



SCIENCE MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPH

MENAI BRIDGE

"On Monday the 30th January 1826, this stupendous, pre-eminent and singularly unique structure was opened to the public at 35 minutes after one o'clock a.m., by the Royal London and Holyhead Mail Coach conveying the London mail bags for Dublin". So begins Dr. Prings account of the opening of the Menai Bridge, the 150th anniversary celebrations of which took place in the last week of January, culminating in a reenactment of the first bridge crossing. Telford's resident engineer W. A. Provis describes how, accompanied by his brother, he boarded the coach some distance from Bangor, informing the driver of the intended change of route, the latter's objections in carrying out these instructions being quashed by the mail coach superintendent who boarded at Ferry Inn. On stopping for a short moment at the end of the bridge "the mail was instantly crowded by Messrs. Hazledine, Rhodes, the younger Wilsons (all directly concerned with the construction of the bridge) and as many more as could find a place to stand on or to hang by. Thus loaded, a crack of the whip put the horses in motion, and we were quickly conveyed to the opposite end, amidst the cheers of the men around us, and the shrill whistling of the gale".

The pride and enthusiasm displayed by the builders of the bridge on the first crossing was later echoed by the crowds who flocked to a be-flagged bridge complete with massed bands and cannon. Even the rain failed to dampen their spirits so great was the "admiration and astonishment on beholding the proportion, symmetry and grandeur of this unrivalled structure".

Yet the universal enthusiasm displayed on the opening day was a comparatively new phenomenon, the early history of the project being distinguished by a misguided, though powerful opposition, centring on the believed hindrance a bridge would cause to navigation of the straits. This factor combined with difficulties of finance and inadequate technology in dealing with the immense problems involved in spanning the Straits effectively prevented any progress being made until the early years of the Nineteenth century when strategic, political, and economic considerations induced central government to interest itself in communications with Ireland. Various plans and petitions had been submitted in the last quarter of the 18th Century ranging from huge embankments complete with drawbridges to more conventional multi-arch wood and stone designs. The justifiable objections raised by local merchants and traders dependent upon the navigation of the Straits, appeared to have become entrenched by the early 1800's bearing no relationship to the practicability of the bridge designs then under consideration. Both Telford and Rennie, unquestionably the greatest Civil Engineers of their age, came up against strong opposition from this quarter which was by no means silent even after the commencement of construction.

The first indication of government interest came in 1801 when the Secretary of State for Ireland directed Rennie to prepare a survey and plan for a possible bridge over the Menai Straits. The sites of Ynys-y-Moch and the Swellies were singled out as being particularly