

Arch five

THE BRIDGE

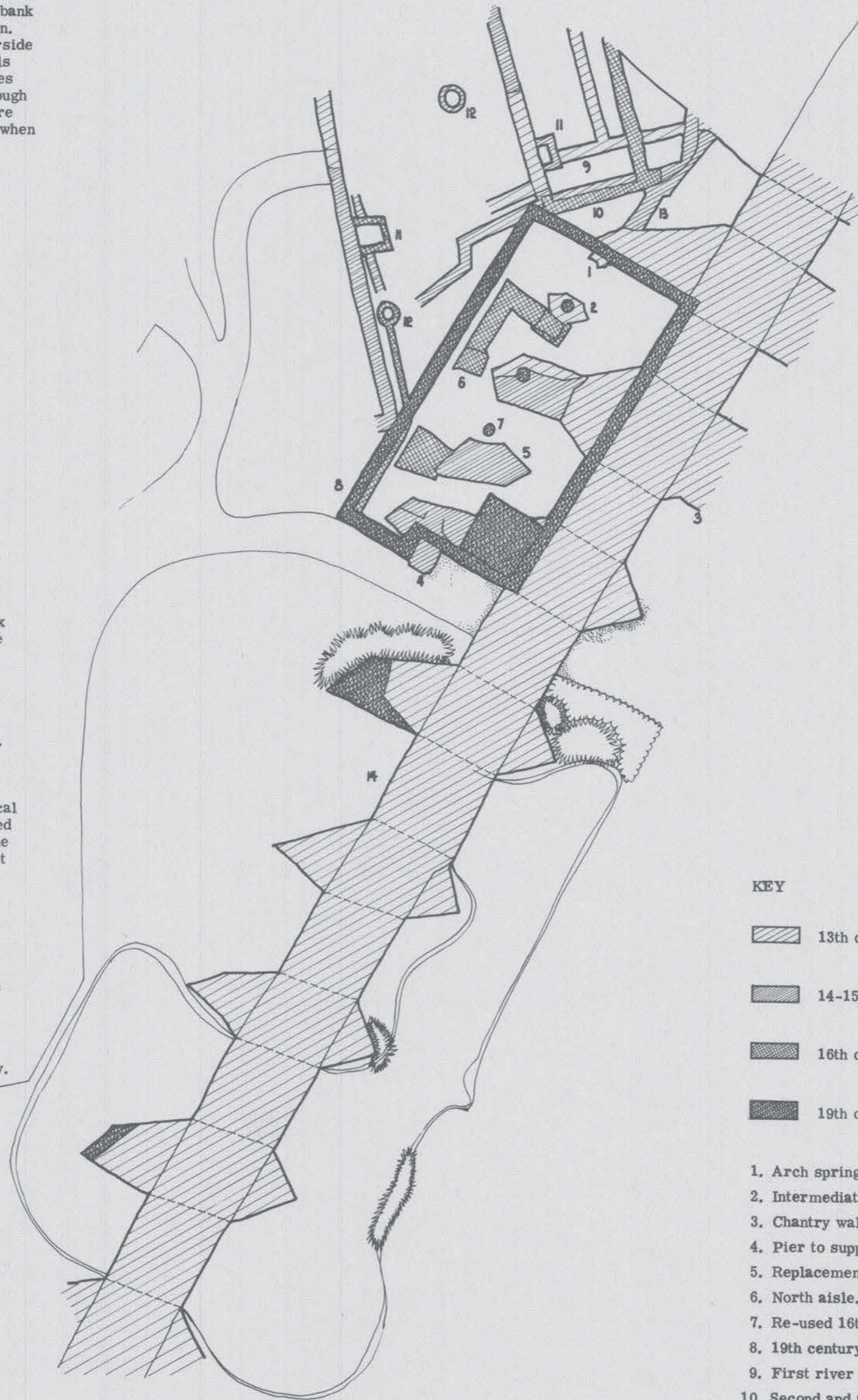
The majority of the arches are of simple Norman round-headed type. When the bridge was built, the pointed Gothic arch was just coming into use. It is difficult to be certain whether the original design included pointed arches, as subsequent repairs have obscured the evidence. We know that on a number of occasions sections of the bridge were destroyed by floods - so it is possible the pointed arches were introduced later. In side view the bridge was ridge-backed, the highest point being over the middle arch. The surface of the carriageway at arch 9 is about 6 m (20 ft) above the river bed, compared with 3.5 m (11.5 ft) at the east abutment. The paving is nearly all modern, but a small area of the original surface is preserved about half way along the bridge on the north side. The predominant building stone is a vesicular volcanic rock known locally as 'trap'. This was obtained from several quarries in the medieval period - notably at Ide and Thorverton - and it is not possible to pin down a precise source. Small amounts of Triassic sandstone occur (eg. in the base of the cutwater at the east end of the church) and Cretaceous limestone from East Devon is used in some of the arches. The coarse red breccia known as Heavitree stone came into general use during the fifteenth century.

