

The Story of Old London Bridge

by Brian Cookson

Old London Bridge was once considered one of the wonders of the world. Construction began in 1176, when an enterprising priest, Peter de Colechurch, decided that the time had come to replace the high maintenance wooden London Bridge with a stone bridge befitting London's growing importance as capital of England. He was to devote the rest of his life to the ground-breaking project of spanning the fierce tidal flow of the nearly 1000 ft. wide river. Sadly, Peter de Colechurch did not live to see the completion of his life's work and on his death in 1205 he was laid to rest in St Thomas's Chapel, which had been constructed near the middle of the bridge. Old London Bridge was eventually opened in 1209 and was to last over 600 years. When it was finally demolished in 1832, some bones purported to be the remains of Peter de Colechurch were discovered in the undercroft of the chapel and were deposited in a casket in the British Museum. Unfortunately, on subsequent examination only one bone was found to be human and the rest were of animal origin.

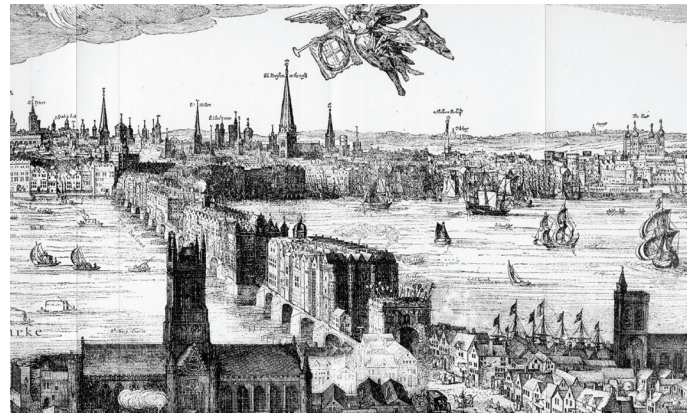
Finance for the 33-year-long project to build Old London Bridge was raised largely from a tax on wool which was England's most important export and formed the basis of the country's wealth. This gave rise to the saying that 'London Bridge was built upon wool-packs'. The Bridge House Estate (BHE) was set up to maintain Old London Bridge, and over the centuries the BHE portfolio has grown to be worth over £500,000,000. Today it is responsible for maintenance of all the bridges which cross the Thames from Blackfriars to Tower Bridge.

Old London Bridge consisted of 20 arches. Since the average gap between the arches was less than 30 ft., the resulting concentration of the tidal flow produced a drop of water level of up to six ft. This gave rise to the risky sport of 'shooting the bridge'. Less dangerous but nevertheless unpleasant was the risk of streams of urine or lumps of faeces dropping onto you as you passed under the many public and private latrines that disgorged their contents into the river from the houses above. Many people were drowned or seriously injured when passing through Old London Bridge and this gave rise to the proverb 'London Bridge is for wise men to go over and fools to go under.'

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Old London Bridge. Note the rapids caused by the narrow arches.



Old London Bridge from the south, 1616, by Visscher.

The dangers of passing through the arches of Old London Bridge were increased in 1581 when the Dutchman, Peter Morice, installed a waterwheel in front of the northernmost arch in order to pump water to a cistern on the north bank and supply water to subscribers in the City. So successful was the enterprise that four more wheels were later installed by the northern arches and two at the Southwark end of the bridge. The result was to concentrate the flow of the tide at the central arches which became even more difficult to navigate. The other effect was to cause Old London Bridge to act as a sort of weir allowing the river to freeze in many of the much colder winters prevalent at the time. This inspired the watermen to set up Frost Fairs on the ice.

A particular feature of Old London Bridge was the drawbridge which was sited near the middle of the bridge. An ornately decorated wooden gate, known as Drawbridge Gate, stood at its northern end. This provided a third line of defence against attack from the south after the formidable stone gate at the Southwark end and the drawbridge itself. Drawbridge Gate also became the site for a gruesome tradition started in 1305 when the head of the Scottish patriot William Wallace was displayed there on a spike. From this time until the seventeenth century heads of convicted traitors were displayed in several places around London including on Temple Bar, but the most distinguished or notorious found themselves impaled at Old London Bridge. Executed royals never suffered this indignity but even the head of Sir Thomas More, one-time friend and Chancellor of Henry VIII, was put on a spike on Drawbridge Gate after he was executed in 1535. After the demolition of the Drawbridge Gate and its replacement by Nonesuch House in 1577, heads were impaled at the great stone gate at the Southwark end of the bridge.

