Medieval London Bridge and its role in the defence of the realm

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SUMMARY

London's medieval river frontage was only defended by its bridge, therefore capturing this bridge was the key to capturing the City of London. The strategic importance of the great stone bridge (constructed c.*1176–1209) is demonstrated by the way that it formed part of the city's defences. It included a gatehouse or barbican and a drawbridge, which was lowered from a masonry gatehouse. On four occasions this bridge was attacked by rebel forces, twice it was successfully defended and twice it was not. Only once in 1263 was the bridge defended against Crown forces.*

INTRODUCTION

The strategic importance of bridges has been known for centuries as their possession provides access to territory, while their defence denies this access. The importance of bridges to modern military operations is demonstrated by 'Operation Market Garden', carried out by allied airborne forces in Holland during September 1944. The strategic aim of this operation was to capture a number of bridges spanning the major rivers and canals at the towns of Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem. The allied commanders hoped that the capture of these bridges intact would speed up the advance of their armies (Badsey 1993, 25–27). The Emperor Charlemagne was well aware of the strategic importance of bridges and Chapter Ten of the *Capitulare Aquisgranense* (801–813) lists 'good' boats and bridges amongst his army's supply requirements (Boyer 1976, 21).

The strategic importance of English bridges in the medieval period is first documented as part of the defence measures adopted against the seaborne Viking raiders, who were sailing up navigable rivers. In 924 King Edward constructed a bridge across the River Trent at Nottingham to link to forts, as part of his defences against the Vikings (Swanton 1996, 89). The Franks also built forts to control access to navigable rivers as part of their own defensive measures against the Vikings. King Charles the Bald (843–877) was well aware of the strategic importance of rivers, he built and fortified a number of bridges as part of his kingdom's defences (Boyer 1976, 21). In 862 Charles the Bald built two forts on opposite banks of the River Seine at Pont de L'Arche linked by a bridge (Hassall & Hill 1970, 192–94; Boyer 1976, 21).

ATTACKS ON THE LATE SAXON LONDON BRIDGE

The Scandinavian or Viking raids on the middle Saxon settlement of *Lundenwic* began in 842. In 872 the Vikings overwintered inside the walled Roman city and in 886 King Alfred (871–99) reoccupied London and ordered its refortification to defend the Thames against further Viking raids (Swanton 1996, 72–3, 80–1). In September 994, as part of a series of incursions, London was attacked and burnt down by Viking raiders, and the surrounding area harried (Swanton 1996, 126–9,). It is quite possible that this raid prompted the rebuilding of the bridge and the fortification of the Southwark bridgehead to try and prevent any further incursions. It is documented that when 'London town' was attacked again in 1009 the attacks were repulsed (Swanton 1996, 139). Archaeological and documentary evidence confirm that by *c.*AD 1000 there was a timber bridge spanning the River

Thames (Watson, 1997, 312). According to the Olaf sagas, the bridge was successfully attacked in 1014 by King Ethelred's Viking allies (Laing 1964, 124). The Vikings rowed their ships upstream, to the bridge, attached cables to it, then rowed downstream again apparently pulling down parts of the bridge. At this point the disheartened Anglo-Danish defenders surrendered and accepted Ethelred as their king. According to the Olaf sagas the Southwark bridgehead was strongly defended by this date.[1] In 1016 the Southwark bridgehead, and presumably the actual bridge, was defended against the forces of King Cnut who apparently bypassed it by digging a new channel along which ships were hauled westwards through the creeks and marshes of low lying south Southwark (Swanton 1996, 148–9). In 1066 when William Duke of Normandy and his victorious army arrived in Southwark after the Battle of Hastings, they found the southern bridgehead defended against them and, having attacked and failed to capture it, burnt down the rest of Southwark as a reprisal (Carlin 1996, 15). William's army returned to London in December 1066 and apparently entered it from the west, capturing it after a battle within the walls (Mills 1996, 60–61).

