



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

New Bridge – Oldest Bridge over the Thames

by Ron Carmichael

Several years ago, on a sunny afternoon, my wife and I were sitting on the north bank of the Thames, near Newbridge. Suddenly, a black sphere broke the surface of the water a few feet from the bank, and a figure arose dripping wet to reveal a human form. After he had raised his visor, the man introduced himself as a diver employed by the Oxfordshire County Council, making the annual inspection of the foundations of the bridge. These, he revealed, were the original elm beams laid by the monks over seven hundred years ago, still intact.

Research into Newbridge reveals little that is known of its origins, and there is also a sort of mystery in the disappearance of the long causeways to the bridge at either end. Radcot, Lechlade and New Bridges were probably all built in the first half of the 13th century; about twenty medieval bridges had been built over the Thames by the end of the 15th century and, of these, only Radcot and Newbridge remain in more or less their original forms, Lechlade St Johns (as distinct from Halfpenny Bridge) having been completely rebuilt in the 19th century. The origins of Radcot and Lechlade are well documented: Radcot Bridge was the first of the three to be built, about 1200, on the orders of King John, by the Cistercian monks of St Mary, Citeaux in Normandy, who were granted land near Faringdon for the purpose.

At the end of the 12th century, the Cotswolds wool trade was burgeoning, the wool staple increasingly important to the royal finances. Communications between the Cotswolds and the wool towns were poor, and it became an economic necessity to build roads and bridges to speed the wool to the south. Lechlade Bridge was built about 1220, also by royal command, by the monks of the Priory of St John the Baptist, who are said to have lived in a building on the site of the present 'Trout' Inn.

The art of building stone bridges in England had departed with the Romans, and by this time only monks possessed the necessary skills, including the building of pointed arches, which are a feature of Radcot and New Bridges, and are similar to the construction of cathedral roofs. No doubt King John, whilst availing himself of the ecclesiastical expertise, was also grateful for the unpaid nature of the labour provided. Later bridges over the Thames, such as Abingdon and Culham, built in the 15th century, had more rounded arches, suggesting that by then laymen had taken over from the ecclesiastical architects and masons.

Newbridge's origins are not well documented and, until recently, the various authorities over the centuries had surmised that the bridge had been built either by a local abbey such as Eynsham, or by Sir John Golafre at the same time as Abingdon and Culham bridges, circa 1420. However, recent research⁽¹⁾ suggests that the bridge was built, about 1250, by the monks of Deerhurst Priory, to which the manor of la Nore (Northmoor) belonged. Edward the Confessor had made Deerhurst an outpost of the Benedictine Abbey of St.

Denis, near Paris, and it was from here that the Pontife Brothers, noted church architects, came to England in the first half of the 13th century. It is known that Deerhurst Priory, near Gloucester, was responsible for the upkeep of the bridge, and for the collection of tolls, until 1460, when La Nore was seized from the French in the Hundred Years War, and New Bridge, inter alia, reverted to the Crown.

Newbridge was built to a similar design to Radcot, but in a superior mode, naturally with fifty years of bridge-building between the two, and the 'New' in the name is in relation to Radcot and Lechlade. It was longer than Radcot, wider, had more arches, had pedestrian refuges, used superior stone (from Taynton near Burford) and the grey honey-coloured stonework makes it one of the most beautiful old bridges in Britain today. There were several other improvements, but the most important was the length of the causeway at each end of the bridge. The present bridge has six arches over the river itself, and six in the causeway to the south of the bridge. But it was originally a far more massive structure.

Leland, writing circa 1540(2) says

'I rode then 2 myles and halft through fayre champayne ground, fruitfull of corn to New Bridge on Isis. The ground there all about lyeth in low meadow, often overflown by rage of rayne. There is a long causeye of stone at each end of the bridge. The bridge itself has 6 grate arches of stone.'

More details were given in the Baskerville MS of 1692, quoted by Thacker(3)

'New Bridge on Bark Shire side has 17 arches to ye main bridge. The bridge itself has six arches, and is about 53 paces or yards. Over on Oxford Shire side beyond ye main bridge are 28 arches, the causeway on Oxford Shire side is about 300 yards, and ye causeway on ye Bark Shire side 373 yards. And in all over causeways and bridge about 726 yards over 51 arches, to vent water in great flood.'

Thacker, writing in 1974, says 'where are the arches now?' I have seen no other references to these causeways, and it must be surmised that they were demolished, perhaps in the 19th century, during extensive marsh-draining and perhaps river dredging.

The right to call either Radcot or Newbridge the oldest bridge on the river has never been the cause of any controversy over the centuries, as far as I am aware, but several writers and authorities have said, either tentatively or unequivocally, that one or the other is the oldest bridge over the River Thames.

