

Medieval London Bridge with its chapel dedicated to St Thomas the Martyr, a reconstruction produced by the late Peter Jackson

THE BRIDGE CHAPELS OF MEDIEVAL BRITAIN: a new gazetteer, plus cases studies and an international overview.

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Introduction

Today national government agencies or local authorities are generally responsible for the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges, but in the Middle Ages the situation was quite different. Instead, landowners (both secular and ecclesiastical) and local communities undertook these duties. Bridge construction and maintenance were seen as pious and charitable deeds because these actions were helping the community and preventing deaths or serious accidents which might occur when people waded across fords. Prior to the Reformation, crosses and chapels were common sights at bridges enabling travellers to offer prayers and (monetary) thanks on setting out or completing a journey.

Some bridge chapels were founded to commemorate through prayer the deceased especially those who had funded the bridge and or chapel. Elsewhere those who maintained the bridge, paid for the expenses of the chapel, as at London, Rochester and York. In a few instances the bridge chaplain was responsible for the maintenance of the bridge.

The Wardens and Assistants of Rochester Bridge (the Rochester Bridge Trust) and the Bridge House Estates (established in 1282 to maintain London Bridge in the City of London) represent extremely rare survivals of civic bridge maintenance groups. Since the 12th century, and in all probability from much earlier, responsibility for maintaining and repairing Rochester Bridge lay with 54 parishes, manors and estates in the surrounding area. After the destruction of the bridge by flood in 1381 construction of a new bridge with a chapel on its southern approach were largely funded by Sir John Cobham and Sir Robert Knolles. Subsequently Letters Patent of Richard II consolidated the earlier arrangement into a communality charged with electing two wardens to oversee the administration of the bridge through a trust in 1399. Funds received enabled the trust to maintain and eventually replace the bridge in 1856 and add two further bridges in 1970. Today the restored chapel forms part of the offices of the Trust known as the Bridge Chamber on Rochester Esplanade (Fig 1).

The practice of constructing bridge chapels in Britain and beyond during the medieval period is the subject of a major research project undertaken by David Harrison, Peter McKeague and Bruce Watson with the Rochester Bridge Trust sponsoring the publication (see below for details).



Figure 1. The façade of the Rochester Bridge chapel

What are bridge chapels?

A bridge chapel is defined as a place of worship situated at the end of or built onto the structure of the bridge. Ideally, the relationship between the chapel and the bridge it served should be documented to prove that there was a link between these adjoining structures, but some sites possess no such documentation. Most of the best-known surviving examples of bridge chapels - St Bénézet's Bridge, Avignon (France) see below, St Ives (Cambridgeshire) (Fig 2) or Wakefield (West Yorkshire) see below, all possess chapels situated on an enlarged bridge pier. These well-known examples have affected the popular perception of bridge chapels. Many bridge chapels were located either at one end of a bridge or situated a short distance away. As well as Rochester, remains of chapels by the bridge end may be found at Cromford (Derbyshire) and Morpeth (Northumberland) (Fig 3).



Figure 2. The restored chapel on Town Bridge, St Ives

During the 13th century it became increasingly popular to leave an endowment for a priest or priests to say Mass on a regular basis either for a period or permanently for the benefit of the benefactor to reduce their time in Purgatory (the place in which the souls of those who died in a state of grace are believed to undergo a limited period of suffering to expiate their venial sins before they go to heaven). In common with other religious foundations, some bridge chapels benefited from such chantry endowments. Only the wealthiest and generally urban bridge chapels possessed a full-time priest. Rochester Bridge chapel from 1399 until 1549 generally was staffed by three priests. Other chapels may have held only occasional services and Masses and some examples were maintained by secular hermits. (see below).

Some chapels like those on London Bridge (City of London, see frontispiece) or Ouse Bridge in York were clearly integral features of construction. While the construction of some chapels, such as Catterick Bridge (North Yorkshire), Foss Bridge (York), Old Trent Bridge (Nottingham) and Rochester were linked with either the replacement or rebuilding of existing bridges. Many bridge chapels are poorly documented, so details like their precise location or dedication cannot be determined. While some possible examples which appear to be undocumented have only been identified from visual evidence.

There are numerous examples of indulgences (a remission of time your soul would spend in purgatory being cleansed of sin, so after this process it could pass into heaven) being granted by medieval bishops, archbishops and popes for the fabric of bridges and chapels. One early recipient of this practice was Thrapston Bridge (Northamptonshire). In 1213-14 Bishop of Hugh of Wells granted an indulgence to travellers contributing to the bridge and in 1313 Bishop Dalderby granted an indulgence on behalf of the fabric of the chapel.



