Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Medieval Bridges in Oxfordshire

by John Steane

Roads and Rivers

It is increasingly being realised that medieval society was more mobile than the history books used to make out. Roads and rivers were in constant use not only by kings and their retinues making politically inspired progresses but also by merchants seeking trade, soldiers marching on campaign, pilgrims and other travelers of all classes. We do not know a great deal about the road system of medieval Oxfordshire but the 14th century Gough Map in the Bodleian Library shows three major roads crossing the county. One is the London-Gloucester road which follows roughly the course of the old A40 through Wycombe, Tetsworth, Oxford, Witney, Burford and Northleach. A second runs from Oxford to Faringdon and thence to Malmesbury and Bristol. A third runs south east, crosses the Thames at Wallingford, and so to Reading. Another ancient road, not marked on the Gough Map, connected Northampton to Southampton, and crossed the Thames at Oxen's Ford, giving the name to the future city.

The county of Oxfordshire was also on a major line of river communication, the upper Thames, which, in the early middle ages at least, was navigable as far as Oxford, and, possibly for smaller boats, up as far as Radcot. Later with the construction of weirs and mills the navigation of the river declined and by the 14th century it seems that Henley was the furthest point to which the Thames was normally navigable.

River crossings were originally made by fords and the earliest mention of a bridge is in 1004, a reference to the crossing of the Cherwell on the site of what was afterwards Magdalen Bridge. Here, in the river, have been found objects all relating to transport, stirrup irons, a prick spur and a horse-shoe. Bridges in fact replaced fords at important crossing places. They took roads across rivers which were otherwise difficult obstructions. Their arches were made wide enough to enable boats to pass under. Early bridges were made of timber and these structures have not survived. Timber piling however was found under Ock Bridge, Abingdon when it was being repaired. We know that the bridge at Henley was made of timber on stone piers. Chiselhampton bridge c 1500 apparently had a timber roadway and stone piers. Stone began to be used for arched bridges in the 12th century. Probably the oldest example in Oxfordshire is the barrel vault of one of the arches of Abingdon Ock bridge which may be as early as 1100 AD.

The Characteristics of Medieval Bridges

(1) They have projecting piers, triangular in shape, known as cutwaters. These are found on the upper side with the point towards the stream their purpose being to protect the pier from the force of the current and from the impact of trees and other objects borne along by the water. The upper part of these piers at roadway level have refuges for pedestrians.

(2) The widths of medieval bridges are commonly from 10 to enabled the bridge to be kept open during the reconstruction. If the arches are inspected from the underside, by boat if necessary (!) it is easy to see by the straight joints where the widening has occurred. Often the building material and technique is different.

(3) The spans varied from five feet in the case of small bridges to twenty feet or more in a few cases. The first were semicircular with a barrel vault. In the 13th century pointed arches replaced these arches and groined vaults replaced barrel vaults. Here the main weight was taken on ribs of stone. Some bridges like Newbridge have had the ribs cut away to improve navigation. In others, as at Heyford, the ribs have been filled with brick.

(4) Many medieval bridges are humped, especially where the roadway rose over pointed Gothic arches. This characteristic rise is seen at Radcot and Newbridge. The gradually flattening of the Gothic arch had the effect of reducing the hump and a somewhat flatter roadway appears in the 15th century as is seen at Burford.

(5) Often a medieval bridge is extremely long and included a long stone causeway which leads up to it across a flood plain. This is pierced by subsidiary arches which do not regularly have channels of water flowing through them. They are used, however, at times of flood to allow the swollen waters to escape away, instead of ponding up behind the bridge. Folly Bridge, Oxford, had a causeway with no less than 42 arches in the 16th century. Heyford still has eight and Abingdon, Ock Bridge has seven.

(6) Further structures connected with bridges include chapels built for bridge hermits. Gateways and drawbridges were also found. Folly Bridge had both. In 1646 four of the arches of Wallingford bridge were replaced with wooden drawbridges to help with the defence of the town.

Financing of Medieval Bridges

They owed their existence to acts of religious charity, orders from government, the calls of commerce, the opportunities of levying tolls, and the thoughtfulness or necessities of great persons.

(1) The Church. In many parts of the country monasteries or great churches were responsible for building bridges. The abbot of Ramsey for instance built St. Ives' bridge. At Abingdon a religious gild called the Fraternity of the Holy Cross helped to build and maintain Burford and Culham bridges. A hermitage might be founded and a hermit given license to collect from passengers and villagers who crossed the bridge. Newbridge was financed in this way and there were also bridge hermits at Banbury and Henley.

(2) Pontage was a further means of financing bridge building. It was a right to collect tolls at a bridge and was usually granted by the crown when it found that nobody was willing to be responsible for repairs. At Dorchester in 1381 the bailiffs were able to collect dues for 3 years.

