

Putney Bridge

by Brian Cookson

Putney Bridge crosses the Thames between Fulham on the north bank and Putney on the south bank. Today's bridge replaced the old wooden bridge known as Fulham Bridge which was opened in 1729. This had been the first bridge constructed across the tidal Thames in London since the 13th century Old London Bridge. At the time it was the only bridge between London Bridge and Kingston where a bridge had existed from medieval times.

The settlement of Fulham has been connected with the Bishops of London since the eighth century. The manor house, with its large grounds to the west of Putney Bridge, became known as Fulham Palace. It was the summer residence of the Bishops of London until they handed it over to the local council in the early 20th century.

The Bishops of London used the river to travel from London to Fulham Palace in their private barges from the earliest times. In addition they owned a ferry which they leased to local ferrymen to transport pedestrians and vehicles between Fulham and Putney. However, the ferry increasingly became a bottleneck as well as often causing risk to life and limb.



Fulham Palace.

Despite the opposition from the ferrymen and other vested interests, pressure continued to mount for a permanent crossing. Matters came to a head in 1720 when Prime Minister Robert Walpole was returning from a visit to George I in Kingston to attend a debate in the House of Commons. He rode on horseback to Putney only to find the ferry was on the other side of the river. The ferrymen were drinking in the nearby Swan Inn and took no notice of Walpole's shouts for them to take him across the river. Walpole had to take a longer way round to Parliament and this incident seems to have made up his mind to have a bridge built at Fulham.

In 1726, with Walpole's support, an Act was passed 'for Building a Bridge across the River Thames Fulham to Putney'. Commissioners were appointed to manage the project and maintain the bridge. Tolls were set to attract private investors.

The 768 ft. long wooden structure with its 26 narrow openings was opened without ceremony on 29 November 1729. The first person to cross in a coach was the Prince of Wales. He could have had free passage across the bridge since the King paid an annual £100 fee to the company to cover all crossings by members of his household. On the introduction of the new Gregorian calendar in 1752, when the Government abolished the dates between 3 and 14 September, the King deducted £1 10s from the £100 to compensate for the 11 lost days. However, the King was the loser in the following year. London Bankers had always been liable to pay their taxes annually on 25 March but delayed their payment for 11 days until 5 April, which has marked the end of the tax year in Britain ever since.

Amazingly, the wooden bridge was to last for over 150 years, which was longer than many of the later stone bridges on the tidal Thames. When the Thames froze over during the severe winters of 1739, 1788-89 and 1813-14, people could cross the river on the ice and avoid the tolls altogether. Frost Fairs were held stretching from Rotherhithe to Putney with entertainments including bonfires, puppet shows, roundabouts and live animal shows. Even as late as 1870, after the removal of Old London bridge effectively stopped the Thames freezing in the centre of London, the river was iced over at Putney. Old Fulham Bridge was also the scene of the attempted suicide of Mary Wollstonecraft, who was suffering depression because of the neglect of her lover. She jumped from the bridge and lost consciousness when she hit the water, but was resuscitated by some watermen who were passing at the time. She later married William Godwin, but died shortly after giving birth to Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

By the middle of the nineteenth century complaints about the old wooden bridge were growing on all sides. In 1877 the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) introduced the



All Saints Church, Fulham

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Putney Bridge (cont.)



Metropolitan Toll Bridge Bill, enabling the purchase of all privately owned bridges in the Metropolitan area with a view to freeing them from tolls. Sir Joseph Bazalgette (1819-91), as head engineer of the MBW, produced a damning report on the state of Fulham Bridge and in 1881 an Act was passed to enable the demolition of Fulham Bridge and the construction of a 44 ft. wide stone bridge in its place. Bazalgette's new Putney Bridge could hardly have looked more different from his ornate Gothic structure at Hammersmith. He chose a classical design, consisting of five segmental arches made of granite from Aberdeen and the Prince of Wales's own quarries in Cornwall. The centre arch is the widest at 140 ft. and the total width of the river here is 700 ft.

Putney Bridge has since been widened twice, most recently in 1926 by when it had become the busiest Thames crossing upstream from Westminster. On a quiet Sunday morning the handsome stone-arched Putney Bridge, with the picturesque parish churches of All Saints, Fulham, and St Mary's, Putney, on either bank of the

Thames, presents an idyllic picture. The scene of course is not always so peaceful. Putney Bridge is still the busiest bridge over the Thames from the south west, with an average of nearly 60,000 crossings a day during the week. Nor is it peaceful on the day of the Boat Race when the crowds throng the riverside as they wait for the starting pistol to send the crews on their voyage around the Hammersmith bend and under Hammersmith and Barnes Bridges to the finishing line at Mortlake.



St Mary's Putney is the scene of the famous Putney Debates during the Civil War

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/