Figure 3. The west front of Morpeth chapel

Related Monuments

Crosses

At a number of bridges, crosses are documented. These may once have been very common features on bridges, but little evidence has survived. Presumably, they were places where donations could be offered or prayers said. Plaques served as a public reminder of the generosity of donors and asked that travellers remember them in their prayers. The number of crosses by or at bridges will never be known as they are largely undocumented in medieval sources. Almost all the examples of English bridge crosses were destroyed during the Reformation and the succeeding centuries. Maisemore Bridge

(Gloucestershire), formerly possessed a cross and an inscription. In 1956 a copy of the vanished inscription and a replacement cross was erected on the bridge approach (Fig 4).



Figure 4. The replacement cross and inscription at the end of Maisemore Bridge

Hospitals and Monasteries

Hospitals, leprosaria (Leper hospitals) and monastic houses were an important aspect of medieval society found in urban, suburban and rural locations. Some were situated along bridge approach roads, where they could collect alms from wayfarers and offer shelter to travellers. Documentary evidence confirms that some of these institutions were responsible for the maintain of the adjacent bridge, such as the Hospital of St Mary at Strood (Kent), which was founded in 1192-93, by 1277 the hospital was running St Mary's chapel located at the north-western end of Rochester Bridge. Another example of this practice was St Bartholomew's Hospital at Westgate Bridge in Gloucester. Harnham Hospital. Salisbury (Wiltshire), founded by Bishop Bingham of Salisbury before 1227, initially also maintained the adjoining bridge

across the River Avon and St John's Chapel. The bishop originally intended that the chaplains of St John's would conduct Masses for the benefit of travellers in the chapel with offerings collected paying for the bridge maintenance. In 1397 the endowment of a chantry based in the new chapel at one end of Cross Bridge. Beverley (East Yorkshire) was also linked with establishment of a nearby new hospital for 'twelve poor persons' (*Calendar Patent Rolls 1396-99*, 162). Such well documented cases are rare.

Documentary evidence implies that the small chapel at Duxford (Cambridgeshire) standing on the low causeway beyond Whittlesford Bridge, is the last remnant of the hospital of St John the Baptist (founded c.1200, dissolved c.1337) (Fig 5). However, all too often the relationship between the religious institution and the adjacent bridge cannot be proven by documentary evidence



Figure 5. Duxford Chapel

Fords, ferries and lighthouses

A number of medieval fords and ferries also possessed chapels for travellers to offer prayer before or on completion of a safe journey. At Wadebridge (Cornwall) before the bridge was constructed during the 15th century there were chapels at either end of the ford across the River Camel. The building of lighthouses to assist navigation was also seen pious charitable work. The 13th-century lighthouse known as the Tower of Hook, located at the eastern entrance to Waterford Harbour in Ireland is still functioning and it is believed to be one of the oldest working lighthouses in the world. In 1566 Aberdeen town council in Scotland decided for the safety of shipping to

convert the eastern end of St Ninian's Chapel into a lighthouse.

Bridge Hermits

Medieval hermits are often defined as male recluses, who withdrew from society and sought a solitary existence. However, some pious laymen with a religious vocation, but whose calling did not fit with any of the monastic orders or priesthood also described themselves as hermits, but they did not live as recluses. Sometimes, these pious individuals supported themselves by undertaking social duties including maintaining roads and bridges, the sort of philanthropic works now undertaken by public bodies. Occasionally, ordained priests became bridge hermits, but most of these individuals apparently were not members of any religious order. For instance, in 1366 the hermit of Stockport Bridge (Cheshire) was a priest, who also ran the bridge chapel. Some medieval bridges possessed hermitage chapels and some hermits served as bridge-keepers (collecting alms, tolls, raising funds etc.).

There was a hermitage chapel at Dartford Bridge (Kent) by 1415-16. Today a small stained glass window (added 1905) in north-west corner Holy Trinity parish church in Dartford, commemorates the hermits of Dartford, it is known as 'the hermit's window' (Fig 6).

