

Bridgetown's bridges 1862 - 2019

Bridgetown has had a total of seven bridges across the Blackwood River (Goorbilyup) since 1862: five road bridges and two rail bridges. There is confusion surrounding the dates and locations of these bridges and this research will clarify the details.

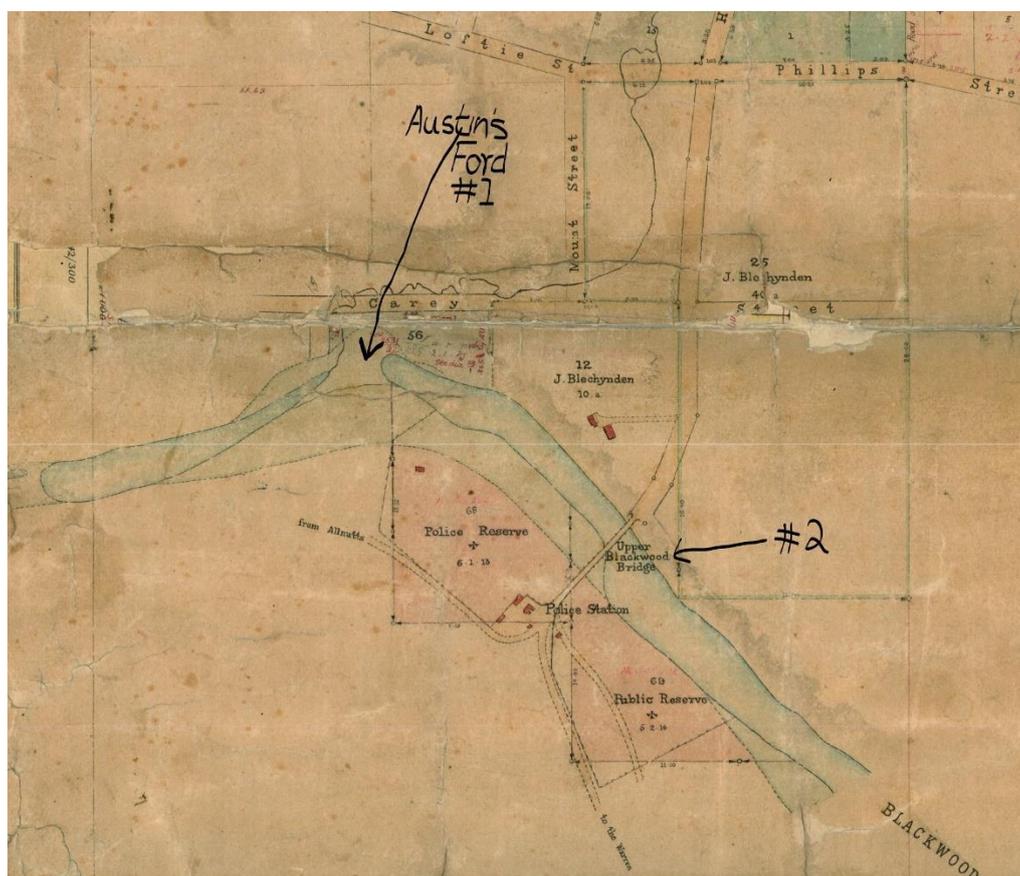
Bridge #1 A wooden construction, under the management of William Forrest (father of Lord Forrest), was built early in 1862 adjacent to the mouth of Geegelup Brook where it enters Blackwood River at Austin's Ford (a low water). The tender cost was £380.

Mr Keith Walter (oral history OH8)

The first bridge in Bridgetown was never completed, it was down by Ford House, I think there are one or two of the old piles still there. But the first winter flood came up before it was finished, all the piles were out of sight under the flood, they didn't realise the river came up so high.

In July that year, before the bridge was completed, there was torrential rain over the Blackwood catchment area and the majority of the bridge was washed away before it could be used. The *Perth Gazette* (8 August 1862) reports that the bridge was submerged 12 feet, allowing floating trees and other debris to pass over without obstruction. Mr Forrest was to be compensated for the loss. Mr Joseph Smith was the foreman for the bridge construction, having come to Bridgetown as a ticket-of-leave man for that job.

