

Author's Note

When I first came to live in Eynsham in 1969 late night motorists used to queue up and wait for the toll-collectors to turn out the lights at 10.30pm to avoid paying twopence to cross Swinford Bridge.

Thanks to inflation, today it is not worth delaying your journey for six times that sum: 5p is the equivalent or twelve pence or a shilling in pre-Decimalisation currency. Yet, however small a proportion of their income, the majority of toll bridge users still resent having to stop and shell out.

It is not a matter of principle. They begrudge paying to cross a bridge that would be valueless except as a historical monument but for the public road either side they maintain out of their taxes.

They object to helping to underwrite "a unique UK tax haven." Above all, they do not see why they should foot the bill for restoring a bridge, which generations of owners, including the present one, have neglected for so many years.

This brief history is based on the archive I have assembled over the last 21 years for Eynsham and District Liberal Democrats. It presents the facts from a political point of view. For that I make no apology.

There are plenty of other sources the serious student can consult from the anniversary booklet Lady de Villiers compiled for the Eynsham History Group to Dr. Fred Wright's massive file in Eynsham Library.

Swinford Bridge is an endless source of fascination. As a so-called expert on the subject, I have found myself gracing the pages of the Wall Street Journal and appearing "coast to coast" on American television.

It is also a continual source of controversy. I would like to think one day in the not too distant future this living relic of a dead way of life will become a working museum.

Who knows? If the Government takes notice of Oxfordshire County Council's latest proposal, perhaps glib 21st century couriers will wisecrack disgracefully as they debouch another coach-load of tourists into the Thames-side car-park: "And here we have an example of the madness of George III.."

Don Chapman

Millstone Cottage, Eynsham

September 1995

SWINFORD TOLL BRIDGE

A Political History

Swinford Toll Bridge crosses the River Thames six-and-a-half miles west of Oxford at Eynsham. It is on the B4044, which was the main thoroughfare from Oxford to Witney, Gloucester, Cheltenham and the West Country before the opening of the A40 north of Eynsham in 1935. Although the name of the architect is unknown, it is arguably the most beautiful bridge spanning the river. It is a Grade II listed building and a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

The toll-house is on the Eynsham side, but neither it or the toll bridge is in the parish of Eynsham. The ancient ferry, which enabled people to cross the Thames at this point before the building of the bridge, belonged to Abingdon Abbey. Both banks of the river are in the parish of Cumnor and were, until the Local Government reorganisation of 1974, part of Berkshire.

The celebrated English judge, Sir William Blackstone, masterminded the building of the bridge to replace the ferry between 1767 and 1769 in an effort to revive the ailing fortunes of the Fourth Earl of Abingdon.

In March 1962 the late Neil Marten, Conservative MP for Banbury and North Oxfordshire, whose constituency then included Eynsham, said in the House of Commons he did not see why his constituents should have to pay to cross the bridge because George III got wet crossing the ford before it was built. In other words, it was a royal ducking that precipitated its erection.

Lady de Villiers dismissed this story as folklore in *Swinford Bridge 1769-1969*, the account she wrote for Eynsham History Group to mark the bridge's 200th anniversary. All the same, the crossing did have a bad record. In 1636 three or four Welsh Sheriffs bringing Ship Money to Charles I drowned and their £800 had to be rescued from the river. In 1764 the divine, John Wesley, narrowly escaped a similar fate when his horse lost its footing on the underwater causeway.

A Cunning Piece of Legislation

The 1767 Swinford Bridge Act Sir William drew up was the cunning piece of legislation you might expect from a jurist whose works are still required reading

both sides of the Atlantic. In return for building the bridge it stipulated the Earl, his heirs and assigns were to have a monopoly two miles up and down stream - a monopoly which continues to this day - and all revenues from the venture were to be tax-free. The Act did not compel them to rebuild the bridge or to provide a ferry if it fell down or became dangerous, though they were at liberty to do both to protect their investment.

Sir William hoped the bridge would boost his spendthrift young patron's fortunes by £500 a year, a return of ten per cent on the £5,000 capital outlay its erection involved. In fact, it was a good year when the takings topped £400 in an era when a flock of 600 sheep at a farthing a head would have paid the gatekeeper's wages for a week and still left Lord Abingdon sixpence to gamble at Burford Races.

