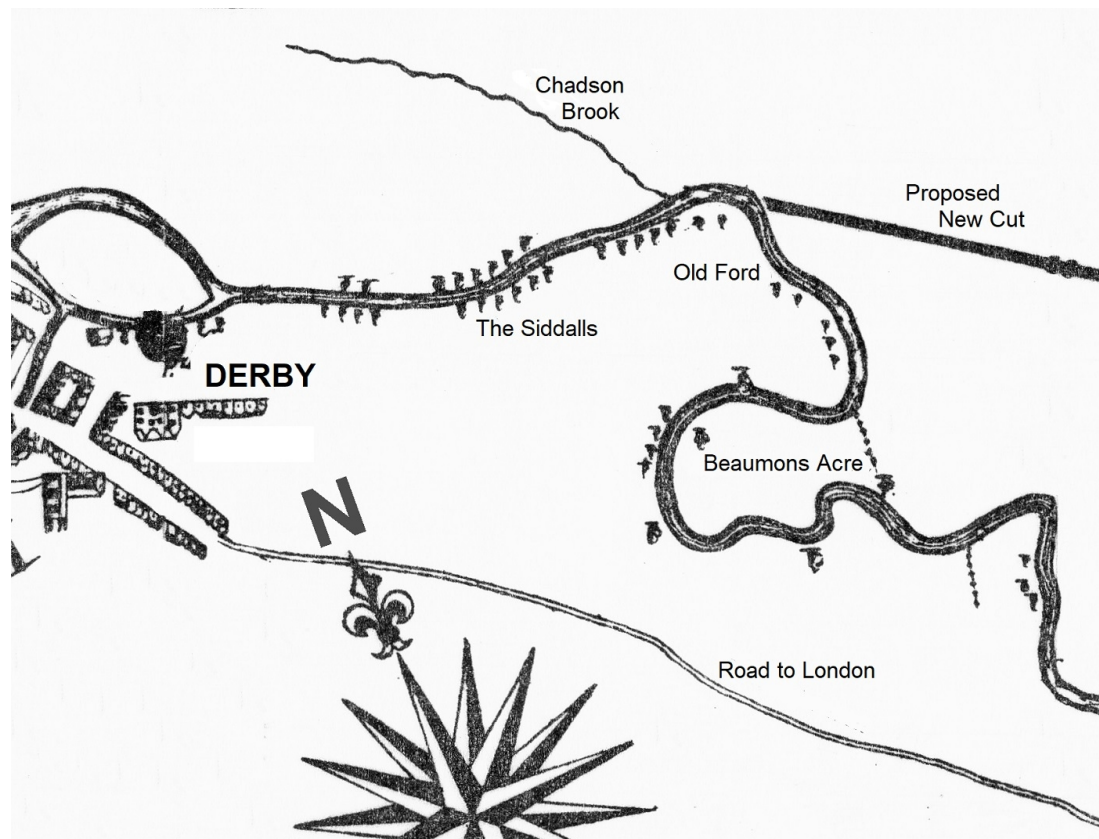
Hopefully the village would then put the necessary repair work in hand. Presumably the normal situation was for parishes on opposite sides of the river bank to share liability for the upkeep of a ford, unless the obligation could be proved to lie with just one village.

4 I. H. Jeayes, *Borough of Derby – Calendar of Ancient Records*, Derby, 1904, p.38, no.76.

5 The painting is on the ArtUK website: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/2024--works:east-view-of-derby> Unfortunately the image is too small to see much in the way of detail.

6 Rev. J. C. Cox, *Three Centuries of Derbyshire Annals*, Vol. 2, London, 1890, p.218.

Frequent users of local fords in the Derby area would have become concerned at successive attempts to get the River Derwent made permanently navigable for vessels. These first began in 1633 when King Charles I granted a thirty-one year lease of the passage by water on the River Derwent to Thomas Statham on behalf of the Bailiffs and Burgesses of Derby, providing the river was made navigable from the River Trent up to Cromford. However, thanks to the Civil War nothing came of this particular scheme. Further efforts to make the Derwent navigable were made in 1664, 1675, 1695 and 1699, but the relevant parliamentary bills were always blocked by other vested business interests.⁷ In 1702/3, the supporters of a navigable river employed the engineer, George Sorocold, to draw up proposals to improve and straighten the river from Derby to the River Trent. The map he prepared clearly marks the location of Holme Ford, which he simply notes as an old ford, perhaps indicating that the ford was then no longer in regular use.⁸



George Sorocold's map of 1702/3 shows Holme Ford between Chaddesden and Osmaston marked as 'Old Ford'. The original map has south at the top and has been inverted here to make it more comprehensible to modern readers. Sorocold's spellings have been retained. The proposed new cut indicated on his plan was never constructed. Once again, the promoters' plans were thwarted and another effort in 1717 failed no better. However, just two years later a new Navigation Bill was prepared, and those opposing the idea of improving the river to permit boats to use it lost no time in producing a document with the title 'Reasons Against making the River Derwent, in the County of Derby, Navigable'. The authors of the document stated:

