

The Building of Magdalen Bridge, 1772-1790

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I

THE new Magdalen Bridge was built from 1772 to 1790 according to the designs of John Gwynn. Its construction was ordered and supervised by the Oxford Paving Commission, a body set up in 1771 by a local Act of Parliament to effect general improvements in the streets and roads of the city.¹ Apart from Magdalen Bridge, it was also responsible for the new Market, repaving the main thoroughfares, removing Bocardo, Eastgate, Carfax Conduit and other obstructions, lighting, drainage, traffic regulation and refuse disposal.

This point of the Cherwell has been used as a crossing at least since Anglo-Saxon times. There is a reference to the existence of a bridge in 1004 and finds dateable to between the 9th and 11th centuries have been made at the eastern end of the present bridge and a few yards downstream at the south-west corner of the island opposite the Botanic Garden.² Significantly, these finds were of objects relating to transport: stirrup irons, a prick spur and a horse shoe. The bridge is described in the middle ages as 'al pount trefable sur Petypount' indicating a wooden, trestle construction or, more probably, a drawbridge.³ The stone bridge that survived until 1772 was thus of late medieval construction. Where the bridge crossed, the river was divided into two streams, the one on the east being the main course and that on the west the confluence of Holywell Mill stream and Magdalen College Water Walks. The two streams were connected by a shallow dyke along the northern side of the bridge which was used as a ford but which disappeared completely during the 19th century. To the south there was a large island occupied in part by houses and shops from 1733 until their demolition to make way for the new bridge. Before 1733 this land had been meadow and pasture, only proving solid enough to support development after the extensive repairs to the bridge in 1723 had altered the flow of the river.⁴ This particular arrangement of land and water meant that the bridge had more the character of a causeway. Extending over five hundred feet, it was a flat terrace supported on more than twenty arches with deep cutwaters and a solid parapet.

The legal responsibility for the repair of the bridge lay with the city and county administrations, three-quarters of it being within, and one quarter without, the city boundary. However, effectual control was exercised by the Super-

¹ 11 Geo. III, cap. 19.

² Margaret Gelling, *Place Names of Oxfordshire*, part I (1953), pp. 35-6 (English Place Name Society, vol. XXIII); W. A. Seaby, 'Late Dark Age Finds from the Cherwell & the Ray 1876-86', *Oxoniensia*, xv (1950), pp. 31-43.

³ H. E. Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, ed. W. A. Pantin & W. T. Mitchell (O.H.S., n.s. vol. xx), vol. II, p. 3.

⁴ H. E. Salter, *Oxford City Properties* (1926), p. 335; *An Attempt to State the Accounts of Receipts and Expenses relative to the Oxford Paving Act: with Remarks* (Oxford 1774), pp. 8-9; *Hearne's Remarks & Collections* (O.H.S.), vol. VIII (1907), p. 79, vol. XI (1921), p. 224.

visors of the Highways. The Supervisors were a board, jointly appointed by the city, county and university, established by an Act of 1576 which vested in them powers to repair all the main routes of access into the city up to five miles from its boundary.⁵ Revenue for this work was in the form of a tax levied in commutation of the statute labour due under the Act of 1555. The powers of the Supervisors did not extend within the city of Oxford, but the Act did seem to include the bridges. However, although there were a number of amendments and consolidations, the legal position, especially in relation to Magdalen Bridge and the parish of St. Clement's, was never settled satisfactorily. Thus in 1771, when Parliament was discussing the Oxford Paving Bill, it was opined that St. Clement's had never come within the mileways administration, as those roads had come to be called, and that the bridge was still the responsibility of the city.⁶ But, whatever the pundits' opinions, the city and the county justices never made any provision for its repair and even went as far as expressly excluding it, for, when approached at the Easter Quarter Sessions of 1722 on the possibility of widening the bridge because it was not wide enough to allow two vehicles to pass each other with safety, the county justices agreed in principle, as long as they were put to no expense.⁷ This particular project was possibly the most extensive alteration made to the structure since its original building. It was not financed by the Supervisors of the Highways, nor by the city but, reputedly, by the university.⁸ The work was carried out during 1723. Some of its effects may be seen in the sketch by J. B. Malchair where round-headed arches are seen next to one of the pointed originals.⁹ Hearne's description of the completed works indicates how it proved impossible to remove the houses on the eastern bank so that the situation was little improved at that end of the bridge.

At both ends, the approaches to the bridge were closely built up so that there was no alternative to the demolition of property should the Paving Commissioners wish to widen these roads. In Bridge Street there was Magdalen College on one side and the Professor of Botany's house and library on the other. The Physic Garden, as is seen by its great boundary wall, had always been set well back from the road, but it was forced to erect its offices and working quarters on the vacant ground to the north owing to a lack of space within. The Professor's house and library that stood in 1772 was built for Professor Dillenius from 1728 to 1734.¹⁰ On the other side of the river, houses so hemmed in the road that it was only thirteen feet wide at the eastern extremity of the bridge. Furthermore, the

⁵ 18 Eliz. I, cap. 20.

⁶ Oxford City MSS. (in the Town Hall) R. 3.15, Paving Commissioners: Various deeds and papers 1771-1831 (hereafter called Misc. MSS.), f. 39; see also *ibid.* f. 49.

⁷ Oxfordshire County Record Office, MS. calendar of Quarter Sessions Rolls, vol. 3, p. 464.

⁸ *An Attempt to State the Accounts*, pp. 8-9.

⁹ *Hearne's Remarks & Collections* vol. VIII (1907), pp. 79, 127. See PL. XHA.

