

Thomas Telford's Shrewsbury Team

Thomas Telford, William Hazledine and John Simpson

Andrew Pattison

In this 250th anniversary year we rightly celebrate Thomas Telford's genius. But behind every great man (or woman) there are almost invariably others whose support allows that greatness to blossom and flourish. The supporters of architects and engineers are those whose skilful work with materials bring the designer's plans into reality. Part of Telford's genius was to recognise those who had this ability, to inspire them to use their talents to the full, and also to retain their loyalty over many different projects. Among the main 'players' in Telford's 'team' were William Hazledine, John Simpson, Matthew Davidson, John Wilson, Alexander Easton and William Provis. Their names are almost unknown, but without these, and others, Telford would not have achieved much of what he did. This study looks at the relationship between Telford and the two, William Hazledine and John Simpson, who were based in Shrewsbury.

Brief biographies

Thomas Telford (1757–1834)

The story of Thomas Telford is relatively well known, so will not be repeated in detail here.

*William Hazledine (1763–1840)*¹

William Hazledine was born in Shawbury, north east of Shrewsbury. His grandfather, father and uncle were all millwrights, and he followed in their footsteps. He quickly developed both in practical skill and business acumen, and by the early 1790s was developing an iron foundry at Coleham, Shrewsbury, as well as his work as a millwright. His first major ironwork contract was for the first multi-storeyed iron framed building in the world, the Ditherington Flaxmill in Shrewsbury, built in 1797.

At his new Plas Kynaston works he produced another innovative piece of work, the iron linings for the Chirk and Pontcysyllte aqueducts on the Ellesmere Canal close by. From then on he produced iron work for many of Telford's projects, including

the Caledonian Canal, the Göta Canal, the Holyhead Road and a series of spectacular bridges, including Bonar Bridge and Craigellachie in Scotland, Menai in North Wales, and Holt Fleet and Mythe on the River Severn. He also produced ironwork for many other projects not related to Telford.

He had always been interested in politics, being a supporter of the Whigs and Radicals. Later in life he became increasingly active in the movement leading first to the Reform Bill (1832), and then the Municipal Corporations Act (1835). When this Act came into force in Shrewsbury, the Tory majority on the council was overturned, the Tory mayor ousted, and Hazledine elected as the Mayor (1836). He remained active in both politics and business till the end of his life, being a very rich man when he died. Almost the whole town closed as a mark of respect on the day of his funeral.²

John Simpson (1755–1815)

What we know of the life story of John Simpson is sketchy.³ He was born in Stenhouse, Midlothian, and trained as a mason. What he did prior to 1790 is not known, but in that year he was employed by the architect George Steuart to supervise the building of the new St Chad's Church in Shrewsbury. It is conceivable that he was already in Shropshire, as Steuart had previously been the architect for Attingham Hall (1783–5) and All Saints Church, Wellington (1787–9). Some sources⁴ state that Simpson worked as a mason for Telford at Montford Bridge, just outside Shrewsbury, but since this was built at the same time as St Chad's, it seems unlikely.

After St Chad's he built up a flourishing building firm. His first major collaboration with Telford was as the chief masonry contractor for the Pontcysyllte and Chirk aqueducts (1795–1805). During a break in this work he rebuilt Bewdley Bridge to Telford's design in 1798–9. He was involved in many works for other employers as far afield as Bath, but much of his time from 1804 until his death was spent in Scotland on Telford's works. He was the main contractor for the masonry work on the Caledonian

Canal, and also built roads, harbours and piers to Telford's designs. Dunkeld Bridge (1805–9) is still in use today, and Bonar (1811–2) and Craigellachie (1812–5) bridges were tests of his masonry skills. An indication of his skill and ingenuity is given in the method that he and his partner John Cargill invented to secure iron dowels into rock, so they could build a cofferdam at the western end of the Caledonian Canal. It appears that he sustained a serious accident in 1814,⁵ and had to return to Shrewsbury, where he died the following year.

Joint works in Shropshire

It is clear from the above that the lives and careers of these three men crossed at many points. The work of all three together in Shropshire was limited to a small number of bridges. The first was on the Shrewsbury to Ludlow road on the outskirts of Shrewsbury at Meole Brace (1811–2). The design for this bridge was done by Telford, and the details drawn up by Thomas Stanton, his longstanding deputy as County Surveyor. This design was used, with appropriate modifications, on a number of occasions. The first was Long Mill Bridge in Wem (1812), and the next was Cantlop (1812–3), which is the only one of these bridges still standing. The other two, Cound (1818) and Stokesay (1822), were built after Simpson's death, so, although Hazledine supplied the ironwork, the masonry contracts were given to others. (Cound Bridge was replaced in 1967, but the ironwork was preserved, and it has now been re-erected as a footbridge near the Forge Retail Park in Telford town centre. A testament to the excellence of the original execution!)⁶

Meetings

How did these three men first meet each other? Telford arrived in Shrewsbury in January 1787, initially to restore the Castle for his mentor Sir William Pulteney, who the following year arranged for him to be appointed Surveyor of Public Works for the County of Salop. Hazledine finished his millwright's apprenticeship in 1785,⁷ and shortly after moved to Shrewsbury. There he went into partnership with Robert Webster, who was a successful clock and watchmaker.⁸ Webster was also an inventive man, whose attempts to produce a mechanical washing machine unfortunately ended in failure. Webster and Hazledine set up a foundry, but when Hazledine wanted to expand this the partnership

broke up, and he set up a foundry by himself. While this was happening,

about the year 1788 ... [Telford and Hazledine] made each other's acquaintance, much to their mutual advantage. They were both thoroughly practical men who had risen from the ranks by the force of character and mental endowments.⁹

Rolt says they met at the Freemasons' Lodge.¹⁰ We know that Telford was a very keen Freemason at this time¹¹, and Freemasonry was popular in this period, but there is no reference in the accounts of Hazledine's life to his having been a Freemason. While it is possible to believe that the preferment of men like Telford and Hazledine was due to contacts with other influential Freemasons, there is no evidence that Freemasonry played much, if any, part in their later lives.

