

# The Saxon London Bridge★

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IN THIS ARTICLE, one of a series presented to P. E. Jones, Deputy Keeper of the Corporation of London Records, Miss Honeybourne elaborates her argument for the siting of the wooden bridge which preceded the stone bridge, always known as "Old London Bridge," begun by Peter of Colechurch in 1176, which she has already briefly deployed<sup>1</sup>.

Miss Honeybourne's contention is that London Bridge in Saxon and early Norman times ran from the bottom of Pudding Lane to a strip of land lying west of St. Olave's Church in Tooley Street<sup>2</sup>. The article starts by listing the historical references to the wooden bridge both before and after the Norman conquest. The earliest of these dates to the reign of Edgar (959-75) and there are three others before 1066, besides the saga of the demolition of London Bridge by St. Olaf, the Viking leader, but this comes from a 13th century Icelandic source and must be treated with some scepticism. There are only four literary references to the bridge between 1066 and 1176 which are also listed and a possible context for the rhyme "London Bridge is broken down" is given.

There is then a complex discussion of the topography of the areas at either end of this supposed bridge but the argument for the position of the bridge is more or less deployed on two and a half pages<sup>3</sup>. The arguments are:

1. Since the stone bridge took 33 years to build, London could not have lasted that time without a bridge, which must therefore have been on a different site;
2. It would be sensible to build the new bridge upstream from the pre-existing one so that the old one could act as a buffer against the tide;
3. It is convenient to the markets on East Cheap;
4. Just downstream was a very important common wharf (Botolph's Gate), which would be expected just below the bridge, to obviate the need to go under the bridge;

5. The proximity of St. Botolph's Church since churches dedicated to him also occur near three of the landgates;
6. The fact that originally the Parish of St. Magnus would have included all the bridgehead;
7. The ward boundary between Billingsgate and Bridge Ward is said to have originally run right across the river;
8. Ownership of land at the east end of St. Magnus' Church by the Bridge House Estate;
9. The ownership by the City of a narrow strip of land west of St. Olave's Church which is the only land it holds west of the Church. It is suggested that this is the actual bridge approach.

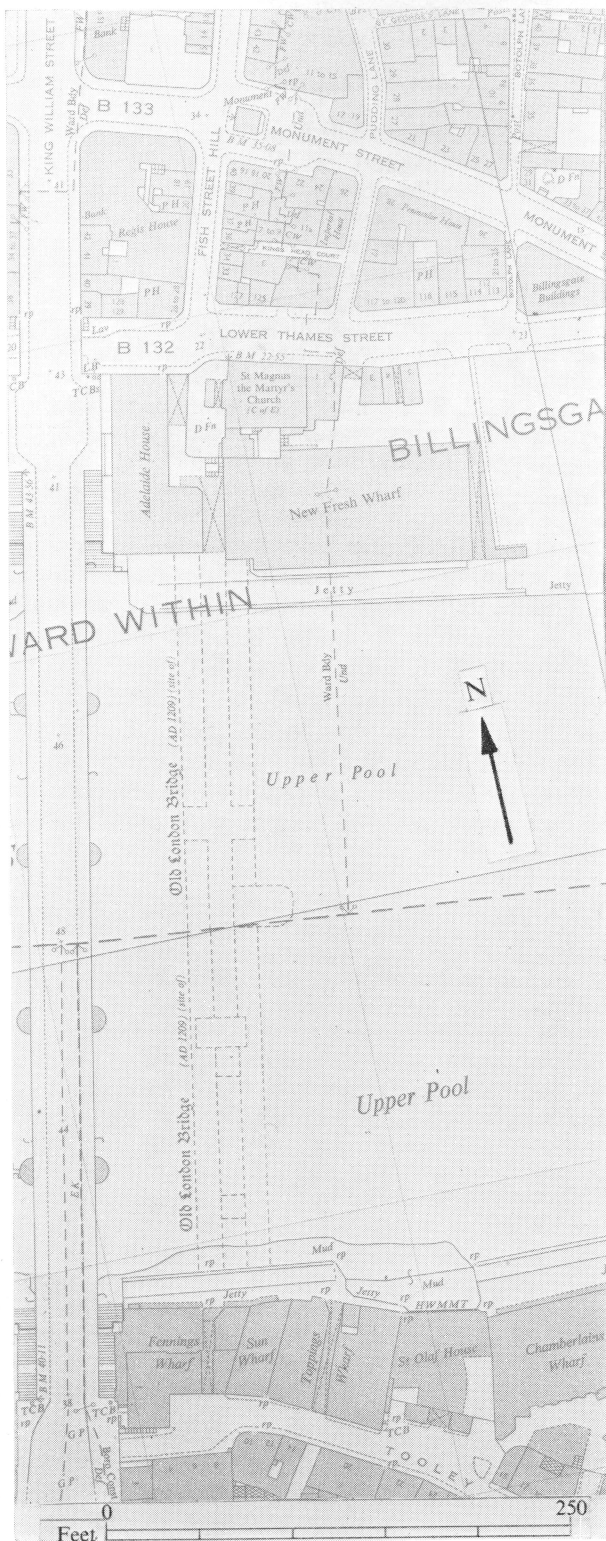
There is one other point deployed elsewhere in the article that in a forged document, which must, however, have been in existence by 1142, St. Magnus' Church is described as *prope pontem*.

