

### ENCHANTING WYCOLLER, NEAR COLNE, LANCASHIRE.



**On a cold February morning Wycoller's curious looking, crooked, double-arched packhorse bridge spanning Wycoller Beck with the ruinous Wycoller Hall to the rear. February 2010.**

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**T**he charming East Lancashire village of Wycoller with its architecturally renowned eighteenth century stone houses and its ruinous, reputedly haunted, Wycoller Hall, straddles Wycoller Beck that meanders down the beautiful Pennine valley, Wycoller Dene to drain the high moorland to the east that extends over to Haworth in West Yorkshire.

Anyone approaching Wycoller could not help but notice the wild silhouettes of gnarled, wind-bent ancient Oaks, Alders, Ash and Birches against the sky. Wycoller received its name from the Anglo-Saxon: - 'wic-air' – which translates into, 'the dairy farm amongst the Alders'. Middle Stone Age man lived and hunted on the encircling high moorland that dominates Wycoller.

Early records mention – (circa 1196) – there were two cattle rearing farms, known as 'vaccaries' in Wycoller. It is probable that vac-

aries were established for the breeding of oxen. These powerful, sturdy animals were the main beasts of burden for centuries. Each village required eight oxen to pull the plough, and it was the Wycoller vaccaries that provided the oxen.

The unusual looking, enigmatic vaccary walls, built of massive, weirdly-shaped gritstone slabs are a striking feature of the fields around Wycoller. Their existence alongside the ancient trackways where they stand up like giant jagged teeth against the sky, are a testament to the men who erected them centuries ago. These walls of gritstone slabs were built to act as enclosures for the safeguarding of the farm's oxen, cattle and sheep, and were probably erected during the mid-thirteenth century when many new vaccaries were established in nearby Pendle Forest, Rossendale Forest and elsewhere in Pennine Lancashire.

## JAGGERMEN'S BRIDGES ON PACKHORSE TRAILS

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**'A row of giant jagged teeth against the sky'. A section of vaccary walling on the fell side above Wycoller Dene. February 2010.**

**© Christine McEwen Collection.**

By 1527, the two Wycoller vaccaries had developed into a hamlet. Between the Tudors and the stirrings of the Industrial Revolution, Wycoller developed into a locally important, handloom weaving village, which by this period lay astride the packhorse trackway from nearby Colne to Keighley on the other side of the Pennines in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Wycoller village, together with the verdant, leafy Wycoller Dene with its beautiful stream, has for over forty years been a favourite place to visit for my husband Alan, and also for myself ever since I became lovingly acquainted with its charms in 2002. The area abounds with wildlife; and we have frequently observed kestrels hovering above the village in search of mice, rats, stoats, weasels and young rabbits. In Wycoller Beck, we have been regularly delighted in seeing heron gracefully standing in the beck fishing for the abundant brown trout. On a number of other occasions I have been thrilled on seeing the

typical flash of bright plumage as a kingfisher races above the surface of the busy, chattering Wycoller Beck searching for a meal. Alan also enjoys a passion for wild flowers, so in spring we often take a most delightful stroll along Wycoller Beck where we are rewarded with seeing hosts of bluebells, wood sorrel, celandines, and those unusually looking plants, butterburs. In summer, the edges of the steeply sloping meadows are awash with the colour of tall foxgloves, dog violets and germander speedwell. A truly delightful, enchanting and serene haven for wildlife and for Man.

### **WYCOLLER'S FAMOUS UNIQUE BRIDGES**

Wycoller straddles one of the earliest important packhorse trackways across the Pennines between Colne, once an important cloth-making town, and over into the West Riding of Yorkshire, Keighley and Bradford in the Aire Valley.

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Wycoller is renowned for its seven stone bridges that span Wycoller Beck, three being unique specimens of the bridge builders art. On entering Wycoller the first of these three bridges, the packhorse bridge can be seen spanning the beck a cockstride downstream of a cobble stone-bottomed ford.

## THE PACKHORSE BRIDGE

The famous packhorse bridge is a fascinating specimen of a double-arched bridge. Some say it dates back to the thirteenth century, whilst other say the fifteenth century. However, I am sure its true age will never be revealed but the ancient structure has withstood the constant passage of Jaggermen and his strings of packhorses for centuries.

