

Richard Forman's poem on the building of Abingdon and Culham Bridges and the causeway between them - translation

This line-by-line translation is intended as an aid to understanding Forman's poem. It makes no claim either to perfect accuracy or to literary merit.

I have generally followed the footnotes provided by C D Cobham and Ralph Hanna, except in lines 62 and 63 where I have preferred the reading of David Harrison which accompanies his description of how medieval bridges were built.

References: C D Cobham (ed), *A Monument of Christian Munificence* (Oxford, 1873), Appendix; Ralph Hanna, "The Bridges at Abingdon: An Unnoticed Alliterative Poem." *Yee? Baw For Bokes: Essays on Medieval Manuscripts and Poetics In Honor of Hoyt N. Duggan*. Ed. Michael Calabrese and Stephen H. A. Shepherd. (Los Angeles: 2013), pp 31-44; David Harrison, *The Bridges of Medieval England: Transport and Society 400-1800*, (Oxford, 2004), pp. 134-5, 206-6.

King Henry V in his fourth year
Founded bridges both
Over Burford and Culhamford.
Between them he provided a high road.
5 In further years he gave a wide road for travel
Of which the start is at Abingdon.
It was in the year fourteen hundred
And sixteen that he performed this work of piety.
You who pass by be aware of him
10 And remember the founder in your prayers.

Of all works ever performed in this world
The chief is the church where children are received
For by baptism these babies are brought to bliss
15 Through the grace of God, and well reborn.

Another blessed business is building bridges
Wherever people cannot pass after heavy rain.
It is sad to draw a dead body out of the stream
20 That was baptised in a font and was one of us.

King Henry the fifth in his fourth year
Founded for his people a bridge in Berkshire.
So carts and their loads can come and go
25 That previously in winter would become stuck in the mud.

And some would fall out of their saddles to the ground
And off in the water no one knew where.
It might be five weeks before they were found
30 Their families and friends took them up with sadness.

Then the commons of Abingdon appealed to the king
And dukes and lords that were in this land
The king told them to begin with God's blessing

- 35 And make it as strong as they could with stone lime and sand.
On St Alban's day they began work
And John Huchins laid the first stone in the king's name.
- 40 Sir Peter Bessels, courteous and gentle knight
For his father's soul and his other relatives did as he should.
He gave them stones enough for all the work
As many as they needed, but they would have to transport them.
- 45 Craftsmen for the quarry made crowbars of iron,
Wedges and tools and many hard hoes.
Jeffrey Barbour paid their wages.
Then they needed frame work to centre the arches,
- 50 They quarrelled about carts and prepared the sluices
They dug for the foundations and put in large stones.
They calculated the arches by geometry and raised them
With eleven labourers baling at once
- 55 There was water enough, stone, lime and gravel
Workmen as skilled as they could find
And Barbour continued to pay for their labour
Till he had spent every penny of a thousand marks.
- 60 But they were seriously hampered by the strength of the stream
And in labour and baling much money was lost.
Till there came a lad who was an experienced water man
He helped stop the stream as the work advanced.
- 65 It was good to see in the summer season
Three hundred working at once.
In teams of four well organised
To see who worked best at their current task.
- 70 The people showed their strength with the pickaxe.
The mattock was wielded well for a time
With spades and shovels they made such a noise
That they could be heard a mile away.
- 75 Wives went out to see how they fared:
Five score in a flock, it was a fair sight
In clean tablecloths they brought white bread
Cheese and chickens nicely arranged.
- 80 The ditches were dug in very hard ground
And the spoil heaped up to carry the causeway
And trees were planted along the banks
To hold them firm for ever.
- 85 The Abbot of Abingdon granted of his land

An ample 80 feet for the breadth of the bridge.
It was a big saving of earth and of sand,
And he stopped charging for the ferry.

90 A hundred and fifteen pounds was paid
By John Huchins and also Banbury
For the road and the ferry, it must be said.
All Abingdon can witness, and many others,

95 That it's all ended at Culham hithe
And all the country is better for it and no one worse off.
There were previously few folks who could go that way
Without leaving a gage or paying cash.

100 If it was a beggar with his bread in a bag,
He would soon be told to go elsewhere
And of poor people the ferryman would take
A hood or a girdle, and they had to go on without it.

105 There was more mischief than I can say.
Culham hithe has caused many a curse
But blessed be our helpers through whom we have a better way
Without any penny for cart or horse.

110 It was so agreed between the king and the abbey
And the commons of Abingdon, as the Abbot wished.
Thus they were put in possession and all agreed
That the town would be responsible for any repairs.

115 This was also confirmed by act of parliament
To have and to hold peacefully in perpetuity.
This tale is told for no other reason
Than as a happy reminder to young and old

120 Every good person that crosses this bridge
Should pray for good Jeffrey Barbour
Who gave clothes and shelter to many poor men
And gave rental properties to maintain this road.

125 These rents were taken in hand by trustworthy men
Who have managed them properly for a good while now.
Whoever has them in the future, if he does not act correctly
It will be known publicly to his own discredit.

130 I advise everyone to avoid the curse
For I don't want to say more on this subject
Don't be too keen to fill your own purse
Because you will risk punishment in the pit of hell

135 God give us grace to behave with honesty
That we may have a place in the bliss of heaven. Amen.

r. A.B.I.N.D.O.N.R.F.I.

Take the first letter of your forefather with A, the worker of wax, and I and N, the colour of an ass. Put them together and tell me if you can what you get. Richard Fannade Ironmonger has made this table and set it here in the 36th year of King Henry VI.

MB

14/06/2016