## What is the validity of these arguments?

1. Is negative evidence against the bridge being where Old London Bridge was and is only supposition. Although it is clearly right that London could not have done without a bridge for that length of time, this does not necessitate building on a different site, for apart from the possibility of building on the same site while the bridge was still being used, (as is happening today and as it does not seem impossible could have happened then), a temporary structure may have been built alongside as happened when houses were removed from the bridge in 1758-62;
2. is purely an *a priori* argument;
- 3, 4 and 6 are not specific to any particular site but would apply to any in the immediate area including the site of Old London Bridge. It is difficult to evaluate the significance of 5, but the argument is weakened by the claim that it would have also served Billingsgate, so clearly it cannot point very strongly to this particular position;
7. would be a very powerful argument but unfortunately no source is given for it, so its veracity

\* Review article of "The Pre-Norman Bridge of London" by Miss M. Honeybourne in *Studies in London History*, ed. A. E. J. Hollaender and W. Kellaway, Hodder and Stoughton (1969), 6 guineas. This article has been reprinted at the suggestion of Mr. Ralph Merrifield (see letter on p. 261—Summer 1971 issue) and by kind permission of the Editor of the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society Newsletter (No. 23 May/June, 1970).

1. *London and Middlesex Historian* No. 3 (Oct 1966), 11.
2. The second part of the article deals with her suggestion that the Roman Bridge existed in the same position. This has been discussed in *London Archaeol.* 1 (Summer 1970) 156-160.
3. On p. 32-4.



Map showing a number of the locations mentioned in the text.

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cannot be judged. Even the author claims that it "is said to" have done so;

8. Hardly means much, for the Bridge House Estate owned a lot of land at the east end of St. Olave's Church, but Miss Honeybourne places the bridge to the west of that Church. Again the value of
9. as evidence is disputable, since there is no evidence that the Bridge House Estate owned it any earlier than the 16th century, and its peculiar shape is due to the fact that it was a lane leading to the site of St. Olave's Stairs<sup>4</sup>.

The final piece of information would again apply just as much to the site of Old London Bridge as to the site suggested in this article.

In fact there is one piece of evidence which would argue against this site, namely that at the northern end of this suggested bridge there was a wharf called Rederesgate (later Fresh Wharf) and this was clearly in existence at a date earlier than the removal of the bridge to the Old London Bridge position (e.g. in 1125<sup>5</sup>), and it is clear that Pudding Lane led to this wharf since it was called Rederes Lane, which does not fit with it leading to the bridge.

