

LONDON BRIDGE AND THE IDENTITY OF THE MEDIEVAL CITY

Derek Keene

SUMMARY

The paper surveys the history of London Bridge from its beginnings to the 18th century. It concentrates on the bridge as a symbol of London's identity and its role as a site for both civic and national display. Maintenance of the bridge was one of the major continuous building enterprises of medieval England. The citizens' assumption of responsibility for the bridge during the late 12th century expressed and consolidated their growing collective authority. In that sense, the bridge played a crucial role in the evolution of London's communal government.

The River Thames and its crossing at London have always been central to the commercial prosperity of the City, giving it ready access, by land and water, to inland and coastal Britain and to Continental trade networks (Campbell *et al* 1993, figs 1 and 7). A recent theory on the origin of the name London suggests that centuries before the Romans came it denoted the estuarine part of the river downstream of the lowest point at which it was possible easily to cross the water. This was perhaps in the vicinity of modern Westminster and the City of London (Coates 1998). The name was transferred to the Roman city established during the 1st century A.D. at the furthest point downstream where it was possible to build a town on a large, well-drained site and where approach roads from the south could be built right up to a convenient crossing. The Romans can almost certainly be counted as the founders of London Bridge. Yet no physical remains of a Roman bridge have so far been certainly identified (Watson & Dyson 1997). The possibility cannot be discounted that in Roman times the river was crossed at London by some

other means than a bridge with piers. Whatever the form of that crossing, the pattern of streets within the city and the convergence of roads on the south bank demonstrate that it was on the same site as that occupied by the bridges of London until 1831. A Roman bridge at London, extending from the low-lying island at Southwark to the sharply rising north bank, would have been about 300m long and subject to the increasingly powerful destructive force of a tidal river, as well as to the processes of building later bridges on the same site. It is hardly surprising that no trace of such a structure has yet been identified. Maintaining a bridge would have been difficult after the end of Roman rule, since bridges require sophisticated economic and administrative infrastructures to keep them in good repair (Brooks 1994). When London re-emerged as a major centre of authority and trade in the 7th century, the centre of population and business lay just upstream from the Roman city, and there was probably little need for a bridge on the old site. About that time the river was eroding the south bank in the vicinity of the bridge, so any surviving remains of the southern end of the structure are likely to have been entirely washed away.

The earliest physical feature that can plausibly be interpreted as part of London Bridge is a displaced fragment of a timber structure of the late 10th or early 11th century (Watson & Dyson 1997). The first documentary reference, concerning tolls payable at the bridge (Robertson 1925, 72–3), is probably from the same period, although the evidence for the date of this source is circumstantial rather than direct (Wormald 1978, 62–3; Wormald 1999, 320–3, 366, 371).

A late 10th-century reference to a 'London bridge', however, probably denotes a place in Huntingdonshire (Hill 1976). London Bridge seems certainly to have existed in 1016, for the Danes are reported in the course of their attack on London that year to have dug a great ditch 'on the south side', presumably through or around Southwark, and to have dragged their ships to the west side of the bridge (Whitelock *et al* 1961, 95). This incident reveals the significance of the bridge as a defensive work, blocking attackers who sailed up river and so protecting some of the wealthiest and most important areas of the City, including St Paul's cathedral, probably a royal residence nearby, and busy trading areas around Queenhithe and Dowgate. Defensive needs suggest a plausible context for the first construction of the bridge in the post-Roman period. This would have been during the late 9th century, when the city within the Roman walls was resettled as a place of population and trade and as a front-line stronghold against Viking attack. Certainly, the earliest archaeological and documentary evidence for this resettlement concerns the commercial waterfront district upstream of the bridge. Associated with this work, or following soon afterwards, was the establishment of a defended settlement of Southwark at the southern end of the bridge, an association of defended bridge-heads paralleled elsewhere in the period (Watson & Dyson 1997; Keene forthcoming a). In later centuries the bridge was certainly valued as a defensive barrier across the river, as in 1338 and 1377, when French attacks were anticipated and the quays below the bridge were to be fitted out with timber defences, while in 1377 the bridge itself was armed with ordnance directed down-river (Sharpe 1907, 64–6; Thomas 1926, 176–7).

During the 10th and 11th centuries, as overseas trade revived, the landing places immediately downstream of the bridge became ever more significant. It may have been in this period rather than earlier that streets were laid out in the vicinity of the bridge and leading from the river into the eastern part of the City. Fish Street Hill, leading from the bridge itself to Bishopsgate, presumably originated earlier. Even so, the established riverside markets above the bridge continued to attract merchant ships from overseas. Trading regulations of the 12th century or earlier reveal that the passage of these ships through the bridge marked an important formal stage in their entry into London and their