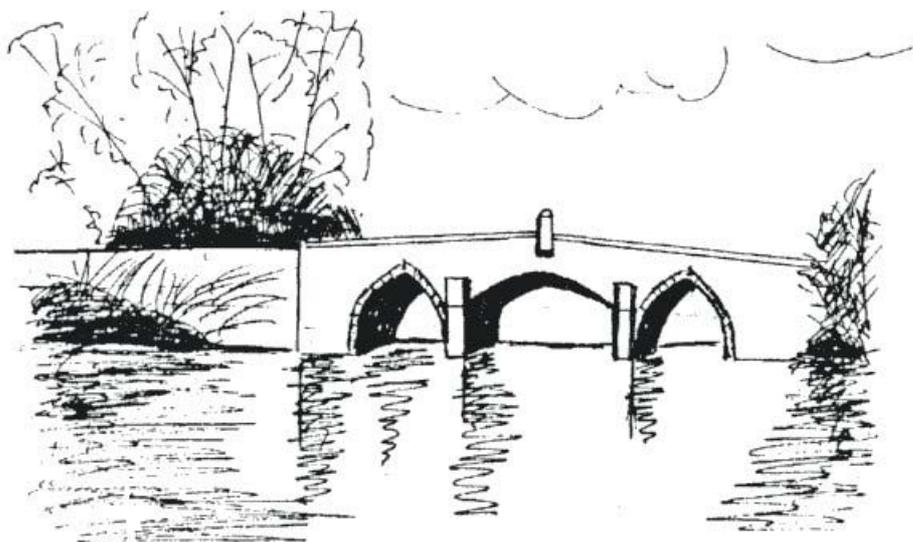
At first sight it seems certain that Radcot Bridge, built in 1200, is fifty years older than Newbridge, built in 1250. But, as Professor Joad might have said, it depends on what you mean by the oldest bridge. There are two factors to take into account to deny Radcot's claim, first the bridge was severely damaged during the Wars of the Roses, and had to be substantially rebuilt above its foundations. During this reconstruction, the centre arch of the three (see illustration) was flattened, presumably to reduce the gradient of the bridge, and thus, whilst Newbridge is still more or less in its original form, Radcot cannot be said to be the oldest intact bridge over the Thames. Secondly, Radcot Bridge is not strictly, now, on the River Thames; it is on a backwater, due to the construction of a new cut in 1787 as part of the Thames and Seven Canal Company's improvements, when a new bridge was built at the same time to take the road traffic.

There is insufficient space here to complete the story of Newbridge to the present date. The hamlet of Newbridge, the river traffic, the Battle of Newbridge in the Civil War, the

Maybush and the Rose Revived, the construction of the present river banks, the many traffic accidents, and the introduction of traffic lights. All these must await another time, when perhaps some of the unanswered questions might be answered. Meanwhile the remarkable life of a loved landmark carries on.

References:

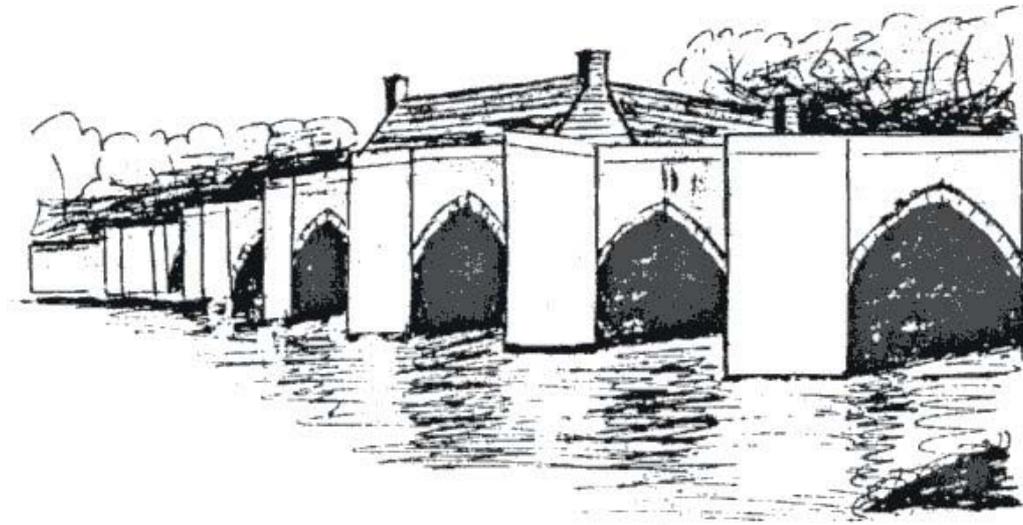
- (1) Thames Crossings, by Geoffrey Phillips, David and Charles, 1981
- (2) Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales (135-1543) vol 5, Bodleian
- (3) The Thames Highway vol II by Fred S. Thacker, 1974



The old Radcot Bridge, built c 1200, now over a backwater of the Thames



The new Radcot Bridge, built in 1787, over the navigation cut



New Bridge, built about 1250, with the 'Rose Revived' behind

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