The whole bridge is built from the local Millstone Grit. The voussoirs: the stones that comprise the double arches actually extend the full width of the bridge and display evidence that in the distant past the arch stones themselves were the actual paving. Also due to the bridge's foundation stones being laid in an uneven fashion, the whole structure, and in particular the 'village side' arch looks to be in a precarious state of health. How long the bridge has been in this predicament nobody seems to know, but in 1948 the Ministry of Works issued a fascinating condition report on the bridge which, I feel is worth adding in full:

**“At first glance this appears to be in a precarious state but it is considered mainly an optical effect due to the extra ordinary method employed in springing the arch – (entirely built of long stones) – direct from the rock without any attempt to level it first; the distortion of the arch does not appear to be a recent fault and in fact may never have been true. The bridge is not falling over as appearance suggests. Mortar in the joints is mainly lacking and they should be thoroughly consolidated. Original path surface and low parapets are missing and the backs of the arch stones now form the surface. When this is washed out and consolidated, it would perhaps. Be as well to lay a layer of concrete over the whole bridge, within the parapets of course, to form a saddle and provide a proper surface, care, however, would be necessary to provide a pleasing surface .....**”

When I read this document, I was truly horrified at the prospect of the Ministry of Work's

builders covering this striking, ancient packhorse bridge with so hideous a material as concrete! Gladly they did not do so.

The packhorse bridge is affectionately known hereabouts as Sally's Bridge. So who was Sally? Local tradition has it way back in the mists of time, a local lass named Sally influenced the construction of this amazing bridge. A one time resident of Wycoller Hall, Squire Henry Cunliffe had a favourite niece, Sally Scargill, who evidently delighted in spending time at the hall, which she had enjoyed ever since being a wee lass. This Sally, probably was a young well-born woman, Sarah Scargill, who was locally known as Sally. She eventually married into the prominent Cunliffe family, thereafter being known as Sally Owen Cunliffe. Later, she gave birth to a boy, Henry Owen Cunliffe, who in time became the last Squire of Wycoller Hall.

When I have viewed this fascinating, double-arched, old stone bridge from its upstream side, the crooked left-hand arch referred to above, appears to be most strange. Nevertheless, the quirky, malformed configuration, whether intentionally built in, or the result of an early partial collapse of the structure, actually accentuates the overall attractiveness and appeal of this stunning pre-industrial packhorse bridge which countless visitors to Wycoller take pleasure in photographing.

The 'crooked' arch has a span of around fourteen feet. The 'main' arch leaps from the centre stone pillar, a distance of around twelve feet to the bank. The overall span of the bridge across Wycoller Beck amounts to around twenty six feet. The centre stone pillar rising from the middle of the beck acts as cutwaters on both upstream and downstream sides.

The twenty six inch wide trackway over the bridge consists of severely worn cobbles and flagstones. The random stone parapets are approximately ten inches high. These were probably rebuilt by the Ministry of Works around 1948.

Two or three yards upstream is an attractive stony-bottomed ford, and several stepping stones. Both ford and stepping stones originally would have been used by herdsmen whilst leading cattle and sheep across the beck. When in full spate, the beck would no doubt be difficult to cross, and particularly so for packhorses with their heavily loaded panniers, perhaps containing oats, corn, wheat, woollens, cotton – which had to be kept dry, this is probably the reason the packhorse bridge was constructed.

# JAGGERMEN'S BRIDGES ON PACKHORSE TRAILS

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**On a beautiful April morning I took this picture of Wycoller's ancient Clapper Bridge crossing the beck near the front of Wycoller Hall. April 2005.**

*© Christine McEwen Collection.*

## **THE CLAPPER BRIDGE**

This superb specimen of a clapper bridge spans the beck in the shadow of the broken down walls of enigmatic Wycoller Hall. Hereabouts, the beck was too wide to be spanned by a single-slab bridge, such as the clam bridge located about a half a mile upstream. Although somewhat primitive looking, clapper bridges of these proportions in Northern England are a profound rarity, and the age of this bridge is the subject of much head-scratching amongst historians. It is safe to say, however, that Wycoller's clapper bridge is among the rarest of its type to be found anywhere in Britain. In Devon, in the village of Postbridge there is a similarly striking clapper bridge, but the date of its construction is unknown.

The clapper bridge is also quite unusual, as it is known hereabouts by three different names: Th'Hall Bridge; Weavers' Bridge and Druids' Bridge. Its colourful, varying names derive from the centuries old traditions that surround the ancient structure. It is known as Th'Hall Bridge because it crosses the beck right in front of Wycoller Hall; Weavers' Bridge, no doubt, recalls

several centuries of village handloom weavers who crossed the bridge with their 'pieces' – sheets of coarse woollens to hang out to dry in the Tenter field then located at the rear of the Hall. Local legend spins that in the Dark Ages, local Druid priests carried out human sacrifices in an amphitheatre located on the side of the beck where the Hall was later constructed. Evidently, these ancient Druid rites are now recalled in the clapper bridge's thought-inspiring name.

