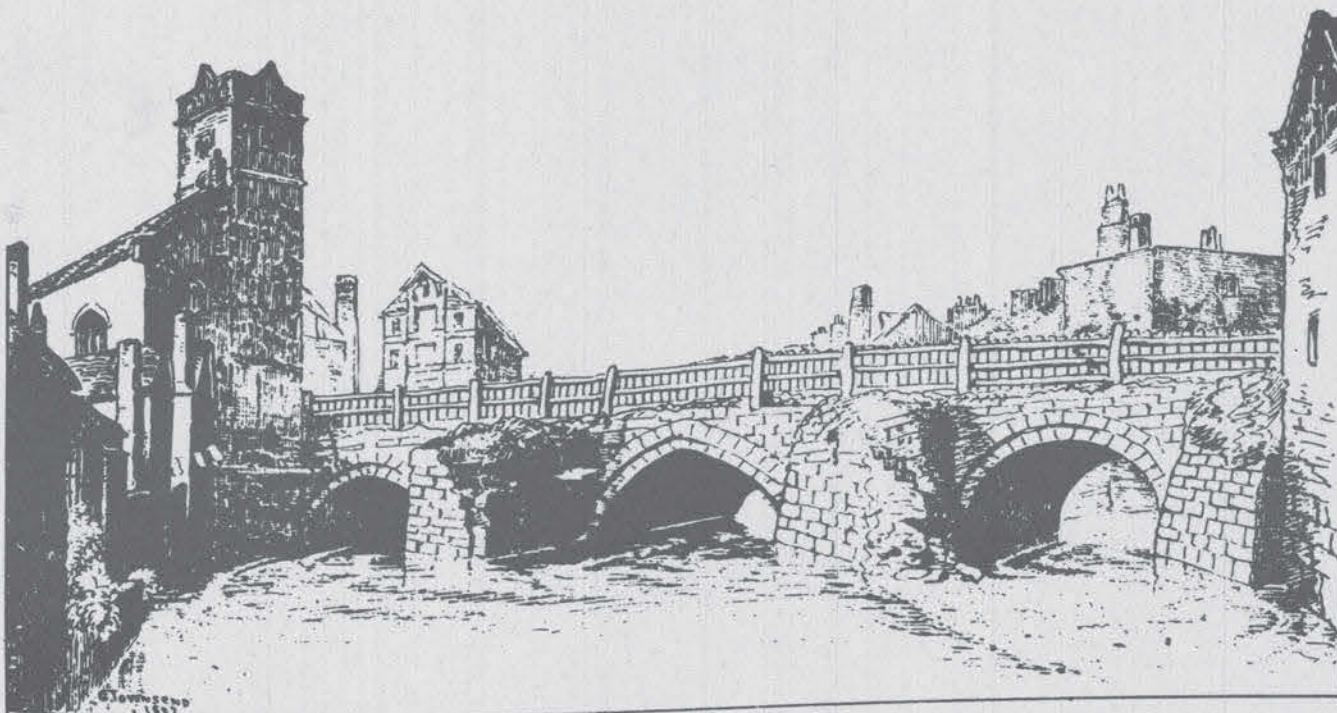


THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BRIDGE

By the mid eighteenth century the narrow medieval bridge had become very congested due to the increased volume of traffic. In 1770 a Mr Joseph Dixon was engaged to prepare plans for a new bridge, of three arches only, in a direct line from Fore Street to Cowick Street. The scheme necessitated breaching the city wall at the bottom of Fore Street, as well as the removal of Allhallows church (see Hogenburg's map) and a total of twelve houses. The foundation stone of the bridge was laid by the mayor, John Floud, in October 1770. Work was well advanced when, on Monday, 18th January, 1775, a tremendous inundation "entirely destroyed the foundation and carried away all the arches of the new bridge, and greatly terrified the neighbouring inhabitants lest it should damage the old bridge". Despite this setback, the bridge was completed and open to traffic by 1778. New Bridge Street gave access to the bridge along a raised embankment, pierced by arches over Frog Street and the Higher and Lower mill-leats. A remnant of the original balustrade can be seen over the arch for the Lower Leat.

