

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2320 James and the Giant Bridge

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James and the Giant Bridge

Spanning the river Avon at Evesham in Worcestershire there is a lovely bridge, which is Grade II heritage listed for its special architectural or historic interest.¹ My claim to fame is that it was constructed by James Taylor, my great-great-grandfather – or so the family legend goes.

Sure enough, it has a plaque naming the Engineer, James Samuel, and Contractor, James Taylor. Also identified is Henry Workman, who was the Mayor and prime mover in replacing the previous medieval one. (Such was his role that the New Bridge became known as the Workman Bridge.²) A friend who was travelling nearby hung over the parapet to photograph the sign for me.



Plaque on the Workman Bridge, Evesham, photographed by the author

Some years later, I was able to see it myself and while there I took the opportunity to visit some distant family still living in the town. It was their view that our ancestor probably worked on the bridge but was never the contractor. They also said that other family members didn't believe this and clung to the legend. So, who was right?

My James was baptised on Christmas Eve 1815 in Kenilworth, Warwickshire³, and was married in 1839 at the parish church of All Saints, Evesham, to a local girl, Sarah Morton. He gave his occupation as bricklayer and his address as Chapel Street, Evesham.⁴

After that, as far as I knew, he had never moved from Evesham. This was confirmed by all the censuses. From 1841 to 1881 James gave his occupation as bricklayer, never builder or contractor. In 1871 his wife was even recorded as a charwoman.⁵

By also examining the birth certificates of his nine children, from 1840 to 1862⁶, I was able to plot the family's residences in a small area of the town: Cowl, Chapel, Swan and Rynal Streets and Cross Keys Lane.⁷

Unfortunately the Taylors' houses no longer exist but those that I saw in the same streets, from around the same time, were modest attached terraces.

James was living at Merstow Place, Evesham, when he died in 1882.⁸ He and Sarah were both buried in the Waterside Cemetery there.⁹ I would describe their headstone as dignified but not very expensive.

Seeking more information, I visited the old newspaper library at Colindale in London where I found articles about the opening of the bridge¹⁰ and the large party the builder gave following the laying of its ceremonial stone.¹¹ I also discovered that an Act had to be passed by Parliament to allow its construction.¹²

This was sounding like a big deal!

But my first real doubt was when I viewed relevant documents at the County Archives in Worcester. On 11 September 1854 James Taylor contracted to replace the stone bridge over the Avon River that joined the towns of Bengeworth and Evesham. The contract price was £8,865.¹³

He also entered into a bond to complete at first a temporary bridge and then a new stone bridge within 18 months "in a good and workmanlike manner". His address was given as "Vine Terrace York Road within Lambeth, Surrey".¹⁴ Two problems immediately stood out: the value of the contract and the address of the builder, near present-day Waterloo Station in London.¹⁵

An 1856 newspaper reported that the next job for Mr Taylor was "extensive works at the new docks at Grimsby"¹⁶, which is in Lincolnshire. He was constructing a graving-dock, at a cost of £32,000.¹⁷ A court case in 1855 had identified him as "the contractor for the repair of the permanent way on the Manchester, Sheffield, and Lincolnshire Railway".¹⁸

Hmm. All of this sounded to me a bit beyond a bricklayer.

So, weighing up all the evidence, I believed that my great-great-grandfather James was not the contractor. However, to be completely sure, I felt I needed to investigate the other man. With such a common name I needed a connection to a place.

A letter from him to the engineer on 29 January 1855 was written on letterhead:

London and South Western Railway, Pert. Way.

Contractor's Office, 28, Vine Terrace, York Road, London¹⁹

Although he wasn't named in a London directory of 1852, the London and South Western Railway had offices at 118 to 121 York Road.²⁰

Among the documents at Worcester was an agreement for the letting of part of a wharf to "James Taylor of Accrington in the County of Lancaster Contractor".²¹ As Accrington was also the address of John Christie, who provided surety for the 1854 bond²², I followed this clue. In an Accrington directory of that year, listed under Contractors, was:

"Taylor Jas., (for the maintenance of permt. way on the E. L. and L. & N. W. Rys.)
Blackburn st"²³

I searched the 1851 census and in Blackburn Street, New Accrington, appeared James Taylor, whose occupation was "Railway Contractor employing 450 men". His birthplace was Whitmore in Staffordshire.²⁴

In 1891 his obituary listed many of the railway works where he was the contractor: the Yeovil and Exeter Railway, Exeter and Exmouth Railway, Aldershot, Poole and Bournemouth, Barnstaple to Ilfracombe, Kew Branch, Torrington Extension Railway, among others.²⁵

Curiosity got the better of me and I bought a copy of his will of 1890. At his death the following year his personal estate was valued at over £42,000.²⁶

Although now certain that my James was not the contractor for the bridge, I believe he probably played his part as one of the bricklayers. I can't be sure because there are no records naming the workmen involved. The Librarian at the National Railway Museum advised me that was because "work forces in those days were often hired on a casual, almost daily basis."²⁷

While in Evesham my family hired a narrowboat so we could travel under the bridge and see close-up the brickwork involved. I can be proud of my ancestor's work that survives to this day.

When the Mayor officially opened the bridge the "workmen and labourers were supplied with ale"²⁸ – I hope my James enjoyed his.

¹ Historic England, *List entry*, Workman Bridge (Over River Avon), Evesham.

(<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1156175> : accessed 19 May 2023).

² *ibid.*

³ St Nicholas (Kenilworth, Warwickshire), "Baptisms, 1813-1910", p. 31, James Taylor, 24 December 1815; digital images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/4424661:2446> : accessed 19 May 2023).