Currently, the clapper bridge consists of three massive gritstone slabs resting on two supporting pillars. However, local legend says that early in the nineteenth century there were only two slabs, until the slab on the Wycoller Hall side of the beck was broken in half due to a falling, heavy tree. This resulted in the two broken sections of the slab being subsequently repaired, and being supported from the bed of the beck by a stout, Oak log. Later, the log was replaced by the current concrete pillar.

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So this is the reason why the bridge now comprises of three huge slabs of local Millstone Grit to span this wide section of Wycoller Beck. The slabs have an average width of thirty eight inches by eleven inches in thickness.

In the middle of the beck there is a massive arrowhead-shaped gritstone boulder, seven feet, six inches long by three feet high which tapers at the downstream side from thirty eight inches down to six inches. This boulder, an Ice Age erratic, together with two squarish lumps of stone stacked on top acts as the main support pillar; on the upstream side the arrowhead acts as a cutwater.

The main slab which even for a large section of Millstone Grit is, at fourteen feet, eight inches a considerable length. One end of this huge slab on the 'village' side of the beck rests on crudely built abutments constructed from huge, roughly-squared, natural pieces of stone. The other end sits mid-way on the supporting stone pillar. Between this natural stone pillar and the 'hall' side of the beck, acting as an additional support pillar, is the most unappealing, incongruous, concrete support. The middle slab, some seven feet in length is supported by the huge stone column and the concrete pillar. The third slab measures around seven feet, four inches and is also supported at one end by the concrete pillar and the other end by large pieces of stone let into the bank of the beck.

The present top surface of the clapper bridge is relatively smooth. Most modern footwear is not iron-tipped like the handloom weavers' clogs of old, or the heavy leather boots once worn by farmers, and therefore, do not cause grooves to be worn into the stone. However, past generations of foot traffic did indeed, over time, wear extremely deep troughs along the centre of the upper surface of the stone slabs.

These ever-deepening grooves, obviously made walking across the bridge increasingly difficult, particularly at night when it would be pitch-black, or during bad weather when the conditions could be hazardous. Local legend spins that the grooves were in fact chiselled flat by a Wycoller farmer following the tragic death of his daughter who evidently drowned in the flooded beck resulting from her missing her footing in the deep grooves and falling into the raging torrent.

Although not specifically mentioned as a packhorse bridge, I believe this broad-topped clapper bridge pre-dates the packhorse bridge and therefore, would be regularly used by the Jaggermen's heavily laden packhorses, as well as farmers driving their cattle and sheep across the beck.

### CLAM BRIDGE

Located about a third of a mile upstream from the clapper bridge is an excellent specimen of a stone beam or clam bridge, which comprises a massive, single slab of Millstone Grit which is laid resembling a huge tree trunk across the beck. This clam bridge is the most primitive-looking of Wycoller's bridges, its design harking back to earlier times when man would use large tree trunks for crossing streams.

In the mountainous regions of Northern England, where there was an abundance of stone, for example, the Millstone Grit areas of the South Pennines, large slabs hewn from gritstone and other suitable sandstones were considerably commonplace.

The massive, natural-looking slab used in the Wycoller clam bridge originally may have been discovered among the numerous piles of erratic boulders left scattered about Wycoller Dene during the last Ice Age; for there is no distinct evidence in the form of mason's tool marks to be seen anywhere on the stone.

