

LONDON BRIDGE: A REASONABLE DOUBT?

by
David Hill

In any discussion of late Saxon London the earliest documentary source for the existence of London Bridge must appear. Modern opinion is summarised by Biddle 'The earliest written evidence for a post-Roman bridge at London dates from between 963 and 984' (Biddle 1973, 23).¹

The relevant portion of the charter is a short aside in a longer document which recounts an exchange between Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester and Wulfstan Ucca, by whom land at Washington, Sussex, was exchanged for an estate at Yaxley, Huntingdonshire, given to Thorney, and an estate at Ailsworth, Northamptonshire, given to Peterborough. The exchange can be dated 963–975 and is found in a later cartulary of Peterborough² (Sawyer No. 1377).

The entry referring to London Bridge has been translated:

Then the bishop gave the land at Yaxley to Thorney and that at Ailsworth to Peterborough. And a widow and her son had previously forfeited the land at Ailsworth because they drove iron (?) pins into Wulfstan's father, Ælfsige. And it was detected and the murderous instrument dragged from her chamber; and the woman was seized, and drowned at London Bridge, *adrencie hi aet Lundene brige*, and her son escaped and became an outlaw. And the land came into the king's possession, and the king gave it to Ælfsige, and his son Wulfstan gave it to Bishop Æthelwold.³ (Whitelock, 1955, 519.)

Can we take the matter further? Has the reference any other significance apart from the existence of London Bridge in a period immediately before 948 (the date at which Ælfsige received Ailsworth, Sawyer No. 533).⁴ It may indeed have more. The text tells us that the widow was seized after evidence of witchcraft had been found in her chamber. There can be little doubt that this bower was at Ailsworth in Northamptonshire and it is here that the widow was seized. It seems strange then to the point of inveracity that a woman taken for witchcraft in northern Northamptonshire should be dragged the eighty-two miles to London to be drowned. Witchcraft usually engenders an hysterical reaction and it would seem unlikely that the widow's execution was not at the hands of her rustic neighbours. Why was she taken to London? It could not be that there was some sort of supreme court of appeal in London, although there is a possibility that King Eadred was at London at the time and the widow was taken to him for judgement. In a period when the Danelaw was still responsible for much of its own law, for a case which does not appear to be regalian and in a case which one would expect the church to be active we are free to discount this.

Why then London Bridge, *Lundene brige*? Many Anglo-Saxon Charters refer to roads, streets and ways by names which indicate their destinations, generally these destinations being only defined as *Port*, or *Wic* thus giving rise to *Portweg* and *Wicweg*. More infrequent are combinations such as *ceaster herpad*, apparently the road leading

from Enford, Hampshire, to the ceaster, Winchester⁵ (Sawyer No. 427). In Sawyer⁶ No. 692 the bounds for Evesty on the Cam brook in Somerset tell us of *pone bæp herpad*, the Bath army path, and the bounds of Damerham, Hampshire, have a *wilteneweie*, Wilton Way⁷ (Sawyer No. 513), while the bounds of the charter⁸ (Sawyer No. 695), dated 961, for Easton near Winchester has a *lunden Weg*, a 'London Way'. The many bridges in Charter bounds have descriptive names as well; 'Wood', 'Black', 'Plank', 'Stone', 'Woodford Bridge', 'Ælflæd's Bridge' and 'Ealmund's Bridge'. To this day roads, streets, lanes and bridges are to be found in many of the towns and villages named after London, the great terminus to which they lead.

Is it not probable then that the widow was dragged from her bower at Ailsworth not the eighty-two miles to London Bridge, but to the River Nene, which forms part of the bounds of the estate at Ailsworth, or to a place of some importance as a law centre at the period? For example the borough of Stamford was a centre of major importance at this period, with judicial functions. It is eight miles from Ailsworth and stands astride the medieval route from the North to London, and it is probable that Edward the Elder in his campaign of 918 when he constructed a southern, twin, fortification on the south side of Stamford, built a bridge to join them, and here, on the road to London, the river Welland is a major river and quite deep enough in its pools and deeps to provide a miserable end for the widow of Ailsworth. Four miles to the east of Ailsworth there stands another, less likely, candidate, Peterborough on the river Nene, crossed now by the Fitzwilliam Bridge which leads onto 'London Road'.

NOTES

¹ M. Biddle, D. Hudson and C. Heighway, *The Future of London's Past*, 1973, p. 23.

² P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, an annotated list and Bibliography, 1968, No. 1377

³ D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, 1955, p. 519.

⁴ P. H. Sawyer, op. cit. No. 533.

⁵ *Ibid.* No. 427.

⁶ *Ibid.* No. 692.

⁷ *Ibid.* No. 513.

⁸ *Ibid.* No. 695.