subjection to the rule of the king of England (Bateson 1902, 499–500; Keene 1999a). In its earliest recorded history London Bridge thus emerges as a formidable public symbol: a means of crossing the river, a strong work of defence, and a legal and fiscal barrier.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that during the 11th and 12th centuries the abutment structure at the southern end of the bridge was of timber (Watson & Dyson 1997). The entire structure may have been of timber, although parts of it could have been of stone, possibly incorporating the remains of piers from a Roman bridge. In 1129–30 the sheriffs of London spent the large sum of £25 (enough to buy about 175 oxen) out of the king's revenues from the City on making two arches of London Bridge (Hunter 1833, 144). These arches may have been of timber, but it seems more likely that they were of stone. Supervising the maintenance of the bridge seems initially to have been the responsibility of officials who, like the sheriffs, were directly responsible to the crown. For centuries, the duty of maintaining public defences and bridges had been one of the services reserved by the king when he made formal grants of land. Normally such services would have been due within the county where those works lay. During the 11th century, for example, the important bridge at Rochester, which carried the road from London to Canterbury and was less than half the length of London Bridge, was maintained by services due from estates in Kent lying up to 30km from Rochester. Each estate contributed labour and materials to a particular section of the bridge (Brooks 1994). London, however, lay towards one corner of its county of Middlesex, which at most extended only 30km from the City. Services from more distant places were required. Thus in 1097 a chronicler noted the sufferings of the many counties whose labour was due at London on account of the works at the Tower of London and the king's new hall at Westminster (the present Westminster Hall), and because the bridge had been almost entirely swept away by a flood (Whitelock *et al* 1961, 175). Service is known to have been due at London Bridge from Alciston in Sussex some 75km from London (Johnson & Cronne 1956, no. 160), a radius which if it extended from the City in all directions would encompass a dozen counties. The work of keeping London Bridge in good repair thus had a big impact on the people of south-eastern England.

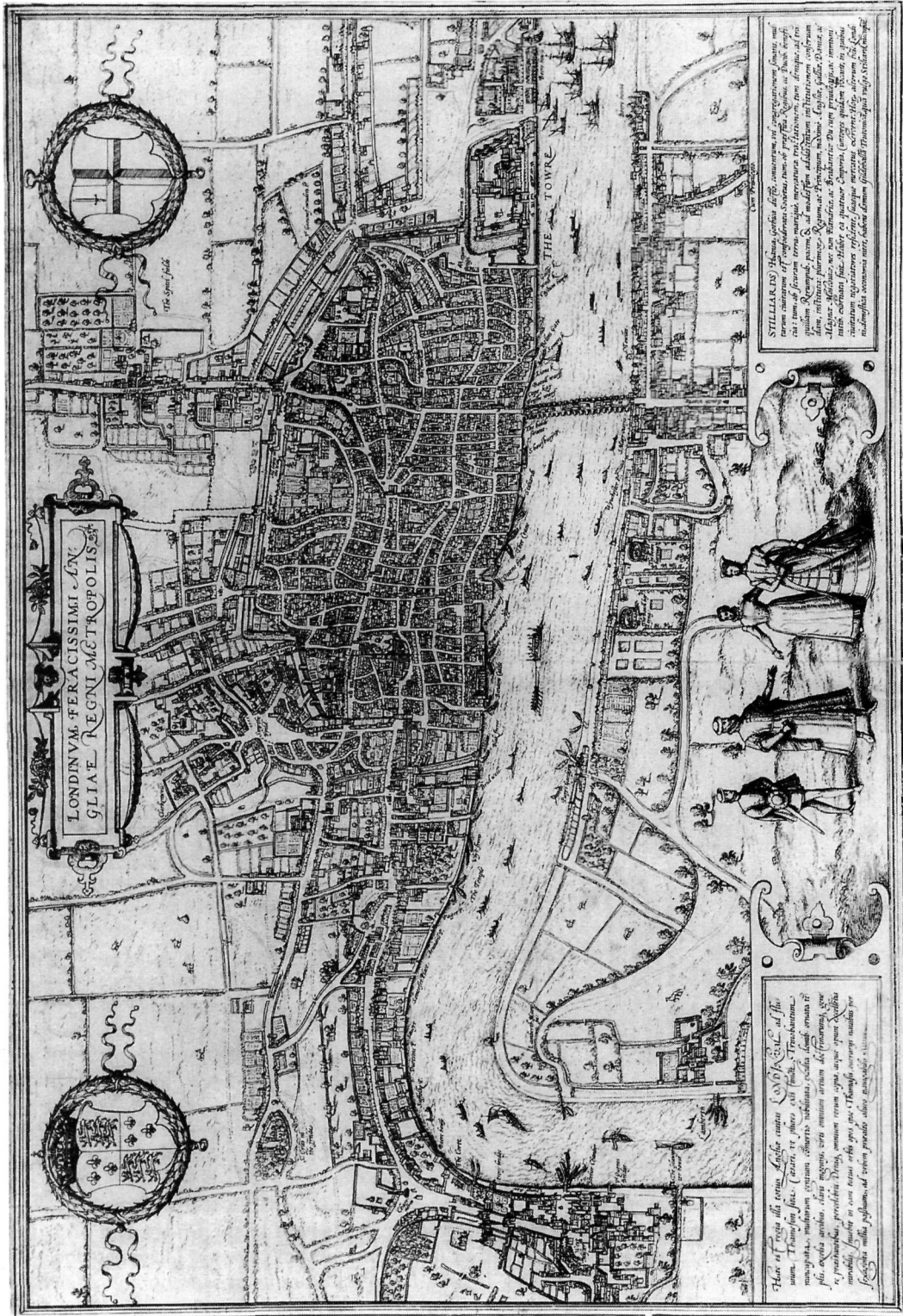


Fig. 1. London, Westminster and Southwark in the mid 16th century. From G Braun and F Hogenberg Civitates Orbis Terrarum, first published in 1572. This reproduction is from the second state of the map first published in 1574. It shows the physical dominance of London Bridge and the way in which it protected the western part of the City including St Paul's cathedral (shown as it was up to 1561). (Copyright: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)