⁴ England, marriage certificate (certified copy) for James Taylor and Sarah Morton, married 08 February 1839; registered March quarter 1839, Evesham District 18/345 Evesham Sub-district, Worcestershire; General Register Office, Southport. (N.B. His surname indexed as Tayler).

⁵ 1841 Census of England, Worcestershire, Evesham, James Taylor; image, *Findmypast* (<https://www.findmypast.com.au> : accessed 19 May 2023); citing The National Archives, HO 107/1207, book 7, folio 21, page 37, schedule 732. Later censuses:

1851 HO 107/2044, folio 106, page 20, schedule 79.

1861 RG 09/2100, folio 111, page 27, schedule 143.

1871 RG 10/3058, folio 124, page 33, schedule 155.

1881 RG 11/2925, folio 33, page 8, schedule 252.

⁶ England, birth certificate (certified copy) for Sarah Evan Taylor, born 22 June 1840; registered September quarter 1840, Evesham District 18/345, General Register Office, Southport; and for her siblings: Frederick, 3 October 1843 (December Q 18/363); Eliza, 17 January 1846 (March Q 18/369); Joseph Morton, 31 March 1848 (June Q 18/389); James, 31 October 1850 (December Q 18/374); George William, 30 October 1852 (December Q 6c/294); Mary, 12 April 1856 (June Q 6c/344); Thomas, 31 October 1859 (December Q 6c/342); John, 2 March 1862 (March Q 6c/355).

⁷ Google Maps, *Cowl Street, Evesham*. (<https://www.google.com.au/maps/place/Cowl+St,+Evesham,+UK> : accessed 19 May 2023).

⁸ England, death certificate (certified copy) for James Taylor, died 3 May 1882; registered June quarter 1882, Evesham District 6c/188; General Register Office, Southport.

⁹ Waterside Cemetery, Section L, no. 142.

¹⁰ "Opening of the new bridge." *Worcester Journal*, 15 March 1856, p. 8 and *Worcester Herald*, 15 March 1856, p. 2.

¹¹ "Evesham Bridge. Laying of the Ceremonial Stone." *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 30 June 1855, p. 8.

¹² "An Act for empowering the Mayor, Aldermen, and Burgesses of the Borough of Evesham in the County of Worcester to build and maintain a Bridge over the River Avon in the said Borough; and for other Purposes." 1853 (16 & 17 Vict. c.xvi);

(<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukla/Vict/16-17/16/contents/enacted> : accessed 19 May 2023).

¹³ "c15 bonds, letters and other papers concerning James Taylor and his contract for erecting Evesham Bridge", dated 1854-7. Worcestershire Archives: 261.5 BA6087/1(ii).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Bacon, George W. *The A to Z of Victorian London*. Lympe Castle : H. Margary in association with Guildhall Library, 1987, p. 23.

¹⁶ "Evesham. The Bridge." *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 25 March 1856, p. 3; image, *Findmypast*

(<https://search.findmypast.com.au/bna/viewarticle?id=BL/0000312/18560325/018> : accessed 19 May 2023).

¹⁷ Clark, Edward Hele. "Description of the Great Grimsby (Royal) Docks." *Institution of Civil Engineers Proceedings*, vol. 24, 1864-1865, p. 49.

¹⁸ "Lincoln County Court." *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 14 September 1855, p. 5 ; image, *Findmypast*

(<https://search.findmypast.com.au/bna/viewarticle?id=BL/0000354/18550914/010> : accessed 19 May 2023).

¹⁹ "c15 bonds, letters and other papers concerning James Taylor and his contract for erecting Evesham Bridge", dated 1854-7. Worcestershire Archives: 261.5 BA6087/1(ii).

²⁰ *Post Office London directory (Small edition) 1852*. London: Kelly, 1851, p. 858, London & South Western Railway Office; digitized book, *University of Leicester*

(<https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/181034/rec/1> : accessed 19 May 2023).

²¹ "c15 bonds, letters and other papers concerning James Taylor and his contract for erecting Evesham Bridge", dated 1854-7. Worcestershire Archives: 261.5 BA6087/1(ii).

²² *ibid.*

²³ *History, topography, and directory of Mid-Lancashire, with an Essay on geology by Mannex & Co.* Preston : printed by William Bailey & Henry Thomson, 1854, p. 402; digitized book, *University of Leicester* (<https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/318799/rec/2> image 412 : accessed 19 May 2023).

²⁴ 1851 Census of England, Lancashire, New Accrington, James Taylor; image, *Ancestry.com*

(https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/8860/images/LANHO107_2250_2250-0949) : accessed 19 May 2023); citing The National Archives, HO 107/2250, folio 454, page 41, schedule 124.

²⁵ "Death of Mr. James Taylor." *North Devon Herald*, 16 July 1891, p. 5 ; image, *Findmypast*

(<https://search.findmypast.com.au/bna/viewarticle?id=BL/0003850/18910716/005> : accessed 19 May 2023).

²⁶ Principal Probate Registry copy of the Will of James Taylor of Springfield Hall, Hill Chorlton, Staffordshire, 13 January 1890, proved at Lichfield, 26 September 1891.

²⁷ C. P. Atkins (Librarian, National Railway Museum) to The Author, letter, 9 December 1997.

²⁸ "Evesham. Opening of the New Bridge." *Cheltenham Journal and Gloucestershire Fashionable Weekly Gazette*, 22 March 1856, p. 3 ; image, *Findmypast*

(<https://search.findmypast.com.au/bna/viewarticle?id=BL/0002214/18560322/027> : accessed 19 May 2023).