London Bridge and Riverside

In all probability, London owes its very existence to the Romans' choice of site for a bridge across the Thames. A traders' town, which eventually grew into a provincial capital, was established around the northern bridgehead, which recent excavations have shown to have lain about 100 feet east of the present structure. The shore strips on either side of it have preserved to this day a faintly maritime character, while in the alleyways north of the Custom House nestles St. Mary-at-Hill, the least changed of all Wren's churches.

The Roman bridge must have continued its existence into later centuries. Our first written reference to the crossing is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the late tenth century; a woman was found guilty of causing a man's death by witchcraft, so 'they took that woman and drowned her at **London Bridge**'. It may also be that the nursery rhyme, 'London Bridge is Falling Down', refers to an attack on the Bridge led in 1015 by King Olaf of Norway, in support of Ethelred II of England, the Unready.

In 1176, a cleric, Peter of Colechurch, was entrusted with the construction of a stone bridge, the first to be built in Europe since Roman times, for it antedated the Pont d'Avignon by a year. It was not completed till 1209, four years after Peter's death; his body was laid to rest in the undercroft of the chapel built over the eleventh pier from the northern bank and dedicated to St. Thomas à Becket. The bridge was 910 feet 10 inches long and stood on 19 stone piers of irregular spacing with arches of various widths, since, in order to sink them at all without the knowledge of coffer-dam construction, the best advantage had to be taken of every inch of firm ground in the river bed. In spite of its length, the bridge was only 20 feet wide and the roadway along it a mere 12 feet, so that two carts could only just pass each other and there was a constant hubbub and traffic jam along it. Shops were built across it almost at once; a rental of 1358 records that there were already 139.

This bridge remained the sole means of crossing the river, save by boat, till the completion of Westminster Bridge in 1749. Its appearance was well recorded, by Wyngaerde in the mid-sixteenth century, and later by Hollar, and by the Buck brothers. The Guildhall Collection contains a version of Samuel Scott's well-known painting.

Despite widening and the removal of the shops in 1758, by the end of the century it was clear that the old bridge could no longer bear the volume of traffic, on foot or by horse and cart, which tramped across it. A new bridge, designed by John Rennie, was built under his son's supervision; it involved much alteration of the street pattern near the north bridgehead. Begun in 1823, it was opened on 1 August 1831 by William IV; on 22 November the demolition of the medieval bridge began.

The new bridge was 1005 feet long and 56 feet wide, with a roadway of 32 feet, resting on five broad arches and built from 120,000 tons of stone. One of its most attractive features was the steps leading to the water from either corner of each end. By 1924, however, a settlement was reported in the east side of the South Pier and by 1962 cracks were beginning to show. Work was begun in November 1967 and a new bridge was opened by Her Majesty the Queen on 16 March 1973. The design was by Harold Knox King, the City Engineer, and the building contractors were John Mowlem and Co., whose tender for the work was £4,067,000. It is a post-tensioned concrete structure, faced with granite and spanning the river in three broad arches, thus leaving a wider channel for navigation. Rennie's bridge was sold to the McCulloch Oil Corporation of California and has been re-erected at Lake Havasu in Arizona, the facing stones having been carefully numbered so that each would find its proper place again. The price paid for it was £1,025,000.

On either side of the bridge stands a single large building, an office block, Adelaide House, to the east and **Fishmongers' Hall** to the west. A Hall has stood here since 1434 but the post-Fire building had to be demolished to accommodate Rennie's bridge; the twentieth-century structure has made amends by providing the Hall with a more open, dignified setting than it had hitherto. The Hall was built between 1831 and 1834 to designs by Henry Roberts, in whose office George Gilbert Scott was chief assistant at the time. The result, as Sir John Summerson says, is that Roberts was never again so grand nor Scott so pure in achievement. The Hall presents an eleven-bay front to the Bridge and a

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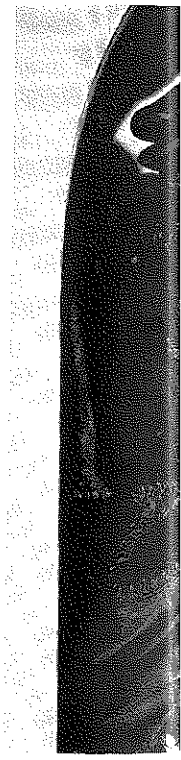

Statue of Sir Willia
Thames Street