

LONDON BRIDGE

ALL limitations set by nature on man's activities act as a spur to his ingenuity and bridge building is but one example of his triumphs. Rivers were a challenge that was overcome centuries ago, yet rivers are still valuable lines of defence in war and are still found as national frontiers. Bridges, in principle so old, may in design be very modern. Thus they serve equally to span the river of time and to link mediaeval society with modern progress.

Bridges have developed from the felled tree allowed to fall across the turbulent stream, to the steel span across Sydney Harbour, from a flimsy rope and bamboo suspension, to the solid mechanical edifice of our well known Tower Bridge. Bridges bring into focus the activities of communities spread far and wide about their approaches, and many an historian and author has taken his stand upon an arch to watch the world go by and feel the pulse of humanity. It has been suggested that the City of London was mothered by the bridge but to me it would appear that the Bridge was a manifestation of the City's development during its period of adolescence. Its eyes turned to an horizon no longer bounded by the river.

We do not know when the first man walked above the Thames from London to Southwark. Some writers assert that the first bridge was built by our Saxon ancestors in the 10th century while others conjecture its Roman origin. Indeed it would seem strange that the Romans, to whom communications were so vital and who were so efficient in the construction of highways and bridges, who bridged the Rhine and the Danube and built at least three bridges over the Tyne in the north of England, should have been satisfied with a ford over the Thames crossed only at low tide, somewhere in the vicinity of Westminster. That their road system in England should have pivoted on a ford or ferry of some considerable width, bounded at its approaches by large areas of marshland in St. Georges Fields and Lambeth, seems hardly to accord with Roman planning and Roman thoroughness. The earliest bridge in Rome, mentioned in 508 B.C., was the Pons Sublicius (sublica, meaning a pile or stake). At the time of the conquest of Britain there were at least 10 bridges in Rome. To each Roman legion an architect was attached who would be familiar with the construction of cofferdams for protecting the foundations of piers. The site of London Bridge may have been chosen by such military engineers at a place where the river was fairly narrow and the approaches firm. Such conjecture has been strengthened by the recovery of a large number of Roman coins from the bed of the river on the line of the bridge and of piles which some believe to be shod with Roman metal.

However that may be, it is certain that a bridge existed in the 10th century. About the year 980 we read of a woman who was condemned to be drowned at London Bridge, having been convicted

of a form of witchcraft by sticking pins into an image of a person she wished to harm. In 1014 the Bridge was the scene of a fierce battle and is said to have been partly destroyed by the forces of King Olaf, giving rise to the poem of Ottar Svarte, which has been translated:—

London Bridge is broken down,
Gold is won, and bright renown.
Shields resounding,
War-horns sounding,
Hildur shouting in the din!
Arrows singing
Mailcoats ringing—
Odin makes our Olaf win.

During the next century and a half the wooden bridge suffered frequent damage as a result of storm, flood, ice, fire and armed conflict, in addition to wear from a numerous traffic. Every chronicler adds his quota of incidents. In 1097 what we should now call the Home Counties supplied forced labour for reconstructing parts of the bridge carried away by flood. In 1131, a certain Geoffrey received £25 for rebuilding two arches and the whole structure was rebuilt in elm by Peter de Colechurch in 1163. Peter was Chaplain of St. Mary Colechurch and Proctor of the Bridge. In mediaeval times there was a strong connection between the bridge and the church. Early grants to support the bridge were made "to God and the Bridge" or to the "Chapel on the Bridge". A deed in the British Museum of the year 1122, and the earliest seal of the Proctor and Bretheren of the Bridge attached to a deed of about the year 1176, suggest that the ancient bridge was in the charge of the Monastery of Bermondsey, then occupied by an order of the Black Friars, the Prior of which was Lord of the Manor of the Great Liberty of Southwark. Under the inspiration of Peter de Colechurch the replacement of the wooden bridge by a stone bridge was commenced in 1176 and took 33 years to complete. It is possible that the cost of this undertaking resulted in the transfer of responsibility from the Monastery to the City Authorities. In 1201 King John addressed a letter to the Mayor and Citizens as to the completion of the bridge and the erection of houses thereon, the rents to be appropriated to repair maintain and uphold the same. The benefit derived from the close connection between the Bridge and the Church was not lost for Peter de Colechurch planned and built a Chapel on a pier near the centre of the Bridge and dedicated it to St. Thomas á Becket whose martyrdom at Canterbury a few years earlier had shocked the nation. Towards the cost of the Bridge the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Papal Legate in England gave 1,000 marks and an offerings box in the chapel collected year by year a small sum for the maintenance of the Bridge, contributed by passers-by, maybe on pilgrimage to Canterbury. Peter died before his bridge was complete and was buried in the chapel. His tomb was discovered in 1832 when the chapel pier was being demolished. It is sad to reflect that neither the tomb nor the vaulted remains of the lower chapel were

