

Waterloo Bridge

by Brian Cookson

From the twelfth century, aristocrats and bishops were attracted to build their London residences along the Strand, because it was conveniently located between the Palace of Westminster and the City of London. Two of the most impressive of these riverside mansions were the Savoy Palace and Somerset House, which were located on either side of the future Waterloo Bridge.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the old Savoy buildings had become ruinous and the area was cleared for the construction of the approach roads for Waterloo Bridge. Somerset House, however, had been rebuilt in the classical manner in the eighteenth century. The river frontage, with its heavily rusticated Doric columns and impressive Watergate, is today separated from the Thames by the Victoria Embankment, but at that time could be approached by boat and was to inspire the architecture of the first bridge at this location.

In 1806 a group of speculators formed the Strand Building Company with the aim of constructing a bridge across the Thames midway between Westminster and Blackfriars, to be financed by the income from tolls. The company selected John Rennie's design of nine 120 ft. semi-elliptical river arches of Cornish granite. The total length including the abutments was 1,380 ft. The bridge architecture was greatly admired. The Italian sculptor Canova called it 'the noblest bridge in the world' and said that 'it is worth going to England solely to see Rennie's bridge.' This was a remarkable accolade at the time when it was more normal for English aristocrats to travel to Italy on the Grand Tour for their cultural education.

The new bridge was opened by the Prince Regent accompanied by the Duke of Wellington on 18 June 1817, exactly two years after the Battle of Waterloo. Following a new Act of Parliament of 1816, the Strand Bridge Company had renamed itself as the Waterloo Bridge Company, hence the present name of Waterloo Bridge.

Although Waterloo Bridge proved a financial disaster as people could cross the river without paying tolls at Westminster and Blackfriars bridges, it continued to excite the admiration of the public and inspired many paintings, including John Constable's vast canvas showing the opening ceremony, now in Tate Britain, and no less than 40 works by Claude Monet painted from his window in the Savoy Hotel.



One of Claude Monet's famous paintings of old Waterloo Bridge, 1903.

In May 1924, after over 100 years of river scour and by now having to carry new forms of motorised transport when it had originally been designed for the age of horse-drawn vehicles, Waterloo Bridge had to be closed for repairs. Sir William Arrol & Co. constructed a temporary iron girder bridge which was used until the bridge could be reopened after the river pier foundations had been strengthened. After the completion of the repairs, the temporary bridge was left standing in case the old bridge should fail again. This was to prove a wise decision.

The battle now raged between the pragmatists who wanted to build a new bridge fit for modern traffic conditions, and conservatives who wanted to preserve old Waterloo Bridge for historical and cultural reasons. The former were headed by the London County Council (LCC) whose engineers insisted that the old bridge was beyond repair and should be completely replaced. The latter consisted of a group of societies including the Royal Academy and the Royal Fine Arts Commission. Unfortunately for the old bridge, politics intervened. In 1934, Labour gained control of the LCC under the leadership of Herbert Morrison who was not impressed by any aesthetic or historical arguments put forward by the Conservative Government and its artistic supporters in favour of preserving Rennie's world-renowned structure. Morrison announced his decision to demolish the old bridge by personally breaking off the first stone on 21 June 1934.



Waterloo Bridge (cont.)



Waterloo Bridge today.

After Morrison had ceremoniously removed the first stone, Sir William Arrol was awarded the contract to remove Rennie's bridge for £331,000. Fortunately the old temporary bridge built in 1924 still stood, so traffic could continue to cross the river during the demolition process. On 4 May 1937 the foundation stone of the new bridge was laid using part of the old bridge's foundation stone

Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, designer of Battersea and Bankside Power Stations, was appointed as architect for the new bridge which was the first reinforced concrete bridge to cross the Thames in central London. The bridge has a 58 ft. wide roadway and two 11 ft. wide footways for pedestrians. Its total length is 1200 ft., consisting of five 240 ft. spans. The sides of the bridge are faced with Portland stone which was chosen because the underlying concrete does not wear so well and was considered unsuitable for the central location with impressive stone buildings such as Somerset House in the vicinity.

Although the design of the new bridge could never rival Rennie's masterpiece from an aesthetic point of view, its simple if severe elegance was generally well received. However, the construction project was delayed considerably by labour shortages and enemy action during course of the Second World War. Because work had to be completed mainly by female labour, Waterloo Bridge is often known as the 'Ladies' Bridge'.

Unlike the 1817 opening of Rennie's bridge which commemorated Wellington's famous victory over Napoleon, the partial opening of the new bridge in 1942 was conducted without ceremony because of wartime conditions. In 1943, the temporary bridge which had served its purpose well for nearly 20 years was at last demolished. The huge steel girders were then shipped to Remagen in Belgium and performed their final duty during the Allied advance on Germany near the end of the Second World War.

After the end of the war the official opening of the fully completed bridge was performed on 10 December 1945 by Herbert Morrison who had started the destruction of Rennie's bridge 11 years before. Even after its demolition, remains from old Waterloo Bridge can still be found. Underneath the present bridge on the Victoria Embankment is a platform which was built over the foundations of one of the river piers of Rennie's bridge with the original twin Doric columns on either side. On the river side of the platform is a bronze model of the old bridge and a replica of the 1811 foundation stone plaque.



This plaque under Waterloo Bridge on the Embankment commemorates Rennie's bridge.

About Brian Cookson

Brian Cookson is the author of Crossing the River: The History of London's Thames River Bridges from Richmond to the Tower and London's Waterside Walks. He is also a Blue Badge Guide who offers various fascinating guided walks of London. Find out more on his web page: www.lonwalk.ndirect.co.uk/