BRIDGING THE GAP

Bridges are older than civilisation itself. The first man-made bridge structures are thought to have been built in Neolithic times, comprising of either wooden planks or stone steps across otherwise impassable terrain. One of the oldest that has been discovered consisted of a wooden track laid across horizontal marshland. Due to the durability of the wood and advances in carbon dating, we can be certain that our distant ancestors solved an eternal problem in a way that we have modified, but not seriously changed. If one wishes to get from bank A to bank B, we should construct an edifice that enables us to do so. In other places, no doubt aware of the damage of damming the river, a Neolithic group ensured there were sufficient spaces between each of the stepping-stones, allowing the river to continue its course unimpeded. For both groups, once across, they did not dismantle the bridge. The effort was unnecessary as they had achieved their goal and the bridges remained through the succeeding generations, opening up new horizons for travelling groups and saving them the effort of constructing new settlements.

The Post Track in the Somerset levels is thought to have been built in the third millennium BC and thus far, the oldest known purpose made bridge-way in the British Isles. There is some speculative evidence the trackway was maintained and even improved for a period of time, at least one succeeding generation. The inherent value of such maintenance is obvious. The bridge trackway, like all bridge constructions, was designed for an essential public good, to open up land access and circumvent a natural barrier without disrupting unduly the natural element below.

It is not surprising that structures that solved problems so eloquently and could last beyond the lifetime of their maker are to be found in the religious traditions. The Norse would speak of Bifröst, the rainbow bridge that separated our world of Midgard with the world of the gods, Asgard. The Zoroastrians teach of Chinvet, the bridge of judgement, which separates the world of the dead and the living. Islam has aṣ-ṣirāṭ, which is held to be the bridge that all must cross on the day of judgement, only the righteous surviving the beam of a razor-sharp hair's length. Christianity is in many ways a religion of bridges, the gap between people and God being bridged by Christ.

A more secular world still has use of bridges in the abstract, with the conscious value of bridges residing in metaphor. When we seek to mend relations, we "build bridges" and when we want to find solace during turbulent times we may seek "a bridge over troubled water". When we wish to know more, we seek to "bridge the gap". It also signals moments of import and fateful decision, suggesting the crossing of boundaries: as we will "cross that bridge when we come to it". In some ways the metaphorical understanding of the bridge has long passed the conscious appreciation of the bridge's value.

There might be several reasons for this. Our relationship with nature has changed to the extent that we do not feel threated by it; indeed we now pose more of a threat to nature than it does to us. Our infrastructure (speaking specifically of advanced economies) is established, efficient (compared to historical means) and prevalent. A bridge does not necessarily hold wonders for us in way they did for our distant ancestors. The conscious value of the bridge is more evident in our conversations and thoughts. Paradoxically when we cross bridges we might not think about them, but think about them when we do not cross them.

Heidegger went further arguing that beyond the functional and symbolic nature of the bridge they also manifest a pure sense of dwelling. Crudely, dwelling in this sense describes the feeling of peace or 'homelieness' certain places evoke. The ineffable nature of the feeling is explored deeper in his writings, where he places the experience of a person is intimately bound up with nature itself. The world is divided between the earth (the land which we walk upon), the sky (our sense of something beyond our daily strides), mortals (the reality of our finite existence) and finally the divinities (the acknowledgement of a being which may or may not exist but sets the standard for existence). The bridge he argues uniquely unifies each of these aspects, whereas other constructions do not.

Bridges then, are clearly special. If we consider the thoughts regarding and treatment of bridges through time, it may help clarify the same phenomenon with land. We use the land and travel across it, but how often does the average person consciously think about it? Never mind its economic rental value.

London Bridge, perhaps the most famous bridge in the world to be continuously misattributed, is London's oldest. Constructed originally as a military pontoon bridge by the invading Romans

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in the first century it has survived in numerous iterations to the concrete, brutalist monument of the present day. Historically, the bridge provided access from the marshland south of the Thames, up a natural rocky causeway that is the now the south bank of the bridge and then access to the north bank and the growing garrison settlement of Londinium. As the great bridge builders of history, the Romans ensured the bridge, made from nearby forest trees was well maintained until the decline of the empire in the 4th century. The wooden bridge survived until its destruction by the Vikings during the Anglo-Saxon period and gave rise to the popular ditty.