There is no Common Cart-Bridge over the River Derwent below Derby, but many Fords, being High-ways through which Carts and Carriages daily and Mill-Stones frequently pass. Now by making the River Navigable, all the Fords will be made unpassable, and the High-ways obstructed, and consequently all Commerce and Communication of the Inhabitants of the one side of the River, with those of the other, will be lost; and particularly the Carriage of Coal in the Summer-time over the River, (the Inhabitants on one side of the River being supply'd with Coals from the other side) will totally be lost, to the irreparable damage of the Country thereabouts.⁹

7 C. M. Swainson, *Waterways to Derby*, Matlock, 1993, p.18–22.

8 Sorocold's map is taken from the reproduction in F. Williamson, 'George Sorocold of Derby', in *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 57, 43–93, p.50.

9 C. M. Swainson, *Waterways to Derby*, Matlock, 1993, p.31, citing DRO D3155/WH/2224.

After so many failed attempts, it was perhaps inevitable that in March 1720 *An Act for making the River Derwent in the County of Derby Navigable* was at last passed by Parliament.¹⁰ The wording of the Act gave the undertakers, i.e. the private individuals who were paying the cost of the enterprise, full power to 'make the River Derwent navigable and passable with and for Barges, Boats, Keels, Lighters and other Vessels from the River Trent to the Town of Derby up Holmes Mill Fleam and into Morledge'.¹¹ Here is another example of a *Holme* place-name element, with the Holmes Mill Fleam at Derby being the southernmost course the River Derwent took as it split into two around an area of ground known as the Holmes in order to avoid a substantial weir; today what is left of this route is still known as the Mill Fleam and runs parallel to Station Approach.¹²

George Sorocold's earlier proposals of 1703 to straighten out sections of the meandering river were not implemented in 1720, and the time saved by not excavating new cuttings enabled the first boat to travel up the River Derwent from the River Trent in January 1721, less than a year after the Act was passed! The undertakers were expressly forbidden to 'obstruct or destroy any fords, bridges, highways or passages over the river without making suitable alternative arrangements,' so it would seem that Holme Ford at Chaddesden, which Sorocold had marked as an 'Old Ford' some years previously, had certainly ceased to be a viable river crossing by 1720.

It is interesting to note that since horses were not initially allowed to haul the boats along the River Derwent when there was insufficient wind for their sails, gangs of men would compete to provide the necessary work. In this illustration of 1728, also taken from Samuel and Nathaniel Buck's engraving *The East Prospect of Derby*, we see a line of boats destined for the newly-built wharf (far bank, centre of picture). Note how the boat over on the extreme left-hand side is being hauled along by a group of five men, with Castlefields House in the background. I should imagine that the process of repeatedly dragging boats up and down the river once the Derwent Navigation had been completed in 1721 probably removed any lingering traces of Holme Ford at Chaddesden if it had not already been destroyed by dredging the river-bed as part of the preparatory works.



10 C. M. Swainson, *Waterways to Derby*, Matlock, 1993, p.32.

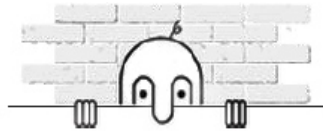
11 DLSL, MS 4649, Bound volume of various Acts of Parliament, Item 44. The undertakers were William Woolley, Thomas Gisborne, Benjamin Blundell junr., Thomas Rivett, Abraham Crompton, John Chambers, Francis Cokayne, Robert Wagstaffe, Samuel Fox and Samuel Shepperdson.

12 The Holmes at Derby has also lent its name to the nearby modern bridge called Holmes Bridge.

By the time John Farey drew up his list of local fords in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, he only named three in the immediate vicinity of Derby, i.e. two fords at Alvaston and one at Breadsall.¹³ A comment he applied to all the fords in his list was that, 'A great part of these Fords were very dangerous to use in time of floods, and whereby many lives have been lost: they are now much less used than formerly, and that seldom, but by the persons of their immediate neighbourhoods.' With Chaddesden being so near to Derby, there can be little doubt that most travellers wanting to cross the River Derwent now preferred to use the widened St. Mary's Bridge, although it is tempting to think that maybe the occasional horse-rider with a taste for adventure might still have tried to use the site of the old Holme Ford when the river was running low!

Today the modern Derwent Parade Bridge between Pride Park and the Wyvern forms one of the latest crossings over the River Derwent, but if you should pass over it, spare a thought for those early travellers who had to use Holme Ford just 270 yards downstream.

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¹³ J. Farey, *General View of the Agriculture of Derbyshire*, Vol. 3, London, 1817, p.282.