As stated above, Simpson moved to Shrewsbury in 1790. Lawson says that 'Simpson had been recommended as contractor [to Telford] by Joseph Loxdale, town clerk of Shrewsbury and one of Telford's close associates'.¹² The reality is just as likely to be that, being County Surveyor, church architect, stonemason and fellow-Scot, Telford couldn't resist seeing what was going on at St Chad's Church after Simpson's arrival. Presumably he liked what he saw, and the rest is history. Looking back in 1799, Telford described his meeting with Simpson in these words: 'I met with him here by chance, employed and recommended him, and he has now under his charge all the works of any magnitude in this great and rich district.'¹³

Presumably Hazledine also got to know Simpson soon after the latter's arrival in Shrewsbury. Early in 1793 Hazledine was paid for iron railings around the new St Chad's Church, and he also lent money to the building fund, so he was obviously closely involved with the building of the new Church, and hence with Simpson.¹⁴

Friendship

So what was the relationship between these three men? The word 'friendship' stands out a mile in what others wrote about them. For example,

The bust of the deceased [Hazledine] ... will be placed upon the monument ... in St Chad's Church, as a companion to that of his friend Mr Simpson, who erected the masonry of the Caledonian Canal.¹⁵

Thomas Telford ... became acquainted with Hazledine, and these kindred spirits formed an intimacy which lasted through life.¹⁶

Telford's obituary in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* includes a list of his works, including the phrase, 'aqueducts at Chirk and Pontcysyllte (executed by his friend Hazledine)'.¹⁷

The friendship between Telford and Simpson is illustrated in this amusing incident. Telford was recovering from a broken leg in Shrewsbury Castle, and wanted to see what had happened to an inscription plate that he had ordered in the town. He writes,

Yesterday afternoon John Simpson pulled up his breeches and mounted me on the outside of the mare and off we set to examine this same inscription plate ... [They went round Shrewsbury and found it was in the same state as the week before.] To be sure John Simpson did not take any snuff, nor was his face [sic], nor did he begin at the middle of the story.¹⁸

The whole tone of the letter is one of farce and hilarity. Simpson acts like a groom, heaving Telford up to ride side-saddle like a woman, because of his bad leg. Simpson then leads the horse round the town trying to find the inscription plate, which had been sent from shop to shop, but was in exactly the same state as Telford had left it. What the last sentence of the extract means is a bit of a mystery, but it sounds as if Simpson was enjoying playing the fool!

Mutual respect

'The Arch Conjuror himself'

Telford's admiration for his friends is clear. In another letter written in 1796, this time from London, he said,

The moment I was conjuring about a spring for the coffee house door this morning, who should make his appearance but the Arch Conjuror himself Merlin Hazledine. This was one of the most singular instances I have met with. We have been considering about the arch over the roadway ...¹⁹

Telford was in London on Ellesmere Canal business, and who should suddenly appear but Hazledine, also on business. Telford was eating his breakfast and thinking hard, trying to conjure up solutions to the problems of building the proposed aqueducts on the canal. Hazledine's sudden appearance, apparently from nowhere, reminded him of Merlin the mythical magician whose sword could cut through the knottiest problems. How he needed his dynamic and innovative friend to help him solve these challenges! So he and the 'arch conjuror' sat down over another cup of coffee to discuss the challenges these great arches would present.

When it came to masonry work Telford knew exactly what to do because of his training and practical experience. Ironwork, however, was a different matter; in this area he must have relied heavily on Hazledine to ensure that his plans were workable in practice.

On a completely different subject he must have been even more dependent on his friend. In 1796 Telford was asked to write a monograph on current best practice in the field of milling by the President of the Board of Agriculture. Most of the monograph is taken up with a compilation of published works, but in the part that is original to Telford he acknowledges Hazledine as follows,

These drawings are taken from mills which have been executed seven years ago by Mr William Hazledine of Shrewsbury, a very ingenious practical millwright, and they are found to answer exceedingly well in practice ... As these mills have fully answered the intention ... I have been most particular both as to the drawings and the following descriptions.²⁰

That must have done Hazledine's millwright's business no harm at all!

'A man of great talents and integrity'

Of Simpson Telford wrote,

We have had a remarkably dry summer and autumn; after that an early fall of snow and some frost, followed by rain. The drought of the summer was unfavourable to our canal working; but it has enabled us to raise Bewdley Bridge as if by enchantment. We have thus built a magnificent bridge over the Severn in one season, which is no contemptible work for John Simpson and your humble servant, amidst so many other great undertakings. John Simpson is a treasure — a man of great talents and integrity.²¹

'Integrity' is a word that recurs repeatedly when Simpson is mentioned. For example,

In the common relations of life he was a man of the strictest integrity ...²²

Diligence, accuracy and irreproachable integrity ensure him esteem and confidence wherever he was employed.²³

These opinions were not just those of doting family members, making the best of their memories, but backed up by those who worked with him. For example, as regards the excellence of his work,

Mr Simpson, the accurate mason ...²⁴

I cannot leave Pont Cysyllte without saying that the columns, without any exception, are executed in a more masterly manner than anything of the kind that I have before seen. ... 'The masonry of the Chirk

Aqueduct is very perfect ...²⁵

Telford, too, had absolute confidence in his work. For example, he wrote,

I have seen Mr Jessop as to the Aqueduct at Chirk, and he agrees as to the general principle of the adopting Brick to Rubble Arches, instead of an Iron Trough. Only he thinks that the Piers should be set out so as to allow 6 feet instead of 5 feet on each side of the Canal. The distance between the Piers to be 45 feet, or if it would not increase the expense very much, say 40 feet, as John Simpson thinks that 45 is a great deal for Brick Arches ...²⁶

And on another occasion,

Mr Jessop may not judge it absolutely necessary to view the Line [of the Caledonian Canal]. ... He can examine Mr Simpson, an eminent and reputable Builder, who has examined these matters very carefully, and with whom Mr Jessop has been acquainted for many years ...²⁷

Against his name Jessop wrote: 'I know Mr Simpson well.'