In the end the poor Earl went bankrupt as a result of an ill-conceived attempt to establish the 18th century equivalent of a motel on the Oxford side of the river - a pie in which Sir William did not have a finger! - and it was left to his heirs and assigns to reap the financial rewards of Sir William's remarkable legal and business acumen.

They seem to have done so more or less unhindered until the 20th century when the disappearance of most toll-gates and turnpikes in Britain as a result of improvements to the nation's road network led to demands for the abolition of the remaining handful as archaic anachronisms.

Commenting on Swinford Toll Bridge in the House of Commons in 1964, the legendary Liberal leader, the late Lord Grimond, said he "thought there must be some error or it was a fairy story" when he heard that for 200 years or more someone had been entitled to an income of several thousand pounds a year free of tax and free of death duty.

Locally, Liberals have been involved in every attempt to end the tolls or to prevent increases since the Second World War. Sometimes the thrust has come from one side of the river, sometimes from the other, frequently both.

In 1948 Berkshire County Council joined forces with Oxfordshire County Council to free the toll bridge at Clifton Hampden. But their efforts a year later to free Swinford and Whitchurch in South Oxfordshire - the only other toll bridge in the county still in operation today - were unsuccessful.

Although Berkshire county councillors were said to have reached a secret deal with the Earl of Abingdon and a figure of £60,000 was mentioned for Swinford, negotiations foundered when the Labour Government of the day refused to cough up a 75 per cent grant. The Minister for Transport said he would rather spend the money improving roads.

In 1955 angry scenes at the toll bridge, petitions and the formation of an association to campaign for its abolition followed the Earl of Abingdon's decision to

increase the toll from four old pence to five old pence. The legend grew up, still prevalent in some quarters, the extra penny was for the spare wheel in the boot. Even Lady de Villiers succumbed to that piece of folklore.

The Horse Power Under the Bonnet

In fact, that is what the Earl should have been charging all along. Under the 1767 Act he was entitled to charge fourpence for every carriage whatsoever with four wheels and a penny for every horse, drawing or not drawing. Under the 1861 Locomotive Act, brought in to take account of steam traction, he was entitled to charge fourpence for every four-wheeled carriage and a penny for the mechanical horse or locomotive. Following the invention of the internal combustion engine, it seems the Earl forgot to charge for the horse power under the bonnet!

Another petition to abolish the toll at Swinford in 1961 prompted Neil Marten, the earlier mentioned MP for North Oxfordshire, to launch a campaign with the MP for Abingdon and North Berkshire, Airey Neave, to get the Government to extinguish the remaining 31 toll operations in Britain. But, echoing his Labour predecessor, the Tory Transport minister of the day, later Lord Marples, said compensation for a tax-free income of £15,000 a year would be astronomical and he would rather spend the money on by-passes.

Muscle-bound Constipated Tortoise

In 1964 the celebrated anti-monarchist Labour MP, Willie Hamilton of Glasgow, tried to insert a new clause in the 1963 Finance Act, requiring recipients of untaxed tolls to declare these revenues. In the case of Swinford he accused the Government of “behaving like a muscle-bound constipated tortoise” in refusing to end “a nice little tax-free local monopoly.”

Speaking in support and no doubt anticipating the inevitable response from the Government, the Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, said he was not against compensating owners if the Government abolished the tolls, “but I am not entirely convinced by the argument that because this has yielded an enormous amount of money for a very long time that is a reason to make the compensation large.” Britain’s future first woman Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was among those who voted against the clause. Well, she would, wouldn’t she!

In 1971 the toll dropped slightly for the only time in the bridge’s history as a result of Decimalisation. Two new pence, or 2p as we learnt to call them, were actually the equivalent of 4.8 old pence.

Elizabeth, Countess of Abingdon, the Earl of Abingdon’s widow, had inherited the bridge in 1963 and, when she died in the 1970s, she bequeathed it to a Dorset television producer and his wife, Ronald and Joyce Hole. The couple were obviously alarmed by the bridge’s state of repair. They commissioned a comprehensive survey and estimate from the Long Hanborough stone masonry firm, J. Joslin (Contracts) Ltd., a few miles from Eynsham, who in January 1980

quoted £273,809 for a full-scale restoration.

As a result the Holes offered to sell the bridge to Oxfordshire County Council in January 1981 for £200,000. But the leaders of the then Tory controlling group, after consulting with the relevant officers, turned the offer down without even referring it to the councillors for Cumnor and Eynsham, let alone the full Council.