thought worthy of preservation. Although Peter's chapel of 1,200 was largely rebuilt in 1396 it must have been a gem of mediaeval architecture.

After Peter's death in 1205 the Bridge was completed by Serlo Mercer, William Almaine and Benedict Botewrite. Subsequently they all became Wardens of the Bridge and Serlo was Mayor for several years. This marvellous structure, it is true with many repairs, partial rebuildings and widenings, lasted over 600 years. A chronicler remarked on the width of the wooden bridge in the 11th century "that it was so wide that two waggons could pass." It would appear that the passageway on the stone bridge was not more than 15 feet, the whole breadth between the straight faces of the piers being from 20 feet to 24 feet, varying from pier to pier. A fire of 1633 destroyed the houses on the northern end of the bridge for a distance of 354 feet and Charles I and his Council endeavoured to encourage the widening of the bridge to 32 feet between the parapets and to prevent the rebuilding of any houses. Nevertheless the houses were rebuilt—their rents were needed! These same houses were rebuilt again after the Great Fire of 1666. The houses were not removed till about 1760 and in the following years the roadway was widened to 31 feet and the footways to 7 feet each. At the same time the middle pier was removed to provide for one large arch with a span of 70 feet. To free the river two other piers were removed in 1826-7, leaving 17 openings in place of the original 20. The present granite bridge of five arches was opened by William IV in 1831 and is west of the old Bridge by 180 feet, which in turn was west of the earlier wooden bridge. Thus the site of the Bridge crept up the river from Botolph Wharf to Fishmongers' Hall.

The history of London Bridge, covering at least 1,000 years, is so full of incidents that in the time at my disposal I can pick out only a few, and whichever I choose, they will be inadequate to reflect the whole. I will tell of pageantry and ceremonial, of estate management, of vineyards, hayfields and cornmills, but first of valour, love and success. Richard Osborne of Ashford in Kent, like all fathers, was anxious for the success of his son, Edward. Accordingly at some sacrifice he apprenticed him in London to a rich clothworker, William Hewet. According to Stow, Hewet lived upon London Bridge although the Bridge rentals do not confirm his tenancy. Stow goes on to tell us how in 1536 Hewet's little daughter, Anne, while playing at a window, lost her balance and fell into the rushing waters below. Osborne, the apprentice, leapt after her and succeeded in swimming to the drowning child and bringing her safely back to her parents. The number of persons drowned at London Bridge is legion. Hewet became an Alderman in 1550, Sheriff in 1553 and Mayor in 1559. There were many offers for the hand of Anne, including the Earl of Shrewsbury and Edward Osborne. Hewet is supposed to have settled the matter by exclaiming "Osborne saved her and Osborne should enjoy her". They were married in 1562. Osborne became an Alderman in 1573, Sheriff 1575 and Mayor 1583. His great grandson climbed still further, to become Duke of Leeds.