¹⁰ Bodleian Library MS. Sherard 2, ff. 1-3, f. 28; see also Oxford Almanack 1771. In Williams's view of the Physic Garden, c. 1733, there is a further house, more like a residence than the herbarium and library under discussion. This was on the Garden wall, to the east of the Danby Gate. It does not appear in other sources and may have been projected but not built when Williams drew his plate. Later professors, and John Gwynn, always thought the residential part of the library extremely temporary in arrangement. On the other hand, Humphrey Sibthorp talks of the house on the wall that was knocked down within living memory, but it is likely that he is here referring to the small summer house, illustrated by Loggan, to the west of the Danby Gate. See PL. XMB.

junction of the main roads from High Wycombe and Marston, Cowley and Henley was very ill-managed. St. Clement's church and churchyard then stood on the Plain and the Henley and Cowley roads joined together to the south-east of the church and were then forced around it to join the Wycombe road at the north-eastern corner of the churchyard. The combined traffic from all these routes was then confined within a narrow street until it reached the bridge. The Commission intended to re-site the Henley road in a straight line from the bridge, leaving the church on the north and demolishing many of the constricting properties.

The reasons for the replacement of the bridge were not only its narrowness, for it had suffered from long years of neglect and from regular inundation. Its structure was therefore becoming very unsound. In his evidence to the Commons committee that considered the Oxford Bill, the mason John Townesend averred that it was now irreparable.¹¹ His opinion proved correct when the western arches collapsed in the storms and floods of February 1772.¹²

II

The designer of the new bridge, and surveyor to the Commission, was John Gwynn.¹³ He was, at the same time, surveyor to the Oxford Guardians of the Poor and designed their new workhouse. He was a Royal Academician who was especially known for his writings, many of which had a bearing on his work in Oxford. None more so than his *London and Westminster Improved*¹⁴ which contained numerous suggestions for the improvement in planning and civic design as well as apposite comments on the condition of Oxford and Cambridge. His architectural works were mainly confined to bridges. He had been one of the three selected for final consideration in the Blackfriars Bridge competition of 1759 and had been involved in a pamphlet war on the matter after his defeat by Robert Mylne. In the west country he had designed the English Bridge at Shrewsbury and bridges at Atcham in Shropshire and at Worcester.¹⁵ Another recommendation that Gwynn may have had to Oxford was that he had shown designs for a building to house the Arundel and Pomfret collections of marbles at the 1760 exhibition of the Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain.¹⁶

Although his reputation was high, it is nonetheless curious that Gwynn was selected for this task, for Oxford was then plentifully endowed with able architects and masons. One who was extremely popular at this time was Henry Keene. He had recently completed or had still in hand works at Balliol, Magdalen, University College, the Sheldonian Theatre and Christ Church,¹⁷ and in the minutes of the Paving Commission he was once described as the surveyor to Oxford.¹⁸ Moreover, Keene was the architect of Sir Roger Newdigate who was

¹¹ *Commons Journals*, vol. 33, 11 Geo. III, 5 Feb. 1771.

¹² *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 15 Feb. 1772.

¹³ H. M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects 1660-1840* (1954), pp. 254-6.

¹⁴ *London and Westminster Improved, to which is prefixed a discourse on Publick Magnificence* (1766), p. 14.

¹⁵ C. V. Hancock, 'Architect of Severn Bridges', *Country Life*, 16 Jun. 1953, pp. 148-9.

¹⁶ Wyatt Papworth, 'John Gwynn, R.A., Architect', *The Builder*, 27 Jun. 1863, pp. 454-7.

¹⁷ Colvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-7.

¹⁸ Oxford City MSS. R. 6.2, Paving Commission minutes, vol. 1 (hereafter cited as Minutes I), 15 Oct. 1771.

M.P. for the University, a member of the Commission, and extremely active in seeing the Paving Bill through Parliament.¹⁹ It was Keene, too, who designed the monument of the Earl of Lichfield, the Chancellor of the University, who died in 1772. Lord Lichfield was responsible for seeing the Paving Bill through the Lords.²⁰

Another possible candidate for the post of surveyor was Sir William Chambers. Chambers had been working for some time for the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim. The Duke's agent was Thomas Walker, who was also town clerk of Oxford and of Woodstock. With James Morrell, the city solicitor, Walker had been the chief executive concerned with preparing the Paving Bill. His brother, John, was to be joint clerk and treasurer of the Commission.²¹ Chambers not only worked for Marlborough, but had also provided Walker with designs for a chimney piece in his new house in Woodstock.²² It would seem likely that Walker had at least discussed the question of a surveyor with Sir William. The architect had another link, this time with the university, for he had prepared designs for the President of Magdalen's lodgings in 1768. These were never used and Keene carried out work there in 1769, Chambers having to wait at least three years before payment, so it is possible that that connection was not propitious.²³ Two masons were also suggested as potential architects to the Commission, in a pamphlet of the time.²⁴ They were John Townesend and John Randall. Randall was in fact to be the contractor for the bridge. There are some personal reasons which may have had their influence on Gwynn's appointment. He was closely connected with Chambers, in the Incorporated Society of Artists, the Academy and in the apocryphal story told of his recommendation of Chambers as a suitable tutor in architecture to the Prince of Wales.²⁵ Thus Chambers, unwilling to undertake it himself, may have suggested Gwynn as a candidate. Also, Gwynn was friendly with Dr. Johnson, who provided him with assistance in his writings. It is possible that he gained by this means an entrée into university circles.²⁶

Gwynn's work as surveyor to the Commission necessitated frequent attendance in Oxford and the performance of widely differing tasks ranging from supervising the removal of bay windows to the production of first-rate architectural designs. He had a permanent headquarters in one of the houses to the south of the bridge and, after they had been demolished in 1774, in or near the Professor of Botany's house. As he was working at Worcester and Shrewsbury at the same time, he

¹⁹ For the part of Newdigate, see Bodleian Library MS. Top. Oxon. c. 279, Accounts and other papers for the repairs to Magdalen Bridge 1771-9 (hereafter cited as Bridge MSS.) f. 11 and British Museum Add. MS. 38,206, Liverpool MSS. f. 350.

²⁰ For the part of Lichfield, see Bridge MSS. f. 18 and Misc. MSS. f. 63.

²¹ For Walker & Morrell, see Bridge MSS. f. 18 & Misc. MSS. *passim*.