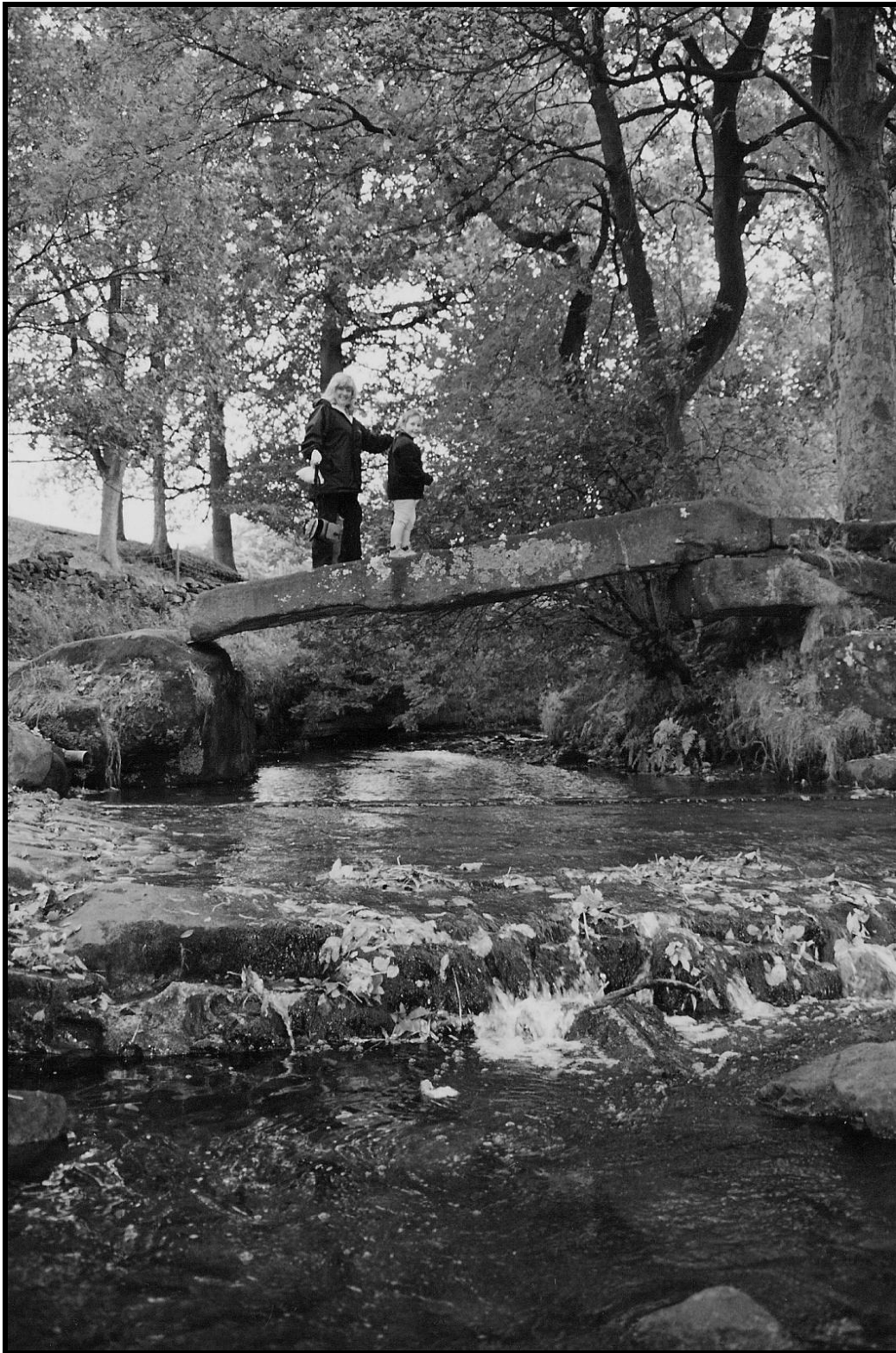
The quarrying of such a large slab, and particularly so in the pre-Medieval Period would have been a significant undertaking. The transportation of the slab, due to the rocky terrain of the dene, unless sourced from nearby would also have been virtually impossible; and the final lifting into place of the slab, would be a most hazardous and practically challenging task.

Regarding the age of the clam bridge, some historians suggest it was built in ancient times, - (between 1000 and 3000 years) - while others say it is relatively modern, probably late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

Just like dating many of these enigmatic bridges – who knows? I have only added the Wycoller clam bridge into the book – because it is one of the well-known 'Wycoller three bridges', and because I just find the old clam bridge absolutely fascinating.

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**The author and granddaughter Emily precariously standing upon Wycoller's Clam Bridge. In the foreground is an ancient ford with some large vaccary stones embedded in the beck. April 2005.**

*© Christine McEwen Collection.*

The overall length of this huge slab of Millstone Grit, the main component of the bridge, is a massive fifteen feet and the width varies between thirty two and twenty eight inches. The thickness of the slab ranges from fifteen inches

down to around twelve inches. There are two square holes measuring approximately two inches square which have been cut into the top, presumably, for securing an iron handrail, now long gone.

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Rather precariously, the slab spans Wycoller Beck with just around three or four inches of purchase on top of a large, irregular-shaped rock embedded in the bank by the road side. The other end of the slab sits on a crudely constructed abutment of large, rough blocks of gritstone built into the side of the beck.

Almost unbelievably, on the 19th of May 1989, a tremendous, powerful wall of flood water thundering down the beck, ripped the giant slab from its position and washed it several yards downstream, resulting in it being cracked across in two different places. The bridge owners, Lancashire County Council, successfully recovered the slab, and subsequent to carrying out specialised repairs involving pinning and bonding the cracks together with special mortar, it was re-sited, where it had withstood many a ferocious Pennine storm for countless years.

