

### ***Rochester Bridge Chapel***

We know that the first bridge at Rochester was built by the Romans soon after the conquest in AD43 and it is reasonable to conclude that Rochester Bridge was the first major bridge to be completed by the Roman Army in Britain. Perhaps there was a temporary timber campaign bridge initially, although there is no evidence for this, and the engineering would have been extremely challenging. Fairly promptly a more permanent bridge with stone piers and a flat timber deck was completed on this vital military and trade route (Watling Street), which linked Dover to London. The bridge and the river needed to be defended and hence a defensive fort with associated trading post developed. Named Durobrivae, or "the fort by the bridges", this settlement evolved into the city of Rochester where the second English Cathedral was established by Justus in AD604 and from 1087 a Norman castle was constructed by Bishop Gundulph.

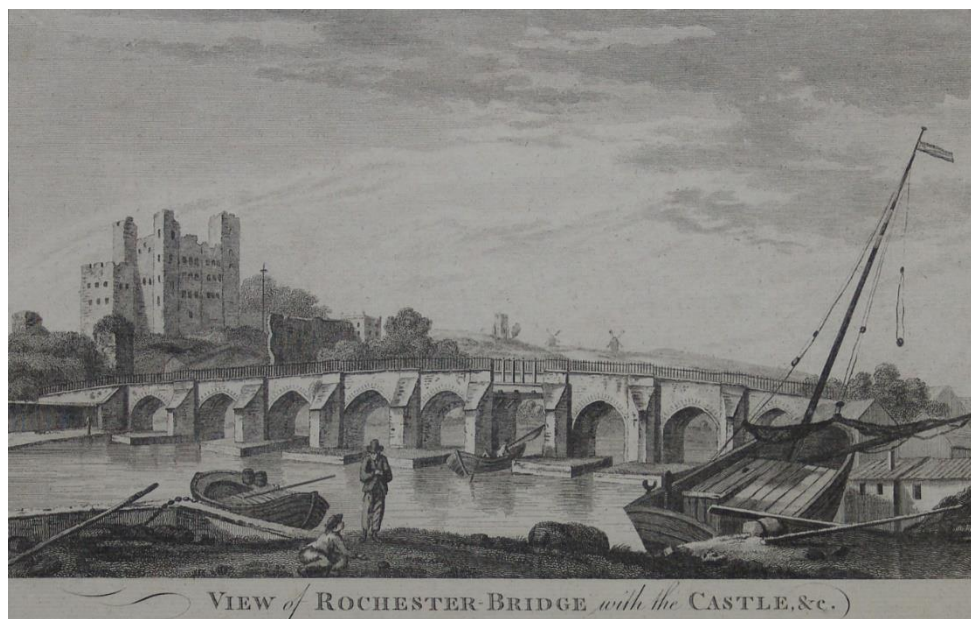


In the early decades following the military invasion, the bridge was maintained by the state, initially the Army, but later the leading landowners of the civitas-territory around Rochester. From the early eighth century we begin to see written evidence of how the continuing maintenance of Rochester Bridge was being organised. Kentish charters began to record the obligations of landowners to undertake the maintenance of bridges, known as "bridgework". The earliest surviving copy of the specific arrangements is known as the Rochester Bridgeworks List and is bound into a book dated 1120 belonging to Rochester Cathedral, called Textus Roffensis. This allocated the responsibility to the common people of a very large area approximating to about a quarter of the County of Kent for the maintenance of the bridge. Local parishes and landowners were liable for bridge works and had to contribute materials, money and labour to the repairs of the sections which were allocated to them.



