

## **“I declare this bridge open” – the story of the opening ceremony.**

The first bridge across the River Medway at Rochester was built by the Romans soon after the invasion in AD43. This lasted until the cold winter of 1381, when the river froze solid. When the thaw came, huge blocks of ice and floodwater swept away the old bridge which had stood for over 1300 years.

Two benefactors soon arrived at the scene. Not only did they build a new stone bridge, they persuaded their friends and acquaintances to donate land and money for its perpetual maintenance. In 1399 King Richard II granted letters patent that allowed two Wardens to be appointed, and the Rochester Bridge Trust was founded. Ever since that time, the trust has provided crossings of the river at Rochester free of charge to the public.

In 1856, the Trust replaced the old medieval bridge with a three-arch cast iron bridge with an opening section. Its life was short, because a number of serious collisions caused major damage. Between 1910 and 1914, the Wardens reconfigured the structure into the bowstring truss as it is today.

A contract was signed with John Cochrane and Sons with Messrs Joseph Westwood and Company as the main subcontractor. The work took three and a half years to complete.

As work was nearing completion, the Wardens began to make plans for a formal opening ceremony. A committee was set up to make the arrangements.

The Senior Warden in 1914 was Ivo Bligh, the 8<sup>th</sup> Earl of Darnley, who had his seat at nearby Cobham Hall. The Committee decided to invite the Countess of Darnley, wife of the Senior Warden, to perform the opening ceremony.

In his younger days, the Earl of Darnley, then styled the Honourable Ivo Bligh, had been a distinguished cricketer and captain of England. The English team, captained by the wonderfully named Monkey Hornby, had lost to the Australians at the Oval in 1882. The *Sporting Times* newspaper wrote a mock obituary to English Cricket, noting that the body would be cremated and the ashes sent to Australia. The following winter's tour, now with England captained by the Honorable Ivo Bligh, was billed as an attempt to reclaim the ashes.

Bligh's team was successful, winning the three game series two-one. At a subsequent social match at the Rupertswood Estate outside Melbourne on Christmas Eve 1882, a small group of women presented Ivo Bligh with a small urn containing ashes to symbolise the ashes of English cricket.

One of those women was Florence Rose Morphy, companion to the mistress of Rupertswood and governess to the children of the household. In 1884, Ivo Bligh married Florence. Shortly afterwards they returned to England, taking the urn with them as Bligh always regarded it as a personal gift. It stayed on the mantelpiece of Cobham Hall, until Bligh died 43 years later, at which point Florence bequeathed it to the MCC.

In 1914, the Rochester Bridge Trust committee decided that the Countess of Darnley would have the honour of performing the opening ceremony. A letter of invitation was sent by the Bridge Clerk which Lady Darnley graciously accepted.

Next, the Committee set about drawing up the general invitation list. The mayors, alderman and senior officers of all the local authorities (Rochester, Maidstone, Chatham, Gillingham and Kent); the Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff; the bishop and dean of Rochester; members of parliament; senior military officers; the river authorities; the local press; and many of those who had been involved in the construction. One hundred and fifty invitations were printed with gold relief at a cost of £3 2s 6d. Many of the handwritten responses are included on the large display panel in the exhibition.

One person was very much upset not to have been included in the list of invitees. His name was Harry Rigby the man who managed the work of the sub-contractor Joseph Westwood and Co Ltd. In a letter to the Bridge Clerk on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1914, he wrote:

*"My Chairman of Directors, Sir William Beardmore, Bart., begs to thank you and the Wardens for the invitation to attend at the opening of Rochester Bridge on May 14<sup>th</sup> .... and he would have accepted with great pleasure but he has to launch a Battleship he is building at Dalmuir on that date, and is unable to be present.*

*I am more than surprised, and I say very much hurt, at the way that the matter of invitations has been dealt with. To commence with, I have not had an invitation at all; and, as I have had all to do with the construction and erection of the Steelwork of the Bridge from its inception until the final completion, I think that some mistake has occurred and that my name has been accidentally overlooked. Surely .... the persons responsible for sending out invitations have, inadvertently, overlooked this matter.*

*You have, also, very kindly sent my Chief Assistant, .... Mr. Arthur Tawse, an invitation, but, should it be found necessary to only invite two Members of this Firm, he will return his invitation tomorrow so that you may renew the same in my name.*

*I am sure, with your practical mind, you will see that I am not complaining over any trivial matter. The work of the Reconstruction of Rochester Bridge has been practically a night and day job with me for three years, and, consequently, I cannot help but feel that a great injustice might easily have occurred, and I trust you will pardon my writing you at length on this subject."*