It was reported in the *Southern Times*, 25 October 1900, that Inspector Withers had been to Bridgetown collecting specimens for the government of the timber from Bridge #1. So, the timbers were still evident nearly 40 years after Bridge #1 collapsed.

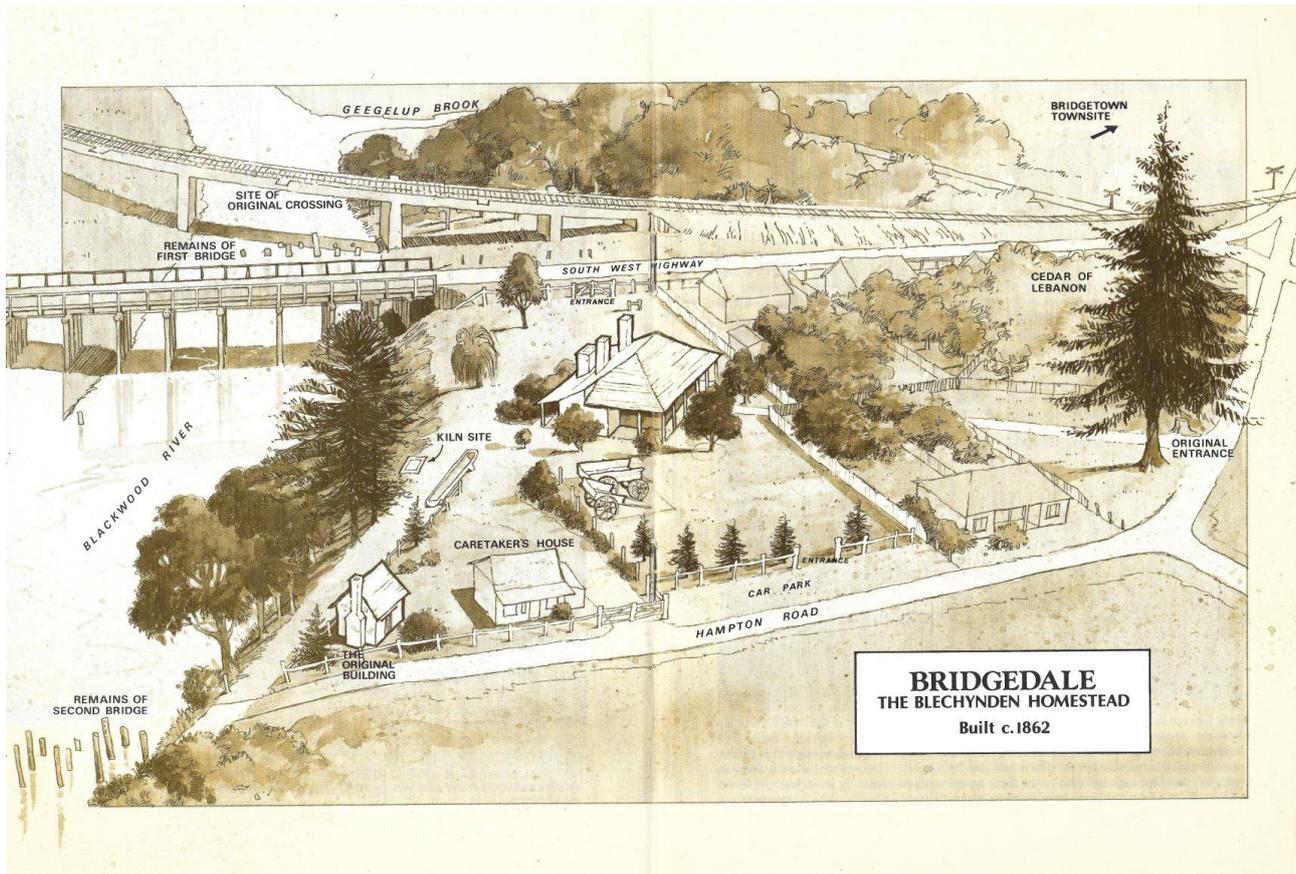


Location of Bridge #1 in 1862 where Geegelup Brook enters Blackwood River at Austin's Ford.
Bridge #2 upstream of Blechynden's house. SRO Cons3868 Item 040