²² British Museum Add. MS. 41,133, Chambers MSS, ff. 1, 5; R.I.B.A. MSS., Chambers Pprs., CHA. 2/28.

²³ British Museum Add. MS. 41,133, ff. 67-8.

²⁴ Anon., *The Paper relating to the intended Market-Place* (Oxford 1771), p. 3.

²⁵ Wyatt Papworth, *op. cit.*

²⁶ The oft-repeated conversation of Johnson and Gwynn about the removal of a church to make way for a road may in fact refer to the re-alignment of the Henley road which necessitated the removal not of the church but of the churchyard.

was bound to have a full-time deputy. This man was William Spiers, probably an Oxford man, who also acted in later years as surveyor of nuisances and rate collector. Gwynn also had a 'young man' who carried messages and generally assisted him in his work. From a note with Gwynn's drawings in the British Museum, it might be assumed that the young man was William Hayward who, the note claims, executed the plans for paving Oxford and for building Magdalen Bridge.²⁷ But there is no mention of this Hayward in any of the records of the Commission and the only occasion on which Gwynn names his assistant it is a Mr. Wale.²⁸ This was certainly a relation of Samuel Wale, R.A., a close neighbour of Gwynn in London and a collaborator in both publishing and artistic ventures.²⁹

The designs for the new bridge were influenced by the old inasmuch as they were both on the same site and they were both long, flat causeways. Otherwise, the new bridge was quite different; a sumptuous piece of architecture as opposed to a utilitarian structure. In plan it was a single roadway, twenty-seven feet wide including pavements, with sweeps at either end opening into the streets that led up to the bridge, and central recesses that doubled the width of the carriageway on part of the island. The sweeps and recesses gave some variety and grandeur to the general outline. In elevation the bridge seemed fairly solid with but one arch in the long stretch across the island. Each branch of the river was bridged by three large semicircular arches with two smaller ones over the towpaths. The whole was articulated by rusticated pilasters, answering the rustication of the voussoirs. Each bay on the island was panelled and the central arch was elliptical, not round. Above, there was a continuous balustrade surmounted by lamp standards, balls at the break of each bay, and, marking the beginning and end of the bridge sections, sphinxes. Other ornaments were carved keystones, alternately a head and a shell, and, crowning the structure in the centre, an aedicule on either side of the roadway enclosing the arms of the city and university with figures symbolic of the arts and sciences recumbent on the pediments.³⁰

An inevitable part of these designs were certain alterations to the bridge's immediate surroundings. The western channel of the river was to be re-cut and deepened so as to avoid future dangers from flooding; the houses on the island were to be destroyed to make room for the recesses; the sweeps at each end would entail the demolition of both the Professor of Botany's house and properties in St. Clement's and, finally, the level of the streets approaching the bridge would have to be raised to make less abrupt the slope up to the bridge itself. As the main structure was flat, this slope was confined to the sweeps. The effect of this alteration on Bridge Street was to take off a few feet from the base of Magdalen Tower and to make the Physic Garden seem to lie in a depression.

This particular aspect of the plans excited much criticism, especially from the

²⁷ British Museum King's Maps, xxxiv, 33, 3a-c; Colvin, *op. cit.*; Papworth, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Bodleian Library MS. Top. Oxon. c. 278, Acts of the Oxford Street Commissioners 1771-9 (hero. after cited as Acts), f. 68.

²⁹ Gwynn's close relationship with Wale is well illustrated in two letters from Gwynn to Chambers in the Chambers Pprs. in the R.I.B.A. CHA. 2/102-103; see also Papworth, *op. cit.*

³⁰ A print of this design, engraved by M. A. Rooker, is in the *New Oxford Guide* 1772; the original designs are in the British Museum King's Maps, *ut sup.* See PL. XIII.

residents of the affected properties. Professor Sibthorp complained about the re-cutting of the channel next to the Physic Garden because of its increased exposure to flooding and damp and because the specimens preserved in his herbarium would suffer accordingly. Sibthorp's chief objection was to the proposed demolition of his house and library. He could not understand Gwynn's reasons for building a bridge of no greater width than that which it replaced and then indulging in wanton destruction of property for the non-functional sweeps. He accordingly suggested that either these adornments should be abandoned and his house preserved or that Gwynn and the Commission should pursue the logic of their improvements and make the bridge as wide as the sweeps and recesses throughout its length. Should this latter course be adopted, they should also make the bridge lower, thus obviating the heightening of Bridge Street.³¹ The parishioners of St. Clement's had no such points to put to the Commission; they simply observed that if their houses were pulled down to make way for the bridge and the re-routed Henley road there would be no room in the parish for them to re-establish their businesses and they would be forced to move, to their ruin and that of the remaining inhabitants who would have to bear a greater burden in rates and taxes.³² In response to their petition Gwynn prepared plans of houses to line the new road. It is not clear when, if ever, they were erected.³³ The designs were also criticized from an aesthetic standpoint. The ornaments were superfluous and inapt; the connection between sphinxes and water tenuous; the elevation heavy, due to the lack of arches in the central section; the order used by Gwynn squat and ugly.³⁴

III

The contract was not put out to tender until the old bridge collapsed at the beginning of 1772. This event caused no undue concern because the wooden relief bridges to the south were ready for use and were merely opened at a date earlier than anticipated. The access roads to the new crossings ran from the church in St. Clement's on one side and from Rose Lane *via* the southern wall of the Physic Garden on the other.³⁵ (PL. XIII.B.)

Had the old bridge not fallen it is doubtful whether work would have been started for many months yet. The Commission had discussed and accepted Gwynn's designs nine months earlier,³⁶ but beyond hiring a stonepit at Shotover and fixing the types of stone to be used in the various parts, nothing had been

³¹ [Humphrey Sibthorp] *to the Gentlemen Delegates of Accounts, and of the Committee for the Physick Garden* [Oxford 1775]; Bodleian Library MS. Sherard 5 ff. 1-14, printed letter from Sibthorp re accommodation of the Professor of Botany [1778]; *ibid.* f. 21, printed broadsheet re Magdalen Bridge, from a member of Convocation, Feb 1778.

