

George Double (1840-1916)

George Double was a local lad, born in Benton Street, Hadleigh in 1840. From humble beginnings he rose to be nationally recognised for his achievements as a bridge builder and civil engineer. As the builder of Boxted, Dedham and Wormingford bridges, he deserves especial remembrance in the Dedham Vale. From the 1870's until the 1890's he was closely associated with the eminent engineer and contractor John Dixon: but by the time he came to work in the Stour Valley he was his own master. The Bury and Norwich Post reported on 10 February 1891:

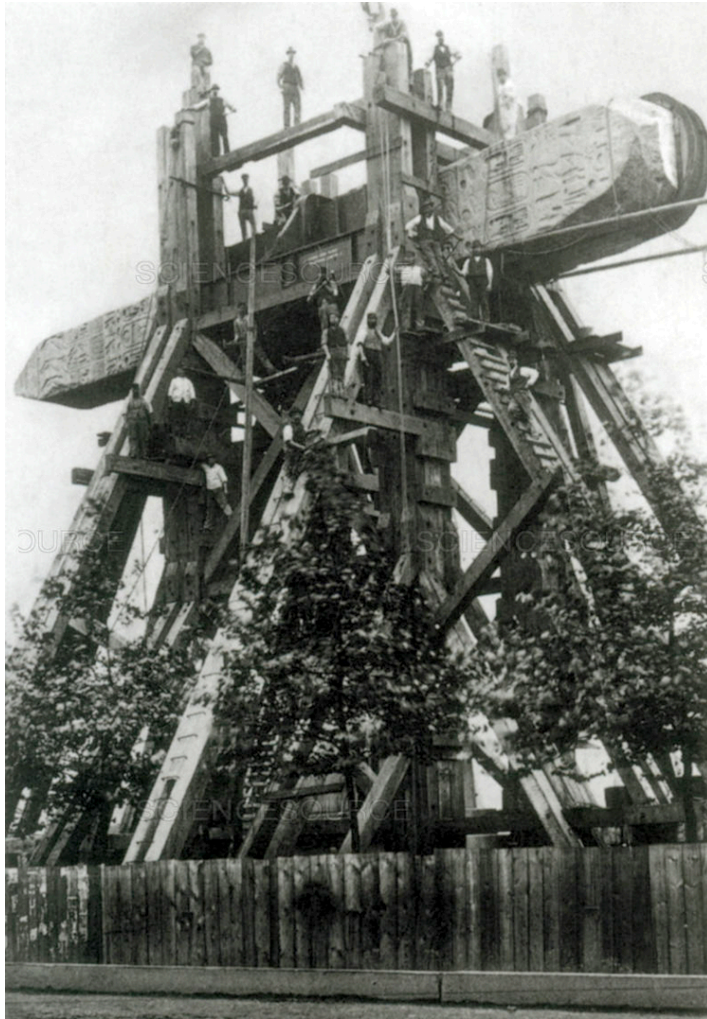
“Mr Double, whose contract had been successful for Wormingford Bridge was a very experienced man, having built Westminster Bridge and was also active in the erection of Cleopatra's Needle.”

Not much is known yet about his early life. What we have found comes from various censuses: occupation listed as a “Scholar”, living in Hadleigh (Census 1851); occupation listed as “railway porter”, London (Census 1861); then a reference to “worked on Westminster bridge” (1862); occupation listed as “engineer” in the Isle of Man (The Athole Lodge Register 1869); and occupation listed as “engine fitter”, near Lake Windermere (1871 Census). It may be no more than a coincidence with regard to the last two references, but John Dixon was in the same place at the time, working on the Iron Pier at Douglas I.O.M., and the Windermere Steam ferry, so an early association between the two men is possible. In any event, we know that our man was working as site manager for John Dixon in 1877 on the Llandudno Pier contract. The Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald, 25th August 1877, reported a serious accident on the Pier:

“a man named William Tooth, one of the workmen employed in the construction of the new pier, received very dangerous injuries by a fall.....Mr Cheeseman, the pier-master, and Mr Double, the manager of the works, were both upon the pier at the time of the accident, and they hurried down to where the unfortunate man was lying. Brandy was administered to him, and he was taken to his lodgings as soon as possible...”

In September 1878, he is very much in the news as John Dixon's foreman, in charge of erecting Cleopatra's Needle on the Victoria Embankment in London. There, he worked alongside Benjamin Baker, the engineer who designed the cylindrical vessel in which the monolith was towed from Egypt to England—a remarkable voyage accomplished by Captain Booth on the steamship ‘Olga’, and quite a story in itself. He is described in several articles in the press from August to October 1878:

“Mr Double's practical sagacity and intelligent command of the working party greatly contributed...” “Into the enclosed space around the skeleton structure only those responsible for the safe raising of the obelisk were admitted. Mr Dixon, the engineer, with Mr Baker as chief of the staff, and Mr George Double, as the executive foreman, remained there throughout directing the labours of the 20 or 30 men who worked the winches that served to prevent a too sudden movement of the ponderous stone.”



Workmen posing on the scaffolding surrounding Cleopatra's Needle, Thames Embankment, 1878. Was George Double one of these men?