This system of maintenance was progressively undermined, not least as the king exempted favoured landholders from service due to the bridge. About 1097, for example, the king freed the lands of the cathedral church of St Paul (lying in Middlesex, Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, and Surrey) from all work concerning the castle of London (*ie* the Tower of London), the wall, the bridge, the bailey (probably a fortification near Ludgate and Newgate), and carrying service there. This was because the cathedral itself was being rebuilt following its destruction by fire in 1087 (Gibbs 1939, no. 13). The heavy royal expenditure on London Bridge in 1129–30, already noted, was perhaps a response to problems arising from the failure of the traditional system. Certainly that method of supplying labour and materials would have come under special strain during the decades of political disturbance and civil war which followed, and the bridge may have fallen into serious disrepair. Later chronicles and traditions, including ‘tables’ on the bridge itself, mention a reconstruction in timber in 1163 and a rebuilding in stone which began in 1176 (Kingsford 1908, i, 22–3; Luard 1865, 240; Brooke & Keir 1975, 109–10). The former may be fictitious, but the latter, said to have been undertaken by Peter of Colechurch, appears to have been a total reconstruction, creating the bridge which survived in some form for nearly 700 years. The new bridge was a substantial edifice 276m long and contained 19 stone piers and 19 stone arches of unequal span. It appears to have been completed in 1209 and was not finally replaced until 1831 (Welch 1894; Home 1931; Watson & Dyson 1997). The initial construction and continuing maintenance of this bridge was one of the great building enterprises of medieval England. It was made possible only by the remarkable economic growth of the 11th and 12th centuries, and in particular by the great increase in the size and wealth of London itself. These developments promoted the transport infrastructure, skills and labour markets that facilitated effective bridge building in stone. The challenge of building the bridge and the failure of the old system of maintenance also brought into being new methods of finance and management. The direct provision of labour and materials as conditions of land tenure and under the supervision of royal officers was replaced by a system controlled by the citizens of London themselves, who collected funds and established

an endowed income in support of the bridge. Especially important for this development were the growing cohesion and collective authority of the citizens of London. They had demonstrated their power and independence during the civil war, but during the very recent rebellion of 1173 were conspicuously loyal to the king. This perhaps enabled them to assume responsibilities once exercised by the king’s officials. Peter of Colechurch’s association with the new bridge is important, for he was the priest of the London parish where Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury, murdered on the orders of the king in 1170, had been born (Keene forthcoming b). This horrifying martyrdom was followed by the rapid growth of a cult and by Thomas’s canonisation in 1173. Londoners were prominent in devotion to the new saint, whose birthplace in Cheapside, just a few steps from Colechurch, quickly became a focus of interest. These events gave the citizens additional leverage with the king. This process, however, should not be interpreted as a straightforward erosion of royal authority by the growth of civic liberty, for the devolution of responsibility for the bridge to a community which had a strong interest in maintaining it and which was developing collective skills in administration and finance would have seemed advantageous to the king. Soon after the City’s communal government under a mayor was established during the 1190s, a period when the king’s need of the Londoners’ support was acute, its leaders adopted Saint Thomas as their patron. Pilgrimages from London to Canterbury began by crossing London Bridge, and so the chapel on the new bridge itself was dedicated to the saint. In 1205, when Peter of Colechurch died, he was buried in the chapel (Luard 1865, 256–7), which in later years was a remarkable expression of civic culture with its fraternity, fine architectural detail, elaborate decoration, music, and chantry priests (Harding and Wright 1995, xvi–xvii).

Peter of Colechurch’s main role in the enterprise, as ‘proctor of London Bridge’, appears to have been to manage the funds collected towards rebuilding the bridge. There is no reason to believe that he was its designer or builder. Peter emerges from the sources as a man of affairs and head of a fraternity which held these assets for the benefit of the bridge and on behalf of the community of citizens. The assets included land, houses, and rents in London and elsewhere, acquired so as to provide a secure income for future maintenance. By about 1190 Peter already