Simpson's integrity mirrored that of Telford himself. A contemporary wrote,

[Telford's] gradual rise from stonemason to the top of his profession ... is to be ascribed not more to his genius and his consummate ability, than to his plain, honest, straightforward dealing, and the integrity and candour which marked his character throughout life ... By his private friends Mr Telford was ardently beloved for his kindness of heart, his firm friendship and unsullied honour.²⁸

Humble beginnings

Having considered how the three men were drawn together, and what they said about each other, it is worth considering the aspects of their life experience and personality that would have attracted them to each other.

Their first obvious similarity is their humble origins. Telford was the son of an Eskdale shepherd who died before the boy was a year old. Simpson's origins are obscure, but since he was trained as a mason it is certain he came from working class stock. As has already been mentioned, Hazledine came from a family of millwrights, working men certainly, but perhaps the 'aristocracy' of the working class, since they were responsible for building and maintaining the largest and most complicated machines of the time. They needed to be able to read, write and perform quite complex mathematics on a day by day basis. As evidenced by his account books, Hazledine's father was more than competent in all

these areas. Another suggestion that the Hazledine family were grander than their working class contemporaries concerns William's mother's wedding dress, donated at some date by the family to the Shrewsbury museums. Peter Boyd, the collections manager comments,

The fabric is 'tobine' and the fly braiding is typical of the period. A plain silk wedding dress would have been an expensive item in itself, but the braiding would have made it very expensive. It is one of our treasures, and probably of national significance.²⁹

Why the wife of a humble millwright should be wearing a wedding dress 'of national significance' is a mystery!

Education

Despite these relatively humble origins, what distinguished these three men from many others of the period was their educational achievement. At that time Scotland was way ahead of England in providing universal primary education, hence Telford and Simpson benefitted from this.

Samuel Smiles explained what happened to Telford,

The legal provision made at an early period for the education of the people in Scotland proved one of their greatest boons ... To our orphan boy the merely elementary teaching provided at the parish school of Westerkirk was an immense boon ... It was not much that he learnt; but in acquiring the arts of reading, writing, and figures, he learnt the beginnings of a great deal.³⁰

Smiles continues the story of what happened once Telford became apprenticed to be a stonemason in Langholm,

Having by this time acquired a strong taste for reading, and exhausted all the little book stores of his friends, the joy of the young mason may be imagined when Miss Pasley [an educated lady related to the local lairds] volunteered to lend him some books from her own library. Of course, he eagerly and thankfully availed himself of the privilege; and thus, while working as an apprentice and afterwards as a journeyman, Telford gathered his first knowledge of British literature, in which he was accustomed to the close of his life to take such pleasure. He almost always had some book with him, which he would snatch a few minutes to read in the intervals of his work. ... He was also a great admirer of Burns, whose writings so inflamed his mind that at the age of twenty-two, when barely out of his apprenticeship, we find the young mason actually breaking out in verse.³¹

Part of the poem, though addressed to Robert Burns, is obviously autobiographical. He wrote,

Nor pass the tentie [attentive] curious lad,
 Who o'er the ingle [fireplace] hangs his head,
 And begs of neighbours books to read;
 For hence arise
 Thy country's sons, who far are spread,
 Baith [both] bold and wise.³²

A love of books and thirst for knowledge of all sorts remained with Telford throughout his life. Smiles goes on,

Telford writes to his Langholm friend [Andrew Little (from Shrewsbury in 1788)] that he is working very hard, and studying to improve himself in branches of knowledge in which he feels himself deficient ... He says it has been, and will continue to be, his aim to endeavour to unite those 'two frequently jarring pursuits, literature and business', and he does not see why a man should be less efficient in the latter capacity because he has well informed, stored, and humanized his mind by the cultivation of letters.³³

Hazledine's experience was similar. The 1760s were long before the advent of compulsory and universal schooling in England, but the children of Shawbury were lucky in that there were two free schools.³⁴ Like Telford, Hazledine would have had a basic, but sound education, mostly in the 3Rs. Like Telford his reading and education were lifelong. A man who knew him well wrote,

Though [he] possessed not all the advantages to be derived from a liberal education, he had been well instructed in his youth, and could converse with freedom and fluency on almost every subject connected with the arts and sciences ... The books in which he chiefly delighted were the poems of Burns and Campbell, and the works of Sir Isaac Newton; which last he read with delight within a few days of his death.³⁵

It seems to be too much of a coincidence that Burns was also Telford's favourite poet, and Telford was a great supporter of the struggling Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (1777–1844), who even lived with him for a time.³⁶ Presumably Telford and Hazledine shared their enthusiasms and so helped to educate each other.