Post-Conquest the importance of the bridge was recognised by the new Norman overlords, with the Conqueror's son William Rufus raising a special tax in 1097 to support the maintenance and repair of the bridge. It's clear the public good the bridge provided, and the economic boost it provided to the growing commercial city was recognised by the highest authorities. Indeed, bridge building was recognised as an act of piety across most of Europe at the time and donations for building and maintenance were actively encouraged by the clergy. During William Rufus' reign land surrounding the bridge was donated to "God and the Bridge" to support its repairment and longevity. Here is an interesting reversal of what we might see now, where the land rent of the bridgeheads, increasing with time, is held privately.

Such was the value of the bridge and its importance to London and the Kingdom, a special order, the Fraternity of the Brethren of London Bridge, were commissioned in 1176 to utilise the funds from taxation and gifts to build the first stone edifice. The bridge they oversaw would go on to last 600 years and, in this construction, we can see parallels to the great cathedral building endeavours of the time. While cathedrals might have more of an obvious spiritual or aesthetic aspect, bridges for the medieval person were also a symbol of order in a world of chaos, a shining light of community solving the challenges of the natural world through, in their mind, the grace of God. The co-existence of society and religion was taken for granted; it would not be possible to have one without the other. The construction of the bridge was no less religious than the construction of a cathedral.

As the stone London Bridge came in to serviceable use its economic value rose. The new stone structure could take permanent buildings across its span and these became commercial ventures and housing for workers and shopkeepers. The bridge teemed with life as market traders, merchants and farmers crossed the bridge to market and shop and dine on the bridge itself. It became man-made land across the Thames and almost a village of its own.

Over the next few centuries, the population of London rose five-fold and London Bridge remained the only crossing, save Kingston Bridge much further to the west. More buildings were constructed on the bridge, including water mills built beneath the bridge led to a displacement of water levels, causing the Thames to rush at high speed under the arches in the middle, compounded by their close spacing. Some would 'shoot the bridge' and gave rise to the phrase "for wise men to pass over, and for fools to pass under". The colourful image suggests that it became more than just a bridge and was a place of entertainment, recreation and business in its own right. All through this time the funds were carefully administered and the bridge was well maintained for the public good.

Later, (and foreshadowing future management of public assets) the immediate financial pressures on the sovereign turned the common good of the bridges revenue into a short term cash boost. The bridge was sold by Edward I to the Corporation of the City of London in return for war loans of which he was in desperate need. Happily, however, good stewardship of the bridge continued. Under the aegis of the Corporation of London, the tradition of assiduous management for the public good was continued and arguably improved. Bridge House Estates was established and it used revenue raised to fund the construction of other bridges across the Thames during the Victorian through to the modern day. Blackfriars Bridge and the millennium bridge (walkway) were constructed using these funds among others. Furthermore, the Trust is one of the UKs largest single funder of charitable works throughout the city, currently around £20 million per year, through its funding arm the City Bridge Trust. This is in keeping, for the most part, with the medieval idea of charitable good works, albeit in a more secular manner.

The current London Bridge was completed in 1972. The previous version was purchased by the American businessman Robert P. McCulloch in 1968 and transported, disassembled, to Arizona. The bridge still fulfils its central purpose of opening access to land in Lake Havasu City and enjoys novel popularity as a symbol of the universal appeal and utility of bridges. It also highlights that a bridge forms a nature of its own, forged by its history and durability, much like the cathedrals of old.

During the late Victorian a period the previous enlightened approach to public utilities was not always maintained and the short-sighted head of mercantile interest rose. Tower Bridge had a less happy experience during its conception. By the late 19th century, the growing population of south and east London, mainly working-class factory workers, led to the demand for a crossing

further downstream. The demand arose from congestion across London Bridge and the subsequent longer journeys. The proposal for the new crossing met with vehement opposition, initially from the corporation of London and merchants who used the Thames for shipping.

London at this time was still a considerable working port, taking in the produce of the world for sale at markets. Access down the Thames estuary narrows rapidly as London is approached, and with the docks towards the central east of the city, a new bridge, would risk cutting the ships off from the docks. The considerable economic interests of the city initially won out for many years, with people forced to the congestion of London Bridge.

In time however, the continuing congestion and delays forced the hand of the corporation of London and a public consultation was held organised by the newly assembled Special Bridge or Subway Committee. A site was chosen at the present tower bridge and a competition was held to design a bridge, which would allow vehicle and foot traffic access across but also allow tall-masted ships and steamers to travel unopposed. Numerous designs were submitted, from the outlandish and impractical to the cheap and dangerous. In the event, Horace Jones's design won as was adapted by the engineer John Wolfe Barry.

