

## History of Whitchurch Toll Bridge

The south branch of the Ridgeway drops down to the Thames at Pangbourne and was one of the earliest crossing places into Oxfordshire, first by ferry and later by bridge. The ferry operated from the road running past the George Inn down to the river, now known as Ferry Lane, and crossed the river to the mill at Whitchurch, where passengers would proceed to the bridge over the mill race to reach Mill Lane.

The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge arose from an idea by Robert Micklem, who with Samuel Gardiner and the Vanderstegens, father and son,



promoted an Act of Parliament, the Whitchurch Bridge Act 1792, for the purpose of building a bridge at or near the location of the ferry over the river Thames, between Whitchurch and Pangbourne. The original proprietors grew to ten in number by the time the Act was passed to take over the ferry rights and

to build at their own costs "a good and substantial bridge" which was described as being "of great utility and advantage to the public". In return for their investment the Proprietors were given the right to charge tolls.

The Company of Proprietors is required by the 1792 Act to repair and to re-build the bridge "such that at all times passage was provided for travellers, cattle and

carriages". The bridge is considered under the Act to be extra-parochial, thus not assessable for rates, taxes or duties, and not considered a county bridge subject to the counties of Oxfordshire or Berkshire. This was at a time when the Turnpike system was common throughout the country. However, in more recent times laws have been introduced which affect such undertakings as bridges, namely the Transport Charges etc (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1954, which gave the Minister of Transport powers to regulate tolls.

**TOLLS to be TAKEN at this GATE**  
 In accordance with the Whitchurch Bridge Act, passed in the thirty-second year of the reign of His Most Excellent Majesty King George III, it shall be lawful for the Proprietors to take a toll for passage over this bridge:

For every person on foot	1/2d
For every horse, mare, gelding, or mule, laden or unladen, and not drawing.	2d
For every ass, laden or unladen, drawing or not	1 1/2d
For every bull, ox, cow, steer, heifer, or calf	2d
For every sheep or lamb.	1/2d
For every boar, sow, or pig	1/2d
For every horse, mare, gelding, mule or other beast, except asses, drawing any carriage	2d
For every carriage with two or more wheels, For each and every wheel	2d

No Toll shall at any time be taken for the passage of Horses going to draw, or returning from drawing Barges or other vessels from Whitchurch Pump Lock, nor for the Persons attending and driving such Horses.

As a result of these changes the Company in 1988 promoted a further private Act of Parliament, the Whitchurch Bridge Act 1988, to link the changes in the 1954 Act to Whitchurch Bridge.

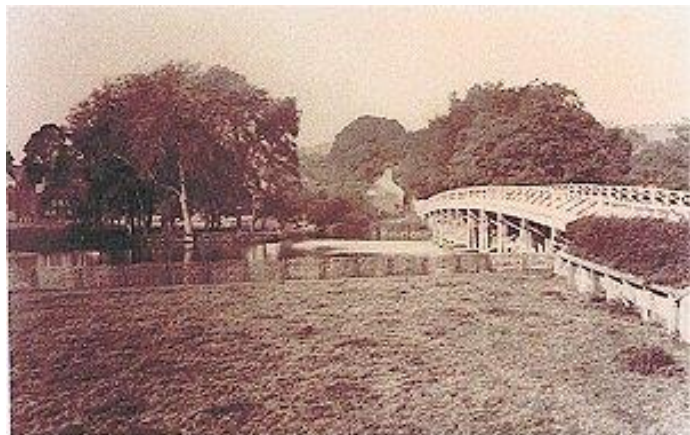


The **first bridge** was built by a Mr Treacher, who was known for numerous works erected on the Thames at that time, "as surveyor to the Commissioners". An engraving of it published in 1805 (*left*) shows that it was supported on about twenty piers, just wide enough to take a carriage and entirely

constructed of timber. The balustrades consisted of a two-railed fence, the posts of which bulged out at their base, and were fixed to the ends of the transverse beams which supported the roadway. The bridge can be seen in the background of the 1793 print shown on the first page.

The Reading Mercury of 10th November 1792 reported that the bridge was now open for horses and foot passengers and all kinds of cattle.

Construction of the **second bridge** (*right*) started in late 1852 and was completed in spring 1853. It was again built in timber but was less steep than the earlier structure and had only half the number of piers. At the toll house there was a wide gate across the road from the porch door.



When this bridge showed signs of deterioration in 1902 it was dismantled and the **third bridge** was built (*below*), this time using iron. The new bridge was designed by Joseph Morris and built by the Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company Ltd.



Construction began in late 1901 and finished in early 1902. The structure was gently arched and consisted of four spans with riveted lattice girders along the two outer edges; these acted as the main load bearing members and also as parapets. There were four 20 metre spans.

The carriageway was supported by wrought iron buckle plates between the transverse girders, overlaid with concrete.

The bridge was supported by three cast iron trestle piers and brickwork abutments. The north abutment had a fixed connection to the deck; the south abutment had elastomeric rubber bearing pads to allow expansion. The side girders were fixed to the cast iron column heads with bolted connections. Carriageway width was 5.2 m, and there was a single footway on the western side of 1.3 m width.

The structure was subject to various strengthening improvements in the 1920s, 40s and 70s, including additional bracing around the column heads and between the pier columns. Upstream fenders each consisting of three braced wooden piles at each pier were installed to protect the bridge. Downstream fenders were added in 2005. The headroom for river traffic was 3.9 m (summer river level), and the maximum depth of water under the bridge was 4.4 m, under the southern span.

The Toll House dates back to 1792 and was built close to the road so that tolls could be collected from the porch door, which at that time faced the road. In 1977 a front door was added in the north-facing wall. Both the toll house and the bridge were designated as Grade II listed structures in 1995.



In 1992 a brick-built toll booth with swing-arm barriers was built in the centre of the carriageway at the northern end of the bridge. In 2006 a computer controlled toll collection system was introduced using proximity cards known as 'bridge cards', which enabled motorists to pay their toll and operate the swing-arm barrier automatically.

The iron bridge of 1902 was in service for 101 years, by which time the increasing volume of traffic had given rise to structural concerns. A complete reconstruction was begun on 3rd October 2013, and the new **fourth bridge** opened on 19th September 2014. The dimensions and visual appearance of the reconstructed bridge are similar to its predecessor but the refurbished main girders no longer carry the loading from traffic. Information on the reconstruction project can be found in a separate article on this website.

### **Sale of bridge to a new owner after 227 years**

In February 2019 it was announced that the [General Estates Company Ltd](#), based in Hythe near Southampton, had become the new owner and operator of the Whitchurch Toll Bridge, having purchased the privately-owned bridge company.

### **Acknowledgements**

An earlier version of this article was displayed on the Toll Bridge Company's website until that site closed in 2019, following the sale of the bridge to new owners. John Elkins, Bridge Company Secretary from 1992 to 2005, wrote the first version, which

was further developed by his successor Geoff Weir, Company Secretary from 2005 to 2019. The version here has been edited for the Whitchurch Web.

Sir Rickman Godlee, "A Village on the Thames"

Robert Noble, "How Whitchurch Got Its Bridge"

Mike Beckley, personal notes

Miss E R Micklem, extract from minutes

Tom Reay, Bridge Company Secretary, 1985 to 1992