Thoroughness

Telford always kept a notebook with him, into which he copied important information. Samuel Smiles added that,

This practice of noting down information, the result of reading and observation, was continued by Mr. Telford until the close of his life; his last pocket memorandum book, containing a large amount of valuable information on mechanical subjects — a sort of engineer's vade mecum — being printed in the

appendix to the 'Life of Telford'.³⁷

Such was the breadth and complexity of his life that it was essential to be well organised. Hazledine was the same. It was said of him that,

So precise and accurate was [Hazledine] also in his other affairs of business, that no transaction, however insignificant, passed unrecorded. His pocket-book was the chief record of all his intentions, and their execution; the first entry therein being made on the morning of the first of January, in the words, 'Paid for this book, 4s', and thereafter followed each transaction down to the close of the years. These books he carefully retained; and could thus, at a glance, inform himself of the minutest occurrence in his business, or his family, for the last half century. Some of these records are exceedingly interesting, being expressed in his own forceful style; and, strange to say, where a corner of a leaf remains otherwise unappropriated, it is often filled up with a verse or two of rhyme, as remarkable for its deep feeling, as its nervous terseness.³⁸

The example that each man set would doubtless have encouraged the other to remain diligent and well organised. Simpson's memorial hints at the same ability in his life when it uses the words 'diligence' and 'accuracy'. When one considers that these men had no secretaries, wrote most of their own letters, and relied on primitive mail and other communications, their ability to keep track of the complexities of their business dealings is astonishing.

Enjoying life

Looking at the serious-looking portraits and busts of the three men, one assumes that they were always so engrossed in planning and executing these great works that they had no time to enjoy life. Nothing could be further from the truth. As usual we know least about Simpson, but his death notice records,

In the common relations of life he was a man of the strictest integrity, generosity and benevolence; a warm and steady friend ...³⁹

Hazledine was extrovert, positive about life. His obituarist quoted him as saying, 'When I have been in difficulties, I don't lie in bed to think of them, but I always get up to face them,' adding the comment that, 'Hazledine ... mingled in all the enjoyments which made people happy.'⁴⁰

As mentioned earlier, Hazledine was deeply involved in local Whig politics. In those days this often seemed to involve eating, drinking and general merrymaking. For example,

At Mr Slaney's election [Slaney was the Whig MP] at the Lion Hotel, Mr Slaney's supporters enjoyed a

night of festivity. Mr Hazledine exhilarated [the company] by his humour.⁴¹

Those who knew Telford also commented on his outgoing nature and good humour. For example,

Mr Telford is a man of highly respect ... His knowledge is general, his conversation very animated, his look full of intelligence and vivacity. He is eminently chearful, and the broad Scotch accent that he retains rather becomes him.⁴²

In 1819 the poet Robert Southey accompanied Telford on a tour of the works he was responsible for in Scotland. Southey immediately took to Telford, and had this to say about him,

There is so much intelligence in his countenance, so much frankness, kindness and hilarity about him, flowing from the never-failing wellspring of a happy nature ... A man more heartily to be liked, more worthy to be esteemed and admired, I have never fallen in with.⁴³

Family life

The truest test of a person's character has to be found in how they behave with those they are nearest to. Telford, being unmarried, had no family of his own. But during the time he lived in Shrewsbury he became an honorary member of the family of Rev Archibald Alison, who lived at the Rectory in Kenley, south Shropshire. Alison's son, also Archibald, who later became a well-known historian, vividly remembered Telford's visits when he wrote his autobiography,

Never was a household more rejoiced than ours with his arrival. No sooner was his well-known white horse seen passing the door than the whole family rushed down with tumultuous joy to receive him. By common consent, lessons, work and occupation of every kind were abandoned; and the whole period of his sojourn, which seldom exceeded two days, was one continued scene of rejoicing — games and sports of every kind, both within and without doors, in all of which he took an active part, succeeded each other without intermission, till, exhausted by joy, the whole children [sic] were sent to early bed. My father and he then sat down and spent the night in discussing the vast projects for the internal amelioration of the country, which he had already conceived, and a great part of which he lived to carry into execution. Never was a more simple heart united to a more powerful understanding — he was a lamb in play with us, but a giant in the council with men.⁴⁴

Hazledine, despite the enormity of his interests, was very much a family man. He and his first wife Eleanor had four daughters and a son who survived into adult life. He was predeceased by his wife and two of the daughters, whose lives are recorded on

the tablet below his bust in St Chad's Church. It is said of his family life,

His strong affections for the members of his family rendered his fireside one of the most happy round which an English family ever gathered. He was ever devising some simple means of increasing their enjoyments; and he attended personally to everything in which their comforts were involved. At that trying season [1826], when the wheel of the Union coach locked into that of his gig on the Wyle Cop, and overthrew him and shattered his arm in several places, and he was carried home in a state which threw his affectionate wife into such agony as deprived her of life by a disorder arising from the grief she suffered from his illness — even in that accumulation of sorrow his presence of mind and affectionate care never for a moment ceased. And while suffering extreme agony from the bone of his arm having to be *again* broken by the surgeon, even then he took upon himself the whole preparation for the funeral of his beloved wife ...⁴⁵

We know less of Simpson's home life, but what we do suggests that, despite being away from home for long periods, his family held him in great esteem. They wrote on his memorial, 'To his exemplary conduct as a husband and a father his afflicted widow



Bust of William Hazledine by Sir Francis Chantry, in St Chad's Church, Shrewsbury

and daughters erect this memorial of affection and regret.'