The Bridge Clerk responded on 1<sup>st</sup> May, inviting Mr Rigby to attend in the place of one of the Directors of his company who had already been invited. Mr Rigby confirmed to be unhappy:

*"I have to thank you for yours of the 29<sup>th</sup> ult., enclosing me an invitation for the opening ceremony, etc.,*

*I am quite sure, as far as you are concerned, that my name would never have been omitted from the list. It looks to me to be a piece of miserly economy on the part of someone, and were it not for the strenuous time that I have devoted to this important Contract, which has now been brought to such a successful issue, I should not have troubled anything further about the matter.*

*I can quite see that there will be a numerous body of people there who have never done a hand's turn in any shape or form with the reconstruction, and I do think, as represented to you in my letter of the 28<sup>th</sup> ult., that, if you are going to refuse one of our Directors the opportunity of being present, I can only repeat that I think it is a piece of beggarly economy. Mr. Brown has repeatedly visited the job, during the reconstruction, with myself, and has throughout taken very great interest in the whole of the work, and I do hope that an invitation, even at this late moment, will be extended to him.*

*Thanking you for your kind letter"*

Finally The Bridge Committee relented and invited the Director and his wife and Mr Rigby to the opening ceremony.

Once the planning of the event was underway, various people wrote to the Trust asking to be involved. The general manager of the B.C. Hucks Company wrote to suggest that the Wardens might like a demonstration by an aviator, a very popular attraction of the date. He wrote:

*"seeing that the new Rochester Bridge [is] to be opened by the Countess of Darnley on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May, it has occurred to me that, .... it would be a good idea to engage the services of an aviator to give demonstrations of looping-the-loop and upside-down flying.*

*I do not think that there is any necessity for me to enlarge upon the attracting value of a looping demonstration – sufficient to say that Mr Hucks was flying in Bristol recently, and they had to stop the football matches while his demonstrations were in progress."*

Sadly, the Committee decided not to take Mr Hucks up on his offer.

A letter was also received from the Transatlantic Film Company in the following terms:

*"will you kindly furnish me with facilities for obtaining a cinematograph film of the opening ceremony when the reconstruction of the Rochester Bridge .... is completed."*

Instead, the Trust seems to have engaged Gaumont News to record the events of the day and I was lucky enough to track down a copy of the film in the archives of the British Film Institute.

The organising Committee turned its attention to the celebratory meals which would follow the opening ceremony.

The first was to be a formal luncheon with eight courses for invited special guests at the Corn Exchange. The second, a sandwich lunch at the Guildhall for the ordinary members of the four local authorities. The third lunch was for 70 Boy Scouts who acted as Marshalls during the opening and were "afterwards entertained at a hot dinner at the Rochester Cafe at the expense of the Wardens".

The lunch at the Guildhall was provided by the Gordon Temperance Hotel and comprised sandwiches of beef, ham, cucumber and salad; a few fillings less common nowadays: anchovy, cods' roe, foie gras, gruyere cheese and sardine; and the mysterious "clent". Also served were meat "patties" and sausage rolls then French Pastries, Swiss Pastries, assorted biscuits, fresh fruit and coffee. The total cost for 80 people was £8 5s 0d. The cost of the Scouts' hot dinner by contrast was £4 3s 0d.

I will return to the subject of the main luncheon later.

A large force of the City of Rochester Police was on duty to manage the traffic and contril the crowd. About 70 boy scouts were also present to assist the police as marshalls.

At 12 o'clock the Mayors and Councillors of the various local authorities met up at the Guildhall and were welcomed by the Mayor of Rochester.

At the same time, all the other invited guests assembled at the Bridge Chamber and were received by the Wardens.

At 12.10pm, the traffic on the bridge was stopped by the Police. the Mayors, wearing their robes and chains of office, led by their mace bearers and followed by the members of the corporations, processed down the Esplanade to be greeted at the Bridge Chamber by the Wardens.

At 12.20pm, the lady guests were required to proceed to the Bridge and take up their places in a special area assigned for them. At 12.25pm, a procession was formed, consisting entirely of men apart from Lady Darnley herself, and made its way up to the bridge.

The Chief Constable was in the lead, followed by the contractor's staff and the engineers, then the mayors and their corporations, the Chairman of Kent County Council and the Chairman of the Medway Consultancy Board. Following behind were the Assistant Wardens, then the Countess with her husband, the Senior Warden, and finally, at the very end of the parade, the Bridge Clerk.

The Wardens carried their staffs of office – this is one of the very few photographs we have of them in use. Lady Darnley had also presented each of the wardens with a buttonhole of forget-me-nots.

