

# Westminster Bridge

by Brian Cookson

In the 11th century, Westminster became the centre of government, at first of England and then of the whole of the United Kingdom. It seems incredible that no bridge was built here until 1750. Until then Old London Bridge was the only permanent river crossing in the central London area.

The first serious attempt to obtain authority for the construction of a bridge at Westminster was made in 1664 when Charles II presided over a meeting of the Privy Council to discuss the matter. Strong reasons were put forward in favour of a new bridge. The arguments against the bridge were put forward by the City Corporation, the watermen and other vested interests. They claimed that if a new bridge were built at Westminster, many watermen would lose their jobs, thus depriving the navy of a ready supply of sailors in time of war. Finally the opponents of the bridge came up with one argument that clinched the matter, in the form of an unsecured and interest free loan of £100,000 to the King from the City Corporation. The King gratefully accepted the bribe, and refused permission to build the bridge.

As London expanded to the west during the 18th century, pressure mounted for a Westminster crossing. The Act for 'Building a Bridge across the River Thames from the New Palace Yard in the City of Westminster to the opposite Shore in the County Surrey' finally received Royal Assent on 20 May 1736. Compensation was to be paid to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the loss of income from the Lambeth Horse ferry, and to the watermen who ran a Sunday ferry across the river at Westminster.



*Brand new Westminster Bridge, by Canaletto, 1746.*

The most intriguing part of the Act was devoted to the method of finance. The usual method of involving private enterprise and charging tolls was rejected in favour of a lottery. Lotteries were in vogue at the time, but were often subject to abuse and fraud and



*Turner's famous picture of the fire of the Palace of Westminster featuring Westminster Bridge, 1834.*

some considered them immoral and a danger to society. The use of the lottery to finance Westminster Bridge instigated Sir Henry Fielding to call it 'the bridge of fools' and this name stuck when the project later dragged on much longer than was forecast.

The decision to appoint young Swiss engineer, Charles Labelye, to design the bridge was equally controversial. The most innovative and, as it turned out, problematical decision made by Labelye was to build the river piers within reusable wooden caissons rather than in the more traditional cofferdams. The caissons were enormous wooden boxes which were constructed on the side of the river and floated out to the location of a pier. Unfortunately, Labelye did make a critical error in his evaluation of the river bed, which he thought consisted of a firm layer of gravel but which turned out to be clay. Because of this he decided it was not necessary to drive piles into the river bed to support the foundations and just sank his caissons a few feet into the dredged clay bottom. The Earl of Pembroke laid the last stone in October 1746 but the very next year one of the piers showed signs of settlement. When a massive stone block fell down from one of the arches supported by this pier it seemed that the whole bridge might collapse. Eventually the pier and two affected arches were removed and rebuilt with stronger foundations.

Westminster Bridge was finally opened on Sunday 18 November 1750. It was certainly a beautiful structure as can be seen from the numerous paintings by Canaletto, Samuel Scott, Antonio Jolli and others. One of the most dramatic views of the bridge was painted much later by J.M.W. Turner who watched the catastrophic fire which burnt down the old Palace of Westminster in 1834. Turner's viewpoint is on the Lambeth side of the Thames from where he captures both the raging inferno that engulfs the palace buildings in the background and the massive structure of Westminster

## Westminster Bridge (cont.)



*The modern Westminster Bridge was opened in 1862.*

Bridge defiantly looming out of the fire to cross the river in the foreground. The most famous literary reference to Westminster Bridge is contained in the title of William Wordsworth's sonnet *Upon Westminster Bridge*, although the actual poem is about the view seen from the bridge of London and the Thames, and does not mention the bridge itself.

Concerns were frequently raised about the safety of Labeled's beautiful bridge. Eventually in 1853 a Select Committee decided that it was essential to rebuild it because of the escalating cost of repairs. Charles Barry co-operated with Thomas Page, the architect of Chelsea Bridge, in the design of the new Westminster Bridge to ensure that it accorded with the architecture of the new Houses of Parliament. Page's Westminster Bridge has seven elliptical iron arches supported by piers consisting of massive 30 ton granite blocks. Barry inserted Gothic quatrefoils in the spandrels of the arches and attached ornamental shields emblazoned with the arms of England and Westminster. The new bridge was opened in 1862



*Westminster Bridge today.*

on 24 May which was Queen Victoria's birthday. The queen had originally agreed to perform the opening ceremony herself, but then went into prolonged mourning after the death of Prince Albert, and so the rather muted celebrations went ahead without her.

In 1970 the bridge was repainted in the present green colour to match the colour scheme of the House of Commons which is at the northern, Westminster Bridge, end of the Palace of Westminster. Further upstream, Lambeth Bridge is painted red to correspond with the colour scheme of the House of Lords which is located at the southern end. Today crowds mass on the bridge to see a very different skyline than that which inspired Wordsworth's sonnet. Although the open fields are long gone, the view is still inspiring with the massive circle of the London Eye downstream and the Houses of Parliament upstream. About the only structure remaining from Wordsworth's time is the Portland stone of the abutments of Labeled's bridge, but sadly this is faced with brick so that no-one ever sees it.

Picture: Tom Arthur, 2009.

### About Brian Cookson

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