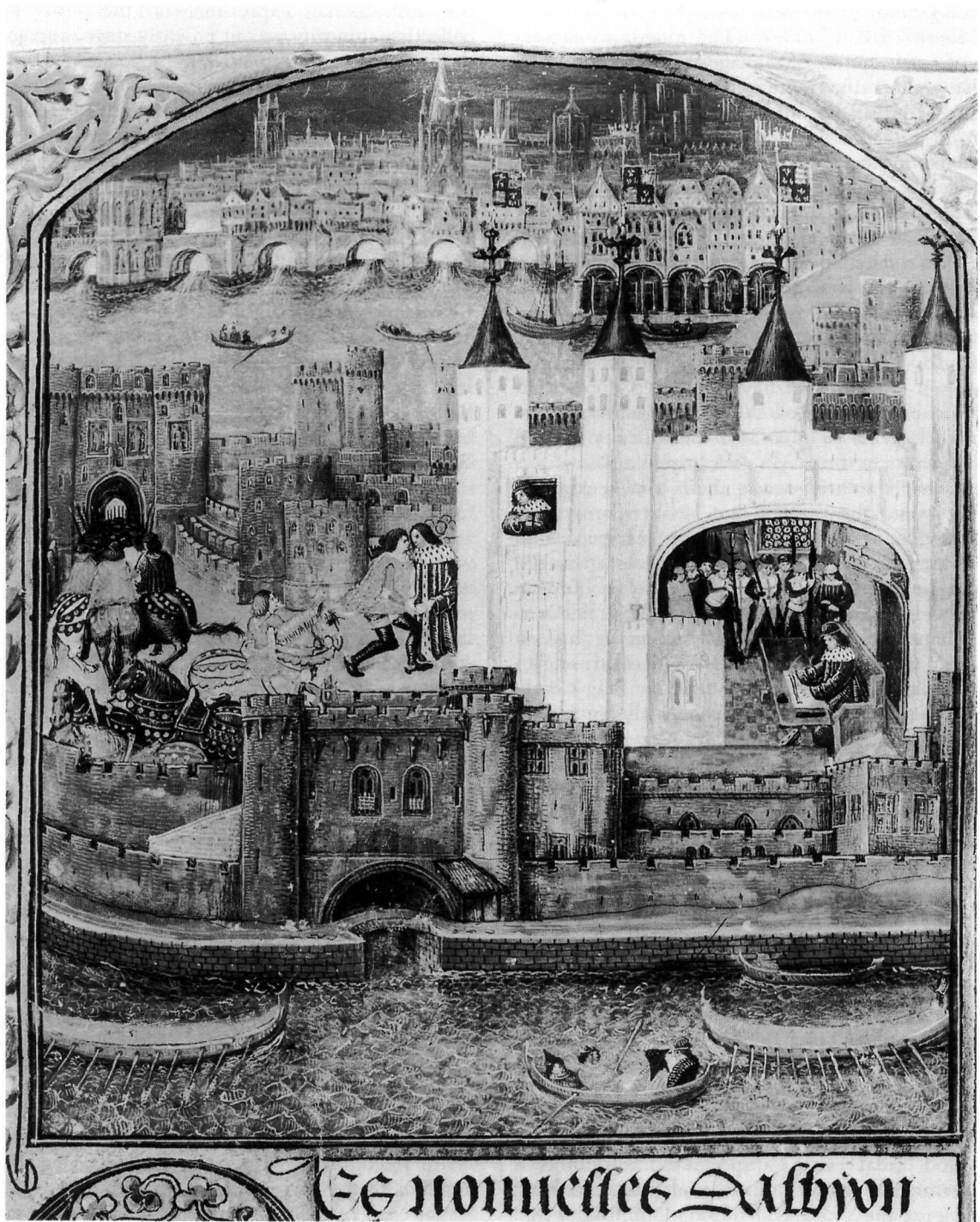


Fig 2. The Tower of London and London Bridge in the late 15th century. From a manuscript of the poems of Charles duke of Orleans (British Library, MS Royal 16 F. 11, fo 73). London Bridge is in the background. The two-storied chapel dedicated to Saint Thomas of Canterbury is prominent. The artist depicts the tide on the ebb, with the water flowing very rapidly through the narrow spaces between the stonings of the bridge. (By permission of the British Library)

held land in the western suburb for that purpose (Moore 1918, i, 208–9). The long-term success of the new system of management owed much to the remarkable increase in London property values during the 12th and 13th centuries. By 1179–80 there were at least five guilds of the bridge in the City, some of them headed by members of leading City families and presumably established so as to mobilise support for the work (Pipe Roll 1179–80, 153–4; Brooke & Keir 1975, 44). At a date between 1163 and 1187 the bishop of London issued an indulgence in favour of a person collecting money for repairing or rebuilding (*ad reficiendum*) the bridge (Morey & Brooke 1967, 454) and Peter of Colechurch himself appears to have collected money in Winchester (Pipe Roll 1184–5, 214). In 1202 the project seems to have been in difficulty for the king wrote to the mayor and citizens acknowledging that the bridge was theirs but seeking to put it into the care of one Isenbert, master of the schools at Saintes, who had experience of working on bridges in Poitou. It was envisaged that Isenbert would cause houses to be built on the bridge (knowledge of how to do this was perhaps the distinctive contribution he had to offer), the rent from which would contribute to the upkeep of the bridge, which the king clearly identified as a structure of national significance (Hardy 1835, 9). By the late 14th century the total annual income of the bridge, from tolls as well as rents, was about £750 a year (of which a proportion was spent on the maintenance of the estate) and its annual rental from land and houses in the City was greater than that of any other landlord (Harding & Wright 1995, xvii–xxi; Keene 1996a, 103–4). The bridge revenues were probably much greater before the Black Death. They greatly exceeded the fixed annual income which the king could expect to receive from the City. Expenditure on the bridge was the most costly regular civic outlay, though probably outweighed by periodic loans and ‘gifts’ to the crown.

The establishment of this great undertaking during the late 12th and early 13th centuries – with a great estate, a specialised workforce, a bureaucracy, a store of materials and a meeting place at the south end of London Bridge, and mechanisms for supervision and audit by the City authorities – did much to consolidate the standing and independence of the citizens of London in relation to the monarch. The bridge project and its estate originated in a period when

the institutional expression of the citizens’ collective authority was at an early stage, and so the enterprise became an independent trust rather than an integral element of civic administration, a relationship that still formally endures. Thus from the beginning the bridge and the Bridge House, as the estate came to be called, have powerfully expressed the identity, strength, and independence of the City.

The bridge and its revenues, like those of the City itself, attracted the attention of needy or greedy monarchs and came to play a symbolic role in the often fraught relations between City and king. Thus in 1250, at the beginning of an extended quarrel with the citizens, King Henry III ordered the City of London and London Bridge to be taken into his hands. He held them only for a few months, but in 1265, following the Battle of Evesham and his renewed control of the City, he granted the bridge and its estates for a term of five years to the Hospital of St Katherine by the Tower, a foundation associated with the queen (CPR 1247–8, 65; CR 1247–51, 285; CPR 1258–66, 507). Then in 1270 he granted the bridge for six years to the queen herself (CPR 1266–72, 459). These assignments seem intended as a pointed slight to the citizens, who in 1263, expressing their opposition to the king, had thrown eggs, stones, and mud at the queen as she attempted to pass upstream through the bridge on her way from the Tower of London to Windsor (Stubbs 1882, 59; Luard 1869, 136). These recipients of the bridge were presumably supposed to devote the revenues to its maintenance, but undoubtedly neglected the structure and used some of the income for their own benefit. When Henry’s son and successor Edward I entered his kingdom in 1274, after the troubled years at the end of the previous reign, he vigorously reasserted royal authority and encouraged a comprehensive programme of reform in the City itself. This included restoring the bridge and its estate to the control of the citizens and creating new sources of income (Stubbs 1882, 90; Williams 1963, 86–7; Keene 2000, 212–13).