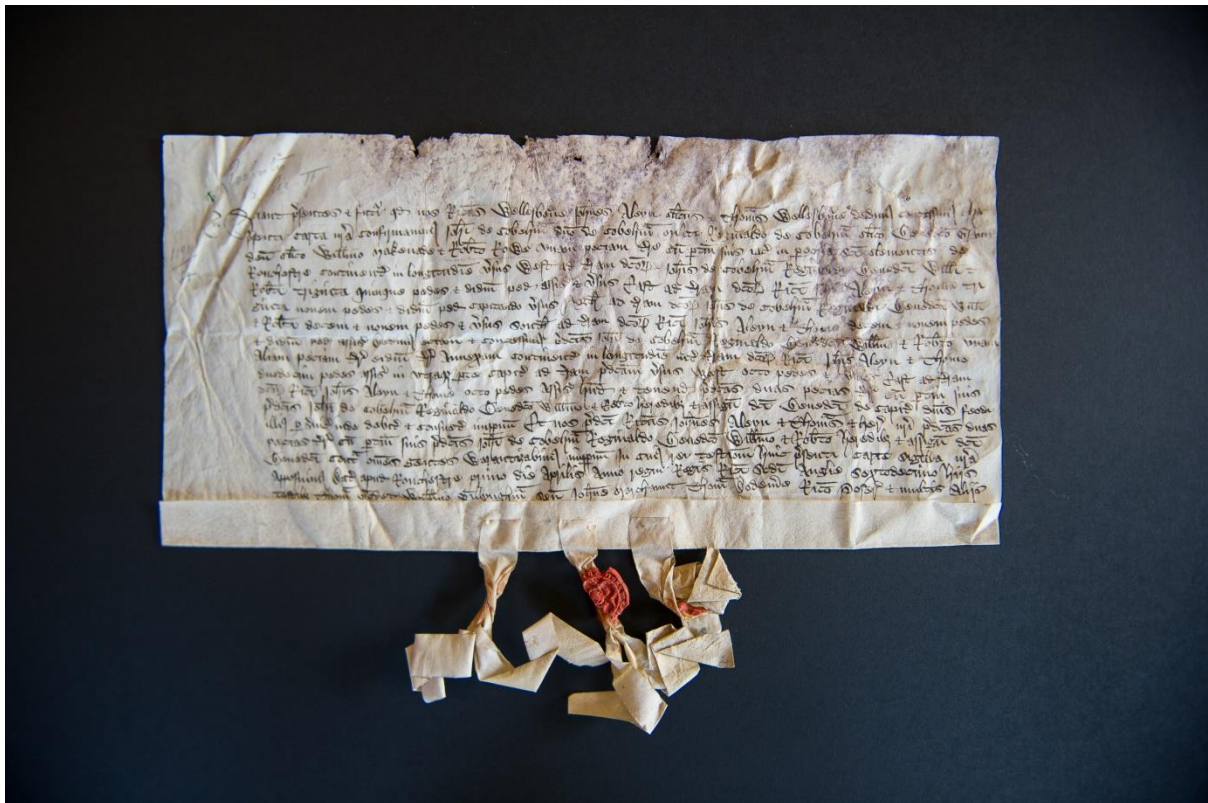
*The Bridgeworks List. Picture courtesy of Dean and Chapter of Rochester*

Under the Contributory Parishes system the old Roman Bridge survived, although much repaired, for thirteen centuries until it was destroyed by ice and floodwater in 1381. Two benefactors, Sir John de Cobham and Sir Robert Knolles, assisted by architect and master mason Henry Yevele, built a new stone bridge about 100m upstream of the site of the Roman bridge, which was completed around 1391. With the bridge complete, they obtained letters patent from King Richard II in 1399 to establish a charitable trust, "The Wardens and Commonalty of Rochester Bridge (now known as the Rochester Bridge Trust), to maintain the crossing of the River Medway in perpetuity. The Wardens were elected by the people of the contributory parishes. The founders and the Wardens persuaded associates and other influential people to endow the Trust with land and money to fund the maintenance and administration of the bridge.





As the bridge neared completion, Sir John de Cobham arranged for the Wardens and Commonalty to purchase some land at the Rochester end of the bridge. The conveyance, dated on 1 April 1393, is in the archives of the Trust. Sir John obtained a licence from King Richard II in 1394/5, to "*found a chantry chapel of three chaplains to celebrate divine service daily in a chapel to be constructed by him at the end of the bridge, the chaplains aforesaid to be supported from the revenues of the [endowed] lands.*" The choice of site was ideal for a chapel intended for the use of travellers as all persons entering or leaving Rochester by the bridge would have to pass its door.



Rochester's Bridge Chapel was not built into the structure of the bridge itself as other bridge chapels often were. In an estuarine location, the engineering challenges at Rochester are severe, with a tidal range of over 7 metres and a marine environment as well as the outward flow of the river to contend with. Most of the other known bridge chapels across the country are inland with no tidal challenges, where constructing a chapel as a buttress structure on a pier of a bridge would be relatively straightforward. Of course at London Bridge there was a structurally-integrated bridge chapel on a tidal river but in the capital there was far more competition for land and London Bridge famously carried a range of other buildings and structures. In contrast, there was land available for the construction of the Chapel on the eastern bank at Rochester where construction was a much simpler proposition.

Sir John took the opportunity of this new Bridge Chapel to use it for a secondary function as a chantry for his family. It seems highly likely that it was built as bridge chapel first and chantry second, since Sir John had other, more obvious, choices of location for a family chantry, such as Cobham Church where he had endowed a college and where he and many members of his family are buried. In the foundation charter for the Bridge Chapel, it is set out that the three chaplains or Chapel Clerks were to celebrate masses at which travellers might be present, and to say special prayers for the living and dead

benefactors of the bridge. Those benefactors are listed in the surviving Chapel Memorandum Book together with notes of purchases and other costs for the Chapel including sacramental bread and wine, candles, rushes, torches, cleaning expenses and washing of vestments. It was the custom for every priest to celebrate mass daily and so there would have been three masses in the chapel every day. Each priest or Chapel Clerk received a salary of £6 a year.