³² Bridge MSS. f. 81.

³³ Oxford City MSS. R. 6.3., Paving Commission minutes, vol. II (hereafter cited as Minutes II), 18 Dec. 1778.

³⁴ It is possible that Gwynn was prompted to put in sphinxes because of those which used to flank the Bridge Street gate of the Physic Garden but which now stand within the Danby Gate; Sibthorp, *ut sup.*; E. Tatham, *Oxonia Explicata et Ornata* (London 1773), pp. 19-20.

³⁵ One tender for the erection of the temporary bridges, from Brian Pepall, survives as Bridge MSS. f. 36; the actual contractor was John Wyatt; for their construction, see Minutes I, Jul.-Oct. 1771.

³⁶ Minutes I, 21 Jun. 1771.

done.³⁷ There was evidently a conflict within the Commission between those who wished to complete the paving before beginning the bridge and those with 'hasty zeal . . . for magnificence in bridge-work'.³⁸ Force of events gave victory to the latter.

The contract was won by John Randall. We do not know against what competition, for although advertisements were placed in Oxford, London, Reading and Gloucester, the only other tender that survives is from John Townesend.³⁹ Townesend's price was £7,896, excluding the pediments, figures and sphinxes. Randall quoted £6,979, including the ornaments, or £6,495 for a plain bridge with a solid parapet.⁴⁰ Randall's first tender was accepted, with a completion time of three and a half years.⁴¹ The contract was signed on 4 August 1772 and provided amongst other things that Randall should have all the materials from the old bridge; that he should construct coffer dams to protect the piers and foundations until they reached the springing of the arches; that he should build platforms from the abutments to the piers on which to erect the arches and that he should use Headington hardstone up to the plinth of the balustrade.⁴² The foundation was laid on 30 September.⁴³

The new bridge was not passable until March 1778, nearly six years later. It was not entirely finished until August 1790, but work was not continuous during the whole period. Building commenced with the abutment on the east bank and moved fairly surely westwards so that the elliptical arch in the centre was keyed in August 1774, work was begun on the western abutment in the following May, and the arches of the western bridge were keyed in November 1776. Thus the essential structure was complete not many months later than had been anticipated in 1772. The trouble arose with the final touches, in particular the ornaments and the construction of the western sweep.⁴⁴ (PL. XIVA.)

Throughout the course of the contract there was a subdued conflict between the Commission and the three main executants, Gwynn, Spiers his deputy and Randall. Randall was not an unobliging contractor, but there is a suspicion that his workmanship was not of the highest order either for reasons of personal disability or because he was anxious to cut corners and save money. In October 1773 he was reported by Spiers for using stones of a lesser size than directed in the soffits of the eastern arches and there were a number of other complaints about the condition and sorts of stone he was using.⁴⁵ On one occasion he was pulled up for employing Coombe stone, adjudged by Gwynn to be too soft, and on another for using stone that was unseasoned.⁴⁶ Another major fault for which he

³⁷ Minutes I, 6 Nov. & 27 Nov. 1771.

³⁸ *An Attempt to State the Accounts*, p. 10.

³⁹ Minutes I, 24 Mar. 1771.

⁴⁰ Bridge MSS. ff. 38-40.

⁴¹ Minutes I, 5 Jun. 1771.

⁴² Bodleian Library Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Oxon., b. 18, ff. 241-4.

⁴³ Bodleian Library MS. Top. Oxon. d. 247, Diary of events in Oxford 1739-1817.

⁴⁴ The progress of construction can best be followed in the accounts of the Commission, Oxford City MSS. P. 3.23, 24. There is a ledger, kept by J. Morrell, which duplicates some of the information in these accounts, in the Morrell Peel & Gamlin papers in the Oxford County Record Office.

⁴⁵ Minutes I, 14 Oct. 1773.

⁴⁶ Minutes I, 29 Jul. 1774; Acts f. 44; Minutes I, 4 May 1775.

was reprimanded was filling the cavity between the vault and the roadway foundation with soft earth.⁴⁷ These conflicts on practicalities caused less concern than his delay in finishing. Randall felt aggrieved by the continual exhortations to quicken his rate of work addressed him by the Commission. Gwynn, he claimed, changed his plans so frequently that it was impossible to make satisfactory progress; by August 1778, he continued, the design of the ornaments and balustrade had been entirely altered from that for which he had tendered in 1772. Furthermore, the Commission was so remiss in its payments of money that was properly due to him that he could not maintain an adequate work force.⁴⁸

If these were not enough, there were practical reasons behind Randall's delay. Ever since its first proposal, the demolition of the Professor's house had been contested. Those leading the opposition so far succeeded in forcing the Commission to postpone its destruction that the necessary orders were rescinded or held in abeyance on more than six occasions after their first issue in March 1775.⁴⁹ But until the building had been removed, it was impossible to begin work on the south west corner of the bridge. Though the Commission procrastinated and temporized over many matters itself, it did not forgive these failings in its contractors. A number of ultimatums were given to Randall after 1776, culminating in 1778 with an arrangement whereby he was retained on a weekly basis, money being paid on the sole condition that he kept eight masons on the site until all was finished.⁵⁰

The relations of the Commissioners with Gwynn and Spiers were no happier than those with Randall. Spiers was a paid employee of the Commission, not of Gwynn, and seems to have been an argumentative, assertive man. In 1771 he was assaulted by the builder of the temporary bridges as a result of his complaint that they were shorter than provided in the contract.⁵¹ It was usually Spiers, not Gwynn, who reported Randall's failings to the Commission. He complained in one letter that

‘I have frequently experienced the disagreeable effects of my perseverance in obliging the contractors to adhere to the terms of their engagements and what has frequently rendered my case the more distressing, is that my superior has, either through the natural timidity of his disposition, or from a friendly inclination to oblige every one, or rather to disoblige no-one, frequently winked at those defects which it was his duty to reprobate . . . From hence has followed that I have been looked on as too officious in my business.’⁵²

This self-portrait of the model employee is not born out by events. In 1776 he was involved in a case of alleged fraud and bribery over the placing of orders for stone with Richard Keene of Northleigh, in partnership with an Oxford pavior,

⁴⁷ Minutes I, 21 May 1776.