Overseas visitors to the City in the 16th century commented on the magnificence of London Bridge. To a visiting Moravian in 1597 it was ‘one of the finest bridges in the whole of Europe for size and beauty’ (Groos 1981, 175), while to a Frenchman in 1578 it was ‘great and powerful and the most magnificent bridge in the whole of Europe’, covered with houses ‘like great castles’ and its shops being full of all sorts of rich

merchandise (Grenade 1578, fo. 29r-v). These characteristics appear to have been established by the early 13th century. In the 14th century 138 shops or houses stood on the bridge, reduced to 100 by the 16th century when they nevertheless produced a greater revenue (Harding & Wright 1995, xvii-xxix). The chapel of St Thomas stood on the ninth pier from the north. Four piers further south stood a gate housing a drawbridge, which could be raised to allow the passage of ships, a practice which appears to have ceased in the 1470s (Harding & Wright 1995, xxi). By that date overseas trade was concentrated below the bridge in the Pool, and the toll income from letting ships through the bridge did not offset the cost of damage to the structure occasioned by operating the drawbridge. Raising the drawbridge was an valuable defensive measure when the City was under attack from the south, as happened quite often between the 13th and the 15th century (Watson 1999); from the 1470s onwards it was supposed to be raised only for defence. On one such occasion it was hewn down into the river rather than raised, but the ingenious lifting machinery was still there to be admired in 1578 (Home 1931, 174; Grenade 1578, fo. 30). On the second pier from the south was another gate, known as the Stone Gate. Both gates were first recorded in 1258 (Stapleton 1846, 40), and may have formed part of the original late 12th-century structure. The original width of the bridge masonry may have been 7.3m, but the houses on either side, which were corbelled out beyond the bridge and framed across at an upper level, reduced the width of the roadway to about 3.7m (Watson & Dyson 1997). That was adequate for the passage of a single cart, but very tight if two had to pass. Yet when the bridge was in good repair it seems to have been the practice to let carts cross in both directions without restriction.

In the absence of detailed records and visual evidence, we can say little about the appearance of the bridge before about 1500. The chapel, as rebuilt between about 1384 and 1397 (Home 1931, 99-101), was an elegant two-storied structure projecting downriver and occupying the widest of the piers. It is prominent in late 15th- and 16th-century representations of the bridge. To judge from these, one of the most impressive approaches to the city must have been upriver by boat. The bridge rose almost 10m above low water to the road surface, and the houses and chapel at least as much again above that,

providing a dramatic frontispiece behind which rose the spires of St Paul's and other churches. This was a powerful expression of the City's identity at the point of arrival, even more impressive than the statements made by the landward gates. In 1426 the drawbridge tower began to be rebuilt, as a large square structure with turrets at the corners (Thomas & Thornley 1938, 150). Along with the bridge chapel and the guildhall in the northern part of the City which was rebuilt from 1411 onwards (Barron 1974), it formed part of a major programme of civic construction which was evidently intended to impress. The Stone Gate, reconstructed after its collapse in 1437 (Thomas & Thornley 1938, 173; Harding & Wright 1995, xxi-xxii), was a more modest structure, probably identical with the 'first gate newly built by Cardinal Henry' (Harvey 1969, 268-9), the bishop of Winchester who died in 1447. The bishop, whose London house was close to the south end of the bridge, was very wealthy and he had probably contributed towards the costs of reconstruction, perhaps by way of recompense for his men having seized and fortified the houses at the south end of the bridge in 1425 (Gairdner 1876, 158-9).

The stone bridge was presumably more durable than its timber predecessor, but continuous maintenance and periodic reconstruction remained essential. The stone piers rested on broad foundations known as starlings, which protected the piers from the flow of the river but by greatly narrowing the passages for the water increased its scouring effect. When the tide was on the ebb, there was a fall in the water at the bridge of more than a metre. Repairing the starlings and renewing the timber piles which retained them were among the most frequent of the necessary works. Elaborate pile-driving machines and sometimes pumps were employed (Harding & Wright 1995, xxi). The bridge was an intensive site of specialised skill and innovation, reflected in the vocabulary employed (Wright 1996, 26-44). We get some sense of the thrill of this technological constellation from the account of a pump purchased in 1496-7, which seems to echo a salesman's patter: 'a vyce of Bras bought in the cuntry of fflaunders conteyning theryn right conning and crafty conseit of Ghematry in conveiaunce of water out of ryvers wellis or poondis vp into the highest partees of castellis toures or eny other places' (Wright 1996, 137).