At the centre of the bridge at exactly 12.30pm, the Bridge Engineer reported to the Wardens that the Bridge was complete.

Above their heads were the flags of Rochester, Chatham and Gillingham and the Trust had also arranged for an Australian flag to be flown as a tribute to the Countess's country of birth – much to the delight of Lady Darnley.

Across the centre of the bridge had been stretched a red, white and blue silk rope. Lady Darnley untied the knot and declared:

"[I have great honour in declaring] the splendid new Rochester Bridge open. I hope it may have a long and prosperous career and that prosperity may come and continue in the ancient city of Rochester and the surrounding towns". As the newspaper reporter wrote: "cheers of a delighted crowd rent the air".

Lord Darnley, the Senior Warden, gave an address.

He said it was his duty as the Senior Warden to say a few words, but it would be a very few since the purpose of the bridge was to give a quick and free passage over the river, and they would not be justified in holding up the traffic for any appreciable time. Besides, Lady Darnley having just declared the bridge open, it would hardly be polite or prudent for him to keep it shut.

He paid tribute to the engineers and contactors and congratulated them on "turning out a fine piece of work, worthy of its historic situation on one of the oldest bridge-ways in England. I think it speaks well for both engineers and contractors that the work has been carried out without loss of life or serious accident during the three years that it has occupied". "On behalf of the Bridgewardens I wish that the bridge may, under God's blessing, long survive to the service and use of these towns and the good old county of Kent"

The procession then reformed and returned to the Bridge Chamber with the members of the Corporations going off to the Guildhall for their sandwich lunch. The bridge was open to traffic again at 12.45pm.

The newspaper account of the opening ceremony summed up the affection of local people for the bridge to Rochester:

*"Rochester's new bridge was opened yesterday – an improved link between the territories of the men of Kent and the Kentish men and a further reminder of the importance of the Great Kent highway and the river flowing beneath."*

*"It was a glorious May Day, the speeches of good wishes...being quite in keeping with the sunshine which favoured the proceedings throughout. Then there were the cheers of the crowds who assembled on and near the bridge and heartily greeted the Earl and Countess of Darnley.... Altogether yesterday was an historic day, memorable alike to the City of Rochester and the ancestral family of Cobham Hall."*

Lord Darnley's speech was reported by the newspaper:

He thought they would all agree that the new bridge was more stable, more commodious and more convenient for both passengers above and ships below. He said he had heard some criticisms about the beauty of the bridge but, so far as that was concerned, it must

always be completely eclipsed and extinguished by the appalling ugliness of the railway bridge on the other side (he was greeted by "hear, hear" from the audience). In common charity and kindness to the sister and neighbouring bridge, he thought the new bridge could not have been very beautiful without being absolutely unkind.

Lady Darnley gave a short speech at the luncheon. After thanking the Wardens for granting her the honour of opening the bridge, she went on:

"That this magnificent bridge .... may be the means of adding enlarged prosperity to this ancient borough and the surrounding towns I wish from my heart. It is a wonderful fact and one that especially appeals to women and mothers, and one that calls forth our very best gratitude and congratulations, that no serious accidents have happened and no lives have been lost during the three years of the bridge's construction. I would add a fervent prayer that this bridge may be so providentially guarded as the gate to our beautiful cathedral city that no accident, wilful or otherwise, may ever bridge a cloud upon its glorious and, I hope, lengthy future". Her speech was greeted by cheers from the assembled audience.

The day after the ceremony, the Bridge Clerk received a charming but rather sad letter from a Mr Locke of Shepherd's Bush. He wrote:

*"As one who was present at the opening ceremony of the new Rochester Bridge in 1856, I should be extremely obliged if you could kindly inform me of the day, date and time of the opening ceremony which I understand is to take place [so that I may attend]."*

Poor Mr Locke had missed the celebrations by just one day!

As a gift for performing the opening ceremony, Lady Darnley was presented with an extraordinarily generous gift – a solid silver model of the bridge measuring nearly two feet long. It was made by Edward Barnard and Sons of Fetter Lane, London. The company is considered to be the oldest manufacturing silversmith in the world, having been founded under a different name in 1680. In 1977 Edward Barnard & Sons Limited became a subsidiary of Padgett & Braham Ltd., which is still in existence today.

The model cost £75.00 which probably equates to around £7,500 based on general inflation increases over the past 100 years. The model was borrowed by the Institution of Civil Engineers shortly afterwards and put on display at their annual Conversazione

Far more elaborate was the formal luncheon at the Corn Exchange where ninety two guests were present. The Royal Engineers string band of six musicians plus a harpist were engaged to play during the luncheon.