THE MEDIEVAL STONE BRIDGE AND ITS FORTIFICATIONS

The timber bridge was replaced by a stone bridge, constructed between *c.*1176 and 1209 by Peter of Colechurch, a chaplain of St Mary Colechurch (Home 1931, 23–24). The new stone bridge was 276.09m long and supported by 19 piers surrounded by starlings. Between the piers were 19 stone arches and one other spanned by a drawbridge (see Fig 1, **14**). The roadway was probably 6.09m wide, very likely reduced to 3.66m by the presence of buildings on both sides of the bridge (Watson 1997, 320–21). The new stone-built bridge, like a number of other English urban bridges, fulfilled a variety of functions, including being part of the town's defences. A number of medieval, English urban bridges including those at Bedford, Chester, Durham, Newcastle, Shrewsbury and York all possessed gatehouses. Only two bridge gatehouses survive today in England and Wales – one at Warksworth Bridge, Northumberland and the other at the Monnow Bridge at Monmouth, Gwent (Rowlands 1994, 100).

THE STONEGATE

At London the second pier from the southern end of the bridge accommodated a gatehouse or barbican known as the 'Stonegate tower' or the 'great gate' (Fig 5). Stow referred to it as the 'bridgegate,' and suggested that it represented one of the seven principal city gates listed by fitz Stephen in the late 12th century (Stow 1603, i.42), though as fitz Stephen does not mention London Bridge the validity of the claim is difficult to assess. It is nevertheless probable that the Stonegate was an original feature of the

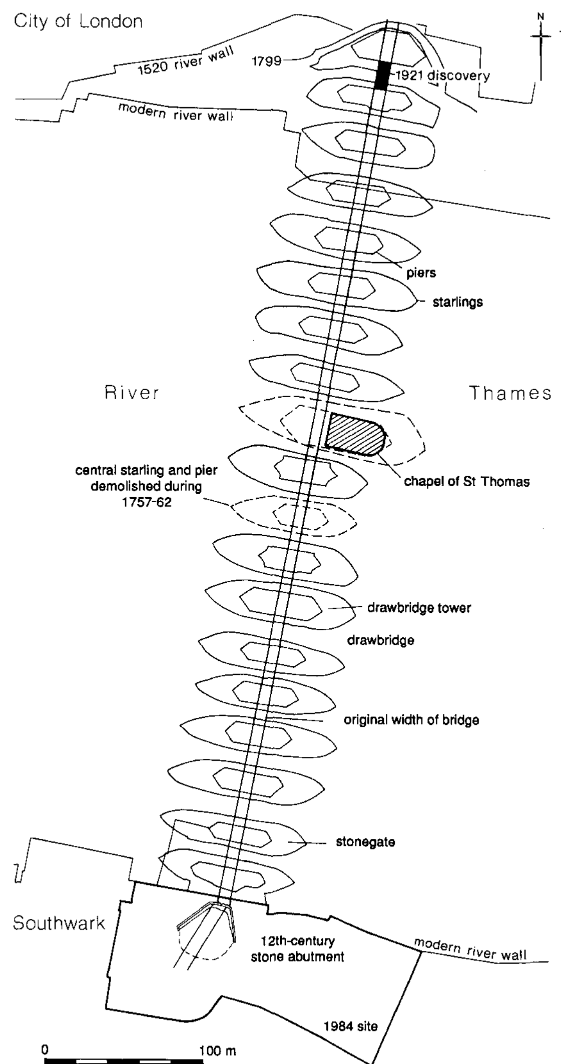

Fig 5. Plan of the medieval London Bridge, showing the location of its defences and extent of the piers and starlings (MoLAS Susan Banks)

Colechurch bridge, though its existence is not documented until 1258 (Riley 1863, 42). In the Bridge House accounts for 1381–2 a new 'latten pulley' was purchased for the portcullis there (Harding & Wright 1995, 21). A large portion of the gatehouse collapsed in January 1437. The Stonegate was rebuilt between 1437 and 1465–6, perhaps as a consequence of damage by fire during the Cade rebellion of 1450, when the houses on the southern end of the bridge were burnt down (Home 1931, 128). The newly rebuilt Stonegate was burnt down during Fauconberg's abortive attack on the bridge in 1471 (discussed later). Interestingly, there is no evidence that the Stonegate was defended during the 1471 attack, in contrast to the Drawbridge gate which was heavily defended. This decision could imply that the Stonegate was seen as undefendable against serious attack.