The only strange thing about this inscription is that there is no mention of his son James, who went to Sweden to work on the Gotha Canal in 1813. While there he did not distinguish himself, and was dismissed by Telford, who wrote to Count von Platen in Sweden, 'both you and I have, of course, done with him.'⁴⁶ This happened in the winter of 1815, about 6 months after his father's death. The fact that there is no mention of a son on Simpson's inscription suggests that these actions caused his family to disown him. However, James appears to have regarded his father with affection, as several of his letters to his father still survive. In one he says,

I were truly sorrow [sic] to be informed by ... the 2 Swedish gentlemen of the severe misfortune that you sustained, but hope in God you are perfectly restored to your usual health and strength again, and you may [—?] upon me paying all attention according to your prompt [—?] as I am convinced of your [—?] regard towards me ... Please make my kind love to Mrs Simpson and the two young ladies with all friends and acquaintances.⁴⁷

Another contemporary says of John Simpson that he was 'a most affectionate husband and indulgent parent.'⁴⁸ Perhaps his son would have benefitted from more discipline and less 'indulgence'!

Relationships with subordinates

In an age when workers and subordinates were often treated with scant respect, the attitudes of these men to those who worked for them (as well as those less fortunate) stand out. Early in his career Telford wrote that he wished to acquire 'the true way of acquiring practical skill, a thorough knowledge of the materials employed in construction, and last, but not least, a perfect knowledge of the habits and dispositions of the workmen who carry out our designs.'⁴⁹

For Telford, safety, both of what was being built, and of the workmen, was paramount. Smiles wrote,

His inspection of work was most rigid. The security of his structures was not a question of money, but of character. As human life depended upon their stability, not a point was neglected that could ensure it. Hence, in his selection of resident engineers and inspectors of works, he exercised the greatest possible precautions; and here his observation of character proved of essential value. And thus it was that Telford put his own character, through those whom he employed, into the various buildings which he was employed to construct.⁵⁰



Bust of John Simpson, in St Chad's Church, Shrewsbury

Robert Southey was also impressed by Telford's concern for the disadvantaged. On his trip through the Highlands with Telford, they often stayed at very poor inns. Southey recalls what happened at the end of their stay in one at Glen Roy,

When Mr Telford paid the bill, he gave the poor girl who had been waiter, chambermaid, and probably cook in chief also, a twenty shillings bill. I shall never forget the sudden expression of her countenance and her eyes when she understood it was for herself.⁵¹

Hazledine, too, was well liked and respected by his workers.

[Hazledine] had a bluff straightforward manner — some would say unpolished, but beneath this manner was a kindly disposition, which prompted him to treat his workpeople justly, and often liberally.⁵²

As a master [Hazledine] was kind and considerate to all employed under him; his workmen, if they conducted themselves well, became grey and died in his service.⁵³

An amusing incident illustrates this well,

[Hazledine] had been constructing a bridge near [Chester], and being the race week, he drove to the course in his gig. The first man he met whom he recognised was a workman of his own, a soul

endowed with unquenchable thirst, who had gathered around him a crowd intently listening to the warbling of the mellifluous song of 'Giles Scroggin courted Molly Brown'. Hazledine was wonder-struck at the spectacle of his own workman whom he had left comfortably at work at Shrewsbury thus engaged on the Chester Race Course, and stopping his gig till the song had ceased, he roared out with his stentorian voice, 'Jack, lad, what bring'st thee so far from home? Dost na' thee want a jug of drink to clear thy pipes?' 'Aye, bless thee, master,' was Jack's answer, 'or I'll never see ou'd Coleham agan, for the ruck o' these cheese-chawers here have only given me a half-penny for two hours' singing!' Hazledine desired him to step into his gig, and taking him to the Stand, crammed him full of what was there to be obtained ... Next day he clothed him in a new suit, and sent him off by the coach to Shrewsbury.⁵⁴

There is no record of how John Simpson treated his workmen, but one suspects that his attitude was the same.

Money

The inventiveness and industry of these three men brought them fortune as well as fame. Hazledine, in particular, was well known for his ability to make money, and by the end of his life had made a great deal. He amassed his fortune not only through his engineering work, but also by buying and selling such items as French stones for milling. An example of his wheeler-dealing, that also involved Simpson, concerned the ill-fated woollen mill in Coleham, Shrewsbury. This enormous concern was opened in 1790, but war with the French started soon after, the market for woollen articles collapsed, and the mill had closed by 1795. That year we find Hazledine acting as the auctioneer for all the equipment in the mill, which he presumably acquired at a knockdown price.⁵⁵ The owners couldn't sell the buildings initially, but around 1800 Simpson and his partner bought them and sold on to Charles Hulbert, who used them for a cotton mill.⁵⁶ Doubtless Hazledine and Simpson made a profit on their speculations. Hazledine owned or leased coal mines, iron mines and lime kilns, the materials from which he used both for the manufacture of his ironwork and also to sell on the commercial market.

Hazledine lived comfortably, but not extravagantly, since most of these profits he invested in property. It was said of him,

Mr Hazledine is also proprietor of a great portion of Coleham [and] many houses of consequence and other premises in the town. His property in various

parts of the county, and out of it, is beyond my description, and shares in public companies etc almost immense.⁵⁷

Almost all this wealth was passed on to his family, who consequently went up in the world. His son, John, described himself as a 'gentleman' when he was elected Mayor of Shrewsbury in 1854; John's sister Mary married a 'gentleman', while Ann married an attorney.⁵⁸

As well as providing for his family, Hazledine was generous with his money, as has already been indicated in the discussion on his relationships with his workmen. He also spent considerable sums to improve the town of Shrewsbury, so much so that, 'It is said by some that [Hazledine] had done more for the improvement of the public streets of Shrewsbury, at his own cost, than the Street Act Committee with their yearly revenue of £1500.'⁵⁹

Simpson, too, did much else beside his work with Telford. In particular, he built many houses in Shrewsbury. There was once a Simpson's Square in Castle Foregate, which he built and owned. He named Ann's Hill (in St Michael's Street, also now demolished) and Jane's Place (in Coton Hill, which is still there) after his two daughters. He had made enough money by 1805 to take out a mortgage for £800 on Berrington Rectory, and later moved to a large town house in Belmont, Shrewsbury. He, too, had gone up in the world, which is indicated by the fact that one of his daughters married a retired Indian merchant, and the other a future High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire.⁶⁰

Telford, too, could have been a rich man, but chose rather to give much of his wealth away. Catherine Plymley's observation of him was,

But praise of a higher kind belongs to him. What he procures by his merit and industry he bestows most benevolently and liberally: frugal in his own expenses, he can do more for others, and what he does he does cheerfully.⁶¹

Samuel Smiles explained Telford's philosophy in this area,

Telford held the sordid money-grubber in perfect detestation. He was of opinion that the adulation paid to mere money was one of the greatest dangers with which modern society was threatened. ...

