

# THE FIRST HAMPTON COURT BRIDGE

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## INTRODUCTION

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service during extension of the Mitre Hotel, Hampton Court, in 1992. Work took place just to the west (upstream) of the present bridge, which was opened in 1933 (TQ 1535 6856). This included the area of the preceding mid Victorian bridge abutment and toll house, both of which remained in situ (Fig 1, A & B).*

## BACKGROUND

There have been four bridges between Hampton Court and East Molesey, the first three were privately built and funded by tolls until 1876 (Baker 1961). The first bridge, basically of timber

with seven arches supported on piles, was opened in 1753 and the second, also of timber with eleven arches,<sup>1</sup> by 1770; the latter was replaced by a five arch cast-iron structure in 1865. These bridges were built on more or less the same site, some 15m to 30m to the west of the present bridge, and all appear in contemporary illustrations (Gascoigne & Ditchburn 1981, cat. 620–641).

## DISCUSSION

The watching brief revealed a substantial part of the masonry abutment of the first bridge (Fig 2). This was retained with modifications for the second bridge and finally encased, after removal of the upper level of masonry, within the Victorian reconstruction. Upstream of the abutment and behind the present waterfront there were two phases of brick-built river wall, constructed *c.*1670 and 1850. The earlier and more substantial of these may well be contemporary with the Mitre Hotel, which lay about 6m to the north and for which the earliest known reference is 1676 (Manor Court Rolls, PRO. LR3/40/5 Lib VI). The wall survived to a maximum height of 2.50m. It was up to 0.80m thick and was traced upstream for over 30m. To the east there was a landward return, presumably giving way to the sloping foreshore from which the ferry operated until 1753. It appears that in the early 17th century this point marked the approximate limit of the tidal reach (VCH 1967, 452), although by 1752 the Articles of Agreement for construction of the Bridge refer to High and Low Water (SRO 2200/1/2/2).

The first bridge abutment was solidly constructed of brick with quoins of oolitic limestone

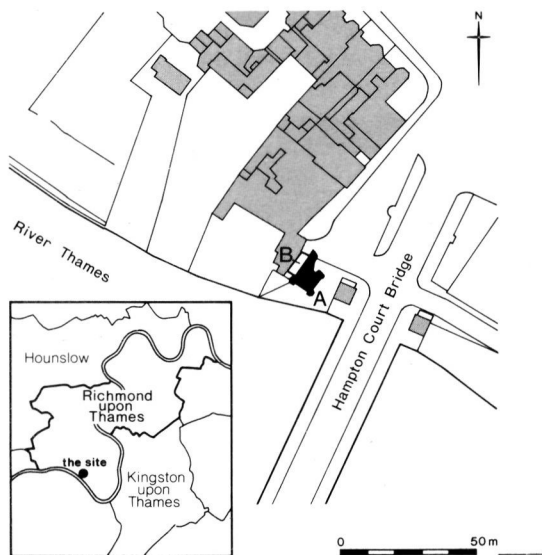


Fig 1. Site location

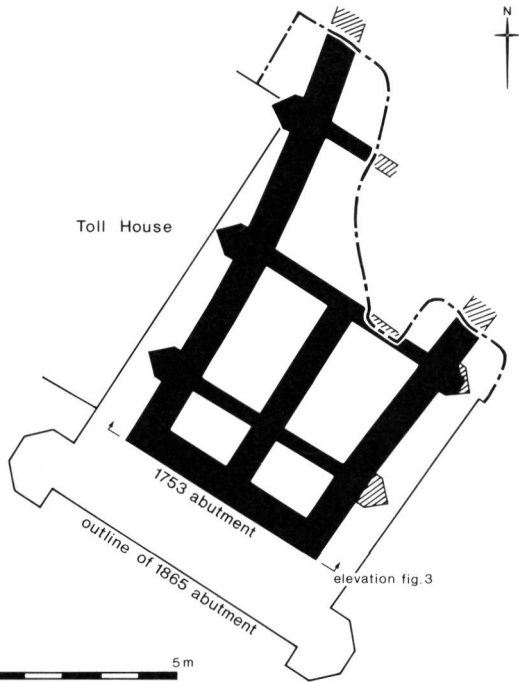


Fig 2. Plan of first bridge abutment

(?Portland stone) at the riverward corners, as prescribed within the Articles of Agreement. There were also two blocks of stone set within the upper part of the southern wall (Fig 3). The external walls were  $\approx 0.70\text{m}$  to  $1\text{m}$  thick, increasing to the base and with a double batter on the riverward face. The exposed brickwork appeared generally to be of Flemish bond, but

English on the upstream buttresses. The full abutment is shown in a contemporary illustration (Fig 4) and in preliminary form within the revised Articles of Agreement of February 1753 (SRO 2200/1/2/6), although the latter varies in detail from the actual structure. In conjunction with the archaeological record this source material enables a reliable estimate of the overall dimensions to be made: the completed abutment would have been some  $14.5\text{m}$  in length and about  $6\text{m}$  to  $10\text{m}$  in width, and up to  $6.25\text{m}$  high at its riverward end. Originally the structure was not infilled, but supported the roadway on a series of internal brick walls  $0.35\text{m}$  to  $0.74\text{m}$  thick; externally these were marked by brick buttresses on the up and downstream faces. The central and thicker north-south wall was only present within the southern and narrower part of the abutment, suggesting that its primary purpose was to reinforce the riverward face against stresses from the adjacent arch.