HOUSES ON THE BRIDGE

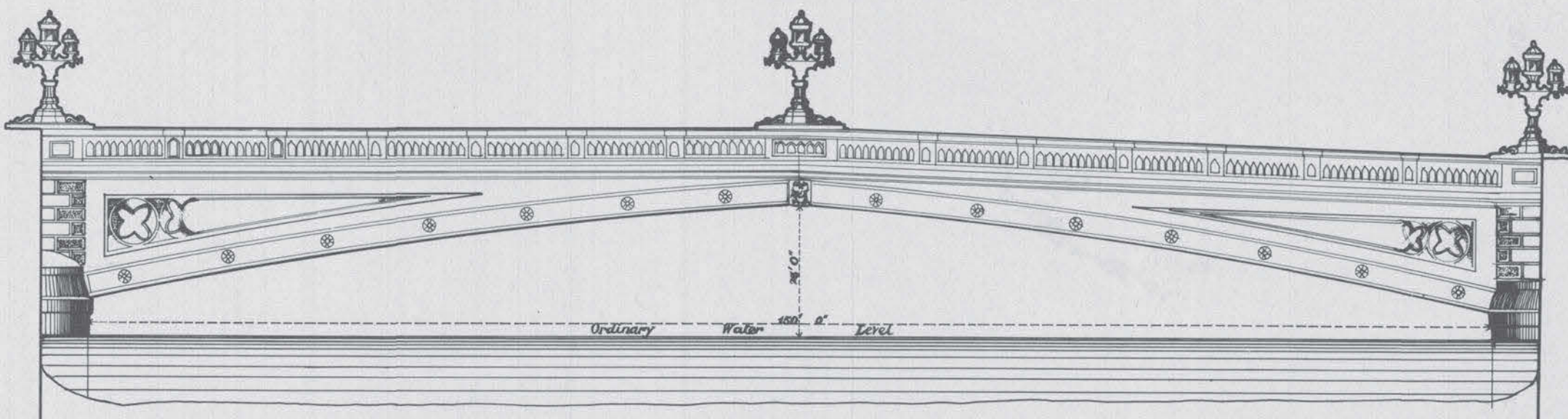
The depiction of houses on the Exe Bridge Seal suggests their presence from the first; a pier which supported a house at the west end of the church may date to this earliest period. More impressive is the rear wall of the house on the eastern side of the church. This contained an arch (now partially reconstructed) which allowed water to flow through beneath the floor. Most of the houses belonged to the Exe Bridge Trust, set up originally by Walter Gervaise. The western half of the bridge was demolished in 1778, but the properties around St Edmund's represented a valuable source of income and were therefore retained. They eventually became very dilapidated and were removed by stages in the 19th century. The Townsend drawing on the right shows the houses next to the church being demolished. On the corner of St Edmund's Street and Frog Street is the 'house that moved' in its original position. Dating probably to the sixteenth century, it is now situated at 24 West Street, having been moved there when the Western Way was put through in 1962.



EXE ISLAND AND THE LEATS

The history of Bonhay, Exe Island and Shilhay really began with the reclamation of the land from swamp and mudbanks in the twelfth century. The Higher Leat certainly existed by the twelfth century and may well date back to late Anglo-Saxon times. It runs for almost half a mile beneath the city walls from Head Weir to the Quay. Until the sixteenth century, Exe Island was outside the jurisdiction of the City, being a separate manor held by the earls of Devon. Up to quite recent times it was the principal industrial suburb of Exeter, possessing an abundant supply of water to power the corn and fulling mills. Sometime between 1180 and 1190, Robert de Courtenay granted to Nicholas Gervaise "all his water which Thomas the fuller holds of him outside the west gate of Exeter, which is between his corn mills and Crickenpette, so that the said Nicholas and his heirs may build a mill on the said water towards Crickenpette as shall appear best and most commodius to them". Evidence for other medieval industries - tanning and the working of horn, bone and bronze - came to light in the recent excavations. However, the cloth-finishing industry was always pre-eminent; in the 16th century the City owned 40 mills near the river, nearly all of them employed in fulling, and large areas were given over to cloth-drying racks (see Hogenburg's map). But during the eighteenth century the industry gradually declined and by 1875 we find the area occupied by iron foundries, corn-mills and breweries.

Drawing of the bridge in 1887 by G. Townsend. The houses are all demolished; on the right is the City Brewery, built in 1860, forming the western side of the Lower Leat.



BRIDGE OF 1905

The 19th century bridge stood for 125 years, but by early this century the volume of traffic had so increased that plans were put in hand to build a new and wider structure on the same line. A temporary wooden bridge was put up in 1903, and the Georgian bridge dismantled the same year. The new bridge, a single-span steel structure 150' long and 50' wide, was declared open by the mayor, Mr E. C. Perry, on 29th March 1905. It cost about £25,000 and was considered at the time to be something of an engineering novelty: the arch describing part of a parabola instead of the usual ellipse. Two opposed sets of girders were hinged together at the middle of the bridge, expansion and contraction of the metal being accommodated by the rise and fall of the centre.