⁴⁸ Bridge MSS. f. 71; Minutes II, 3 Aug. 1778.

⁴⁹ Minutes I, 14 Mar., 30 Jun. 1775; 5 Mar. 1776; 2 Apr. 1777. Minutes II, 2 Dec. 1777; 10 Mar. 1778.

⁵⁰ Minutes I, 13 Sep. 1776; 12 Nov. 1777; Minutes II, 10 Apr., 15 Jun., 3 Aug., 14 Sep., 15 Oct. 1778.

⁵¹ Minutes I, 15 Oct. 1771.

⁵² Acts f. 64.

James Lord. In the event the Commission decided that there was insufficient evidence to support a charge against him and in fact Keene was convicted of slander.⁵³ In the same year, however, Spiers was appointed rate collector to the Commission and this had no happier results. Within six months he was shouldering a heavy burden of arrears, though whether due to incompetence or embezzlement is not certain. The Commission felt it was the latter for, by September 1777, it was forced to institute proceedings against him for recovery.⁵⁴ He was further threatened with legal action over the loss of the books of instructions, accounts and plans for the bridge. Evidently he had complained at length about Gwynn's treatment of him, in much the same tones as in the letter quoted above, but Gwynn retorted that it was Spiers who ill-treated him for refusing to hand over the plans and accounts that were normally kept in the site office. There followed a wrangle in which Spiers claimed that Gwynn had sent his young man to fetch them away and Gwynn asserted that Spiers was withholding them for some malign purposes of his own. In the upshot, Gwynn was believed and this episode, in addition to that of the rate arrears, cut short Spiers's career with the Commission. The plans were never recovered and there survive but three or four drawings.⁵⁵

Gwynn's reputation, too, suffered at the hands of the Commission and its employees. Two complaints of his timidity and changeability have already been noted; he was openly accused of venality by Humphrey Sibthorp in his pamphlets against the bridge designs and by the anonymous author of a remonstrance against the plans for the new Market.⁵⁶ There are signs of the Commission having lost patience with his practice of altering the designs after agreement had been reached for he was ordered to cease doing this without prior notification in October 1773.⁵⁷ Owing to the loss of the working papers relating to the bridge, we have little record of these alterations. Certainly the most important was in 1774 when the arc of the central elliptical arch was changed, the watercourses widened at the expense of the island and the level of the sweeps raised.⁵⁸

It had been agreed in 1771 that Gwynn should be employed at £150 a year for at least two years after the completion of the bridge.⁵⁹ But, from January 1776, considerably before his contract should have expired, there were regular debates as to whether he should not be dismissed.⁶⁰ These continued until November 1778 when he left the Commission's service. He reappeared in later years, firstly in June 1779 when he submitted a report on the finances of the bridge,⁶¹

⁵³ Acts ff. 62-5; Minutes I, 21, 30 May, 13 Jun. 1776.

⁵⁴ Minutes I, 19 Aug., 30 Sep. 1777.

⁵⁵ Acts ff. 66-70; Minutes I, 30 Jun. 1777.

⁵⁶ Pamphlet beginning *The Paper relating to the intended Market-Place* (Oxford, May 4 1771); see also the remarks on Gwynn's 'unassuming manner' in Mulvany's *Life of Gandon* (1846) quoted in Papworth, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Minutes I, 26 Oct. 1773.

⁵⁸ Minutes I, 1 Jul. 1774.

⁵⁹ Minutes I, 21 Jun. 1771.

⁶⁰ Minutes I, 21 Jan., 20 Dec. 1776; 21 Oct. 1777. Minutes II, 14 Sep., 3 Nov. 1778.

⁶¹ Minutes II, 15 Jun. 1779.

then in 1782 when he was asked to make suggestions for the alterations to the ornaments⁶² and finally in 1783 when a payment of £21 for designs and estimates is recorded in the Physic Garden accounts. The building to which they probably referred, the Professor's house and library, was certainly not to Gwynn's design ; his estimate has not survived.⁶³

It is remarkable how much bitterness and questioning arose from the bridge project. The members of the Commission, because they represented sectional interests, found it difficult to submit to proposals which might affect the condition of the institution or faction to which they belonged. Thus a minority might succeed in blocking a certain policy for a considerable length of time. A typical episode was the drain in Bridge Street. It had been agreed from the first that one major objective should be the construction of a main sewer and drain the length of the High Street and continuing through Bridge Street to the river. This was to be of generous proportions : 2' 6" wide, 5' high and the bottom 9' from the surface of the pavement. Its completion would be the foundation of an adequate drainage system for the city contributing to the improvement of both the physical comfort of pedestrians during bad weather and the public health. But it would also cause inconvenience to Magdalen College, along whose front it ran, during its construction, especially as at the same time the level of the street would be raised to meet the proposed slope of the bridge approach. Those who defended the interests of the College, therefore, impeded any progress on the scheme when its design was shown in the spring of 1773.⁶⁴ It was not built for another six years.

Another factor that militated against the satisfactory conclusion of the bridge was the inadequacy of the Commission's revenue, based on tolls, rates and loans. The first yielded approximately £950 *per annum*, the second about £200, but fluctuated according to the efficiency and honesty of the collector, and the third varied according to requirements but averaged between £800 and £1500 yearly during 1771-1781.⁶⁵ Until 1777 the Commission operated with an annual surplus of some £300, but this declined to under £100 during the next four years. Owing to this tight margin, and an increasing number of calls on resources, the Commissioners were forced to alter the financial arrangements in the Paving Act amendment of 1781.⁶⁶

The excessive financial burden of the bridge was the cause of two attacks at meetings in 1775. At one it was proposed that the whole structure should be dismantled and re-started on a more economical basis. This was defeated by fifty votes to ten and one member of the Commission was deputed to inspect the foundations to reassure his colleagues that it was being properly built.⁶⁷ The

⁶² Minutes II, 8, 30 Apr., 20 May 1782.