Neglect of the structure precipitated disaster. Its decay was noted in 1275, and in the heavy

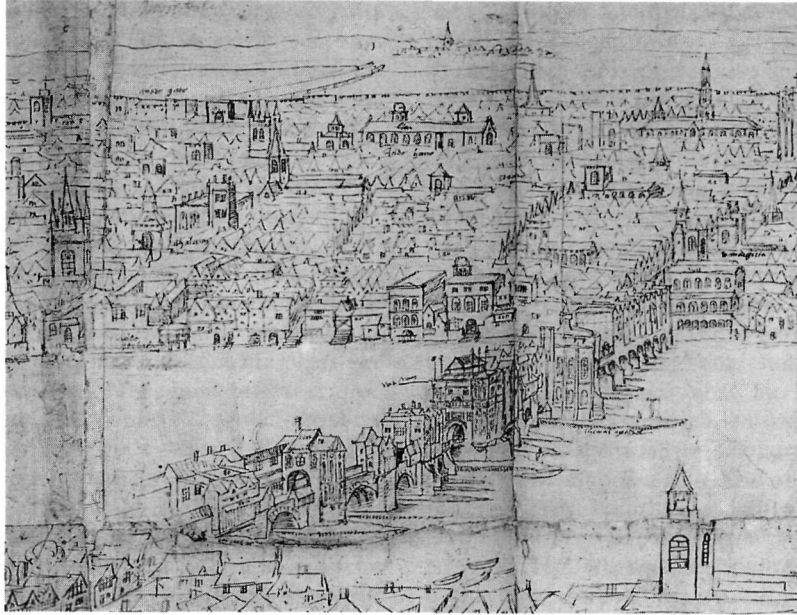


Fig 3. London Bridge from the south-east, drawn by Anthonis van den Wyngaerde c.1544; see Colvin & Foister 1996. The drawing clearly shows, from south to north: the Stone Gate with the City's arms; the elaborate structure of the Drawbridge Gate, with traitor's heads on poles above; and the chapel of Saint Thomas, projecting downstream. The figure on the starting by the chapel is probably operating one of the pile driving machines which were in constant use. (Copyright: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

winter of 1281–2, probably before 2 February 1282, five arches collapsed, the long-term outcome of the late queen's misuse of the revenues (Rot Hund i.406; Stubbs 1882, 89). The king had already lent his support to a special programme of fund raising for the bridge throughout the country and on 4 February, on account of the 'sudden ruin' of the bridge, authorised exceptional tolls to be charged on men, horses, and pack-horse loads crossing the Thames 'on either side of the bridge'. It seems that the bridge was now completely impassable and that all crossings were made by boat. During the recent frost, however, carts, as well as men and horses, had been able to cross on the ice, the melting of which probably occasioned the collapse (the record of this incident is misinterpreted in Watson & Dyson 1997). The seriousness of the situation is clear from the degree of royal intervention. Later that year the king extended the grant of special tolls and formally authorised the citizens to devote the rents from houses to be built on certain public plots of land in the City towards the upkeep of the bridge. Without such a grant those rents would have been due to the king. By 1306, when the City was authorised to charge tolls on a long list of goods for sale

passing across or under the bridge, the structure appears to have been in a good enough state to carry carts. In 1320, however, it was still, or again, weak enough to cause alarm about the risk that it presented to people and goods, and the king supported a further fund-raising campaign (Thomson 1827, 129, 154; CPR 1272–81, 422; CPR 1281–92, 10, 30; CPR 1301–7, 431; CPR 1317–21, 502, 517; Hearne 1774, 472–85).

By the 1420s there was again concern about the state of the structure. In 1425 one arch was reported to be cracked so that you could see through to the river below (Welch 1894, 56). Punishments were ordained for those who drove carts with iron-bound wheels across it (Sharpe 1911, 38). Heavy carts were perceived as responsible for much wear and tear, and later in the century carts with bare wheels were charged only two pence to cross the bridge but those with iron-bound wheels twelve times as much (Harding & Wright 1995, 121). In 1437 the two arches adjoining the Stone Gate collapsed, along with the gate itself. A timber structure spanning the gap was erected, but the reconstruction of the south end of the bridge was not completed until the 1460s. Only ten years later there was concern