(3) Individual donations might be collected. Men often left money in their wills for the repair of bridges. Legacies are known from the 14th century for the repair of Petty Pont bridge, Oxford. Wills are found from 1505 onwards leaving bequests towards the expenses of Banbury bridge. Renovations to Folly Bridge were carried out about 1530 at the expense of John Claymond, President of Corpus Christi College.

(4) Only gradually did the idea of communal responsibility grow towards bridge repair and construction. In the 1570s and 1580s the City and University were under pressure to repair Folly Bridge. The Mileways Acts of 1576 and 1593 providing for the maintenance of roads and bridges within a mile of the City by all inhabitants within 5 miles, failed to yield enough funds. Things were particularly difficult in Oxfordshire where there were a number of bridges along the Thames which was the county boundary and the two counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire were reluctant to contribute or co-operate.

Some Medieval Bridges

Abingdon: Ock Bridge is on the site of a former ford mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon document. There was a bridge here before 1101 when Abbot Faritius entered the town at this point and unshod himself to walk barefoot to his abbey. One stone arch with a rubble barrel vault may be of this date. The rest has been rebuilt in the 15th century and was widened in the 18th century and in 1979-80. In the 14th century there was a hospital on the Ock Bridge dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene. A chapel "on the south end of Oke Bridge in Abingdon towne" is mentioned in 1547.

Abingdon.: Burford Bridge. The name comes from "Borough Ford". The bridge over the Thames, the causeway over Andersey Isle and Culham bridge were all built 1416-1422 by local merchants, the chief of whom were Geoffrey Barbour and John Howchion. The Fraternity of the Holy Cross, a town guild, contributed large sums. These engineering works replaced the old dangerous way by ferry over the river and attracted through the town the traffic from London to the west. The bridge has been widened but still has four 15th century arches embedded in it: the main navigation arch is 18th century in date. Maud Hales bridge: the Southern part is so called because these three arches were added c 1430 by William Hales and his wife Maud.

Banbury: Millstream Bridge. First mentioned in 1294, there was a mill belonging to the bishop at this time. Bequests for bridge repair date from 1505 onwards and in the 16th century there was a hermit living "at the bridge foot" at the Northamptonshire end. About 1540 the bridge was said to have 4 arches: by the 18th century it was 258 feet long and contained seven pointed arches, but now only two of the original 13th century arches remain. They are embedded in later reconstruct ions on both north and south sides in brick and iron girders and you really have to peer underneath to see the medieval arches.

Burford: Burford Bridge. A bridge stood on this site in 1322 because it was in a ruinous condition and pontage was granted for its repair. Four segmental arches are divided by cutwaters and refuges. The 14th - 15th century parapet was rebuilt c 1945.

Chiselhampton Bridge. Over the river Thame, 178 feet long, has 8 arches and five stone cutwaters. First mentioned in 1444 when pontage rights were granted. In 1500 Leland rode over a great bridge "with five great pillers of stone apon the which was layid a timbre bridge". This took an important part in the civil wars, being fortified by gates. Rupert crossed it with 1,700 men and returned the same way after his victory at Chalgrove in 1643. Shortly afterwards it was broken down. It was repaired with Headington stone in 1690 and widened by 8 feet in 1899.

Culham. As already mentioned under Abingdon-Burford this bridge was built in the 15th century. The five pointed arches survive. It has been widened in the 18th century and byepassed in the 20th.

Dorchester. The bridge carries the main Oxford-Henley road and is first mentioned in 1146. In 1381 the bailiffs of Dorchester were granted pontage for 3 years. Leland described it as 'of a good length: and a great stone causey is made ... there be 5 principale arches in the bridge and in the causey joining to the south ende of it'. Between 1813 and 1815 it was replaced by the present one. The foundations of the piers of the old one may still be seen at low water.

Godstow. (1) West of Godstow abbey is a small bridge with a single irregular rubble arch which may be medieval. (2) The Old Bridge (so called) is by the Trout Inn. It has two spans of which the northern may be medieval. Here Queen Elizabeth I was met by the university when she began her visit in 1566.

Henley. The first record of a bridge is in 1234. In the 13th century the king frequently granted oaks for its repair from the Forest of Windsor. In the 14th century it was administered by the Bridgemen. Leland describes it as a wooden structure on stone foundations (still said to be visible at low water). There was a bridge chapel dedicated to St. Anne nearby. The old bridge was swept away by floods in 1774 and replaced by the present 5 arched one in 1786-9 designed by William Haywood of Shrewsbury.