Throughout its life, Old London Bridge played its part in many historical events which decided the fate of the kingdom. Both Simon de Montfort in 1264, and Wat Tyler in 1381 persuaded the citizens of London to raise the drawbridge so that their forces could enter

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the city against the will of the authorities. However both uprisings were eventually defeated and the leaders killed. Wat Tyler's head was impaled on Drawbridge Gate, replacing the head of Archbishop Sudbury, who had recently been executed by the Peasant army.

The last time Old London Bridge saw military action was during the Civil War. General Fairfax led the Commonwealth New Model Army to Southwark with the intention of gaining control of London. No force was needed as Londoners supported Cromwell and the army was allowed to cross Old London Bridge peacefully. The Civil War ended with the defeat of the king, who was executed in Whitehall in 1649. No king's head has ever been displayed at Old London Bridge. Following his execution, the head of Charles I was sewn back on to his corpse before he was eventually buried in St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

Old London Bridge reached its pinnacle of fame in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tourists came from all over Europe to admire what was considered a wonder of the world. It must be admitted that many visitors were fascinated by the display of heads as much as by the bridge's other charms. However, the centuries-old bridge was steeped in history, was the longest inhabited bridge in the world and possessed an extraordinary mixture of architectural styles that made it typically English at a time when the rest of Europe was embracing the classical Baroque.

Old London Bridge's days of glory nearly came to an end in 1666 when the City was almost completely destroyed by the Great Fire of London. Although the City was quickly rebuilt after the Great Fire, many people decided to move their residence to the attractive new squares and riverside developments that grew up in the west of London. Like the City itself, Old London Bridge ceased to be fashionable. In the eighteenth century Old London Bridge became a byword for congestion, leading to increasing threats to build new bridges which would improve cross-river traffic by removing Old London Bridge's monopoly. The City tried to improve the situation by introducing a new rule requiring traffic to keep to the left. This decision turned out to have enormous importance in the later standardisation of the rule throughout the United Kingdom which was formalised in the Highways Bill in 1835. The rule was even enshrined in a piece of doggerel:

*The rule of the road is a paradox quite,
For if you keep to the left, you're sure to be right.*

Despite the introduction of the 'keep left' rule, Old London Bridge's monopoly was finally broken, first at Putney in 1729 and then more significantly at Westminster in 1750. This led to the decision to remove all the houses, so that the roadway could be widened from 12 ft. to 45 ft. This work was completed in 1760.

Without its houses, Old London Bridge no longer aroused the strong emotional attachment of the past. Its death knell was sounded 1801 by the Third Report from the Select Committee upon the Improvement of the Port of London which found that Old London Bridge was now insecure. The Report recommended the construction of a new bridge. The City selected a design for a 1000 ft. granite structure of five semi-elliptical arches by John Rennie. Both Rennie's London Bridge and its present day successor were constructed 180 ft. upstream of Old London Bridge. There is, incidentally, no truth in the amusing story that the Americans thought they were buying Tower Bridge rather than London Bridge when the McCulloch Corporation paid £1 million for Rennie's bridge in 1968.

Remains of Old London Bridge itself can be found in various places. One of the half-domed stone alcoves erected in the 1760s to provide refuge for pedestrians now stands in the grounds of Guy's Hospital. The colourful Coat of Arms of George III which was displayed at the Southwark stone gate was bought by a Southwark publican and today can be seen in Newcomen Street. A chair made out of wooden piles from Old London is held in Fishmongers' Hall, which stood upstream of Old London Bridge from the fourteenth century and was rebuilt in 1831 to accommodate Rennie's bridge. Three stones were placed in the churchyard of St Magnus Martyr where they can be seen today. This location is especially appropriate since the footway on to Old London Bridge passed through here after the removal of the houses. Inside the church is a detailed model of Old London Bridge showing the houses and hectic life of the people who lived, worked and shopped there for over six hundred years.



About Brian Cookson

Brian Cookson is the author of *Crossing the River: The History of London's Thames River Bridges from Richmond to the Tower and London's Waterside Walks*. He is also a Blue Badge Guide who offers various fascinating guided walks of London. Find out more on his web page: www.lonwalk.ndirect.co.uk/