

Crossing to Manchester Racecourse



'Crossing to Manchester Racecourse'
'Riversdale (Gerald Road) Salford 7 March 31st'
Photo of an original picture
(The year appears to be 1960)

Introduction

For almost 200 years there has been a bridge, or two, at this location over the River Irwell in Manchester.

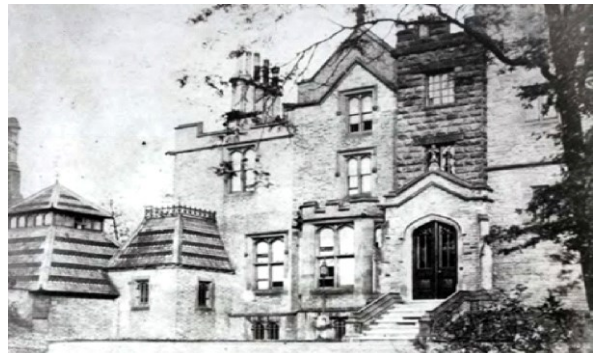
Brian's picture shows the bridge around 1960, at the time when people used to cross the river on their way to Manchester Racecourse.

History of the Bridge

1826 – 1914 'Broughton Suspension Bridge' (rebuilt in 1831 due to a collapse).

1924 to present, 'Gerald Road Footbridge' as shown above.

We start with John Fitzgerald, MP from 1826 -1832, who built his family home, Castle Irwell House, in 1826. In order to connect the house he paid for the construction of a 144 feet (44 m) suspension bridge across the River Irwell between Lower Broughton and Pendleton. The lane that crossed the bridge was called Suspension Road, later becoming Gerald's Lane (as in Fitzgerald's).





The bridge avoided the use of the Broughton Ford river crossing, which when in flood would have resulted in longer trips via either Agecroft Bridge or the Crescent. It connected not only Fitzgerald's Castle Irwell to Broughton and onwards, but also continued on to Fitzgerald's Pendleton colliery.

Fitzgerald aimed to recoup his outlay charging all users of the bridge a Pontage to cross (term for a toll levied for the building or repair of a bridge). The bridge was the only means of communication between the townships of Broughton and Pendleton and a source of great local pride, as the Menai Suspension Bridge had opened that same year and suspension bridges were then considered the "new wonder of the age".

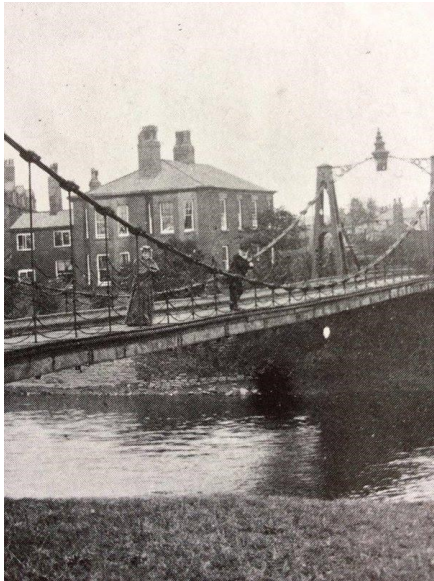


Map of the area showing Pendleton Colliers, Castle Irwell and the Suspension bridge

Brief History of Broughton Suspension Bridge

Broughton Suspension Bridge was a suspended-deck suspension bridge, the bridge's construction has been attributed to Samuel Brown, but this has been questioned; some

sources have suggested that it may have been built by Thomas Cheek Hewes, a Manchester millwright and textile machinery manufacturer.



Broughton Suspension Bridge was situated where the Gerald Road Bridge is today. Constructed in 1826 it crossed the River Irwell, between Broughton and Pendleton in Greater Manchester and was one of Europe's first iron chain suspension bridges. The 44-meter chain link suspension bridge was financed solely by John Fitzgerald, the wealthy owner of the nearby Castle Irwell House (later to become the site of the Manchester Racecourse), At the time the bridge was the only nearby crossing between Broughton and Pendleton.

Picture from Facebook - We Grew Up in Salford

British Army's 60th Royal Rifle Corps

On 12 April 1831 four years after the bridge's construction, soldiers from the British Army's 60th Royal Rifle Corps were participating in an exercise on Kersal Moor. They were led by Lieutenant Percy Slingsby Fitzgerald, John Fitzgerald's son and an MP.



When the 74 soldiers were marching back to Regent Road barracks by way of the bridge, they crossed the suspension bridge, four abreast. As they marched, they noticed the bridge had begun to vibrate in time with their steps. They were not aware that they were inducing mechanical resonance within the bridge, which would lead to a catastrophic structural failure.

The troops found the vibrations amusing and even adjusted their step to amplify it further, unaware of the effect at play. The frequency of the vibrations increased until the bridge could no longer handle it, suffering a structural failure just before the first men reached the other side.