Clearly the documentary evidence for the siting of the wooden bridge is insufficient and since there is little hope of new documents appearing which will throw fresh light on this, our main hope for definitely locating the bridge must rest with archaeology. In this context it is interesting to recall that Syer Cuming reports that "the remains of stout oaken piles with iron shoes and huge conglomerates of feruginous matter" have been traced across the river just to the east of Old London Bridge<sup>6</sup>. He regarded this as Roman because Roman coins were also found and because the iron was hard, tough, solid metal and *not* "ropy" which was all he thought the Saxons were capable of. Today this belief in the incapacity of the Saxons can no longer be accepted (though it still lingers disconcertingly on) and it is possible that this relates to a Saxon rather than a Roman bridge, and we might imagine therefore that the stone bridge was built against the upstream face of the wooden bridge so that they partly overlap but not completely (this would make it possible to build the new bridge while the old one was still in use). We can recognise Cuming's description of "huge conglomerates of feruginous material" as the result of the decay of iron

4. But now see my note (*London Archaeol.* 1 (Summer 1971) 254) which shows that this strip is a post-medieval creation.

5. Source quoted by the author on p. 24.

6. *J. Brit Archaeol. Ass. Ser.* 1 43 (1887), 162-3.

to which gravel of the river bed would adhere. However, Cuming does not quote any source for these observations, and if they were made when the Old London Bridge was demolished in 1831, then Cuming was only 14 at the time. It is even possible that they relate, in some way, to the stone bridge itself.

Clearly we are far from finality in this matter. I think that it would be rash to rule out Old London Bridge as the position for the Saxon and early Norman wooden bridge into the City of London.

### **Saxon Southwark — a suggested sequence**

Very little indeed is known about Saxon Southwark either archaeologically or historically, but in the light of our present knowledge it is possible to suggest a sequence which it may well be possible to check by excavation in the next few years, particularly those at Montague Close this summer (i.e. 1970) and in following years.

We know that Southwark was a Roman suburb of London from at least c. 50 to approximately A.D. 400. It is suggested here that this is followed by a short sub-Roman phase of perhaps 50 or 100 years when, probably, the same population, more or less, continued to occupy Southwark but when the organised fabric of Roman life had broken down (as in such things as the disuse of the bridge and the building of timber buildings on top of the roads.) After about A.D. 500 the site is more or less completely abandoned until the founding of the Burgh about 900, when a new bridge was built and the road pattern changed. After this Southwark prospered in the late Saxon period, as the site of a Mint, a Burgh (a fortified settlement, one of a chain built by Alfred and his successors against the Viking Invaders) and probably a Borough (i.e. enjoying some form of

urban government), and, by 1066 playing part at least of the role of a county town for part of Surrey.

It is to be stressed that this is a very hypothetical sequence but there is a little evidence for it. Slight evidence for the first part was provided by the excavations at Montague Close last year<sup>7</sup>, and the latter part is provided by documentary evidence (i.e. Burgh, Mint and County Town). It is hoped that more substantial archaeological evidence for the whole sequence will be forthcoming this year at Montague Close (or perhaps for a different sequence), but it is very similar to the sequence suggested for Winchester and it may well occur elsewhere, in Roman settlements. Of course there must be exceptions and the City of London must be one of them, for there a trading settlement was in existence by the 8th century as recorded by Bede, and archaeology suggests that *Hamwih* (Southampton) may be another. If this is really so, it is interesting that the City and Southwark would then have a different development from each other, a very different position from that in the Roman period, and this would be accounted for if there was no bridge between the two, and therefore that they were separated. Indeed, as far as written history for the period goes, London seems to be connected with areas to the north of her rather than to the south. But one must remember that the lines of the Roman roads were more or less preserved at least as far as the settlement itself, even if not up to the bridge.

7. *London Archaeol.* 1 (Winter 1969) 114-7, but recent work has suggested that 1, the sub-Roman phase is late Roman; 2, the posts are not of timber buildings; 3, they do not indicate disuse of the road or bridge.

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## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING** **the London Archaeologist**

THIS WILL take place at 6.15 on Friday the 9th June at Church House, Dean's Yard, S.W.1.

The annual report and accounts will be presented. The proceedings will include the election of officers and also the election to the Publishing Committee of the five local society representatives whose nominations should be made in writing not less than 14 days before the A.G.M. to the Chairman, 779 Great Cambridge Road, Enfield.

Local societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers to the A.G.M.; individual

subscribers to the magazine and their friends will also be welcome to attend. A copy of the agenda will be circulated to all societies known to be interested in *the London Archaeologist*. Further copies will be obtainable from the Secretary of the Publishing Committee, 3 St. Johns Avenue, S.W.15.

The lecture following the business meeting will be given by Harvey Sheldon, the newly appointed Field Director for Southwark, on "Aspects of Rescue Archaeology in the London Area."