The Missing “Not”

Hearing of their refusal, in March the bridge manager, an ex-SAS man called Michael Cox, made the Holes an offer and bought the bridge with his wife , Stella, for £100,000, plus £7,710 legal costs.

Later the same year he increased the toll from 2p to 5p after lowering it to 1p for a day, as he claimed he was entitled to do under the 1767 Swinford Bridge Act. It turned out his type-written copy of the Act omitted the vital “not” from the clause saying owners could lower the tolls and raise them again so long as they did *NOT* exceed the original figure. The County Council took out a High Court writ and forced him to return the charge to 2p.

After an abortive attempt to present a bill increasing the tolls to the House of Lords in January 1982, which again fell foul of the County Council and the High Court, the Coxes appealed to the Secretary of State for Transport under the provisions of the Transport Charges &c. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1954 to increase the toll from 2p to 10p. An inquiry took place at Witney in March 1983, at which the reason for the fivefold increase they were demanding soon became apparent.

Their accountant disclosed they took £29,913 in tolls in the year ended 31 October 1981. They paid out £13,311 in wages, maintenance and other charges but, despite their tax-free status, still made a loss of £336. Only £7,000 of the original purchase price came out of their own pockets. The rest they borrowed, and in 1980-81 spent £16,938 servicing their debts.

A Deficit of Well Over £1m

In order for Joslin’s to carry out the restoration programme, by that time estimated to cost £500,000, the accountant said the Coxes would need to raise the toll to 10p and, even so, they would run up a deficit of well over £1 m before they started to move heavily into the black again at the end of the 1980s.

In evidence Oxfordshire County Council said the basic structure of the bridge was sound and the load-carrying capacity was twice the limit necessitating a weight restriction. They said Joslin’s scheme would last up to 100 years. A less ambitious 25-year repair scheme would cost only £181,057.

Giving evidence for Eynsham and District Liberal Democrats, who had spearheaded the campaign locally and organised a petition against the increase, Don Chapman, then chairman of the branch, advanced the argument *Caveat*

Emptor - Buyer Beware, which has remained the main plank in the Liberal case against increasing the tolls. The Coxes knew or should have known when they bought the bridge it needed massive repairs and the price they paid should have reflected that.

Mr Chapman demanded: "Would (Mr Cox) be prepared to pay five times as much for a pint in his favourite free house because the new owner announced the place was falling down and he couldn't afford to repair it? No. He would go to the tied house down the road. But in this case there was no local authority bridge down the road. As the owner of a public utility, Mr Cox has the priceless advantage of operating a tax-free monopoly. Either his customers pay his charges or they face long, expensive and inconvenient detours."

Mr Chapman suggested: "It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that if the present owners ceded responsibility for it to Oxfordshire County Council, the bridge might be run as a tourist attraction by a charitable trust and for old times' sake travellers would continue to pay a nominal sum to cross. So far as we can discover, there is no museum devoted to this fascinating aspect of social history."

Turning the application down, the inquiry inspector said: "It would clearly not be acceptable for a buyer to be able to pay an inflated price for the bridge in the certainty that he could obtain an inflated annual return on his investment through an increase in tolls."

Following the deaths of Mr and Mrs Cox within months of one another, Graham Smith of Worcestershire bought the bridge in 1985 from the Coxes' heirs, Mrs Cox's daughters by an earlier marriage, as "a private long-term investment on behalf of his family trust." The selling agents, Humberts, who had described the bridge as a unique UK tax haven in their sale brochure, did not disclose the price paid, but pointed out they had been looking for offers in excess of £275,000, there had been a high level of interest from the UK and overseas, and the figure was "substantial".

Arthur Giles, who had just become Liberal Democrat county councillor for the Eynsham division, proposed an emergency motion at his first meeting, which was carried, that the Council should institute negotiations to buy the bridge. But before officers could take the matter further the sale to Mr Smith was announced. The sale also put paid to a private initiative by Mr Chapman to set up a charitable trust, buy the bridge, run it until the restoration was carried out, then hand it over to Oxfordshire County Council.

No Intention of Changing Things

Mr Smith told the press he had no intention of changing the running of the bridge and its operation seems to have carried on in the same way until 1987. Previous owners had carried out no major repairs in living memory apart from replacing the odd balustrade demolished by careless lorry-drivers and presumably paid for out of their insurance. Mr Smith took no remedial action either, though he

admitted later he had a copy of the 1983 inquiry inspector's report containing a summary of Joslin's survey.