Later reports described sounds like gunshots, as one of the iron columns that supported the bridge's chains collapsed. The rest of the bridge followed suit, falling away beneath the feet of the troops, around 40 of whom were tossed into the river below.

Thankfully the river was less than a metre deep at the time of the collapse and none of the soldiers were killed, although there were many injuries, including broken bones and head wounds.

After the collapse, an investigation discovered that one of the ground anchor bolts that supported the bridge's stay chains had snapped. However, this ground anchor only relied on a single bolt, rather than two, and was found to have been poorly forged. The investigation concluded that because of this design flaw, the bridge was destined to collapse and that the marching just sped the process up.

*After the collapse the British Army ordered marching troops to **break step** when crossing a bridge, to prevent another similar disaster from happening again.*



The Rebuilt Broughton Suspension bridge in 1883
(Photo credit: Richerman / Salford Local History library / Wikipedia)

Though rebuilt and strengthened, the bridge was subsequently propped with temporary piles whenever crowds were expected.

Gerald Road Footbridge

In 1924 a truss bridge replaced it, which is still used today. Here's the new bridge as it currently stands:



The replacement bridge in Broughton is known as the Gerald Road Foot Bridge.

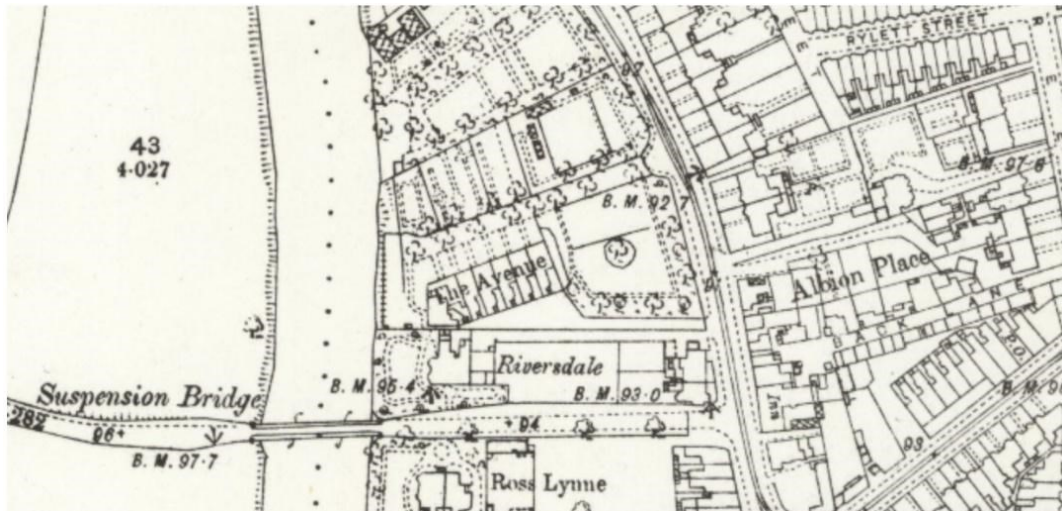
Picture by Ian Smith 31st October 2022

The Broughton Suspension Bridge of 1826 was eventually demolished and replaced by a Pratt Truss footbridge, designed by the Borough Engineer at a cost of about £2,300, which was formally opened on 2 April 1924. However, the over-wide abutments and a stone post on the Broughton side are part of the original structure.

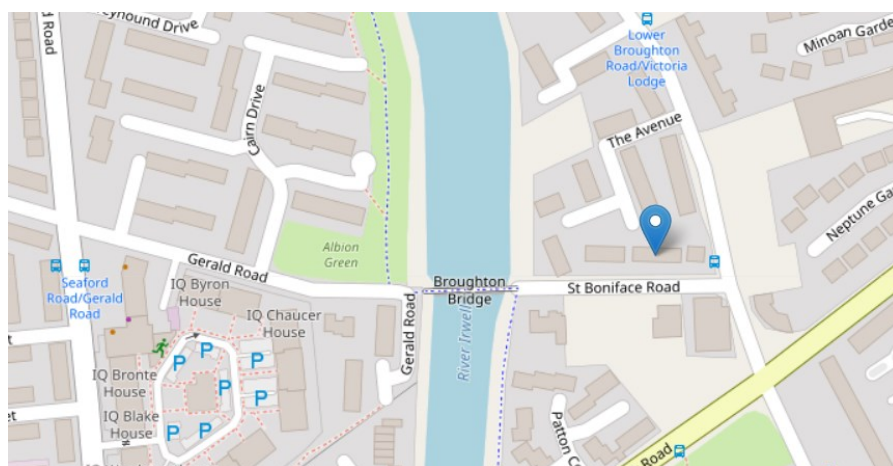
Extract from the Manchester Guardian 3rd April 1924, page 11