Most illuminating of the documents throwing light on the foundation of the bridge chapel is a Composition dated 17 January 1393, which describes the chapel as "newly erected" at that date. The Composition gives the dedication of the chapel as Holy Trinity and this name also occurs in one of the Wardens' early account rolls. However, it is often stated in sources, including the foundation charter itself, that the chapel was called "Allesoulen" or All Souls.

The plan of the Bridge Chapel is a small rectangle, about 30 feet long and 20 feet wide. There are eight windows, the largest looks east; two each facing north and south (with one of each now bricked up); and three west – one each side of, and one above the entrance door. The ceiling was painted and the walls lime-washed. The paved floor was strewn with rushes. Sitting accommodation was not universally provided at this time since the custom was to stand when not kneeling but the records show that the Chapel was provided with stools, partly paid for by the clerks themselves. On the altar stood a silver cross and another painted wooden cross was placed on the rood beam. Altar frontals and vestments appear in the accounts and as gifts and were kept in two wooden chests with locks and keys. On one wall hung a scroll of benefactors' names, written on velum, and above the door was the royal coat of arms.

The new Chapel establishment was largely independent of the direct management of the church authorities. Although explicit documents are not available, various pieces of evidence point to the Chapel clerks being directly employed by the Bridge Wardens. The names of each of the clerks appear in the accounts.

Any cash oblations received by the Bridge Chapel were to be handed over to the rector of the nearby parish church of St Clement's which may help to explain why the Clerks of the Bridge Chapel did not appear to make much effort to collect alms in cash, except in years when the bridge needed repair when they were presumably able to persuade the rector of St Clement's to allow them to keep some or all of the funds raised. Non-monetary gifts, such as ornaments, chalices, vestments and candles, were to be retained by the Bridge Chapel.

A house was constructed for the Clerks immediately adjoining and directly accessed from the Chapel. The small doorway in the north wall can still be seen although it is now bricked up. There was a small garden enclosed by a fence and gate. The records show that the house was large enough to accommodate four men and that sometimes spare rooms were rented out. Various domestic utensils were purchased by the Wardens, including a spit, pots and pans. A 1549 inventory mentions a bed, valued at 30s, and a "payer of Andyrans" worth 12d.



In the 16th Century, the Chapel was still performing the wishes of its patron. The survey of monastic property undertaken by Henry VIII in 1534 reveals the names of the three clerks and records that each were still receiving £6 per annum for "their singing according to the foundation of John Cobham and Robert Knolles".

Following the 1547 Chantries Act, the chapel was dissolved and converted to a storeroom for the master carpenter of the bridge then let to various tenants and used as a public house, a private house, and in Victorian times as a fruit and sweet shop. Various changes were made to the structure over the centuries, including the addition of a clock tower with windows so that the Overseer of Workmen could observe repair work on the work on the bridge and ring a bell to indicate the start and end of each tidal shift.

There are lots of original medieval features preserved within the Chapel including window tracery, three piscinas, notches for the rood screen, stone lamp corbels, and an aumbrey which would have been used to store the chalice, wine, candles, and other supplies for all three chapels. Some of the features are hidden behind the modern panelling.



An account dated 1788 by the son of an earlier Warden, describes building work of the 1730s and records that "The ancient porch at the west end of the chapel becoming ruinous and decayed, the stone work, lead, timber and other materials thereunto belonging, were taken down ... and the present handsome building of Portland stone erected in its stead ... On the front of the old porch were seven antique shields with arms ... but being much decayed and corroded by time ... new ones [were] neatly carved on stone, of the same size and form, which are placed in a parallel line above the key-stones of the arches of the portico". The Portland stone structure was later demolished and the eighteenth century copies of the shields, which had originally been placed on the west front by Sir John de Cobham in 1393, were moved inside and are now displayed on the east wall. Four of the shields represent the temporal power of the 1390s and are those of Richard II and three of his uncles. Two represent St Andrew (patron saint of Rochester Cathedral) and St Edmund (patron saint of England before Edward III associated St George with the Order of the Garter). The final shield probably represents the arms of Edward the Confessor, who was venerated by Richard II.





Over the decades, the chapel fell into disrepair but, despite repeated petitions from the Wardens of the bridge, the Charity Commission would not agree to allow the Trust to make the necessary repairs. By 1879 when the Wardens constructed the new Bridge Chamber which now adjoins the Bridge Chapel, the Chapel had roof had fallen in. Unable to obtain approval from the Charity Commission to do more, the building was thoroughly cleaned and the floor was laid with gravel. No further work was carried out until 1898 when a galvanised iron roof was erected to protect the old oak gallery screen.