The luncheon was provided by the Army and Navy Co-operative Society of Victoria Street, London. The charge was 11s 6d per head plus 3d per head for coffee, bringing the total cost of the meal to £60 11s and 3d.

The staff for the event were sent by train from London at a cost of 10s 6d per man plus their train fares to and fro. Cigars were provided for the gentlemen after lunch at a cost of £6 3s.

The menu for the formal luncheon was colossal and perhaps not to modern tastes.

The first course was "Consommé Velours". This dish is a bit of an enigma as consommé is generally a clear soup yet "velours" means "velvety" in French.

The second course was "Saumon avec sauce Tyrolienne Salade de Homard".

Tyrolienne sauce is made with chopped tomatoes and shallots, heated until reduced to a thick consistency. To the cooled tomatoes was added mayonnaise, chopped cervil and parsley, pepper and mustard. So the first part of the dish was salmon in a tomato mayonnaise – not dissimilar to what we now know as Marie Rose sauce. This was served with a lobster salad.

Next they had "Chaufroid de Caille Lucullus". "Chaufroid" literally means "hot cold". The technique was developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the chef Marie-Antoine Careme, considered to be one of the first "celebrity chef" of international renown. In essence the dish is made of cooked poultry, cooled and set in aspic mixed with cream. In this case the poultry was "caille" or quail.

Moving on to the fourth course, this was "Cotelettes d'Agneau St Germain". In my research, I found the dish served at the Grant Hotel in London in June 1898 and again for the annual regimental dinner of the Royal Scots (Lothian Regiment) in June 1906. Wherever the phrase 'a la St Germain' appears, it refers to a dish being served with whole peas. So the main course of the luncheon was lamb cutlets served with peas.

Rather oddly, the fifth course was a cold meat salad. A "Salad de Laitue" or lettuce salad was served with Poulet de Surrey a la Gelee (chicken in aspic), Jambon d'York (York ham), and Langue a l'Epecurienne (sliced tongue).

The salad course was then followed by the first of three sweet courses.

Firstly, there was "Gateau Moka" served with "Gelee au Champagne". The Gateau Moka was an elaborate layered cake flavoured with coffee, chocolate and coffee liqueur. The cake layers were "Biscuit Joconde" made with almonds, sugar, flour, butter and eggs. The mixture is folded together with French meringue and then baked in very thin layers. Next, an Italian style meringue is made by heating sugar syrup and pouring it into whisked egg whites. The mixture is whisked until cold and then softened butter is added, a little at a time before being flavoured with coffee, coffee liqueur and vanilla. This makes a very special coffee buttercream. The gateau is assembled by layering the cake and buttercream, sprinkling coffee syrup on each cake layer. This was served in 1914 with individual Champagne jellies.

The seventh course was another dessert, this time, "Bombe Africaine with Friandise". The Bomb Africaine was chocolate ice cream filled with an apricot and cream mousse. The "friandises" which accompanied it were small delicacies or cakes, meant to be eaten with the fingers. Today we might refer to these as "petits fours".

Finally, for their eighth course, the guests were served "Dessert", which referred to sliced fresh fruit and coffee.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May this year (i.e. next Wednesday), the Wardens have once again invited the current Earl and Countess of Darnley to join them for lunch to mark the Old Bridge's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Although this will be a far more modest affair to reflect modern tastes, we will be serving a menu which is inspired by that enjoyed one hundred years ago. We have decided not to have the quail in cold milk jelly, or the cold meat salad in the middle of the meal, and one of the dessert courses has gone. But as far as practicable we will be using Edwardian recipes to recreate other parts of the menu, and tonight we have a special advance tasting of the Gateau Moka recipe and hope you will all try a piece.

#### Family Tree

Ivo Bligh 8<sup>th</sup> Earl (1859-27) m. 1884 Florence Rose Morphy (1860-1944)

Esme Ivo Bligh 9<sup>th</sup> Earl (1886 – 1955)

m. 1 1912 div. 1920 Daphne Rachel Mulholland (Margueritte (1913-2002), Peter Stuart Bligh 10<sup>th</sup> Earl q.v., unmarried (1915-1980)

m. 2 1923 div. 1936 Nancy Ellinor Kidson (Rose Amanda 1935-)

m. 3 1940 Rosemary Potter (Adam Ivo Stuart 11<sup>th</sup> Earl 1941-, Melissa 1945-, Harriet 1949-)

Adam Ivo Stuart 11<sup>th</sup> Earl 1941-

Ivo Donald Bligh, Lord Clifton, 1968-

Henry Robert Stuart Bligh,