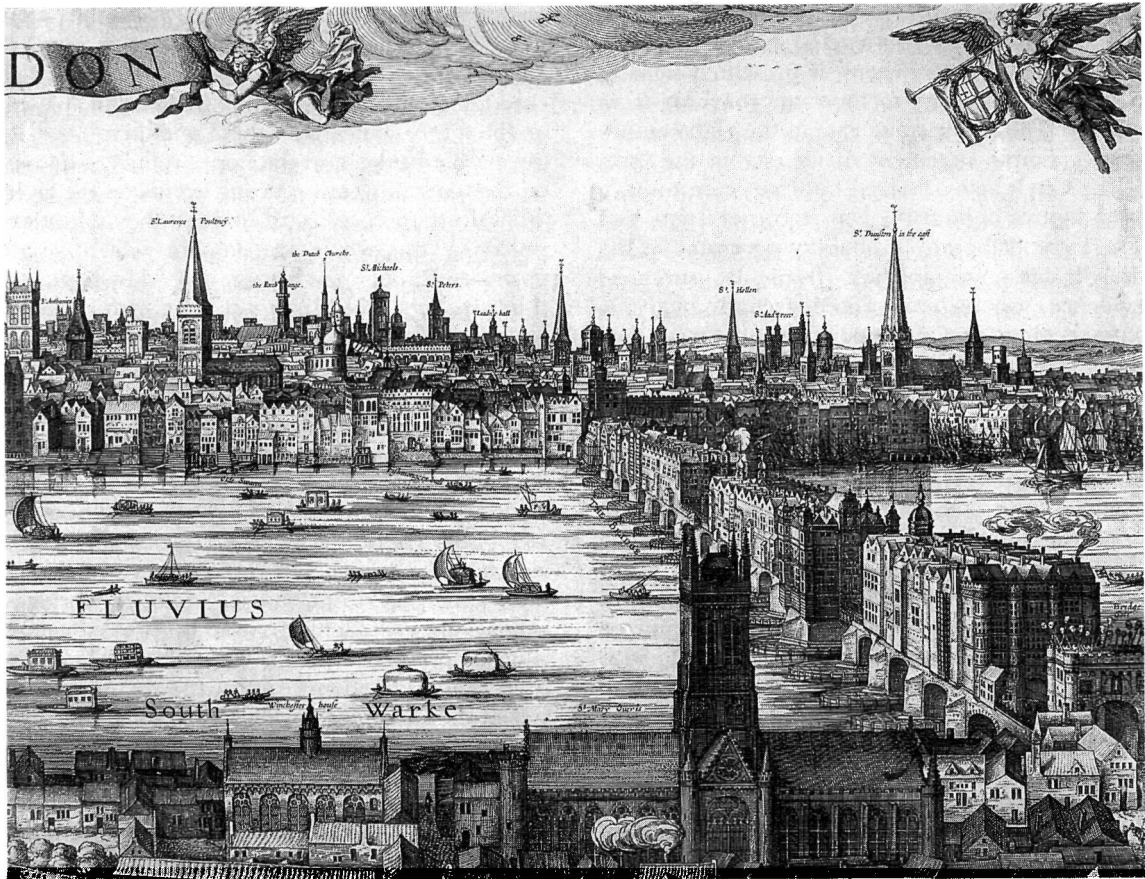


Fig 4. London Bridge from the south-west c.1600. From an engraving published in 1616 and based on a drawing attributed, probably wrongly, to C J Visscher. The timber piling of the starlings is clearly shown. The Drawbridge Gate has been replaced by Nonsuch House and the traitors' heads are now displayed above the Stone Gate (labelled 'Bridge Gate'). (Copyright: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)

that the operation of the drawbridge endangered the structural stonework, while in the same decade several more arches of the bridge were rebuilt. By 1500 the 12th-century structure had probably been almost entirely replaced. This pattern of renewal was typical of bridges in tidal rivers where the foundations were subject to continual erosion (Harding & Wright 1995, xxi–xxii; Watson & Dyson 1997, 323–5).

London Bridge was one of the largest and most continuously-active programmes of building and engineering in the realm. It brought great profit and standing to the principal masons and carpenters involved, many of whom can be recognised from their other works as among the leaders of their profession. One of them, Richard Beke, was appointed master mason of Canterbury Cathedral, but was summoned back to London to inspect the

bridge after the collapse of 1437 (Home 1931, 117–18). Several of them became master mason or master carpenter of the king (Harvey 1984, 64–5, 78–9, 165, 201–2, 358–66). Their work for the bridge presumably represented the highest quality and most up to date available. Experts from overseas were also involved. As we have seen, King John recommended a Frenchman to work on the bridge. A famous German carver, later known for his work on royal effigies, was employed in 1492 to make a new statue of Saint Thomas for the west side of the bridge, while in 1521 a Spanish carver made three statues of saints for the great gate of the bridge (the drawbridge gate) and a statue of Saint Katherine in honour of the queen (Welch 1894, 66–8; Harvey 1984, 100, 231).

The bridge also served as a great defensive outwork for the City, resembling a barbican with

its two gates, drawbridge, and long, dark passages where houses were constructed across the street. Like city gates everywhere, it presented signs of power and authority to those approaching from outside. The outer, stone gate in the 16th century bore a simple statement of identity in the form of the City's arms, flanked by what seem to have been figures of lions (Colvin & Foister 1996, 12). The more elaborate symbolic programme of the drawbridge gate appears, from the surviving evidence, to have emphasised strength, heavenly gate-keeping, and national identity. In the late 14th century carved effigies of the king and queen were placed there, along with shields of their arms and those of Saint Edward the Confessor. The statues carved there by the Spaniard in 1521 represented Saints Peter, Paul, Michael, and George (Welch 1894, 65–6). Not until the traveller had passed the drawbridge gate and entered the defended enclosure of the City did he encounter Saint Thomas of Canterbury, the special patron of the citizen community. Passage through or across the bridge thus involved a theatrical enactment of entry into a space of power. This elaborate structure was naturally one of the most important sites for the pageants staged as part of formal royal entries to the City of London. In particular these pageants were noted for images of giants and champions, and for lofty towers, all normally associated with the drawbridge gate (Welch 1894, 119–22; Thomas & Thornley 1938, 94, 115, 158–9, 297–8, 419). The drawbridge tower was itself a powerful symbol of London's close links with the monarchy and its role as the English capital. For that reason, it was customary from the early 14th century onwards to display there on poles the heads or quarters of executed rebels and traitors, where they could be seen by those approaching by land or water. London Bridge was the most important such site in the realm, and it is significant that the first of these displays on record was of the heads of the Scottish patriots William Wallace and Simon Fraser. The former had presented a special threat to the national sense of identity during his raids on the northern counties by allegedly slaughtering all those who spoke the English tongue. This was in 1305–6, when the bridge structure had recently been put in good order, perhaps partly with this authoritarian function in mind. Previous displays of heads in London, as with those of the Welsh leaders in 1282–3, had been at the Tower (Stubbs 1882, 90–1, 141; Home 1931, 77–9 and

passim; Thomas & Thornley 1938, 25, 84, 87, 156, 260, 291, 325).