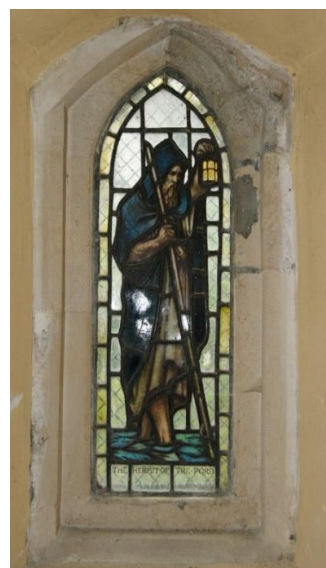


Figure 6. The 'hermit's window' in Holy Trinity Church, Dartford

On 29 October 1423, when the new hermit (and bridge warden) of Maidenhead Bridge (Berkshire), Richard Ludlow was inducted to the hermitage of Maidenhead Bridge by local a priest. This induction provided Richard with detailed guidance, which explained that in addition to his spiritual commitments, he was spend everything except bare necessities on maintaining the bridge and local roads. The hermit at St Mary's Bridge chapel, Derby (Fig 7), collected alms and tolls.

At the southern end of the Clopton Bridge, Stratford-upon-Avon (Warwickshire) there was both a chapel and a hermitage. But there are many more references to hermits soliciting alms for and maintaining bridges than there are hermitages. Not all hermits were godly men, in 1354 the hermit of Corbridge Bridge (Northumberland) was pardoned for the theft of a pig.



Figure 7. St Mary's Bridge chapel, Derby (photograph kindly provided by Peter Hodgson)

When were the first bridge chapels built?

From the mid-2nd millennium BC onward across Britain and Europe there is evidence of prehistoric ritual deposition or votive offerings in watery locations associated with river crossings. The excavation of an Iron Age causeway by the River Witham at Fiskerton (Lincolnshire) revealed a variety of domestic and military objects including four swords, two of which were in their scabbards and three socketed iron spear heads.

It is probable that the Roman bridges over the Tyne at Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the Thames at London both possessed shrines. Roman objects recovered from vicinity of old London Bridge during dredging carried out between 1834 and 1841 include many coins and a bronze head of the Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-38) (Fig 8), suggesting that there was a statue of him on the bridge. Many Roman bridges processed inscriptions or monuments commemorating their builders, often emperors. At Alcántara over the Tagus in Spain, an arch placed on the bridge commemorates the Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117). A small temple placed at one end of the bridge commemorating the bridge engineer Caius Julius Lacer was later converted into a chapel dedicated to St Julian.

In about AD 560 a historian known Procopius of Caesarea wrote a sycophantic account of the numerous construction projects undertaken by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (AD 527-65), these including building various churches (showing his piety) and bridges. In one instance a church was constructed at one end of a bridge supposedly for travellers to take 'refuge' in during storms. According to the mostly legendary life of St Swithun (died AD 862), Bishop of Winchester (Hamps), one day while St Swithun was supervising the construction of 'City Bridge' across the River Itchen, a poor woman carrying eggs to sell at the market was jostled by the workmen and all her eggs were broken. St Swithun seeing her distress promptly performed a miracle and repaired all the broken eggs. Even though this account was compiled almost 150 years after St Swithun's death, it shows that by the early 11th century it was believed that Anglo-Saxon bishops took an active interest in the construction of bridges.

During 1031-37 Eludes II, Count of Blois in France announced he would construct a bridge across the Loire at Tours in France, for the benefit of his soul. At Avignon in France, St Bénézet (died *circa* 1184), during the 1170s is credited with organising the construction of a bridge across the River Rhone for which he was

canonized. He was buried within the chapel erected on his bridge (Fig 9).

Early examples of English bridge chapels include Ouse Bridge (York) built around 1170-80; and in 1196 the post of 'chaplain to Exe Bridge' was documented implying the existence of a bridge chapel. London Bridge which was completed by 1209 had a chapel as an integral part of its design (see frontispiece).

The practice of building bridge chapels and shrines continued across Britain until the Reformation. One of the latest examples of bridge chapel construction was the example the built at Dee Bridge, Aberdeen (Scotland), this bridge was completed by Bishop Dunbar in 1527.

