

# The Building of the Ashburton Bridge

## 1930 – 1932

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The bridge over the Ashburton was first suggested in 1925. At that time the estimated building cost was £5,000 which was considered too expensive. In 1927 a more detailed inspection was made at a site between Minderoo Station and Ten Mile Pool. Boring operations were carried out at the proposed site in June 1928. By January 1929 the bridge design was announced at an estimated cost of £10,000.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1929, Atkins and Gorham, contractors, successfully tendered for the construction of the Ashburton River Bridge on the Carnarvon – Onslow road near Minderoo homestead (£11,970<sup>2</sup>) and the Fortescue River Bridge on the Meekatharra – Nullagine road near Roy Hill homestead (£7,263).<sup>3</sup>



Atkins and Gorham was formed sometime in 1927-28 by a partnership of L.F. “King” Atkins and Edwin Arthur Gorham an engineer and surveyor who moved to Western Australia from Victoria within this time period<sup>4</sup>.

Mr John Head was the construction foreman and was responsible for assembling the plant and getting his organisation in working order. As you can imagine, there was a vast amount of preliminary work to be done before actual construction could commence.

The preliminary work commenced in the first week in February 1930. As far as possible local labour was engaged for the workforce.<sup>5</sup> The State Ship MV *Kangaroo* delivered 24 tons of materials for the bridge construction to Onslow in August 1930 and the contractors were expected on the MV *Koolinda* soon afterwards.<sup>6</sup>

Today this project would not draw much attention, however in 1930 when most of these rivers were crossed by either low level timber bridges or at-level causeways, both of which were impassable during high river flows, these projects were prominent in local newspapers. This bridge was one of the first steel and concrete bridges in Australia, moving away from timber bridges. The logistic of getting materials to the site and the very manual construction methods made such a project lengthy, difficult and dangerous for the workforce. The West Australian reported that construction work was expected to start June-July 1930<sup>7</sup>. The Northern Times<sup>8</sup> reported in November 1930, early in the construction, that the chain on a steam winch snapped fracturing the leg of one worker who required hospitalisation in Onslow and sustaining minor injuries to the foreman Mr. Head and contractor Mr. Gorham.





Main Roads ordered four compound steel piers for the bridge made at the Welshpool factory of Forward Down and Co. They were 30 feet long and 15 feet<sup>9</sup> wide weighing about seven tons each. They were carried as deck cargo on the MV *Kangaroo* on four trips by the end of 1930<sup>10</sup>

The following description of the construction is taken from notes prepared by an unknown author (possibly King Atkins) reproduced in my father's hand writing.



The excavations for the base of 6'<sup>11</sup> diameter and 25'<sup>12</sup> into the river bed belled out to 8'<sup>13</sup> at the bottom. Water pumps were used to keep the water level down during excavation.



The steel columns were, 65'<sup>14</sup> long weighing 10 tons (differ from the Main Roads story above). The legs were 2'2"<sup>15</sup> plate. They were transported to Fremantle by barge from Perth. They were then transported to Onslow by ship and on to the bridge site by Camel drawn wagons. The steel columns were slid down the temporary rail line into the river bed. They were then lifted into place with a steam winch. The base and column were then filled with concrete. Work was abandoned for about 6 months after the river flow, which reached the underside of the girders: 64'<sup>16</sup> of water flowing at 11 knots.

Mr Godfrey, Main Roads engineer, and Mr Gorham, representing the contractors, travelled overland from Perth to inspect the work in March 1930. However, progress had been hampered by the lack of certain equipment which had been delayed<sup>17</sup>.

(Black and white images from the LF Atkins collection. Newspaper clip from West Australian, 21/11/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia)



The bridge was officially opened on 8 May 1932. Mr R.M. Forrest (Chairman Roads Board) congratulated the Main Roads engineer and designer, Mr Godfrey, and the contractors, Atkins and Gorham, and the men employed by them on the splendid way in which they carried out their work. He mentioned that it was the only one of its kind in Australia<sup>18</sup>.



Picture courtesy: The Shire of Ashburton Local Government Heritage Inventory Place Record Form Ashburton River Road

*Ashburton River Road Bridge, also known as the Minderoo Bridge; today*

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<sup>1</sup> The Shire of Ashburton Local Government Heritage Inventory Place Record Form Ashburton River Road

<sup>2</sup> The Shire of Ashburton Local Government Heritage Inventory Place Record Form Ashburton River Road Bridge record the tender as 15,303 pounds

<sup>3</sup> Western Mail, 5/9/1929, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>4</sup> TROVE National Library of Australia; various newspaper references

<sup>5</sup> Northern Times, 13/2/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>6</sup> Northern Times, 21/8/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>7</sup> West Australian, 13/6/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>8</sup> Northern Times, 6/11/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>9</sup> 4.5 metres

<sup>10</sup> West Australian, 21/11/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>11</sup> 6' denoted 6 feet (1.8 metres)

<sup>12</sup> 7.6 metres

<sup>13</sup> Approx. 2.5 metres

<sup>14</sup> 19.8 metres

<sup>15</sup> 0.66 metres

<sup>16</sup> 19.5 metres

<sup>17</sup> Northern Times, 6/3/1930, TROVE National Library of Australia

<sup>18</sup> Northern Times, 19/5/1932, TROVE National Library of Australia