⁶³ Bodleian Library MS. Sherard 2, f. 49.

⁶⁴ Minutes I, 9 Feb., 30 Mar. 1773. This seems likely to be the culvert described by T. G. Hassall in *Oxoniensia*, xxxii (1967), p. 71. The history of the construction of the High Street drain is complex and uncertain ; there were many false starts and alterations of plan and there are many *lacunae* in the evidence.

⁶⁵ Oxford City MSS. P. 3, 23, 24, Commission accounts ; R. 6. 1, Counterparts of Turnpike securities.

⁶⁶ 21 Geo. III, cap. 47.

⁶⁷ Minutes I, 16 Mar. 1775.

motion came very soon after the initial move to remove the Professor's house and may have been by way of a retort. There is a likelihood that the proposer was Thomas Hornsby, Savilian Professor of Astronomy.⁶⁸ Four months later, in July 1775, it was moved that the stone balustrade should be replaced by one of iron, again presumably on the grounds of cost. At this time the body of the Commission was not too deeply anxious about financial prospects and this motion, too, was defeated.⁶⁹ Also connected with these attacks may have been the proposal 'by a noble peer' for a subscription to finance the further widening of the bridge that is reported by Humphrey Sibthorp, but which came to nothing, he says, because of the 'very great pains he [Gwynn] took to damp it by obstinate adherence to his plan . . . lest his own plan should be laid aside'.⁷⁰ Financial considerations did become paramount, however, once the essential structure was finished. By the end of 1778, traffic was using it freely, the balustrade was finished and had the balls and lamp standards in position on its coping, and the pediments designed to receive the sculptures had been built. All that was wanting was the demolition of the Professor's house and the provision of the sphinxes and the sculptures. At the beginning of 1778 Gwynn had been asked to postpone ordering these ornaments until there was some money available.⁷¹ This was eventually raised by means of a special subscription of £150. The sole contributors were Archdeacon Randolph, Master of Corpus, and William Adams, Master of Pembroke.⁷² The Commission elected to employ Henry Webber as sculptor. In 1776 he had been awarded the Royal Academy Gold Medal and he was to become the chief modeller for Josiah Wedgwood.⁷³ Apart from two payments made to him during 1778 and 1779, nothing is heard of Webber until 1782; one must presume that he was at work in his studio.⁷⁴ His reappearance begins the penultimate episode in the completion of the bridge. Having made an especial effort to raise the money in 1778, the Commission experienced a complete reversal of its opinion about the adornments in 1782. In April it was decided that they should be entirely dispensed with. Webber was paid £25 over what he had already received and permitted to keep those carvings which he had prepared. Randall was ordered to take down the central pediments and, by a very small margin, it was agreed to ask Gwynn to submit plans for a new design for the balustrade.⁷⁵ Three weeks later these were accepted. It is probable that he suggested the erection of a plain pediment similar to that on his bridge at Shrewsbury. At the same meeting a motion that the balls already in place on the

⁶⁸ Sibthorp's pamphlet at MS. Sherard 5, f. 1 refers to 'the Remonstrance of another Professor . . . even so far as to recommend the demolition of the whole, in regard to a different plan.' 'Dr. Hornsby' is added in the margin in MS., possibly by Sibthorp himself.

⁶⁹ Minutes I, 24 Jul. 1775.

⁷⁰ Sibthorp, *op. cit.*, f. 9. The name of Lord Le Despenser is here added in the margin.

⁷¹ Minutes II, 24 Mar. 1778.

⁷² Minutes II, 12 May 1778; Oxford City MSS. R. 6. 1, Counterparts of Turnpike securities, nos. 134, 145. At the same time a much larger subscription was raised for the completion of the paving of the High Street.

⁷³ R. Gunnis, *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851* (1951, rev. ed., n.d.), pp. 417-8.

⁷⁴ Oxford City MSS. P. 3. 23, Commission Accounts, Jun. 1778, May 1779.

⁷⁵ Minutes II, 8 Apr. 1782.

balustrade should be taken down was defeated.⁷⁶ However, in the next two months it was decided both that Gwynn's revised scheme was unsatisfactory and that the balls should go. Advertisements were placed calling for new designs and were answered by Randall and John Townesend. This time Townesend was successful.⁷⁷ His scheme is that which is seen on the bridge today, that is, a plain balustrade with nothing remarkable about it. It can only be regretted that Gwynn's more original proposals were not carried into execution, for they would have made Magdalen Bridge unique in this country for grandiloquence and *panache*.

Matters rested like this for several years, the bridge complete save for the south western corner. Finally, in 1790, the last move was made when the Vice-Chancellor announced his willingness to allow the demolition of the Physic Garden library.⁷⁸ Once this had been effected, Randall completed the sweep according to Gwynn's design. The architect had died in 1786 and so the Commission asked Daniel Harris, the keeper of the County Gaol and a local architect, to supervise this ultimate stage. He reported his approval of the work on 30 August 1790 and submitted plans for a permanent toll house at the other end of the bridge in the following month.⁷⁹

The architect for the work at the Physic Garden, however, was James Wyatt. It had been intended, when removal was first discussed in 1775, to pull down the house and library and re-erect the building further back, closer to the garden wall.⁸⁰ Wyatt, however, had thought otherwise and in letters written to Lewis Bagot, the Dean of Christ Church, in November 1775, outlined plans for an entirely new house.⁸¹ These were evidently unacceptable for the Physic Garden delegates advertised in the spring of 1776 for the submission of further schemes. At least one was received, from W. Latimer.⁸² In the event, this too was unacceptable and the Delegates then succeeded in putting off any action for fourteen years. This was as irksome to the Professor of Botany, after 1784 Humphrey Sibthorp's son John, as it was to the Paving Commission, for he was all this time without an official residence or even an allowance in lieu of his free accommodation. In 1789 he petitioned the Vice-Chancellor for a loan to cover the cost of the work and as a result James Wyatt was again approached.⁸³ A new house was not constructed, but the existing greenhouse to the east of the Danby Gate was given an extra floor and converted into a library and residence.⁸⁴ This was made more spacious in 1834 when the reforming Professor Charles Daubeny added a further range onto the front of the house so that it now straddles the Garden wall. (PL. XIV C.)