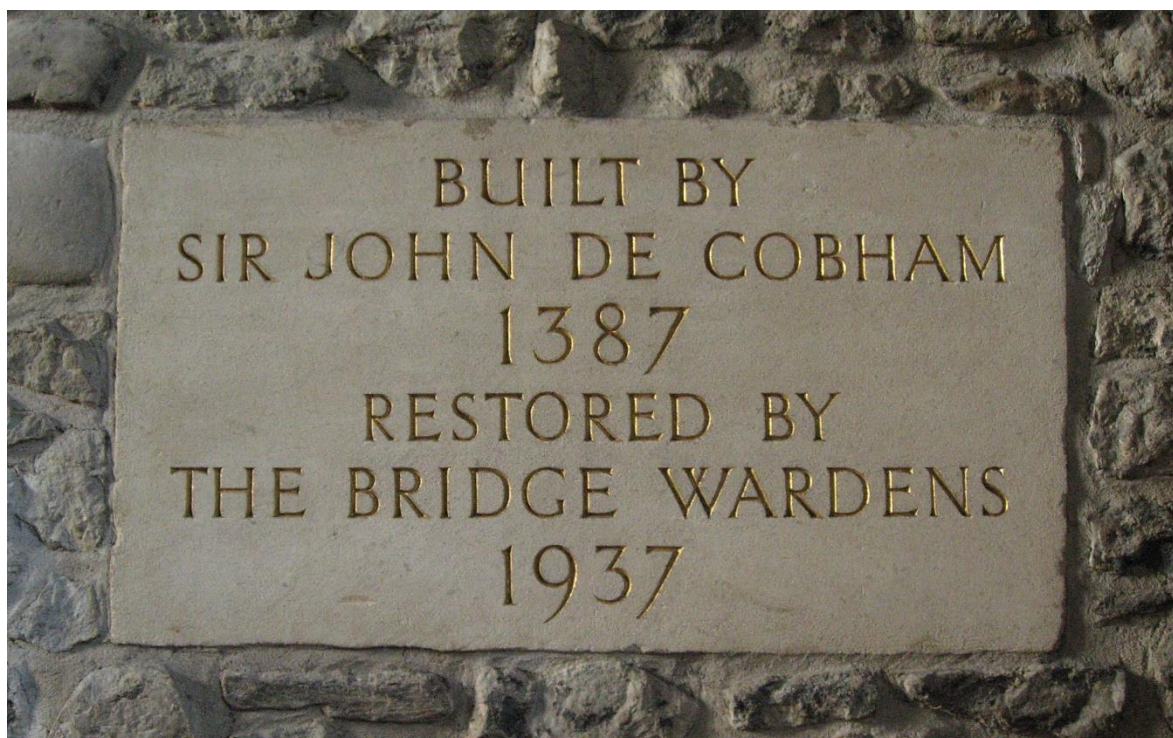


Finally, in 1935, the architect Sir Herbert Baker, managed to obtain the Commission's approval to carry out full restoration. The window mullions were repaired with Portland stone and missing Kentish ragstone blocks in the walls were replaced. A new roof was constructed, the floor covered in red quarry tiles and oak panelling was installed. One detail of the work which Sir Herbert considered most desirable was to install a new stained glass east window. The Charity Commission would sanction nothing other than plain glass, however, so the Wardens and Assistants had to meet from their own pockets the cost of adding stained glass with the arms of the founders, Sir John de Cobham and Sir Robert Knowles. A fine boardroom table and 22 chairs were commissioned from Robert "Mouseman" Thompson of Kilburn.





During the restoration work some burials were disturbed in the centre of the Chapel, near the site of the main altar. Three skulls from these burials, which were probably those of some of the medieval clerks to the chapel, were re-interred in a recess made in the east wall and sealed by a stone slab, now hidden behind the panelling. The renovation was completed in 1937 and cost a total of £2,691.



The bridge chapel of Rochester has many similarities with its surviving sister chapels but in other ways it is quite different. The chapel's location as a bridgehead chapel saved it from being demolished with gunpowder by the Royal Engineers along with the medieval bridge in 1857.

Perhaps most significantly, Rochester Bridge Chapel has been in the hands of the same organisation since its foundation and has never been under the direct management of the church authorities except in the most cursory way. Because the chapel has always been managed by the same body that is responsible for the bridges, it has managed to hold onto its true and original purpose, inextricably linked with the fortunes of the Wardens and Rochester Bridge. No doubt this has contributed to its survival. The tradition of celebrating mass to commemorate the founders and benefactors continues with the annual All Souls' Day service.



The Rochester Bridge Trust also continues its original purpose as an independently resourced charity which now provides and funds three major bridges at Rochester at no charge to the public purse.





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