In 1879 Double built the 146 foot swing bridge over the River Blyth, Suffolk for the Southwold Railway Company. - a major civil engineering challenge for the Railway as it featured a pivoting span to allow boats to pass. The bridge connected the 8 3/4 mile narrow gauge (3 ft) single track railway line from Southwold to Halesworth. The Chairman of the company was Richard C Rapier, of Ransomes Rapier, Ipswich, a major manufacturer of railway equipment.

On 23 April 1887 The West London Observer, reporting on the Hammersmith Suspension Bridge, observed:

"The cost of the new bridge has been about £85,000. and it has been erected with remarkable expedition under the supervision of Mr George Double, the energetic manager of Messrs. Dixon and Thorne, the building having taken just two years, reckoning from the date of commencement"

By 1890, he is listed as an independent bridge contractor in his own right on the plaque of a wrought iron trellis girder bridge, at Curbridge, Hampshire. The following year in 1891 he was successful in the tender for building Wormingford bridge, over the River Stour, on the Essex/Suffolk border.



Wormingford bridge, over the River Stour, built 1891 (photo taken in 2020)

George Double's considerable earlier building experiences in water must surely have led to being chosen as the contractor for the new pier head and landing stage for steamer ships on Clevedon Pier, Somerset, now a grade 1 listed building. The Wells Journal 9th June 1892 reported:

"The work undertaken by the contractor (Mr Double) from designs of Mr Abernethy, the eminent engineer, is being carried out in a very satisfactory and expeditious manner."

The new pier head was 100 feet in length and 50 feet wide with 24 massive iron columns, from the deck to the mud was 65 feet. The new landing stage was built at an angle to the pier head in order to align with the prevailing Bristol Channel current. It is worth noting the extraordinary difficulties involved in the construction: the pierhead at Clevedon has to withstand the second highest tides in the world and constant immersion (then drying out) in salt water.

George Double's tender for £937 to build Boxted bridge, over the River Stour in Essex, was accepted on 14th November 1896 and on the 28th April 1897 - a mere six months later The Evening Star reported:

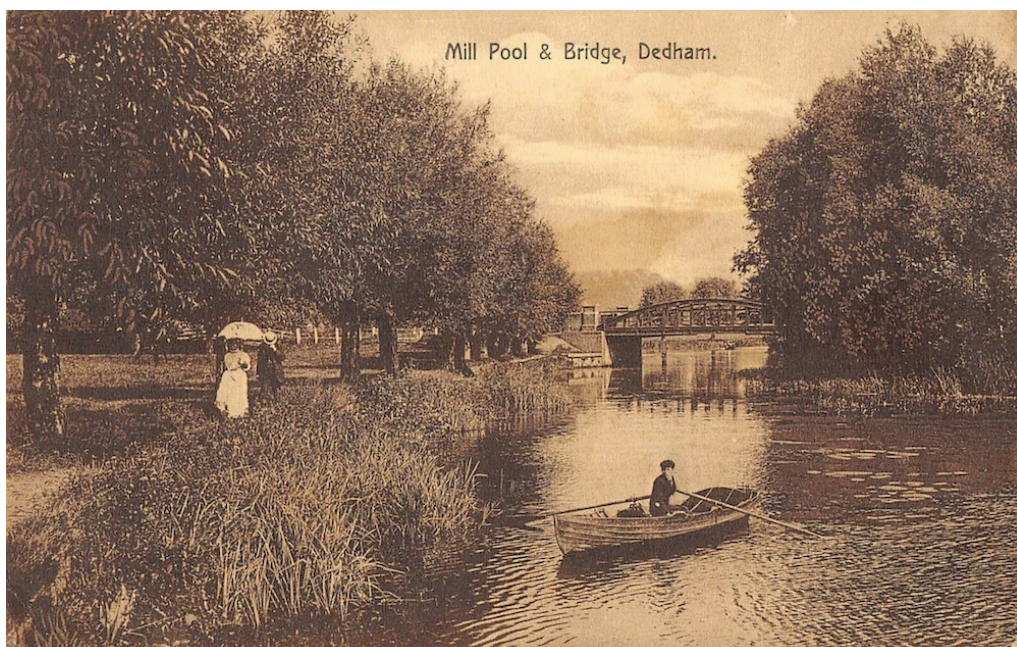
"The Boxted Bridge, which has been built by Mr George Double of Ipswich, is now completed and opened for traffic so that the road to Nayland is once more available."



Boxted bridge, over the River Stour, built in 1897 (photo taken in 1903)

Double's next contract on the River Stour in Essex was Dedham Mill Bridge, once again another substantial bridge built in the space of six months! The Ipswich Journal announced on May 12th 1900:

"that the tender of Mr George. Double, Ipswich, for £1865, had been accepted, and that the work had to be completed within six months, was adopted'.



Dedham Mill Bridge, over the River Stour, built 1900

The 1911 Census records George Double and his wife of 48 years, Emma Double, living at Kirby Lodge, Kirby Street, St John's, Ipswich as well as his niece Emma Elizabeth Laws. His occupation is listed as "Retired Contractor, (Bridges)(Pier & Bridge)". Kirby Lodge, a substantial house on the California Estate, with 9 rooms, outbuildings and grounds with a large cedar tree, was sadly demolished in 1964 to make way for six new houses). Emma Double died

in 1912 followed by George Double who died in 1916. They had no children and his niece inherited his estate. So far no photograph of George Double has come to light to complete his biography, further research is ongoing, can anyone help?