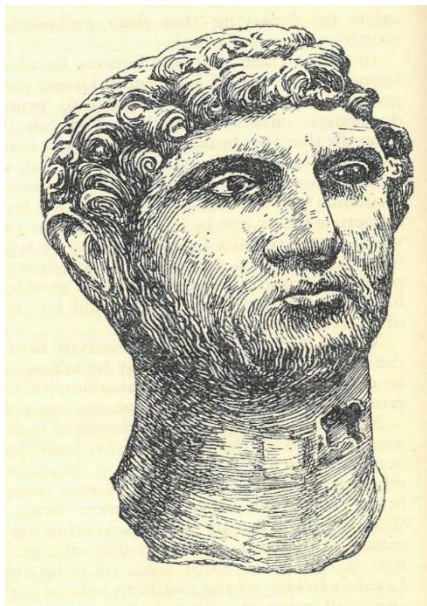


Figure 8. The head of a colossal bronze statue (height 41cm) of the Emperor Hadrian (born AD 76, reigned 117-38) aged about 30, some 15 years before his visit to Britannia in AD 122. It was recovered during dredging of the Thames in 1834 close to the third arch of old London Bridge. It may represent an ex-situ portion of a statue originally located on the Roman bridge (source Home, G, 1948 Roman London AD 43-457, London, 86)

How numerous were bridge chapels and related monuments and institutions?

While Harrison (2004, *The Bridges of Medieval England: transport and society 400-800*) estimated that there were about 100 medieval bridge chapels in England, until now, there has been no comprehensive study of bridge chapels, hospitals and other religious structures associated with bridges in Britain. Antiquarian studies focussed on the few well known extant examples built on bridge piers such as at Rotherham (South Yorkshire), St Ives and Wakefield. Remains of chapels on Elvet Bridge, Durham and St Mary's Bridge chapel, Derby built over arches on bridges tended to be overlooked as were those located at the end of bridges including Morpeth and Rochester.

Many vanished bridge chapels are known from medieval documentary sources, and antiquarian accounts, particularly John Leland's survey in the mid-16th century, but no comprehensive gazetteer has been produced to date. Our project set out to compile a list of these forgotten buildings from a range of sources including printed Chancery Records (in particular, the Patent Rolls), local authority Historic Environment Records, the digital resources of the Archaeology Data Service and British History Online. To date we have identified over 250 sites of bridge chapels and related monuments (including ferry and ford chapels, plus lighthouse and beacon chapels) across Britain and Ireland as well as numerous examples from across Europe. The British and Irish gazetteers entries include a comprehensive history of each structure and a bibliography including key published and online sources of data.

Figure 9. The two storey chapel on Avignon Bridge, the lower one is dedicated to St Bénézet and upper one to St Nicholas



In 2021 we will publish a volume of synthesis and discussion devoted to British bridge chapels to supplement the online site gazetteers. This will be the first major publication devoted to the topic of bridge chapels of medieval and will place these monuments in their international context.

What happened to all these English bridge chapels and related monuments?

The majority of English bridge chapels were closed and their funds confiscated during the Reformation particularly as a result of the Chantries Act of 1547. Quite a number of bridge chapels survived the Reformation and acquired other functions. At Morpeth, by the mid-16th century part of the bridge chapel was occupied by the town's grammar school and the rest of it as served a chapel of ease for the town, a role it retained until 1846. Some chapels passed into civic ownership during the Reformation and subsequently served a charitable function. At Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk) the former chapel became almshouses and that at St Mary's, Derby served initially as a workshop to employ the poor. Other examples ended up as prisons. For instance, the chapel on Town Bridge, Bradford on Avon (Wiltshire) was apparently rebuilt as a lockup during the early 18th century. St Edmund's on Exe Bridge, which had once been a chapel, became a parish church in the Middle Ages and remained in use until the 1950s.

Stanford Bridge at Stanford on Teme (Worcestershire) formerly possessed an inscribed brass plaque bearing the wording: 'Pray for Humfrey Pakynton efq. born in

Stanford, which payde for the workmanfhepe, and making of this brygg, the which was rered and made the first day of May, in the first yere of the rayne of kyng Edwarde the VIth [1547-48]'. Placing plaques on bridges asking people to pray for the soul of the builder or sponsor before the Reformation was not unusual, but this late date is unusual as is also the fact the word 'soul' is omitted from the text reflecting the impact of the Reformation on doctrine. Most crosses shrines and plaques were probably removed from bridges the English Reformation or in the succeeding centuries. Charitable bequests to bridges continued after the Reformation, but for centuries the surviving bridge chapels ceased to have a religious function.

In countries such as Roman Catholic France and Spain as well as orthodox Russia where the protestant Reformation did not take root the practice of erecting religious statues and shrines on bridge carried on. One famous example of this practice is the Charles Bridge (completed during the 15th century) in Prague, (Czech Republic), which during the 17th and 18th was decorated with numerous statues of saints and shrines (Fig 10), including St John of Nepomuk, who was tied to a wheel at drowned in the River Vltava during 1393 on the orders of the local king.