But though Telford was comparatively indifferent about money, he was not without a proper regard for it, as a means of conferring benefits on others, and especially as a means of being independent. At the close of his life he had accumulated as much as, invested at interest, brought him in about £800 a year, and enabled him to occupy the house in Abingdon

Street in which he died. This was amply sufficient for his wants, and more than enough for his independence. It enabled him also to continue those secret acts of benevolence, which constituted perhaps the most genuine pleasure of his life. It is one of the most delightful traits in this excellent man's career to find him so constantly occupied in works of spontaneous charity, in quarters so remote and unknown that it is impossible the slightest feeling of ostentation could have sullied the purity of the acts.⁶²

Downsides and disagreements

Thus far we have painted a largely positive picture of these three men. Each must have had their downsides, though it is hard with our limited knowledge of them to paint a truly rounded picture.

No contemporary source says anything but good about Simpson, for example, 'The excellencies of this most excellent of men are most accurately delineated in the inscription ... placed in the parish Church of St Chad, Shrewsbury ...'⁶³

If Telford had feet of clay they were to do with personal ambition, though ambition may not be a bad thing if it is used for the good of society at large. While he was still in Shrewsbury he wrote, 'My disposition is not to be satisfied unless when plac'd in some conspicuous point of view.'⁶⁴

He was also not afraid to speak his mind, even in the company of his social superiors. He wrote,

[Mr Pulteney's] good opinion has always been a great satisfaction to me; and the more so as it has neither been obtained nor preserved by deceit, cringing, nor flattery. On the contrary, I believe I am the only man that speaks out facts to him, and who contradicts him the most. In fact, between us, we sometimes quarrel like tinkers.⁶⁵

Personal ambition and plain speaking may have made him enemies. One such was the famous engineer John Rennie, though exactly why the two men were on such bad terms is rather a mystery.⁶⁶ Telford was obviously a very strong character, and such men tend to evoke either great loyalty or loathing in those they meet. Mostly, it seems to have been the former emotion that motivated those who worked with him. Sometimes that loyalty became strained. For example, even though work on the Caledonian Canal was ongoing, Telford was encouraging some of the masons to move to Sweden to work on the Göta Canal. Matthew Davidson, who oversaw work on the eastern part of the Caledonian Canal, was obviously thoroughly frustrated when he wrote,

[The masons] all complain of shortness of notice ...

You speak of a written agreement, but none of the men have received any ... You will please lose no time to send to them at Edinburgh or Leith a draught [sic] of the agreement you made with them here, as this appears to be the chief object [objection] ...⁶⁷

Davidson was obviously annoyed that not only was Telford taking his workers, but he was anxious on their behalf that the promises made to them might not be kept. The relationship between Telford and Davidson was presumably repaired, since Davidson continued to work with Telford until Davidson's death four years later.

The speed of payment could be a bone of contention also. For example, Hazledine did some work for Telford on the harbour in Holyhead. James Brown, Telford's overseer on the spot, wrote,

I have ... 3 letters with Mr Hazledine's account. I had a letter from him this morning, he says he is very much in want of the balance of his account.⁶⁸

Hazledine was hardly poor, and to write three letters for the same bill seems a bit much.

As has been mentioned above, Hazledine was generous with his money, but he obviously liked money, too, and wasn't averse to driving a hard bargain. An example concerns the Salopian Brewery in Coleham, which was profitable for a time, but whose fortunes declined.

After the sinking, it is said, of £30,000 the undertaking was abandoned, and the spacious and substantial premises, with the land, sold to Mr Hazledine, for a mere bagatelle. The buildings are now in his occupation as a depot for timber, etc.⁶⁹

Hulbert, the writer, clearly felt that Hazledine was taking advantage of the misfortunes of others to obtain the property on the cheap. As always, money makes more money.

A serious disagreement

Among Telford's letters there is one which hints at a serious disagreement between himself (or one of his assistants, Henry R Palmer) and Hazledine. The letter from Palmer to Telford reads,

I have sent ... this day a copy of the Manchester Railroad line ... I attended Mr Potts at Chester, and have given a general report. Mr Hazledine was there, and I rather think would have been better pleased if I had been anywhere else. His profits will not however be affected by me, neither ... [illegible word] his greatness be diminished, for it was seen in comparison with an object much smaller ...⁷⁰

In 1825 Palmer 'conducted a series of experiments on the relative resistance to be overcome by a boat



*William Hazledine as Mayor of Shrewsbury, 1836
(Shropshire Archives)*

travelling through water and a waggon running on rails'.⁷¹ Using these results, which showed that the boat was superior, Telford produced a report raising this and other objections to the proposed Manchester to Liverpool Railway. Palmer was presumably visiting the sponsors of the railway to discuss these experiments, when who should be also present at the meeting but Hazledine. What offended Hazledine about Palmer is hard to say. Perhaps because Hazledine was a supporter of the railways — his last public appearance was at a committee meeting of the Shrewsbury Railway Company⁷² — but his long association with canals and the experimental nature of the railways would be hardly likely to cause such animosity. The impression is that Palmer viewed him as grasping and overly ambitious — who knows if by this time Telford thought so too?

