

Oxfordshire

HENLEY'S MEDIEVAL BRIDGE

Henley's existing bridge was built between 1782 and 1786, replacing a dilapidated predecessor along its south side. An earlier bridge is documented from 1225, and physical remains suggest that it was built (or possibly rebuilt) in stone around the 1170s, perhaps when the planned town was laid out. The main span was of timber by the 16th century, and survived in an increasingly patched-up state until its demolition c.1784--5.

No detailed descriptions survive of the medieval structure. Its development has therefore to be reconstructed from a combination of documentary references, architectural remains, and post-medieval accounts and illustrations.

Archaeological and Documentary Evidence

Though nothing remains of the medieval bridge's main part, two semi-circular stone arches from each end survive underground, abutting the modern bridge. One (on the Berkshire side) was discovered during building work for the new Henley Regatta building in 1984; the other survives in the cellars of the Angel Inn. The vaults are of flint rubble with stone (ashlar) dressings, and their style, which includes diagonal tooling in the stonework, suggests a late 12th-century date.

That these surviving arches are of stone does not prove that the entire bridge was stone-built, since Jan Siberechts's paintings of the 1690s (below) show stone-built arches at either end of the timber structure. In the 1980s, however, a large masonry block with similar diagonal tooling was found on the riverbed in midstream. This suggests that the 12th- and 13th-century bridge may have been a continuous span of stone arches, which collapsed at some point before the early 16th century. Possibly this happened as late as 1498, when funds were collected 'for making two arches of the bridge', although that could (as in 1532) have referred merely to repairs of the arches at either end, or even to timber 'arches'. The bridge was certainly timber by the 1530s when the Tudor antiquary John Leland saw it, though Leland suspected that 'it was [formerly] of stone, as the foundations show at low water'. Earlier references to timber are inconclusive, since this may have been needed for scaffolding or to support a stone vault during building work.

The Siberechts paintings

Our best evidence for the 16th- and 17th-century bridge comes from a series of paintings of Henley in the 1690s by the Dutch painter Jan Siberechts. These show clearly the timber structure linking the stone arches, its roadway protected by wooden rails which were also repaired frequently. On the Berkshire side the bridge was approached by a short embanked causeway, probably the 'clappers' (or clapper-bridge) repaired in the early 16th century. Many 12th- and 13th-century bridges were approached by causeways, some of which (like Oxford's Grandpont) were elaborate structures several hundred metres long. Henley's more modest causeway was probably also constructed as part of the medieval bridge.

Bridge Buildings

Siberechts showed several buildings adjoining the bridge, one of them (on the north) built out into the water on stilts. Medieval deeds similarly mention buildings 'at' or 'adjoining' the bridge, amongst them a granary which in 1354 had a cellar built into the bridge arch. Also adjoining was the chapel of St Anne, which is mentioned from 1405. In the 15th and early 16th century it was associated with a bridge hermit, who collected alms from passing travellers towards the upkeep of the chapel, bridge and highway. This was a common medieval arrangement, although in Henley most repair-funds came from town properties given for that purpose by leading inhabitants -- an indication of the bridge's crucial importance to the town.

Sources: *South Midlands Archaeology*, 15 (1985), 77--9; 16 (1986), 101; 19 (1989), 52; Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record, PRN 2215; P M Briers (ed.), *Henley Borough Records* (Oxfordshire Record Society 41, 1960), refs at 239; J. Leland, *Itinerary*, ed L. Toulmin Smith, V, 71; *Rot. Litt. Claus.* II, 54; Oxfordshire Record Office, BOR/3/A/XIX/BB/7; BOR/3/A/V/BM/8.

COPYRIGHT

All rights, including copyright ©, of the content of this document are owned or controlled by the University of London. For further information refer to <http://www.englandspastforeveryone.org.uk/Info/Disclaimer>