NEW IRWELL BRIDGE - The formal opening yesterday of a new footbridge over the Irwell at Gerald Road, connecting Broughton and Pendleton, was the culmination of an agitation begun 20 years ago for better means of communication between the two districts. There are now 19 bridges across the Irwell in its winding course through the borough, and the Gerald Road structure supersedes the suspension bridge that was erected about 90 years ago. For many years, foot passengers and vehicles crossing this old bridge had to pay toll, but it became unremunerative when the Wallness and Cromwell bridges were opened as free highways. In 1898 the suspension bridge was offered to the Corporation but declined owing to the cost of repairs. Under its Act of 1920 the Corporation obtained powers to construct the new footbridge but in consequence of the restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Health, the work was not commenced until July 1923. ... When the Borough Engineer (Colonel Martin) was preparing the plans, he found that the abutments of the old bridge were quite fit to receive the new superstructure and resulting correspondence led to Mr G P FitzGerald giving the Corporation permission to use them. He also granted any other easements necessary without monetary consideration. The new bridge, designed by the Borough Engineer, is of the Pratt Truss type. It has a span between the abutments of 142 feet 9 inches, and the width is 8 feet between the railings. The total weight of steelwork in the bridge is 57 tons, and of the whole superstructure 91 tons. Its cost is about £2,300.

Location



Brian's sketch title is 'Riversdale (Gerald Road) the sketch was taken at the St Boniface Road side - after the Roman Catholic Church that was built opposite Riversdale in 1892, but also to avoid confusion with the same road on the Pendleton side of the bridge.



From Facebook - We Grew Up In Salford - John Davies – 7th December 2020

This post was written by a Salford lady, Irene Kirkham, in 2016: Note how similar the picture is to what Brian sketched.

"I lived at 26 Gerald Road in a big old house at the side of the River Irwell, opposite St Boniface's Church. The bridge crossing the Irwell gave us no end of pleasure. We raced paper boats in the water, played hop-scotch by the steps and made a swing on the bars. I remember the gas lamp and the lamp-lighter used to come at dusk in his iron clogs to light the mantle and extinguish it in the morning. The dog track was over the bridge. Near Bonfire Night, the punters were always more than generous to give a 'Penny For The Guy'. I remember going with my grandmother to Cross Lane Market on a Monday afternoon to buy fresh fish which we always had for tea and buying out-of-date toffees.



I attended St Boniface's School. I remember Miss Battle was the headmistress and to me it was a cold, dismal building with outside toilets. After a long illness, I went to Claremont Open Air school and what a difference. There was cocoa and a hot breakfast waiting for us when we got off the bus. One thing I hated was having to have a sleep after lunch. It was in a large covered area but open to the elements and OK in the summer but freezing in the winter. On leaving school, after many temporary jobs, I started my nursing career. I later got married, emigrated to Australia and settled in Melbourne where I still reside - but my heart remains in magical Salford."



Today the bridge leads you to 'The Irwell Riverside Walkway



Pictures of the Gerald Road Footbridge 31st October 2022

If you look at the first top girder on the first picture below it has 13 triangles in it, but Brian's sketch has nine.

We know that Brian would not paint from photographs so he may have simply done the main sketch at the location and then filled the detail from memory. The concrete bases and rails however look very similar. The bridge of course could have been modified or strengthened. A bit of a mystery.





Below is what we think are posts from the old Broughton Suspension Bridge which are located just in front of the Gerald Road foot bridge.



Manchester Racecourse - Castle Irwell

Brian called his sketch 'Crossing to Manchester Racecourse' as well as 'Riversdale (Gerald Road) Salford 7 March 31st'

To understand what the Castle Irwell racecourse looked like you can watch the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8B8ubkWvGc>



The whole course could be seen from the grandstand and from Castle Hill across the river, but the approaches on race days including the bridges were guarded by toll-men. Richard Wright proctor wrote in 1862

Here is a summary of the Racecourse for the full history click on the link at the end of this document.

After the closure of the Kersal Moor racecourse in 1847, Manchester racing was moved across the river Irwell to a site known as Castle Irwell, named after the large, castellated house on the site. The land was rented for £500 per annum on a twenty-year lease from John Fitzgerald. A large grandstand was erected, to seat over 1,000 spectators, and the course, being bounded by the river on three sides, was easier to manage than Kersal Moor

The river is also the source of occasional merriment. As the approaches to the race-ground are jealously guarded by toll-men, it follows that many urchins, penniless tramps, and artisans out of employment are annually excluded. Of these unfortunates some turn listlessly homeward, while others, more persevering, gather in groups along the bank of the stream, and select a place for fording. The youngsters then strip and fasten their bundled apparel upon their heads; the men turn up their trousers, slinging their shoes and stockings over their shoulders; thus, prepared they enter the water, some crossing with comparative ease; but others, on dropping a cap, or swimming a stocking, or sinking deeper than they expected, lose heart and return, to the infinite amusement of those on the winning side. If, as Poor Richard affirms, a penny saved be a penny gained, this is the way to gain it with a vengeance.

