

Notes on Abingdon Bridges - Manfred Brod, revised, with additional information from Roger Thomas and Jackie Smith

The oldest Abingdon bridges were those crossing the River Ock. The stone-built Ock Bridge west of the town was on a main route by which travellers from the south or south-west could either proceed via Dry Sandford towards Hinksey or turn off and enter Abingdon by what is now Ock Street. The bridge was noted in about 1080, and in 1100 the new abbot, Faritius, arrived from Malmesbury by this route. A sort of suburb developed there, with a mill, the Hennor Mill, in existence by about 1200, a chapel dedicated to St Thomas presumably after Thomas à Becket's canonization in 1173, and another one of St Mary Magdalen. In the 1290s, the merchants of Abingdon objected violently to a fair which the abbot had instituted, and this finally had to be moved to outside the town, on the far side of the Ock Bridge, which took it into the hundred of Sutton.

St Helen's Bridge spanned the Ock near its confluence with the Thames. It was mentioned in 1389 when someone was drowned while bathing near it, but may well have been much older. There was certainly a mill at that place by about 1180.

But until the fifteenth century travel south- and eastwards across the Thames was difficult. There may at some time have been a wooden bridge of limited capacity at Abingdon and the river there may sometimes have been shallow enough to ford, but Andersey Island was liable to flood, and at Culham, where the Swift Ditch had also to be crossed, the ferryman's charges were extortionate. In 1416, a group of Abingdon merchants led by Geoffrey Barbour and John Howchion completed a notable feat of engineering. Both river crossings were spanned by stone bridges, and a causeway was built between them. The Abingdon bridge had eleven arches originally, and after 1453 fourteen, and that at Culham seven. A poem written down about 1457 (though perhaps composed much earlier) by an Abingdon ironmonger, Richard Foreman, describes the project in enthusiastic terms, with three hundred labourers hard at work, and a hundred women keeping them supplied with bread, cheese, and cooked chicken. The reality may have been more prosaic, but the economic benefits proved great; the important trade route from the Severn towns towards London shifted from the old crossing at Wallingford to the new route, and Abingdon prospered.

The maintenance of the new bridges and the causeway was to be the responsibility of the townsfolk. This was organised through the town's main guild, the Holy Cross Fraternity. The fraternity was dissolved in 1548, and in 1553 was replaced by the charity of Christ's Hospital. This had the responsibility for all four bridges as well as the highway leading towards Dorchester imposed on it by its charter. Such activities were seen at the time as charitable, since they were for the general good and provided work for the often under-employed poor.

The bridges were of strategic importance in wartime. In the Civil War, a drawbridge was inserted into the Abingdon Bridge. In January 1645, simultaneous Royalist attacks across the Culham and Ock bridges were beaten off by the Parliamentarian garrison of Abingdon. In 1940, Culham bridge, by then no longer in use, carried two concrete pill-boxes with anti-tank guns; the emplacements can still be seen.

Major repairs and improvement projects were carried out at frequent intervals in the ensuing centuries, although other institutions began to be involved. In 1790, the Thames Navigation Commissioners dredged a channel near the Oxfordshire bank of the Thames and rebuilt that end of the Abingdon bridge, with a tall arch for boats and a smaller one over the towpath, but the roadway was still too narrow for more than a single line of traffic. After a number of accidents, it was widened in 1829. But with the deepening of the river, the foundations of the bridge became inadequate, and an inspecting engineer in 1925 considered it so unsafe that he ordered its immediate closure. The Culham bridge had partly collapsed shortly before. The section south of Nag's Head Island was rebuilt in reinforced concrete in 1927, with a temporary wooden structure taking traffic across the river for the duration of the works. The original stones were re-used for facing so that the historic appearance is preserved. At the same time the A415 was diverted at Culham, where the old bridge still stands derelict. It was at this time that responsibility for bridge maintenance was formally passed from Christ's Hospital to the relevant county councils.

Nomenclature: The Abingdon Bridge is also called the New Bridge or Burford Bridge (= borough ford). The section south of Nag's Head Island is the Maud Hales Bridge, commemorating the benefactress who provided three extra flood arches there. The northern part is Hart Bridge, after the White Hart Inn that stood for centuries at its northern end, at the site of the later Old Gaol.

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