⁷⁶ Minutes II, 30 Apr. 1782.

⁷⁷ Minutes II, 20, 27 May, 4 Jun. 1782.

⁷⁸ Minutes II, 30 Feb. 1790.

⁷⁹ Minutes II, 27 Apr., 16 & 30 Aug., 28 Sep. 1790.

⁸⁰ Minutes I, 14 Mar. 1775.

⁸¹ Bodleian Library MS. Sherard 5, ff. 39-44.

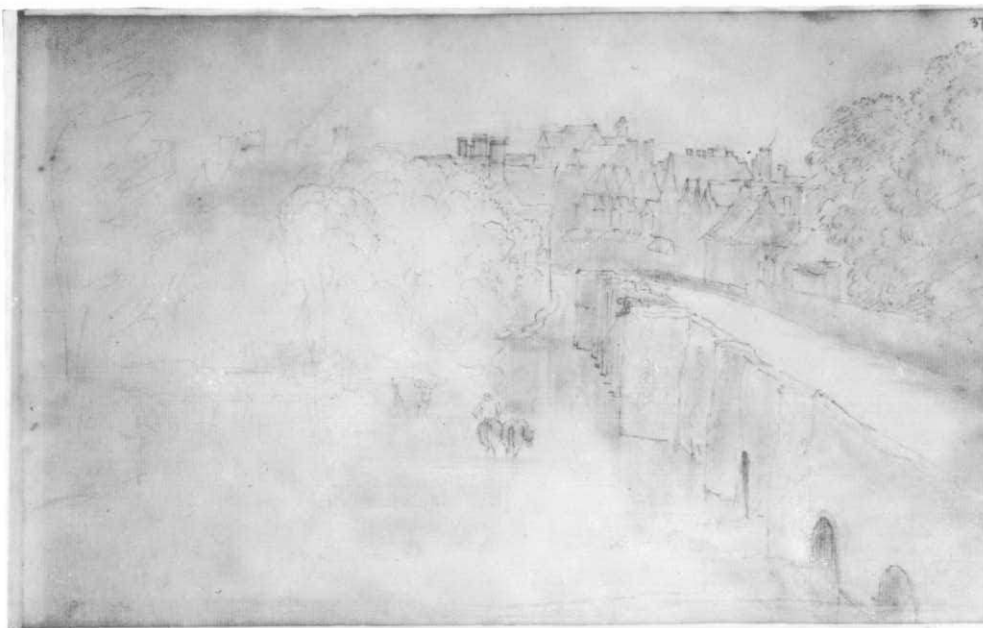
⁸² *Ibid.*, ff. 15-16; plans & elevations, MS. Sherard 6.

⁸³ MS. Sherard 5, ff. 27-8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, ff. 51-8 for accounts relating to the work.

With this, our course is ended ; this part of Oxford remained as it had been designed by the Commissioners until the demolition of St. Clement's church and the widening of the bridge in the later nineteenth century. The essence of Gwynn's bridge, however, remains unchanged and provides a lasting reminder of the beginnings of town planning in Oxford.

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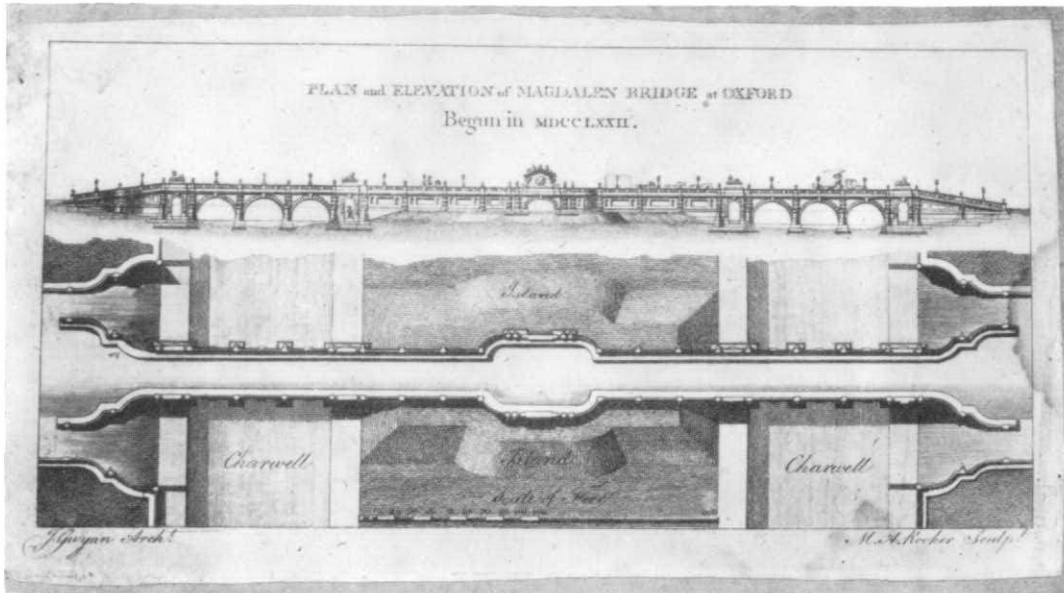


A. Drawing of old Magdalen Bridge viewed from Magdalen College tower by J. B. Malchair, dated 18 June 1772. (Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Ref.: CCC. MS. 443, vol. 3, f. 37.)