The other intriguing evidence of possible disagreement between the two men concerns Stretton Aqueduct. Telford's last canal project was the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal, later part of the Shropshire Union. On this canal are two aqueducts, one at Nantwich, and the other (which

carried the canal over Watling Street) at Stretton, near the Shropshire/Staffordshire border. The ironwork for both was provided by Hazledine, who was a member of the sub-committee of management of the canal. The Stretton Aqueduct was completed in 1832. The central panel on both sides of the elegant structure bears the inscription, 'Thomas Telford, F.R.S.L. and E. Engineer', but on the Shropshire side can just be made out the words, 'William Hazledine, Contractor', which have been painted out. When and why this happened is unknown. Quenby suggests John Wilson and his brother, who were responsible for the masonry work, might have done it. The reasoning is, 'why should Hazledine get all the credit, when their work had been just as important?'⁷³ Maybe — but I wonder if a more likely explanation is that Henry Palmer and his supporters used it as a way of attempting to 'airbrush' Hazledine out of the story and increase Telford's prestige, which would enhance their reputation as well? By this time Telford was 75 and two years away from death. The changes could even have been made after his death, to avoid giving him offence. We shall never know!

A lasting legacy

Telford now has a firm place in the history of civil engineering — and even in the national consciousness since the new town was named after him. Hazledine's name has been appended to a road and a block of flats in Shrewsbury, and a building in Telford; Simpson's is almost totally forgotten. But the association of the three friends does have a legacy, which is largely unseen. This is the modern system for organising public works contracts. Gibb writes,

It is little realised how far Telford was responsible for the system of carrying out public works by contract, that is now accepted as a matter of course. Under him there grew up a body of contractors who brought their methods of business to a new standard, whether on the side of skill or on that of honesty.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Part of Telford's genius was being an excellent judge of men; his good fortune was in making friends at an early stage in his career with two men who played a highly significant part in turning his dreams into reality. Sometimes their friendship and commitment to him was all that kept his projects going, especially in the Highlands. Difficult as the terrain is today, two hundred years ago it must have been truly daunting. No railways or canals, rivers that are

impossible to navigate, dirt roads that only pack animals could follow with difficulty, ancient, narrow bridges, few harbours — these were some of the difficulties that had to be contended with when Telford started his Highland work. Add to that the climate — impossible in winter, and often wet and cold in summer, and the immensity of the achievements of these men is put in perspective. Why did John Simpson leave the comfort of his house in Shrewsbury (where he could earn a comfortable living) year after year to tackle such immense works? Part of the reason must have been friendship with Telford.

Take the bridge at Ballater on the Dee, washed away by a flood in 1799. Telford was asked to draw up plans for a replacement, which he had done by 1806. But who would build it? The country was deep in the Napoleonic wars, masons were in short supply, and no contractor would bid for the work. So what could they do? John Simpson was prevailed upon to do it, and finished up losing money.⁷⁵

Telford had the same problem with Bonar Bridge. Gibb wrote,

Telford proposed to his old contractor friends Simpson and Cargill that they should undertake it; but writing in July 1811 to Rickman, Telford says, 'they are miserable about undertaking Bonar Bridge at a closed sum, and to undertake to uphold it.' [Telford to John Rickman, 18 July 1811] ... The ironwork was cast at Hazledine's foundry at Plas Kynaston, and carried by canal and sea to Dornoch Firth. Hazledine seems to have been equally 'miserable', and, according to Telford, was ready to relinquish it.⁷⁶

But they kept their word, finished the job, and the outcome was the first in a series of outstanding iron bridges, one that Southey recorded had been described as 'something like a spider's web in the air ... it is the finest thing that ever was made by God or man!'⁷⁷

Only friendship, teamwork and loyalty made this, and so many other outstanding achievements, possible. Perhaps Charles Hulbert should have the last word,

Contemporary with Mr Hazledine, and his particular friends were the late Thomas Telford Esq., the celebrated engineer, and John Simpson Esq., an eminent architect and builder... Their names will exist together for ages.⁷⁸

Notes and references

1. Hazledine's story is difficult to ascertain, as he left almost no personal records. The most accessible articles are 'William Hazledine, Ironmaster', *Shropshire Magazine*, September 1955, and John Powell, 'William Hazledine', in *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers, Volume 1: 1500–1830*, 2002, 311–3.
2. *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 6 November 1840
3. The only account of his life I have been able to locate is Mike Chrimes, 'John Simpson', in *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers, Volume 1: 1500–1830*, 2002, 612–4
4. L T C Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, 1958, 31; Neil Cossons, Foreword to *Thomas Telford, Engineer*, 1980, viii
5. Letter from James Simpson to John Simpson, 7 November 1814: Ironbridge Institute Library (Ironbridge), T/GC 95
6. Anthony Blackwall, *Historic Bridges of Shropshire*, 1985, principally 47–50
7. Record and account book of William Hazledine senior (Hazledine's father, 1734–1818), kindly loaned to the author by his descendents.
8. D Elliott, *Shropshire Clock and Watchmakers*, 1979, 6ff
9. W Philips, *Shropshire Men*, Vol 5, article 268, Shropshire Archives (SA)
10. L T C Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, 1958, 51
11. Harold Temperton, *A History of Craft Freemasonry in Shropshire, 1732–1982*, 21
12. J B Lawson 'Thomas Telford in Shrewsbury', in *Thomas Telford: Engineer*, 1980, 13
13. Letter from Thomas Telford to Andrew Little, 26 February 1799. Transcripts of the Telford–Little letters are in the Ironbridge Institute Library.
14. St Chad's Trustees minute book, 10 January 1793 & 18 April 1793: SA 1048/63 (253/J/1/5)
15. Charles Hulbert, *Manual of Shropshire Biography*, Appendix 1839, 4–6
16. Obituary of William Hazledine, *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1841
17. Obituary of Thomas Telford, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 5 September 1834
18. Letter from Thomas Telford to Matthew Davidson, 9 September 1796: Ironbridge
19. Letter from Thomas Telford to Matthew Davidson, 19 February 1796: Ironbridge
20. Thomas Telford, 'On Mills', edited by E Lancaster Burne, in *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, Vol 17 (1936), 205–14
21. Letter from Thomas Telford to Andrew Little, 26 February 1799: Ironbridge