London Bridge has witnessed many ceremonial entrances of the Sovereign, being the counterpart of Temple Bar, and less ceremonial entrances of rebels against the Crown. In both cases the Bridge Funds have borne the consequent expenses; in the first case on pageants to welcome the royalty, in the second case on defences to repel the king's enemies or to repair damage done by conflict. In 1386 the accounts record the purchase of two brass guns weighing 503 lbs. and costing £10 10s. 9d.; timber for tampoons (or tampions, a wad used for ramming the charge; an early use of a word, first mentioned in the Oxford Dictionary in 1481, a century later); 6 lbs. of saltpetre and 3 lbs. of sulphur for gunpowder, 8s. 6d.; a carpenter for stocking 2 guns, 20s. 8d., and a man hired for 4 days to make charcoal for guns, 16d., which together with 114 lbs. of wrought iron at 19s., came to a total of £13 os. 6d., sufficient to upset the balance of the Bridge budget in those days. During the same reign, that of Richard II, we note that the King ordered that statues of himself and the Queen should be set above the Stone Gate of the Bridge. They were made of free-stone under canopies, with shields above, and cost in all £31 10s. 8d. Two gilded sceptres cost £1.

Pageants on the Bridge have been described by every chronicler of London and have been collected in such books as Withington's English Pageantry. There is no merit in repeating their stories so I have chosen a lesser known event, the Coronation of Elizabeth Woodville in 1465, as recorded in the Bridge Masters' Accounts of that year. I might mention here that this unhappy woman spent the latter years of her life in the Abbey of Bermondsey, the early patron of the Bridge, where she must have recalled her former passage over the Bridge to her coronation. The arrangements on the Bridge were hurried, involving night work with candles and fires, and considerable refreshment of the workmen at the Crown Ale-house next the door of the Bridge House. For decorations, red, gold, green, black and white paper, purple, red, silver and mixed buckram, tinfoil, paint of all colours, hogs-hairs for the paint brushes, thread, glue and many other similar articles were purchased. Hazel was required for making images, flax for the hair of images and angels, 900 peacocks feathers for angels wings, 8 pairs of gloves for the hands of 8 figures and flock for stuffing the said gloves. The apparel of the angels was hired, that of other female figures was made of "kerchiefs of pleasaunce" (lawn), while the male figures were clothed by two tailors. John Raby produced a figure of the Holy Spirit, while the Queen was addressed at the drawbridge by representatives of St. Elizabeth and Mary Cleophas. The area around the drawbridge was fumigated, which I take to mean sweetly scented. Three choirs sang at various places on the bridge and the Clerk of St. Georges, Southwark, received the Queen on a stage in the form and manner of St. Paul. John Genycote wrote and illuminated six ballads and numerous "announcements" were hung along the whole length of the Bridge. 45 loads of sand were used to sprinkle on the roadway. Even 1,000 pins, used for fixing clothing, are charged in the account, at 14d.

From this one example you will appreciate the wealth of detail to be found in the original records of London Bridge. In 1827 Richard Thomson wrote 189,000 words and thought that he had exhausted the subject. Charles Welch added over 90,000 words in 1894, and Gordon Home about 100,000 in 1931. Yet they have only scratched the surface. The development of the Bridge House estates is a subject in its own right.

It is certain that the Bridge possessed properties, the profits from which were applicable to its maintenance, as early as the 12th century. In the 13th century it acquired lands in St. Georges Fields formerly held by the Prior of Bermondsey no doubt in trust for the wooden bridge. Later in the same century the Bridge received grants of meadows and mills in Stratford, and lands in Peckham, Camberwell and Lewisham to add to its properties in Southwark. Further land, mainly marsh, was added in the 14th century in the neighbourhood of Deptford, Greenwich and the Old Kent Road. In 1280 we find the Wardens leasing land in the Manor of Lewisham together with mill, 3 horses, 6 oxen, 3 ploughs, 4 geese, 12 hens, 22 acres sown with corn, 10 acres sown with rye, 31 sown with oats, 4 with peas, 2 with beans, one with vetch and 6 acres fallow. The succession of tenants to all these properties, as well as to houses in the City and on the Bridge itself, can be traced without a break from the 14th century to the present day. Moreover expenses of maintenance, sales, exchanges and acquisitions are all recorded. We are astonished to learn that in 1389 Roger Ellis's house in Paternoster Row, had 87 windows, 23 doors, an ambulatory and boasted 13 gargoyles. About the same time the Bridge wardens were paying for the mowing, tedding, collecting and ricking of hay in the Bridge fields, but reserving some fields for the sustenance of the Bridge Horses. The vines in the garden of the Bridge House in Southwark required pruning and training and the garden itself was sown with beans and flowers.