View from Austin's Ford looking upstream to railway bridge #2. April 2020

When Bridgedale, the oldest building in Bridgetown, was handed to the National Trust, c.1974, a booklet was produced telling the history of the building. It included a beautiful sketch of Bridgedale as it sat in relation to the river, drawn by the artist R.H. Shardlow. Further research has shown several inaccuracies in the sketch relating to the bridges:



1. *Remains of first bridge* – these are the remains of the first railway bridge built 1898
2. *Site of original crossing* – the crossing was approximately 100 m further downstream, adjacent to the mouth of Geegilup Brook, which enters the Blackwood River (Goorbilyup) at Austin's Ford
3. *Remains of second bridge* – these are the remains of the third bridge built 1888. (The timber remains of bridge #2 c.1862 were burnt, date unknown. There is a photo showing Bridge #2 and #3 together c.1936.)

Bridge #2 Following the disastrous collapse of Bridge #1, Mr William Forrest immediately commenced Bridge #2 further upstream late-1862. According to a letter from Mr G.W. Hester¹, it took over 18 months to complete. However, this is incorrect because the wooden bridge was completed by late 1862, connecting the end of Hampton Street with the original Geegelup Police Station on the south-western side of the bridge (Trove, *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 08 October 1862).

This view, BHS 10-490, looking north towards Bridgetown c.1868. MC Moulton and his family can be seen in the garden of the police station:



Bridge #2 – BHS 10-490

In 1864 Mr George Blechynden was awarded a tender contract to construct an additional hand railing for Bridge #2 for £10 10s.

Mr Keith Walter (OH8)

So they abandoned that [Bridge #1] and they put one [Bridge #2] just from the end of old Hampton Street at an angle across to [the first police station] the Doctor's house. But they found that was no good because the contractor didn't drive the piles in, he couldn't, it was solid rock and when anybody walked across it, it swayed. So then they had to build the one [Bridge #3] that was there when they built this bridge [Bridge #4] and they burnt that [Bridge #2] out of the river.

Interviewer (Sue and Greg Robinson)

Did you see it being burnt?

Mr Keith Walter

No I didn't see it. I think the Main Roads Board just burnt it out. It might have been the local people. But it wasn't safe for anybody to go over, that's why they burnt it. To stop people going over it and using it.

Note: from Appendix A OH8²

Mrs Jean Rushton's g-grandfather, Joseph [Henry] Smith was the foreman for the bridge built over the Blackwood in 1862 ... The third bridge in 1888 also has close Smith family links as its commencement was marked by a ceremony whereby Eliza Smith (Joseph's wife) and Mrs John Blechynden each in turn