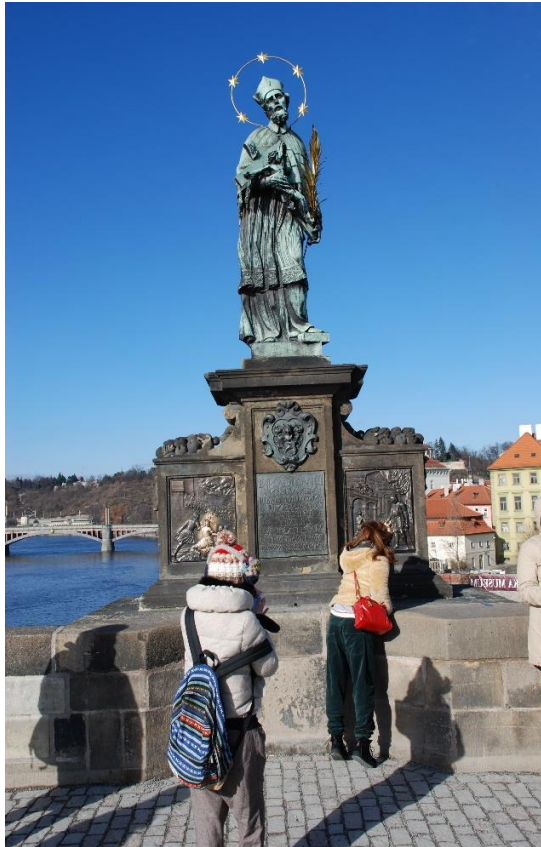


Figure 10. Statue of St John of Nepomuk on King Charles Bridge in Prague

During the later 18th and 19th centuries economic expansion and growth of road traffic in England led to the demolition of bridge chapels. The replacement of many medieval bridges (which mostly had a width of 9 to 12 feet or 2.7-3.6m, and the widest urban bridges 15 feet or 4.5 m) with new dual-roadway bridges. During this rebuilding many chapels and other structures situated on bridges or at the end of bridges were demolished. For instance, at Bedford, the former chapel was probably located within one of the two gatehouses on the bridge, both of which were demolished in 1765 to allow the traffic to flow more quickly and then about 40 years later the medieval bridge was replaced. When medieval London Bridge was demolished in 1832, the undercroft of its bridge chapel was discovered beneath the roadway (Fig 11).

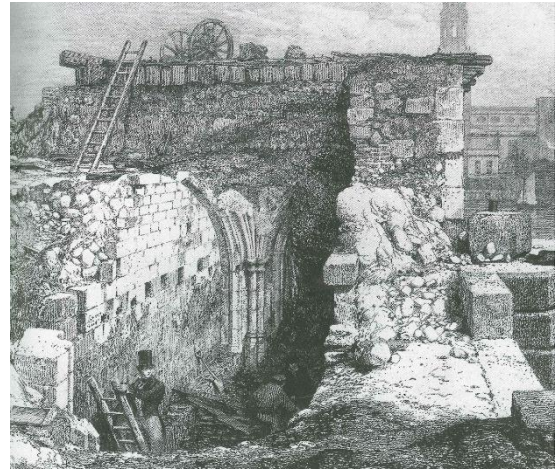


Figure 11. The undercroft or cellar storey of the medieval chapel uncovered in 1832 during the demolition of Old London Bridge

Antiquarian interest in English bridge chapels began with Norrison Scatcherd, who in 1828 published a treatise on ancient bridge chapels, largely devoted to Wakefield bridge chapel in an attempt to promote its restoration. By the 1840s there was growing public pressure for the restoration of Wakefield chapel (Fig 12), which was described as decayed and desecrated. The chapel was rebuilt (rather than restored) by Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1847 and reopened an Anglican parish church before becoming a chapel of ease. Subsequently a few other English bridge chapels including St Mary's Bridge, Derby (Fig 13) and St Mary's Rotherham (South Yorkshire) have been restored as places of worship. Other bridge chapels at Duxford, St Ives, Morpeth and Rochester have been restored as historic monuments rather than places of worship.



Figure 12. Wakefield Bridge chapel



Figure 13. The interior of the chapel at St Mary's Bridge Derby (photograph kindly provided by Peter Hodgson)