Immediately downstream of the clam bridge is the remains of a ford and embedded in the bed of the beck are a number of large 'vaccary' stones which must have been removed from one of the local field walls.

Having many times visited these three fascinating old bridges, and marvelled at their construction, I have found myself becoming more and more appreciative of how they enhance the enchanting atmosphere of beautiful Wycoller Dene, and I just wonder when and by whom these historic stone bridges were built.

## WYCOLLER'S GHOSTS

Legends of ghostly visitations embrace ancient Wycoller as they cling to perhaps just a few other secluded Pennine villages. But it isn't surprising, for the tiny hamlet of Wycoller lies in seclusion in its bowl-like valley encircled with high altitude, misty moorland; surely the perfect spot for ghostly hauntings, boggarts and worst, terrible Guytrash Padfoot.

During the summer days, Wycoller with its beautiful stream flowing peacefully between banks of colourful, perfumed wild flowers is a charming and peaceful location. But during those pitch black, moonless, late autumn nights, with swirling blankets of mist rising above the beck, it would be easy to let your imagination dwell on the local legends of ghostly happenings that for centuries have haunted the village, and in particular the broken down ruins of Wycoller Hall.

Just imagine, in the dead of night, walking

across either the Packhorse Bridge or the Clapper Bridge, the mist swirling around you, to then enter the roofless old Hall and to stand close to the huge stone fireplace. Even for the stoutest heart naturally, this would be a fearsome place because a number of ghostly happenings have occurred hereabouts. Wycoller's ghost stories are well documented and more than one involve two of the historic bridges.

## 'THE SPECTRE HORSEMAN'

The legendary Spectre Horseman is undoubtedly the most well documented, famous Wycoller ghost. From back in the mists of time, local tradition says that the ghost appears on just one night each year, and only then when the night is as black as a grave, the wind howling down from the high, bleak moorland and rain barrelling down in torrents. On nights such as this when there is no moon to light up the secluded, dark and foggy lanes, the village folk of Wycoller would not stir from their hearths.

The haunting of the Packhorse Bridge by the Spectre Horseman is dramatically recorded in Harland and Wilkinson's, *'Lancashire Legends'* dated 1882:

**"He is attired in the costume of the early Stuart Period and the trappings of his horse are one of the most uncouth description. When the wind howls, the loudest horseman can be heard dashing up the road at full speed, and after crossing the narrow bridge, he suddenly stops at the door of the Hall. The rider then dismounts and makes his way up the broad open stairs into one of the rooms of the Hall. Dreadful screams, as from a woman, are then heard, which soon subsides into groans. The horseman then makes his appearance at the door ---- at once mounts his steed ---- and gallops off the road he came. His body can be seen through by those who may be chance to be present; his horse appears to be wild with rage and its nostrils steam with fire."**

This tale, records one of the Cunliffe family members murdering his wife in one of the Hall's upstairs bedrooms. The ghostly apparition, - the Spectre Horseman - is the ghost of Cunliffe, the wife-killer who is doomed forever to re-enact the terrible, bloody scene of the heinous crime.

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There is an even more dramatic telling of the same story in Halliwell Sutcliffe's *'Mistress Barbara Cunliffe'*, who dates the murder during the reign of Charles II.

**“Well, he went a-hunting once on a day --- it was in Charles the Second's time, we're told --- and the fox led them a five-mile chase across the moors until he came to Wycoller Dene. He crossed the stream between the straight bridge and the double-arched, and would have turned down the village; but the hounds headed him, and he ran straight as a die through the open main door of the Hall, and up the stair here: the hounds followed, and after them the old Squire spurred his horse right up the stair, and into his wife's room, where she had been busy with her tiring maid until the entry of the fox disturbed them. The wife screamed aloud in terror for**

**the hounds' teeth were already in the fox, and the music of the hunt was deafening --- and Simon Cunliffe swore a great oath, and cursed her chicken-heartedness, and raised his hunting-crop as if to strike her. That and the fright together killed her, so they say, and all in haste the Squire drove out the hounds, lest they should turn upon his fallen lady.”**

The ghost in this tale is supposedly Squire Simon Cunliffe – who in fact was a fictitious character invented by the author Halliwell Sutcliffe. Nevertheless, it is a most disturbing ghostly tale.

Alan and I have visited the ruins of Wycoller Hall in the wee small hours of a dark winter night, and notwithstanding the creepiness of the ruins, alas, we went back home to bed without seeing or hearing any ghostly happenings. Alan was really disappointed!



The ruins of Wycoller Hall, the haunt of the ghostly 'Spectre Horseman'. February 2010.

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