The Stonegate is shown in some detail in Wyngaerde's view of London Bridge *c.*1544, when it had a large central gate with the City arms above, flanked by a pair of heraldic beasts, probably lions (Fig 6). On each side of the gate were flanking hexagonal towers, following the exact shape of the bridge pier beneath (Colvin & Foister 1996, 12). The number of buildings adjoining the southern side of the Stonegate by this date suggests that it no longer served a military function. The Stonegate was destroyed by the Tooley Street Fire in 1725, rebuilt in 1728 and finally demolished in 1760, when all the buildings were removed from the bridge as part of a scheme to widen the bridge roadway and relieve traffic congestion (Brigham *et al* forthcoming).

THE DRAWBRIDGE GATE

The seventh opening from the southern side was spanned by a drawbridge lowered from a masonry gatehouse which accommodated a portcullis on its southern side (Fig 5). The Drawbridge gate is believed to have been an original feature of the Colechurch bridge, as it was already in existence by 1258 (Riley 1863, 42). It served as an integral part of the City's defences and allowed large ships to pass upstream. Tolls incurred at the lowering of the drawbridge formed part of the income of the Bridge House until 1475–6, after which the accounts record that it could not be raised because the stonework was in need of repair (Harding & Wright 1995, xxi), a frequent if not continuous state of affairs thereafter. On Wyngaerde's panorama (*c.*1544), dating from a few years earlier than Wyatt's insurrection, the Drawbridge gate is shown as a massive masonry structure several storeys high, the elaborate central archway flanked by polygonal turrets (Colvin & Foister 1996, 12) (Fig 6). On top were displayed the decapitated heads of traitors; a practice first recorded at the expense of Sir William Wallace in 1305 (Home 1931, 78). The Drawbridge gate was demolished during 1557 (Welch 1894, 67), and was then rebuilt during 1577–79 (Stow 1603, i.60). The rebuilt tower known as Nonsuch House was not intended as a fortification, it had a stone-built ground storey and three upper storeys and domed corner towers all of timber-framed construction. The actual drawbridge was replaced by a fixed wooden span. Nonsuch house was demolished in 1757 and the wooden fixed drawbridge replaced by a stone arch (Brigham *et al* forthcoming).

ATTACKS ON THE MEDIEVAL STONE BRIDGE

On five recorded occasions the Drawbridge gate fulfilled a military role. Firstly, on 11 December 1263 Henry III's supporters in the City raised the drawbridge and locked the gates to prevent Simon de Montfort and his baronial army in Southwark crossing the bridge and entering the City. Then Prince Edward's army at Merton and Henry's army at Croydon both converged on Southwark, intending to trap and defeat de Montfort's army (Williams 1963, 223). However, the 'Commons of the City' seized the bridge and allowed de Montfort's army to cross and evade their pursuers (Home 1931, 56). It was probably this action that encouraged Henry, after the defeat and death of de Montfort in 1265, to seize the bridge revenues to punish the rebellious Londoners by confiscating their property and arresting them. In October 1265 Thomas Fitz Thomas, the mayor and 40 leading London citizens, travelled to Windsor under promises of safe conduct, to see the king, but their safe conduct was revoked and they were all imprisoned. Mayor Thomas was not released until 1269, when he paid a £500 fine (Williams 1963, 231, 41).