Much of the abutment survived to a fairly uniform height ( $\approx +8\text{m OD}$ ), which may well correspond to the level at which the first arch was sprung; this was also suggested by one extant block of Portland stone overlying brickwork immediately to the north of the landward buttress on the downstream face (presumably part of the horizontal coping shown in Fig 4). The base of the abutment was not exposed, although the west face elevation in the revised Articles of Agreement suggests a further  $1.50\text{m}$  of masonry below the recorded level of the riverward face. Contemporary sources (including the 1753 elevation, Fig

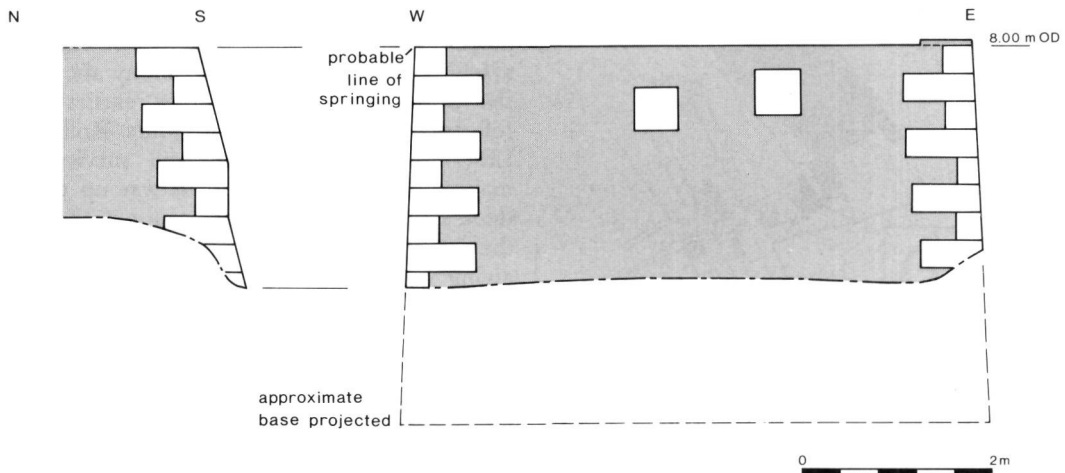


Fig 3. Elevation of riverward (south) face of the abutment



Fig 4. Downstream face of the first bridge, 1753 (*A Perspective view of Hampton Court Bridge ... Open'd Decr 13<sup>th</sup> 1753.* Reproduced by permission of the Guildhall Library)

4 and a written report<sup>2</sup>) also suggest that the lowest level of construction was of stone.

The first bridge appears to have been poorly constructed (Ireland 1792, II, 81) and soon fell into decay,<sup>3</sup> being replaced about 1767.<sup>4</sup> The new bridge reused the previous abutment (probably also at the East Molesey end), although contemporary illustrations give no clear indication of this. The abutment was also infilled, mainly with clean sandy gravel, and the upper part of the internal walls removed. This probably took place during reconstruction, with the further addition of a toll house on the upstream side. The latter is illustrated as early as 1795 (Gascoigne & Ditchburn 1981, cat.629), and is shown with a timber canopy over the road between 1790<sup>5</sup> and 1834 (Fearnside 1834, opp.66). A surviving brick wallbase suggests that the toll house was built out over the infilled abutment, on a line with the bridge itself and by up to 2m in the area of the landward buttress.

There seems to have been little further change until the 1860s, although the toll house canopy had disappeared by 1850 (Baker 1961, plate Vb). This period may also have witnessed the loss of

the outer buttress on the downstream face (at least at its upper level) and subsequent brick refacing; contemporary illustrations appear to show a small hut at this point (*ibid*; Gascoigne & Ditchburn 1981, cat.634).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some accounts give ten arches, possibly as a result of blocking by c.1790 on the upstream side of the northernmost arch (compare cat.629 & 630, Gascoigne & Ditchburn 1981).

<sup>2</sup> *The London Magazine*, 9 October 1752, reports 'a great concourse of people at Moulsey ... to see the first pile drove for the new bridge, and the first stone laid for the abutment'

<sup>3</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, 16 January 1766, reports that the bridge 'being decayed, is going to be pulled down'.

<sup>4</sup> The date widely given is 1778 (possibly from Brayley 1841, II, 307). However, Ireland gives a date of c.1767 (Ireland 1792, II, 81); the second bridge is also illustrated in Harrison 1775, opp.593 (reproduced in Gascoigne & Ditchburn 1981, cat.629).

<sup>5</sup> T Rowlandson *Hampton Court Bridge and 'The Toy'* 1790.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- PRO Public Record Office
- SRO Surrey Record Office
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