The bridge also played a part in informal entertainments. A description of London written in the 1170s notes that the Londoners used to throng the bridge and the upper rooms of houses on the bank to watch sporting events on the river (Kingsford 1908, ii, 227). In 1240 they doubtless yelled at the whale or dolphin which swam upstream through the bridge, chased by boatmen (Luard 1877, 80). In 1396 nine people were crowded to death on the bridge while watching the passage of the young queen on the river (Thomas & Thornley 1938, 47). On St George's day 1390 an English and a Scottish champion fought a great joust on the bridge, possibly chosen for the encounter because of its earlier association with national rivalries (Thomson 1827, 187; Home 1931, 93–4). Life on the bridge also had distinctive qualities. The crowded and disorderly waterfront districts near the bridge-heads were especially prone to outbreaks of fire, which spread to the bridge and then rapidly from house to house since the houses there lacked the stone party-walls which were common on land. As early as 1212 a fire destroyed many houses on the bridge, killing a large number of people. Such events remained common into the 17th century (Keene 1999b). The inhabitants of the bridge, presumably several hundred in number, enjoyed certain facilities in common, such as the public latrines, of which one fell into the river in 1481 drowning five men (Thomas 1924, 247; Thomas 1929, 237–8; Kingsford 1908, i, 25; Thomson 1827, 288–9). There were alehouses and a market on the bridge. Both contravened City regulations, presumably because they contributed to congestion in the narrow roadway and to the risk of fire (Riley 1868, 137; Sharpe 1899, 218).

In many ways the bridge resembled a typical market street in the City or elsewhere, even down to its cage and pillory for the punishment of offenders (Welch 1894, 68, 114). In the 13th century the bridge was an important focus for the trade in iron goods. The heavy and slow-moving traffic generated a good deal of business for smiths on the bridge and much of the iron brought to London from the Weald of Kent would have been carried along the roads converging on Southwark (Keene 1996b). At fairtime in Southwark smiths and other craftsmen occupied the vacant spaces on the bridge (Welch 1894, 105). The bridge was also an important

focus for the fish trade (Riley 1859, i, 378, 380). At the end of the Middle Ages, the shops on the bridge were a special attraction. The visitor who commented on their riches in 1578 thought that there was nowhere more mercantile (*plus marchand*) in London than the bridge (Grenade 1578, fo. 29v). By that time London Bridge was certainly one of the four or five focal points in London for fashionable shopping and the occupants of the bridge made or dealt in consumer goods rather than basic necessities. In the 14th century they included pouchmakers, and in the 15th haberdashers, goldsmiths, jewellers, cutlers, pinner, painters, tailors, bowyers, fletchers, and armourers (Riley 1868, 365; Welch 1894, 80). By the mid 16th century the shops were associated with mercers and haberdashers, who dealt in fine textiles and many items of personal adornment (Kingsford 1908, i, 81). Similar trades predominated in the 17th century, and the 18th-century shopkeepers on the bridge sold an even wider range of consumer items, including books and scientific instruments (Thomson 1827, 374–92, 401–2; Home 1931, 308–24).

The 16th century and the Reformation brought major changes. The chapel with its chantries was abolished and replaced by a private house. In April 1578 the Drawbridge Gate was demolished and was replaced by an elaborate and highly decorated timber-framed structure known as Nonsuch House, presumably on account of its resemblance to Henry VIII's stunning palace of

that name (Welch 1894, 84–6; Home 1931, 186–7). From then on the traitors' heads were displayed on the Stone Gate. The house immediately north of the Stone Gate was at about that time rebuilt in a style similar to that of Nonsuch House so as to present a complex turreted front to the space on the south. These and other changes stripped the bridge of much of its explicit meaning as a symbol of London's identity and strength. It remained a remarkable structure, but one which after 1600 seemed cluttered with out-of-date and untidy buildings and was increasingly an embarrassment to those who wished to modernise the rapidly-growing metropolis. Moreover, with the completion of the Pont Neuf in Paris in 1606, London Bridge would be seen as falling far short of the standards of elegance and uniformity now appropriate for a great riverside city (Ballon 1991, 121–3).

CONCLUSION

Throughout its history London Bridge has been important as a symbol of the river and its crossing which caused the City to prosper. The early medieval bridge embodied both London's role as a focus of national defence, and the duty which men across a large part of southern England owed towards the maintenance of the City. The stone bridge which replaced it demonstrated the wealth, power, and collective identity of the citizens of London. At the same



Fig 5. London Bridge from the south-west c.1644. From a drawing and etching by Wenceslas Hollar, published in Amsterdam in 1647. The buildings on the southern part of the bridge resemble those shown in Fig 4. In 1633 forty-two houses occupying the northern third of the bridge had been destroyed by fire: these were not fully replaced until after the Great Fire of London in 1666. The empty part of the bridge was enclosed by tall wooden fences on each side. (Copyright: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)



Fig 6. London Bridge from the south-west c.1748. Drawn and engraved by S and N Buck, published 1749. The bridge is once more almost entirely occupied by houses, which from this time onwards were progressively removed as the structure was 'improved'. (Copyright: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)

time it was a unique demonstration of London's complex role as the capital of the kingdom of England: no other structure – certainly not the Tower, nor Westminster Hall, nor the Guildhall – expressed in so comprehensive a fashion the concatenation of economic, social, and political forces involved. The citizens celebrated their bridge and monarchs recognised its practical and symbolic significance for both the City and the kingdom as a whole, but during the 17th and 18th centuries, as the metropolis as a whole came to overwhelm the City at its heart, the ancient bridge became an encumbrance. The City authorities were prepared to make the bridge less of a restriction to movement by widening its carriageway and arches, but jealously resisted proposals for other crossings of the Thames which would have provided much needed links between the new parts of London outside the City. When a forward-looking king lent his support to a project for a new river crossing, it was for a bridge at Westminster (completed in 1749), not a new bridge in the City. Since that time, despite successive reconstructions, London Bridge has failed to capture the imagination as the most dramatic, elegant, or innovative of crossings over the Thames.

More than any other bridge in the British Isles, and possibly even in Europe, London Bridge demonstrates that to explore the history of bridges offers one of the most fruitful and least used avenues towards understanding the societies which built and maintained them.

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