On 13 June 1381 Wat Tyler and his Kentish followers, protesting against the poll-tax, entered the City from Southwark and began three days

Fig 6. Medieval London Bridge looking north-west showing the chapel of St Thomas (1), the Drawbridge Tower (2) and the Stonegate (3). This view is based on a portion of Wynegarde's panorama of c.1544

of mayhem. Why the bridge was not defended against them is unclear from contemporary accounts. Some accounts claim the mayor intended to defend the bridge but was persuaded to capitulate by a combination of Tyler's threats to burn down Southwark and London's other suburbs if not admitted and mass support for the rebels amongst the common people of London. Other accounts state that the bridge was surrendered to the rebels by two treacherous City of London Aldermen (Dobson 1970, 156, 168, 188, 209, 212–18).

On 3 July 1450 Jack Cade's,[2] Kentish forces obtained the keys to the doors of the Stonegate and seized the drawbridge before it could be raised, so enabling them to enter the City from Southwark unopposed (Home 1931, 125–6). However, Cade's actions after he entered the City soon ensured that he lost public support. He executed Lord Say, the Treasurer in Cheapside and then executed Lord Say's son-in-law. Cade had the heads of the two unfortunate men displayed on London Bridge. During the night of 5 July forces comprised of the Tower of London garrison and Londoners led by Matthew Gough attacked the rebels, encamped on or near the bridge, and apparently recaptured it. This conflict is immortalised in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* (part 2, act 4, scene 6), Cade on hearing his forces are about to be attacked states 'come then let's go and fight with them; but first go and set London Bridge on fire;' (Ervine 1923, 628). The rebels who were encamped near the bridge in Southwark, realising that their success depended on controlling the bridge, immediately counter-attacked and succeeded in recapturing all or most of it, only to be driven back again. After heavy fighting a truce was arranged the following day, both sides agreeing not to try and cross the bridge. The rebels were then offered a general pardon, so returned home a few days later (Home 1931, 130), while Cade was pursued and

captured. All the houses at the southern end of the bridge had been burnt down during the fighting, but because of a gap in the Bridge House records between 1445 and 1460 the repair of the Drawbridge tower and houses after the rebellion is undocumented. After execution, the heads of Cade and 23 of his followers were displayed on the Drawbridge tower.

In May 1471 during the Wars of the Roses the Drawbridge gate was defended by forces under the command of Ralph Joslyn, a former mayor (1464) and sheriff (1458), against Thomas Fauconberg and his rebel army.[3] The drawbridge was closed and three holes cut in it for 'sending out gun shot' (Welch 1894, 263). The defenders' weapons included long-bows and several cannon. The raised drawbridge was protected from attack by fire (wildefire) by 41 yards of canvas, soaked in vinegar. Sacks of wool were also hung from the drawbridge to protect it from damage (Welch 1894, 263). The rebels certainly captured the Stonegate, which may not have been defended, and burnt down the properties at the southern end of the bridge. Next the rebels attacked the drawbridge, some of their force crossing the river by boat and attacking Aldgate. Neither attack succeeded, and Joslyn's forces then lowered the drawbridge and counter-attacked, routing the rebels (Home 1931, 135–6). The situation was potentially very serious as Fauconberg intended to release Henry VI from his imprisonment in the Tower of London and depose Edward IV, who had only regained his throne earlier that year after being victorious at the battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury (Seward, 1997, 60). After the rebellion Fauconberg was offered a free pardon on 10 June 1471. He then joined Richard Duke of Gloucester's army and marched north to help pacify the Border region. However, Richard had him beheaded at Middleham and sent his head south to be displayed on London Bridge (Seward, 1997, 61).