When John Fitzgerald died at Regent's Park Terrace, Camden Town, March 18th 1852, the property passed to his son (also called John), who refused to renew the lease when it expired in 1867 "for just and Christian reasons" and the course was closed.



**Map of the Manchester
Castle Irwell Racecourse**

John died in 1879, and by 1898 the Castle Irwell land had been bought by the Manchester Race Committee from his executors, they razed the Castle and Knoll and expanded the old racecourse, which had been laid North of Castle Irwell with a 1000-seater stand, to now take up the whole headland in the curve of the river Irwell.

Castle Irwell

A sports facility fit for the 20th Century was created . A high wall was built on the sides not bounded by the river; gardens and glazed galleries were built inside and there were trams to the main entrance. There was a luxurious club stand built in an eccentric amalgam of styles and the main entrance was adorned with dutch gables. The course was finally inaugurated on the Easter weekend of 1902. This first meeting was over jumps, with the principal event being the Lancashire Steeplechase, a handicap of £1,750. This race was run until 1952. The first flat meeting was held in 1902 at Whitsuntide, featuring the Castle Irwell Inauguration Handicap, worth £500 to the winner. It was won by Vatel, ridden by Kempton Cannon.

The course was close to the Manchester city centre and was well served by trams. It was right-handed, and there were three separate tracks on the site, flat, hurdle and steeplechase. Castle Irwell was the venue for the Lancashire Oaks from its inception in 1939 until 1963 and the course also staged a Classic race – the wartime substitute St. Leger Stakes in 1941. The winner was Lord Portal's Sun Castle, 10–1, who beat Chateau Larose (R. Jones) by a short head. Sun Castle was ridden by Georges Bridgland, who rode Pearl Diver to win the Derby in 1947.

In June 1952, at Castle Irwell, Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her first winner as an owner after acceding to the throne.

By the 1960s the problems with the site were beginning to show and the club stand was found to be riddled with rot. A new stand was built, one of the first fully cantilevered reinforced concrete stands to be built in Britain and the first with private viewing boxes. However, the cost put a great strain on the course's finances and within two years financial difficulties persuaded the shareholders to sell the site. The final race, The Goodbye Consolation Plate, was held on 9 November 1963 and won by Lester Piggott, watched by over 20,000 spectators.

The Castle Irwell racecourse closed after the meeting on 9 November 1963

In 1973 the University of Salford bought most of the site and its buildings for £46,000. It was used to construct a student village. The Members' Stand was retained to become an entertainment venue known as the Pavilion or the Pav. It was run by the University of Salford Students' Union before it closed in June 2010. The Student Village closed in June 2015 at the end of the academic year. An arson attack in July 2016 seriously damaged the former racecourse stand.

In March 2015 work began on an £11.75 million scheme to create a flood basin and nature reserve combined with playing fields on the north of the site to extend the river Irwell flood defence scheme already in place on Littleton Road. The scheme, which involved the demolition of the student village and the member's stand and the creation of a flood basin and wetland covering most of the site, was completed in March 2018.

Today if you stand on the Gerald Road Footbridge during the day you will see lots of students crossing, bikers and Joggers.

Useful Links

John Fitzgerald (1775–1852)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fitzgerald_\(1775%E2%80%931852\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fitzgerald_(1775%E2%80%931852))

The Kerrich Family

[The Kerrich Family \(prestwich.org.uk\)](http://www.prestwich.org.uk)

British Army incident in 1831

https://www.warhistoryonline.com/war-articles/broughton-suspension-bridge-collapse.html?D7c=1&A5c=1&D_4_6cALL=1&D_4_6_10cALL=1

Picture from Facebook - We Grew Up In Salford

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/5968150751/permalink/10157927715430752/>

Pratt Truss bridge

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truss_bridge#Gallery

Broughton Suspension Bridge

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broughton_Suspension_Bridge

<https://virtualglobetrotting.com/map/former-site-of-the-broughton-suspension-bridge/>

[Field Trip - Broughton Suspension Bridge \(fieldtripper.com\)](#)

Pendleton Colliery

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pendleton_Colliery

Manchester Racecourse

[Manchester Racecourse - Wikipedia](#)

https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Manchester_Racecourse

[Castle Irwell, Castle Irwell Lane, Pendleton - Building | Architects of Greater Manchester \(manchestervictorianarchitects.org.uk\)](#)

Rise and fall of Castle Irwell and 'The Pav': An 'iconic' part of Salford University

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/nostalgia/rise-fall-castle-irwell-the-23325582>

Ian Smith

2023