

## Bridgehouses Footbridge

The oldest crossing of the River Don in Sheffield is Lady's Bridge, but that is not the bridge that I want to tell you about. If you take a stroll along the river from Lady's Bridge towards Aizlewood's Mill, and perchance visit the Principle 5 co-operative library, and then, maybe call for a refreshing drink at the Harlequin, you will have almost arrived at Bridgehouses Footbridge. Before you get to it however, there is a large road bridge to encounter. At the other side of this road bridge, and before another big road bridge, you will see a little iron footbridge which can be entered at one end but not exited at the other.



And that is Bridgehouses Footbridge. It was Sheffield's first iron bridge, built in 1795, refurbished in 1841, destroyed by the Great Flood in 1864 and rebuilt the following year, then renovated finally in 1921. Largely ignored since then, this footbridge provided a shortcut to Bridgehouses station in the 1840's.

Friends of Bridgehouses Footbridge

The 1795 bridge was one of the earliest iron bridges in the world and was constructed even before Sheffield's first railway station which was The **Wicker railway station** at the northern end of the Wicker, in the fork formed by Spital Hill and Savile Street. It was

opened on 31 October 1838 as the southern terminus of the Sheffield and Rotherham Railway, which ran north to Rotherham Westgate railway station. It pre-dated Sheffield Victoria Station which opened in 1851 and Bridgehouses railway station (1845). But before I slip into a full blown digression I must mention that the bridge would have been used by people going to the Bridgehouses Railway Goods Yard and Railway Station. The Harlequin was a pub which served and accommodated railway passengers and was called the **Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway Hotel**, more recently being known as The Manchester – and now, of course – The Harlequin (the original Harlequin round the corner on Johnson Street having been demolished) – both were Wards pubs and the current Harlequin is a free house. There was a lot of industry around Bridgehouses and the pubs would have been popular amongst the workers.

A bridge made of timber which probably gave the name Bridgehouses to the area pre-dates the original cast iron footbridge which was constructed by the Walker Iron Foundry in Rotherham. They worked with [Thomas Paine](#) in developing iron bridge designs in the 1780's.

(see 'Sheffield – A Civilised Place' by Duncan Froggatt page 199).

The bridge had to be replaced after the flood which devastated the Upper Don Valley in 1864.

Bridgehouses Footbridge will always put me in mind of Thomas Paine who played such an influential role in the [American Revolution](#) and who will always be remembered as the author of [Common Sense](#) and other works including [The Rights of Man](#) and [The Age of Reason](#). He also played a significant part in the French revolution. His life was saved by advice from his friend William Blake who warned him of the danger he faced from the British authorities.

His writings in the long term inspired philosophic and working-class radicals in Britain and United States. Liberals, libertarians, left-libertarians, feminists, democratic socialists, social democrats, anarchists, free thinkers and progressives often claim him as an intellectual ancestor. Paine's critique of institutionalized religion and advocacy of rational thinking influenced many British freethinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as William Cobbett, George Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, Christopher Hitchens and Bertrand Russell.

I recommend the Mark Steel lecture on Thomas Paine which is posted on Youtube:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIhcDxTU1Og&list=PLoTiF9w7DwMlG5\\_isaeui520rXcg1A-lc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIhcDxTU1Og&list=PLoTiF9w7DwMlG5_isaeui520rXcg1A-lc)

Bridgehouses Footbridge became a forlorn and sorry sight, used only to carry utility pipes, until a group was formed called 'Friends of Bridgehouses Footbridge'. They cleaned it up and painted it, signposted it and put up interpretation notices. It still doesn't go anywhere because the far end is blocked up. But it ensures that this little bit of Sheffield will never be forgotten.





Bridgehouses Footbridge



The open end of the footbridge





Bridgehouses Footbridge



Early Morning on the Don in 1910





Aizlewood's Mill and the Harlequin 2021



The Manchester and Aizlewood's Mill

Steve Thompson  
with help from Wikipedia  
2021