The bridge was now in the name of Mr Smith's wife, Mary, and her son-in-law, Michael Hawley, became managing agent in 1988. He started keeping computerised records. They showed takings between 1988-89 and 1993-94 averaging about £71,000 a year. In the same period traffic across the bridge increased from 3.25m vehicles a year to a peak of 3.74m in 1992. Of those, 3.4m crossed the bridge during toll-collecting hours.

According to Mr Hawley, the increased volume of heavy traffic, resulting from roadworks at Pear Tree Roundabout in connection with linking the A34 to the new extension of the M40, and the marked deterioration in the bridge structure resulting from acid rain led the Smiths to consult the bridge experts, Gifford and Partners of Southampton, in 1990.

They produced an estimate for the restoration of the bridge in September 1991, which they revised in November 1992 and October 1993. The final figure was £693,500 plus VAT, the tax presumably being payable because it was incurred by the restorers, not the owners.

In the meantime, the owners applied to the Department of Transport in February 1993 to increase the toll from 2p to 5p under the 1954 Transport Charges &c. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act to pay for the work.

“Boiling Down to a Political Battle”

Like previous attempts to raise the tolls, the application caused considerable resentment. It was felt not only in Eynsham and the small community immediately east of the bridge at Swinford, some of whom crossed the bridge to village shops and schools several times a day, but also by motorists throughout West Oxfordshire and further afield.

Harry Wyatt made it one of the main planks of his campaign to succeed Arthur Giles as county councillor for the Eynsham division at the May 1993 elections, collecting 1,500 signatures for a Liberal Democrat petition opposing the increase. And though the Labour candidate, Mike Shelton, did not mention the tolls, the issue also featured strongly in the election literature of the Conservative candidate, parish councillor Dr. Fred Wright.

Indeed, the toll bridge owner's solicitor, Mr A. K. Dyer of Tyndallwoods & Millichip, wrote in a letter to the Department of Transport in July 1993: “It does seem that this is boiling down to a political battle between the Conservatives led by Dr. Wright and the Liberal Democrats spurred on by Brenda Smith. I had quite a long talk on the phone with Dr. Wright and it would seem that they are willing to be only too reasonable...”. Mrs Smith was at the time the Liberal Democrat branch chairman and signed all the branch's correspondence with the Minister of Transport.

In September Mr Dyer and the owner's agent, Michael Hawley, put the case for an increase to a large and vociferous public meeting in Eynsham Primary School called under the auspices of the Parish Council and The Eynsham Society (CPRE). The mood was hostile, but Eve Hollis, the vice-chairman of the Parish Council and a leading local Tory, was later to claim in a personal statement "a large percentage of those attending were not just members of the public, but were councillors or political party members."

"Bridge Operating at a Loss"

A two-day inquiry into the proposed increases took place at Witney in April 1994. During the hearing representatives of the owners stated the surplus on the operation of the bridge had fallen from £47,049 in 1988-89 to £14,699 in 1993-94. In fact, they claimed, there was a loss on the last three years because the figures did not include the agent's fee of £6,000 per annum or interest on the bridge owner's capital.

The situation was rather different from 1983. Then Oxfordshire County Council spearheaded the case for the objectors and West Oxfordshire District Council and Eynsham Parish Council left the presentation of evidence to the County's officers, though both had representatives present to cross-examine the applicant.

Ten years later the County was struggling to make ends meet as a result of Government capping. To campaigners against any increase it seemed desperate to avoid incurring the expense of preparing a case and appearing at an inquiry.

After painful and protracted negotiations, culminating in the postponement of the hearing from December 1993 to April 1994, the Council's officers eventually struck a deal with the owners to monitor the bridge restoration and the financing of the operation, details of which were approved by the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat group leaders, but have never been made public.

The County then formally withdrew its objection. The District Council had already decided to leave the matter to the County. So that meant the principal objectors to the increases were Eynsham Parish Council and Eynsham and District Liberal Democrats.

Former county councillor Arthur Giles presented the case for the Liberal Democrats. He said: "The bridge forms an essential part of an important and busy public highway, a classified road maintained by Oxfordshire County Council from public funds. Without the publicly maintained road on either side, the bridge would be valueless except as a historical monument."