The last time the Drawbridge tower was instrumental in the City's defence was during Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion.[4] 'The situation was serious and the City might have fallen to the rebels had not Mary, with her accustomed courage, ridden to the Guildhall, where she appealed to the citizens to remain faithful to her' (Lockyer, 1964, 125). As Wyatt's forces advanced through Southwark on 3 February 1554 it proved impossible to raise the drawbridge, which was broken down into the Thames (Holinshed 1586, iii 1097). According to one account, the lifting ropes had been cut by the rebels, while, according to another, the tower may have been gutted by fire – though there may have been confusion here with the Stonegate tower (Home 1931, 126–30). At any rate, the rebels occupied Southwark, dug trenches at the bridge foot and set two pieces of ordnance against the gate (Holinshed 1586, iii 1097; Stow 1603, I.25–6). Wyatt appears to have been unsure what to do next, so he simply waited in Southwark, presumably he was hoping for support from London, which did not materialise (Fletcher & MacCulloch 1997, 86). After three days of waiting Wyatt, having resolved not to attack the bridge, decided instead to march his forces westwards in an attempt to cross the Thames at Kingston. To try and prevent Wyatt's force crossing Kingston Bridge a 30ft length of the bridge was broken down,[5] but Wyatt's forces repaired the damage, crossed over, and then marched east towards London. En route at St James' Fields, Wyatt's forces were attacked by cavalry, but other government troops put up a craven performance and the rebels marched onward, to reach Ludgate, the City gate here was closed and defended by the London militia. Wyatt, knowing he was now defeated, surrendered (Fletcher & MacCulloch 1997, 86–7). The resistance to Wyatt appears to have been rather half-hearted and dilatory which suggests that he had considerable public support within London, but not enough to win the City over to his cause.

CONCLUSIONS

Of the five occasions that Londoners were called upon to defend their stone bridge, only once, in 1263, were they opposing Crown forces. It is clear that in 1381 and probably in 1450 there was either a degree of sympathy with the rebels or perhaps a lack of resolve shown by members of the citizen's militia, not to defend the bridge or, on the first occasion and on the second, to allow its capture without a fight. However it should be borne in mind that the surrender of the bridge in 1381 could have been an act of treachery (Dobson 1970, 156, 212–18). Interestingly, in July 1450 within a few days of the Londoners admitting Cade's rebel army, they realised they had made a mistake and then fought a battle on London Bridge to deny the rebels access to the City.

In complete contrast, in 1471 and 1554 the City of London showed a disciplined resolve to defend its bridge. On both occasions this refusal to support the rebels was the pivotal act which ensured the failure of these ventures. London as the capital city was seen by all rebels as the key to England. However, if rebel forces were advancing on the capital from the south-east, then gaining the bridge was the key to London. William, Duke of Normandy, realised this in the autumn of 1066 and, having failed to capture the bridge, chose instead to march on London from the north, out flanking the bridge he could not capture.

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NOTES

[1] Southwark (*Suthringa geweorc*) was included in the Burghal Hidage, traditionally dated to *c.*915. But the wording of the Hidage text as '(defence) work of the men of Surrey' is quite distinct to the simple and universal form of 'South-work' used subsequently. The exact significance of this wording is unknown, but it raises the possibility that Hidage text may refer to a planned or designated fortress rather than a completed one (Dyson, 1990, footnote 57).

[2] Jack or John Cade was a 'soldier of fortune' and bad character, (Churchill 1956, 314). He exploited the unpopularity of the government of the feeble minded Henry VI by successfully organising a rebellion. Cade's revolt differed from that of 1381 in so far as it was aimed at more unpopular crown officials than at land owners.

[3] Thomas Nevill or Fauconberg was the illegitimate son of the Earl of Warwick. In the Bridge House records he is referred to as the 'bastard Falconbridge' (Welch 1894, 262).

[4] Wyatt's rebellion, like so many European conflicts in the 16th century, was sparked by denominational intolerance. Queen Mary (1553–58), a devout Catholic was about to marry Philip of Spain, a match that was not popular with her predominantly Protestant subjects.

[5] The central portion of Kingston Bridge was timber see Walker (1979, 29).

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