¹ News and Notes. *The West Australian*, 24 December 1937

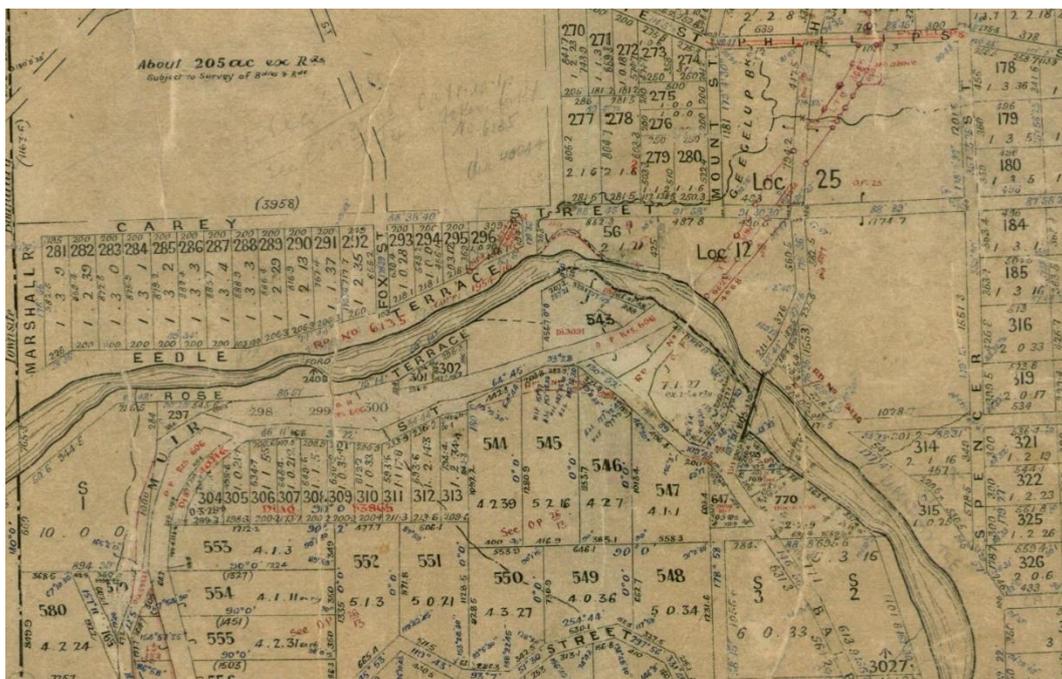
² Oral History OH8, Mrs Bessie Moyes and Mr Keith Walter, 1975

pulled a rope which released the 'monkey' used to hammer in the piles. They continued to assist by supplying the workers with morning and afternoon teas.

Bridge #3 Built by G.W. Floyd of Bunbury in 1888, employing Joseph Smith as foreman, and adjacent to Bridge #2 (known as the footbridge), but skewed slightly to the south-east. Cost was £997. The timber was pit sawn or hewed. All the iron bolts were made on site. The bridge was re-planked in 1914. *The West Australian* reported in March 1916 that '... the bridge should, with reasonable care and upkeep, be safe for all traffic for several years to come.'



Looking south to Manjimup. Bridge #2 veering right (but blocked to vehicles), Bridge #3 veering left. Presumably, Riverwood House in background, built on site of old police station c.1896/7. BHS 95-948, n.d.



Location of Bridges #2 & #3 at the end of Hampton Street. Black line refers to Bridge #3. SRO Cons3868 item 045

Bridge #3 was widened in the centre early in the 20th century, to allow vehicles to pass. Bridge #2 had been demolished, although a stack of wooden planks lies on the bank in this photo BHS 95-133. In 1919, the Bridgetown Road Board agreed to call for tenders for the purchase of the timber from Bridge #2.

Riverwood house is behind the trees, built 1896/7 for Dr Dickinson, the first resident doctor for Bridgetown.



Bridge #3. BHS 95-133. View looking south.

Bridge #4 was built in 1936 under management from the Main Roads Department, at which time the South West Highway was realigned to its current position, being a continuation of Hampton Street at the junction of Carey Street, crossing the river downstream of Bridgedale. This was the first of the bridges to use milled timber as opposed to broad axed timber.

From *The Blackwood Times*, 24 September 1948:

In 1948, Mr and Mrs Percy Wright had a narrow escape from serious injury when their car ran through the railing of the bridge over the Blackwood River. The car remained suspended over the bridge deck until pulled clear by Mr Davidson's truck. Both occupants were badly shaken but otherwise unhurt.