22. Death notice of John Simpson, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 16 June 1815
23. Inscription on memorial to John Simpson, St Chad's Church, Shrewsbury
24. Rowland Hunt's oration at the opening of the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct: SA, 665/3/206
25. William Jessop, *Report to the General Committee of the Proprietors of the Ellesmere Canal Company*, 24 January 1800: SA, 6000/15037
26. Letter from Thomas Telford to Matthew Davidson, 15 February 1796
27. Letter from Thomas Telford to John Rickman, 27 September 1803
28. Obituary of Thomas Telford, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 5 September 1834. It is interesting that the obituary in the *Salopian Journal*, 10 September 1834, uses exactly the same quotation.
29. Peter Boyd, private communication via e-mail. The dress is not currently on display but can be viewed online at www.darwincountry.org.
30. Samuel Smiles, *The Life of Thomas Telford*, 1861, chapter I
31. Ibid, chapter II
32. 'Epistle to Mr Walter Ruddiman', first published in *Ruddiman's Weekly Magazine* in 1779
33. Smiles, op cit, chapter IV
34. Evelyn Lee (ed), *Shawbury, the village and its people*, 2005, 32–3
35. Charles Hulbert, *Manual of Shropshire Biography*, appendix 1839, 4–6
36. L C T Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, 1958, 187
37. Smiles, op cit, chapter IV
38. Obituary, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 6 November 1840
39. Death notice of John Simpson, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 16 June 1815
40. Obituary, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 6 November 1840
41. *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 6 August 1830
42. Katherine Plymley's diary, 5 November 1793, quoted in Anthony Burton, *Thomas Telford*, 1999, 20. Katherine was the sister of Archdeacon Plymley of Longnor Hall, who was a leader and patron of local intellectual life. The spelling is as quoted.
43. Robert Southey, *Journal of a Tour in Scotland*, 1819, quoted in L C T Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, 1958, 76
44. Archibald Alison, *Autobiography*. The relevant passage is in the Ironbridge Institute Library.
45. Obituary, *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1841
46. Anthony Burton, *Thomas Telford*, 1999, 128–30
47. Letter from James Simpson (in Sweden) to John Simpson (presumably in Shrewsbury), 7 November 1814: Ironbridge, T/GC 95. Some of the words are intelligible; these are shown thus: [–?–].
48. Death notice, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 16 June 1815
49. W F Watson, abridged version of *Smiles's Lives of the Engineers*, 2001, 133
50. Smiles, op cit, chapter XV
51. Southey, op cit, quoted in Anthony Burton, *Thomas Telford*, 1999, 107
52. W Philips, *Shropshire Men*, Vol 5, article 268
53. Obituary, *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1941
54. W Philips, *Shropshire Men*, Vol 5, article 268
55. *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 25 September 1795
56. 'Notes and queries', *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 4 October 1901
57. Charles Hulbert, *History and Description of the County of Salop*, 1837, published by the author
58. Joseph Morris, *Genealogical Manuscripts Connected with the County of Salop*, Vol 8, 4010: SA
59. W Philips, *Shropshire Men*, Vol 5, article 268
60. 'Notes and queries', *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 4 October 1901; SA, Attingham Collection, 112/5/43/6
61. Katherine Plymley's diary, 5 November 1793, quoted in Anthony Burton, *Thomas Telford*, 1999, 20
62. Smiles, op cit, chapter XV
63. Charles Hulbert, *Manual of Shropshire Biography*, Appendix, 1839
64. Letter from Thomas Telford to Andrew Little
65. Letter from Thomas Telford to Andrew Little, 8 December 1798
66. See L C T Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, 1958, 148–9
67. Letter from Matthew Davidson to Thomas Telford, 13 April 1814: Ironbridge, T/GC 71
68. Letter from James Brown to Thomas Telford, 22 May 1826: Ironbridge, T/HO 149
69. Charles Hulbert, *History and Description of the County of Salop*, 1837, published by the author, 308, footnote
70. Letter from Henry R Palmer to Thomas Telford, 2 February 1825: Ironbridge Institute Library, T/LM 7
71. Anthony Burton, *Thomas Telford*, 1999, 185. The following pages detail Telford's opposition to this and other railways.
72. 'William Hazledine, Ironmaster', *Shropshire Magazine*, September 1955
73. Ron Quenby, *Thomas Telford's Aqueducts on the Shropshire Union Canal*, 1992, 77, 83
74. Sir Alexander Gibb, *The Story of Telford*, 1935, 186–7
75. See www.royal-deeside.org.uk/Bahistory/bridges.htm
76. Sir Alexander Gibb, *The Story of Telford*, 1935, 155–6
77. Southey, op cit, quoted by Burton, 111
78. Charles Hulbert, *Manual of Shropshire Biography*, Appendix, 1839, 5