He also presented a financial statement from Eynsham parish councillor George Wood, a retired tax official who is not a member of any political party, demonstrating that the true worth of the bridge at the time of its purchase, taking into account the cost of the restoration programme and other factors, was in the region of £18,400.

Dr. Wright prefaced his case for the Parish Council by making a personal statement, during which he claimed the Council changed “its stance from *opposing* to *strongly opposing* the proposed toll increase, as it did not like the way the accounts were given.” He said: “I and many people in Eynsham who have inspected the bridge clearly (not just from cars or buses passing over it) feel that the sooner repairs are commenced the better.”

He also read out a personal statement signed by the Parish Council vice-chairman, Eve Hollis. This concluded: “As an Eynsham villager I am opposed to the tolls in principle but, like the Council, feel that without an increase the bridge will be allowed to deteriorate further. As a villager I feel a certain pride when I tell people that they have to pay to get into our village and, while it is an anachronism, it is part of that indefinable something that makes Eynsham what it is.”

“Eynsham Parish Council,” said Dr Wright in his concluding summary, “as well as strongly opposing the raising of the tolls, also maintains its fall-back position that the whole of any toll rise which may be granted by the Secretary of State should be placed in a reserve or contingency fund for the repair of the bridge...”

First Toll Increase in 225 years

In November 1994 the inspector recommended and the Secretary of State for Transport approved that the tolls should increase from 1p to 2p for a motor-cycle with or without sidecar, 2p to 5p for a car, goods vehicle with two axles, minibus or trailer, 5p to 12p for a single deck bus, 12p to 20p for a double deck bus, and for goods vehicles with more than two axles to 10p per axle.

The inspector at the 1983 inquiry had taken the view that it would be unacceptable for an owner to pay an inflated price for the bridge, then increase the tolls to recoup his investment, a view which the Secretary of State of the day endorsed.

The inspector at the 1994 inquiry took the view, again with the endorsement of the Secretary of State of the day, that the Transport Charges &c. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1954 did not permit him to take into account the purchase price of the bridge or the owner’s failure to make provision for repairs in the past. His sole concern must be the present financial position and “future prospects of the undertaking... bearing in mind the need for major refurbishment.”

The new charges came into effect on 27 November 1994, provoking considerable resentment, including the vandalism of the toll booth. At the same time the management introduced concessionary books of 4p toll tickets for motorists living within a one mile radius of the bridge, who crossed at least six times a day.

“We feared the worst when the Government announced plans to phase out 1p and 2p coins,” the Eynsham & District Liberal Democrat branch chairman, David Rossiter, and County Councillor Harry Wyatt wrote in a letter to the local press. “All

the same, (it) is a bitter disappointment.

“It amounts to an early Christmas present for Mrs Smith and a kick in the teeth for the motorists of West Oxfordshire. In essence they are picking up the repair bill for an investment she paid a grossly inflated sum for in 1985. That doesn’t seem right to us...

“We note the Secretary of State raises questions of the way Mrs Smith has run the bridge and her failure to spend money on its repair. We also note he estimates a 5p toll will produce a total surplus of about £250,000 between 2001 and 2006 and his view that the toll should come down as the restoration programme proceeds.

“But if the owner doesn’t do that off her own bat, that will mean the County Council, Eynsham Parish Council or some other interested party footing the cost of another inquiry...”

Motorists paid up with good or bad grace, but if they thought that was the end of the matter they were in for a rude shock. On 22 May 1995 the Department of Transport issued a consultation paper, Regulation of Tolls at Statutory Undertakings, inviting views on proposals to relax or remove the controls governing the collection of tolls at 17 statutory undertakings in England and Wales, including Swinford and Whitchurch Bridges in Oxfordshire.

John Watts, the Minister for Railways and Roads, claimed the existing controls were an unfair burden on the crossing owners, yet were of little benefit to users. To make the procedures for raising tolls less costly, cumbersome and time-consuming for the operators and easier for the Secretary of State for Transport to administer, his paper proposed three options for change.

1. Maintain the broad framework of existing legislation, but streamline it so operators have greater certainty about what increases they are justified in applying for.

2. Partial Deregulation - relax present procedures to enable operators to increase tolls to a proscribed limit according to a formula based on the Retail Price Index, which only statutory objectors like local authorities and business organisations would be able to object to.

3. Full Deregulation - leave operators free to charge whatever they think they can get.

All three options would involve ending any provisions guaranteeing a statutory monopoly.