Ickford Bridge. On the county boundary where the road crosses the river Thame. It is mentioned as early as 1368 but the present bridge with 2 arches and cutwaters is probably 16th century in date. There are stones with inscriptions "1685 Here ends the county of Oxon" on the Tiddington side, and on the Ickford side "Here Begineth the County of Bucks 1685".

Lechlade. St. John's Bridge, on the county boundary with Gloucestershire, was built over the Thames c. 1220 and was maintained by the hospital of St. John. It was described by Leland as having "3 arches of stone and a causey". It was replaced in 1884 by a single segmental arch.

Lower Heyford. After the construction of the bridge which is first recorded in 1255 the village was usually called Heyford ad pontem. A drawing of the bridge appears in a map in Corpus Christi College Oxford dated 1606. It shows eight arches, four together over the main stream of the Cherwell, four along a causeway. The present bridge has two medieval arches and has been repaired with brick and widened in the 19th century. Two further medieval arches are in the causeway.

Newhridge. The finest medieval bridge in Oxfordshire. At the junction of the Windrush with the Thames. Mentioned by Leland "the ground ther al about Iyethe in low medowes often ovarflowne by rage of reyne. Ther is a long cawsye of stone at eche end of the bridge. The bridge it selfe hathe vi greate arches of stone". These survive with great cutwaters on the upper side. Built of corallian limestone with repairs in calcareous grit. Originally 4 middle arches had groins but these have mostly been cut away presumably to improve navigation. Waller attempted to cross in 1644 to surround Oxford and capture the king but was repulsed.

Oxford

(1) Folly Bridge. There was a causeway built in the late Anglo-Saxon period to carry the main Northampton- Southampton road across the Thames. This was rebuilt in the late 11th century when it was renamed 'Grand Pont'. The causeway in the 16th century contained more than 40 arches through which flood water drained away. Folly Bridge crossed the mainstream on four narrow arches strengthened by heavy piers and cutwaters. It was belief

that it had been used as an observatory by Roger Bacon) stood beyond the third arch from the 13th century onwards. A drawbridge acted as the fourth arch. It was repaired in the Middle Ages by pontage grants and the charity was administered by bridge hermits. The medieval bridge was replaced in 1825 by a stone bridge of 3 arches.

(2) Magdalen Bridge. There was a bridge across the river Cherwell as early as 1004. It was later known as Petty Pont, Eastbridge and finally Magdalen Bridge. There was a drawbridge at its eastern end in the late 14th century and it contained rounded and pointed arches of different sizes: by the 16th century the causeway and bridge was of stone, 1500 ft long with 20 arches and deep cut waters. From 1321 bridge hermits repaired it. A new design by John Gwynn completely replaced it with semicircular arches between 1772 and 1778.

(3) Oseney Bridge. Carried the road westward from Oxford across the present mainstream of the Thames; by the early 17th century it comprised 3 stone arches and was widened to take the turnpike. A collapse in 1885 led to a replacement in iron in 1889.

(4) Hythe Bridge. Carried a road from the town's north gate to the western suburbs across a branch of the Thames running to Castle Mill. The name "hythe" refers to a wharf built there. The first timber bridge was built by Oseney Abbey between 1200 and 1310; it was rebuilt in stone 1373-1403 and was replaced by the present iron bridge in 1861.

Radcot Bridge. Reputedly the site of a stone bridge mentioned in a grant of land made by King Eadwig in 958. There are more certain references to the repair of the bridge from 1208 onwards. The present structure of 3 arches dates from the 14th-15th century. The two outer arches are sharply pointed, the central one 4 centred, possibly the result of a later repair. It played an important part in history in 1387 when Richard II's favourite, Robert de Vere, was intercepted by the forces of the lords Appellant. Apparently the bridge was broken on this occasion.

Wallingford. The earliest mention of a bridge over the Thames here is 1141 when Stephen besieged the castle. The bridge was replaced by a stone structure in the 13th century. It was under the charge of two wardens or bridgemen. The high road to Gloucester and South Wales passed over this bridge until 1415 when the bridges at Culham and Burford by Abingdon were built. This caused a diversion of the road and the result was a relative decline of Wallingford in the late middle ages. It was extensively repaired in 1530 using stone from Trinity Priory Church and in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I was described as being 900 feet long and consisting of 20 arches. Four arches were removed and a drawbridge substituted during the siege of the castle in 1646. In 1809 the three principal arches were rebuilt: of the medieval structure the westernmost arch remains.

Wheatley. There was a ford here in 956 and a bridge is mentioned at 'Harpeford' in 1286. Of this medieval bridge one arch, probably dating to the 15th century remains embedded in the eastern end. It was described by Leland as having 8 arches. The bridge was defended in the civil war and rebuilt in the early 19th century.

Wootton. In 1254 a~document mentions a bridge taking Akeman Street across the river Glyme at Stratford.

Further reading:

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