

THORNS GILL PACKHORSE BRIDGE, GEARSTONES, NEAR RIBBLEHEAD, RIBBLESDALE



The crudely-built limestone semi-circular arch of Thorns Gill Packhorse Bridge which spans the deep chasm in the limestone that the Gayle Beck rushes down on its way to join the River Ribble. July 2004.

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Located about a mile from the remote and famous Ribblehead viaduct on the Settle to Carlisle railway, and close to the ancient farmstead and former inn, Gearstones, is Thorns Gill Bridge, - (locally known as Roman Bridge) - which spans Gayle Beck that rushes down a deep, tortuous, narrow, rocky chasm to eventually flow into the River Ribble, a short distance downstream.

Thorns Gill Bridge is undoubtedly one of the most charming examples of Dales packhorse bridges and is in the form of a crudely-built semi-circular arch which springs from the natural bedrock on either side of a deep chasm. The arch is constructed from roughly-hewn limestone slabs, which spans Gayle Beck in a leap of

around fifteen feet. The structure is devoid of parapets and the overall width of the trackway across the top is six feet, six inches.

One beautifully sun-kissed afternoon in July 2004, when standing on top of the bridge, amidst the overhanging Rowan trees, on me noticing the shear drop of around eighteen feet to the surface of the torrent of water roaring through the chasm, and with my imagination kicking in, I could picture the scene two hundred years ago: a desperately hungry and tired Jaggerman leading perhaps a string of thirty packhorses across the tight confines of the bridge on a pitch black winter's night en route to Gearstones after trekking across the wild and bleak fells, ever since leaving Settle that morning. Terrifying!

JAGGERMEN'S BRIDGES ON PACKHORSE TRAILS

I quickly crossed the bridge into the sunny meadows beyond which were full of colourful wild flowers. Alan then joined me and we walked two fields further on where we reached a semi-ruinous barn amid some gnarled old trees. Close by, was the derelict ancient farmhouse which, my map indicated was called Thorns, and had once been a grange belonging to Furness Abbey.

Originally Gearstones, sited about a quarter of a mile in the direction of Hawes on the Hawes-Ingleton road – (B6255), - was a prominent local corn and oatmeal market which successfully operated until the late 1860s. The historic building also once served as an inn - 'Gearstones Inn' – and is still remembered by some of the older inhabitants of this wild and remote part of upper Ribblesdale.

An interesting piece of research in old books pointed me in the direction of another ancient inn, now a farm called 'High Birkwith' which is sited about a couple of miles south-east of Thorns Gill Bridge. High Birkwith sits on an ancient Jaggermen's packhorse trail that ran up Ribblesdale from Settle via Horton-in-Ribblesdale. This track eventually ran over the wild, bleak, desolate, high moorland to Hawes and Askrigg in Wensleydale. It has been suggested by a handful of packhorse bridge scholars – notwithstanding, there not being a scrap of documentary proof, that Thorns Gill Bridge was used by packhorse trains as a short cut from Gearstones across the wild moorland hereabouts to join the Horton-in-Ribblesdale to Askrigg packhorse route.

Thorns Gill Packhorse Bridge was extensively repaired in the early 1990s.



Alan standing on the rough stones that form the trackway over Thorns Gill Packhorse Bridge. July 2004.

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