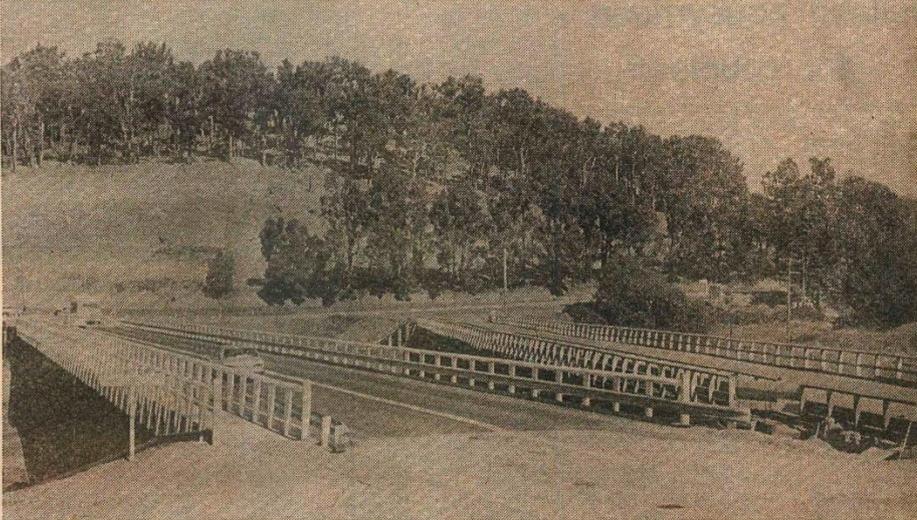
Bridge #4 was widened in 1966 to 6.9m to cope with increasing traffic.



Bridges #4 (blocked off to vehicles) & #5 c.1981. BHS collection not accessioned

Bridge #5 Built in 1980/81 by the Main Roads Department's Bunbury division at a cost of \$320,000. The bridge is 127.5m long with 17 spans and is the longest road bridge in the South West. Overall, 128 piles and 170 stringers were required. The piles vary in length between 6.5m and 17.5m. The stringers are all 7.5m long. The timber is all Jarrah, sourced from Pemberton. The bridge was officially opened on 16 April 1981 by the Hon. E.C. Rushton, MLA, Minister for Transport

Town of the bridge gets a new one



• • Bridgetown's new bridge includes a modern concrete deck, but has also involved the almost forgotten craft of the broadaxe.

LONGEST S-W BRIDGE COSTS \$320,000

BRIDGETOWN'S new road bridge, costing \$320,000, was opened last Thursday, by Transport Minister Cyril Rushton.

The bridge, the fifth in 120 years, is the longest in the South West, and is 127.5 metres long. It has 17 spans and carries an 8.6 metre wide roadway with a 1.8 metre wide footpath.

The ceremony was attended by Bridgetown-Greenbushes Shire Council president Cr Ted Waters, Warren MLA Dave Evans, Lower Central Province MLC Win Piesse, WA director of Transport Australia Ellis Kiel, Main Roads Department deputy commissioner Albert Tognoini and National Trust chairman Mr Roberts.

Mr Rushton said a lot of past history was reflected in the bridge opening ceremony.

Standing near John Blechynden's restored home, the first permanent house built in the district, Mr Rushton recalled that it was in 1861 that the settlers in the district petitioned the Government for a bridge across the river.

The Government of the day responded quickly, and Mr W. Forrest, father of Lord Forrest, came from Bunbury to commence building later that year.

His foreman was Joseph Smith, whose grand daughter Mrs Lou Evans, cut the ribbon to open the bridge last Thursday. Mrs Rushton, the Minister's wife is the daughter of Mrs Lou Evans.

The Minister said that the new bridge had been constructed using jarrah cut at Pemberton.

The technique for shaping the stringers, using the traditional broad axe, was the same technique used by the early settlers, although the use of the broad axe appeared to be a dying art in these days of the chain saw.

Mr Rushton said modern technology came into the structure in the deck, a concrete slab poured over the timbers rather than a traditional planked deck.

"Modern heavy truck traffic causes the bridge timbers to deflect and vibrate, creating a problem with the maintenance of a permanent bitumen surface.

"The concrete deck will help overcome this problem by producing a more rigid structure with a smoother running surface, besides waterproofing the timber substructure, thereby prolonging its life and reducing its maintenance costs.

Mr Rushton said the bridge would be a permanent feature of the district for at least the next 40 years.

"The cost of the bridge with the approaches has been funded from State and Commonwealth revenue sources."

More on page 3
• Bridge background page 3.

The Blackwood Times, 24 April 1981



Remnants of Railway bridge #1 (left) and road bridge #4 (right) still visible April 2020

Mary Elgar, Chairperson, Bridgetown Historical Society

28 May 2019

References: Trove newspaper articles, oral histories in the BHS archives, *Crossing the Blackwood* leaflet by Main Roads WA.