Could Lead to Very High Profits

The paper acknowledged a formula based on the Retail Price Index could be

difficult to frame and administer and that tolls to finance major investments like the restoration of Swinford Bridge “could lead to very high profits... once the investment had been made.” But because the Government would repeal any monopoly legislation, it argued, competition from alternative crossings would prevent operators from setting their charges too high.

From Liberal Democrat discussions with officials in the Tolloed Roads and Crossings Division at the Department of Transport, it emerged the paper was an attempt to tidy up the shortcomings of the 1954 Transport Charges &c. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, “but it seems to us,” commented County Councillor Harry Wyatt, “that in trying to close one can of worms the Government is in danger of opening an even bigger one.

“Whichever option she chose, the owner of Swinford Bridge would have to give up her monopoly. That could mean waving goodbye to the 1767 Swinford Bridge Act, which ensures all her revenues are tax-free and prevents the creation of another crossing two miles up or down river.

“So she would be entitled to bump up her charges to meet her tax bills and, however much they might object, motorists would be forced to pay them. Despite the theoretical ending of her monopoly there is no way our cash-strapped County Council could find the money to build another bridge over the Thames. It would cost at least £1 m and the necessary land purchases and road works possibly another £2m.”

County’s Ingenious Alternative Option

Despite Tory opposition, Liberal Democrat members of Oxfordshire County Council’s Environmental Committee with Labour backing decided at their meeting on 26 July 1995 the best way of satisfying the Government’s desire to reduce the regulation of toll bridges would be for the Government to provide funds to bring them up to standard, then set a date at which they would pass into public ownership without compensation.

But if this was not possible, they favoured an ingenious alternative option, based on the system adopted by the Government in its Design, Build, Finance and Operate initiatives, put forward by the Council’s officers.

A period should be set, say 30 years, during which the tolls would reflect the cost of repaying the capital toll bridge owners had invested, a fair return on that investment and the cash needed to bring the bridges up to standard. *THEN* they would pass into public ownership.

In their report to the Environmental Committee the County Engineer, County Solicitor, County Treasurer and Director of Planning & Property Services noted: “The savings of such a system may be easily evaluated. There is no net financial benefit or disbenefit to the undertaking, but the road user will in the longer term save the cost of toll collection. These toll collection costs are a large proportion of the toll itself for the Oxfordshire undertakings and a more efficient system needs to

be sought.”

Eynsham and District Liberal Democrats can see no chance of the present Government, or any other Government in the foreseeable future, coughing up the money to bring all 17 statutory tolled undertakings up to standard, then transferring them to public ownership without compensation. But we feel the County’s alternative option has genuine merit and represents a real chance - *possibly the LAST chance* - to rescue Swinford Bridge from the neglect it has suffered down the centuries and guarantee its long-term future as a Grade II listed building and Scheduled Ancient Monument.

That is why Eynsham Liberal Democrat District Councillor Derek Malin is organising a petition in support of the County Council initiative as part of our campaign against deregulation.

He or any of our other councillors will be happy to supply you with forms and answer any queries you may have about the Government’s proposals.

If you would like a copy of the Department of Transport consultation paper, Regulation of Tolls At Statutory Undertakings, write to Mr P. Butler, Tolled Road & Crossings Division, Department of Transport, Room F5/11A, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3EB. He is also the person to let know what you think. The closing date for comments is 30 September 1995.

What does the toll bridge owner think? On 2 July 1995 the Independent On Sunday carried a news story by Roger Dobson headlined *Bridge Tolls Set For Big Increases*. In it he quoted Mr Hawley, the managing agent of Swinford Bridge, as saying: “I would like to see deregulation because I believe everybody should be free to find the level of their goods or services within a free market-place.”

Finding the level for Swinford in a free market-place might mean taking a nominal journey between Eynsham and Oxford, working out the difference in mileage travelling via the A40 and the toll bridge, then basing the toll on the difference in cost to the average motorist.

The distance from my cottage in Mill Street to Gloucester Green underground car-park in the centre of Oxford is 0.8 of a mile longer via the A40. According to the RAC, it costs me getting on for 35p a mile to run my Ford Fiesta. Makes you think, doesn’t it?

This history is published by Eynsham and District Liberal Democrats as part of their campaign to prevent the deregulation of Swinford Toll Bridge. It costs £1 and all profits will go to campaign funds.

To help with the campaign and collect signatures for the petition contact the campaign co-ordinator:

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