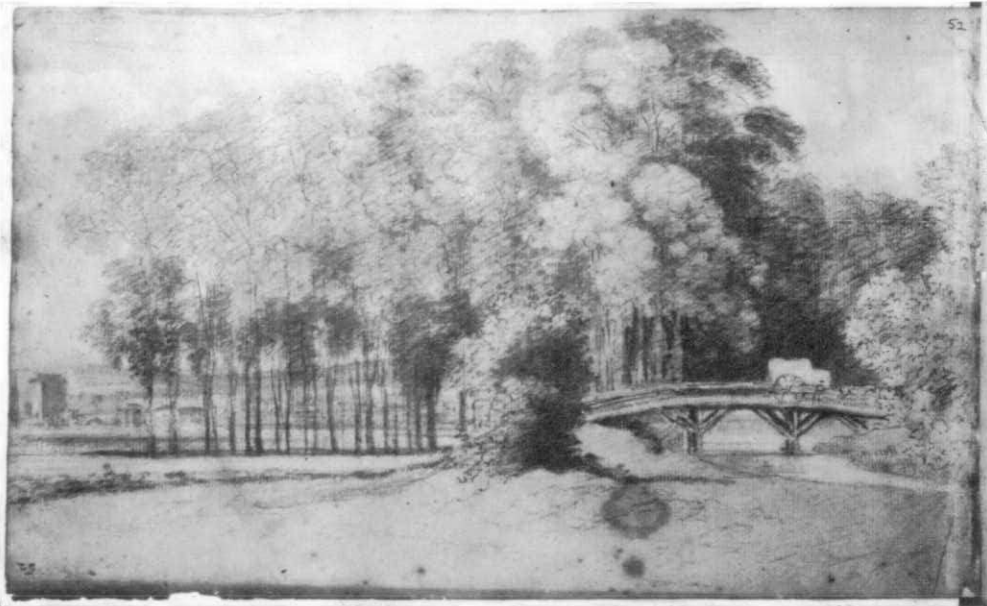


B. View of the western end of Magdalen Bridge before its destruction. Originally the illustration to the Oxford Almanack for 1771.

PLATE XIII

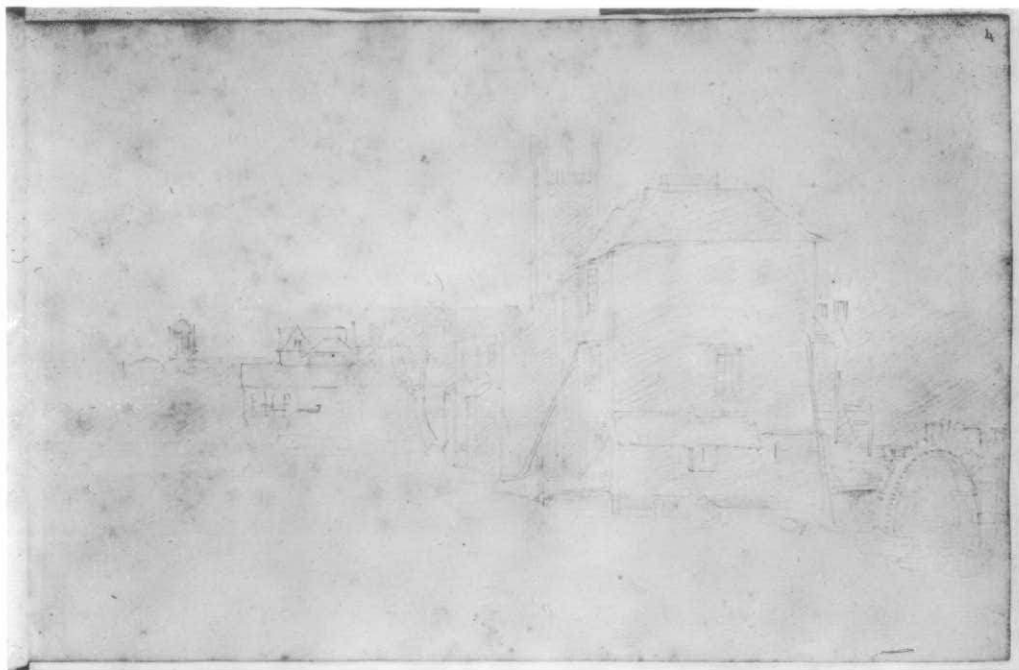


A. Engraving, by M. A. Rooker, of the original scheme for Magdalen Bridge. Published in the *New Oxford Guide* (1772).

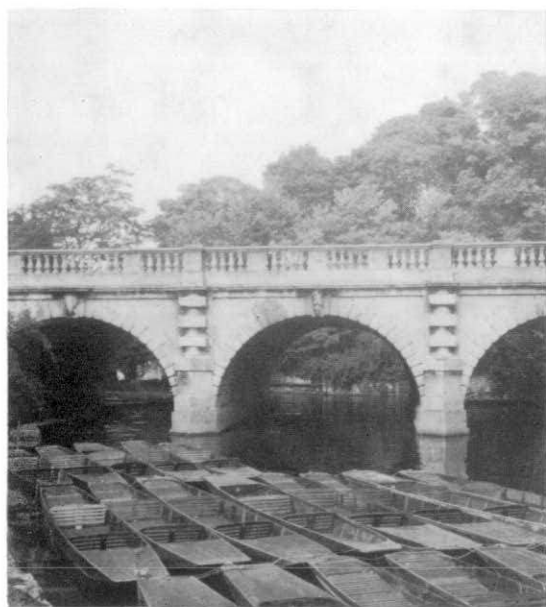


B. Sketch of the temporary bridge at Milham by J. B. Malchair, dated 1 October 1772. (Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Ref.: CCC. MS. 443, vol. 3, f. 52.)

PLATE XIV



A. Sketch of the new bridge under construction made from the east bank, with the island buildings in the foreground, by J. B. Malchair, dated 24 March 1775. (Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Ref.: CCC. MS. 443, vol. 11, f. 4.)



B. View of the southern elevation of the western arm of the bridge as it exists today.
C. View of the Professor of Botany's house in the Botanic Garden.