Thousands of bundles of fire-wood were cut from the Bridge lands in Lewisham. In the 15th century the wardens found it necessary to fence and hedge their lands and a man was employed to watch the new mown hay. The income of the Bridge House Estates was augmented by the sale of produce, by fees for standings of fishmongers, butchers and clothiers at Stocks Market, opposite the present Mansion House, by tolls on carts passing over and ships passing under the Bridge and fines for fishing from the starlings and other offences. This subsidiary income gradually diminished, but the produce of the real estate increased from £464 in 1381 to £202,683 in 1950.

Some intermediate stages may be interesting:—

	<i>Increase in</i>		<i>Increase in</i>		
	100 years.		100 years.		
1460	£619		1750	£3,925	105%
1550	£982	58%	1850	£31,852	711%
1650	£2,010	104%	1950	£202,683	536%

You may be interested to know that the Bridge House Fund has from time to time lent the City small sums to tide it over difficulties. About 1550 £200 was on loan to St. Bartholomews Hospital and

£400 was lent to the Chamber. After the Great Fire the City borrowed from the Bridge, in 1669 for example about £16,000 was on loan, for rebuilding the public buildings, which loan was eventually repaid from the duties on coal. About 1790 the Chamber owed £25,000 to the Bridge and a similar sum was on loan in 1815 mainly to finance the entertainments to the Prince Regent and the Duke of Wellington. From 1559 until 1872 the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs received a "benevolence" from the Bridge House Funds towards the cost of the Lord Mayor's Banquet, £50 to the Lord Mayor and £25 to each of the Sheriffs. In the difficult times of the Commonwealth when the Chamber was depleted and the Banquet in Guildhall was forbidden, the Bridge increased the Lord Mayor's benevolence to £90, to include "ornaments for his house" apparently to enable him to entertain at home. The increase continued long after the reason for it had passed. The payment from the Bridge Funds was authorized by a resolution of the Court of Aldermen of 19 August, 1589, after it had been paid for about 30 years. The Bridge House Committee also furnished the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs with Chopping Blocks and Horse Blocks made by the Bridge workmen in the Bridge Yard. The large workshop, store and staff of the Bridge Yard were dispersed when Old London Bridge no longer needed their services. The new granite bridge of 1831 needed no such maintenance. For a few years the Bridge House Committee purchased suitable blocks for presentation but in 1836 a report of the Committee to the Common Council recommended that the practice should be discontinued.

So closes the most colourful chapter in the history of London Bridge. The estates are still intact and relieve the ratepayers of large annual charges for Blackfriars, Southwark, London and Tower Bridges. But how many of the millions that daily cross these bridges realize what is owed to the Monks of Bermondsey, to Peter the priest of St. Mary Colechurch, to the long line of conscientious Bridgemaasters, masons and carpenters, to the chaplains on the Bridge, to the benefactors from the humble citizens who left 2d. to the Bridge for the good of their souls, to the valuable grants of Edward I, which in some measure compensated the Bridge for losses when the revenues were confiscated and granted to Eleanor his mother, lastly to the Bridge House Committee which for three and a half centuries has administered the estates with such success that the benefits of the trust have been extended not only to the other bridges that I have mentioned but also to the relief of the working classes, by replacing slum property in Southwark and elsewhere by modern flats! While some doubted the propriety of applying Bridge funds for such a purpose I feel sure the Monks of Bermondsey and Peter de Colechurch would have approved. The good that men do lives after them. I am sure that the Bridge House Trust is a shining example of the cumulative effect of good works. I hope that the estates and the administration of the trust may continue long in the hands of the Corporation which during eight centuries has proved its competence and its loyalty to the ideals of the mediaeval founders.