As we might expect, the rental value of the land on both parts increased as the economic activity blossomed. Support services such as restaurants, cafés and shops grew due to the new, nearly constant footfall.

There is a contrast between the constructions of London Bridge (and to a lesser degree the bridges further west) and Tower Bridge, but in the end they served the same purpose. They facilitated the increased access of land in an economically and socially constructive way. In both cases human ingenuity worked not against nature but with it to ensure social and economic activities could take place. We might take them for granted now, but both required an authority to recognise there was a desire and a social good to fulfil. The patrons changed from the medieval kings to the corporations but the custodians held, in general, to the original aim: the rental distribution for maintenance and good works within the city. In both cases there was a demand, a natural need, to widen access to the land and bridges in a sense are examples of man-made land. How else do we walk across the water? It is not the bridge itself which has intrinsic value, but the world it opens up.

When we consider a more recent prospective foray into bridge construction we can see attitudes can be markedly different. In the early 21st Century a new bridge was proposed as a new link-way between the South Bank and the Temple area of London, situated close to Waterloo Bridge to the west and Blackfriars Bridge to the east. The original proposal came from the actress Joanna Lumley and the design idea was absolutely fabulous: a garden bridge for pedestrian use only which would be filled with local and exotic flora for people to enjoy as the crossed. The bridge was titled the Garden Bridge and it initially received favourable fanfare in the press. It would be destined for ignominious end however. Spiralling consultation and procurement costs built from the original proposal of £185 million to over £200 million (with much of that coming from the public purse and Transport for London) while the annual upkeep costs were estimated to possibly be £3 million. By comparison, the pedestrian only walkway, expertly chosen to descend from St. Paul's to the Tate Modern cost only £22 million.

Compounding its problems the Garden Bridge failed to pass its own original cost assessment (made by the new Garden Bridge Trust) but more importantly failed to capture the public imagination. In some ways the reasons are obvious. There was no real utility to the bridge: one could cross on the adjacent bridges and not be limited by the fact the bridge would be closed at night. Secondly, London is not short of green spaces so the ecological element was perhaps not felt as urgent. Compared to the previous bridges considered above, there was a lack of genuine demand or fulfilment of a natural inclination to get from a to b as quickly as possible. In addition, the idea of preventing access to the bridge for special, corporate functions rightly caused outrage. It was the commercialisation of an unnecessary right of way. More philosophically, it ceased to be a bridge and became an adornment. A bridge, which does not fulfil its own purpose, is no bridge at all.

Perhaps the most important problem for the bridge was its inherent restrictive nature. It would be closed to host corporate functions and while not practically a problem (as other routes across the Thames would be available), the idea of denying passage understandably rankled. As documented by Anna Minton, many cities, and London in particular have suffered from the ever-increasing prevalence of modern enclosure, the movement of land from the public to the private sphere. The proposed Garden Bridge's semi exclusionary nature was keenly felt, perhaps more viscerally, than in other parts of the city.

If the exclusionary aspect of the bridge was the final nail in the misjudged coffin, then it highlights something important. Bridges are explicitly public utilities and that fact is recognised by many, even if not consciously. Their design, construction and operation are geared towards the facilitation of movement from one place to another. From a land perspective, they are monuments to our desire to move through the world and to overcome, respectfully, the boundaries nature has set. But they overcome the boundaries not by destroying nature, but by taking lessons from it.

In his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* Arthur Schopenhauer categorises the arts as those which conform most to the internal spirit. Art, in his view, calms the interminable will to life, bringing an experience of the sublime. Architecture features low on the list; it is the most basic as it deals with geometry and forces. Classical music incidentally is the highest form of art. But we might view the architecture of the bridge as not necessarily basic, but primal. We take them for granted perhaps because they fulfil their purpose so well. But the simple structure of the bridge, its cross beam across two points, may speak to us on a deeper level albeit one we are not conscious of. Schopenhauer argued that all elements of man-made construction was in some way an expression of the ceaseless human will to survive (albeit pessimistically in his view) and has a residual impact in the societies we develop.

Andro Linklater argued that the treatment of land informed the political developments of society. Extending the argument, it's possible that consideration of the history of bridges can aid the understanding of land. Bridges represent a microcosm of our relationship with land, the benefits, the produce and the value. The benefits are so stark and obvious that they fade back into the distance. We tend to replace the concrete with the metaphorical because the utility is so immediate we are in danger of taking it for granted. In part it's because bridges have always been with us in one form or another much longer than cities have. The same can be said for land itself. But being able to identify the value and crucially communicate it, could help to bridge the gap.