KEY

- a. Trap stone
- b. Cretaceous limestone
- c. Heavitree stone
- d. waterspout
- e. chamfered plinth

FROG STREET

In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries the sand banks next to the river were used as a sand quarry and dumping ground for domestic rubbish. By 1250 there were timber houses on Frog Street, their back yards extending to the water's edge. A little later the first stone houses were erected, some of whose foundations can be seen on the site today. A stone revetment wall along part of the river bank gave a measure of protection against floods and erosion. By successive stages over the next 300 years the riverside properties were gradually extended and new river-walls built as land was reclaimed from the river. The houses were rebuilt a number of times over the centuries, though the original thirteenth century property boundaries were maintained throughout. They were finally swept away when a new brewery was built on the site.



KEY

- 13th century
- 14-15th century
- 16th century
- 19th century

- 1. Arch springing.
- 2. Intermediate pier.
- 3. Chantry wall.
- 4. Pier to support house on bridge.
- 5. Replacement intermediate pier.
- 6. North aisle.
- 7. Re-used 16th century column.
- 8. 19th century church wall.
- 9. First river wall.
- 10. Second and third river walls.
- 11. Garderobe pit.
- 12. Well.
- 13. Arch in rear wall of house on bridge.
- 14. Arch 5 (shown above).

FOOTNOTE

When the completely new bridge and traffic system was introduced in the 1960's, John Brierley, the City Engineer and Surveyor, pointed out that the changed positions of roads would enable a substantial part of the old stone bridge to be revealed once again. From then on, almost all committees and departments of the Council were involved in bringing a very complex task to its fruition. The Development Committee made funds available and the Department of the Environment (Ancient Monuments Directorate), who were involved from the outset, agreed to grant-aid the scheme. Consultant architects, the Gundry-Dyer Partnership, were appointed and the firm of Dart and Francis accomplished the highly skilled stonemasonry involved. The whole scheme demanded close cooperation from the Council's officers, particularly in the departments of Technical Services, Planning and Museums; the latter was especially involved through the Archaeological Field Unit, which excavated around the bridge and added much new information about St Edmund's church and the adjacent waterfront houses. Another interesting aspect was the use of a Manpower Services Commission Job Creation Project to undertake the first phase of landscaping around the bridge. The landscaping as a whole was designed by the landscape architect and supervised and completed by the Parks Department.

What now stands revealed is a fine span of eight and a half arches, probably half of the original bridge, much of it dating to the early 13th century. As such it is probably the earliest surviving stone bridge of such magnitude in the country and represents the most important project to restore an ancient monument in Exeter undertaken since the early years of this century.

Plan of existing remains

MODERN BRIDGES

Exe Bridge North, downstream of the 1905 bridge, opened in 1956 having cost an estimated £215,000 to build. In 1972 the 1905 bridge was superseded by Exe Bridge South - probably the seventh bridge in the line.