

Swine-ford, ferry and bridge 1299-2008

*Notes kindly sourced by Fred W Wright, MA, DM, FRCP
Resident of Eynsham since 1963 and attendee at toll bridge inquiries in 1983 & 1994*

CHRONOLOGY

- 1299 the ferry was recognised as belonging to the abbot of Abingdon; from then on Eynsham Abbey paid bread (perslofs) and beer to the ferryman while the abbot of Abingdon paid 1s/ year for use of the Eynsham river bank – Eynsham Record 4 (1987) pages 11-14).
- Following dissolution of the abbeys in 1538, the Vicar of Cumnor asserted his rights over the river and held an annual beating of the bounds to collect his dues – Eynsham Record 10 (1993) pages 34-5.
- In 1636 £800 of treasury ‘ship’ money was lost in crossing the river and 3 or 4 Welsh sheriffs were drowned when the ferry boat capsized.
- 1752 references to a wooden ‘toll bridge’ at Swinford belonging to the Goodenough family, built by Thomas Keen of Hanborough, which “did not last” – papers in the Wastie Family collection. This may however, have bridged the Limb and Chil brooks by Eynsham Wharf and the Talbot Inn.
- In 1764 John Wesley nearly drowned in crossing the ford, when his horse stumbled on the causeway then wholly submerged to a considerable depth.
- 1765 Willoughby Bertie, Earl of Abingdon acquired the ferry and land on either side of the river for approximately £10,000. In the same year “... the good Earl thought he would make the passage of (George III)’s carriage easier across the ferry. He got some logs and made it more secure ... In fact the ferry got stuck, and the Royal Coach went into the River and the King got very wet.” (Neill Marten MP for Banbury, 18 March 1962)
- 1767 Swynford Bridge Act. The bridge was constructed by John Townsend and opened on 4 August 1769, with an adjacent Inn designed by Sir Robert Taylor.
- In 1774 the bridge was damaged by floods – the worst in living memory! Tolls failed to raise the predicted sums, the earl of Abingdon went bankrupt and the inn became derelict. Its base is now incorporated in the two cottages on the site.
- In 1835 tolls for pedestrians were abolished.
- On decimalisation in 1971 the charge for cars and lorries under 6 tonnes became 2p. Pedal cyclists were excused a fee (previously ½d) and motorcyclists 1p – usually not collected.
- In 1979 ownership of the bridge passed to Ronald Hole, a retired BBC TV producer, and his wife Joyce. The structure had been falling into disrepair, particularly from acid rain damaging the stone, and the estimate from Joslins of Long Hanborough was £273,809.

- In 1981 Mr and Mrs Michael Cox bought the bridge for £100,000. To finance the loan and to provide for repairs they increased the toll for cars to 10p but were forced to reduce it again after a High Court writ by Oxfordshire CC. Further attempts ended with an Inquiry at Witney in March 1983, when the Inspector commented *“I find it unsatisfactory that the owners are permitted to repair the bridge but are not required to do so.”*
- In 1985 the bridge was placed on the market at about £275,000 and advertised by Humberts as “AN HISTORIC TOLL BRIDGE REPRESENTING A UNIQUE TAX SHELTER, FREE OF ALL CAPITAL TAXATION AND PRODUCING A SUBSTANTIAL INCOME NOT ASSESSABLE FOR ANY INCOME TAX.” It was purchased by Mrs Mary G Smith of Tiddington, who also owned the toll bridge at Whitney on Wye with a car toll of 50p.
- A further Inquiry, requested by the new owner, was held in April 1994. At Fred Wright’s suggestion, it was agreed that a toll increase of 3p should be allocated to cover repairs and OCC should monitor the funds. Repairs to the stonework etc. followed; the toll is probably still the lowest in the country.

PRE-1994 TOLL		POST-1994 TOLL	
Motor cycle, with or without sidecar	1p	Motor cycle, with or without sidecar	2p
Car, goods vehicle not exceeding 6 tonnes gross weight, minibus, trailer	2p	Car, goods vehicle not exceeding 6 tonnes gross weight, minibus, trailer	5p
Single deck bus	5p	Single deck bus	12p
Double deck bus	12p	Double deck bus	20p
Goods vehicle exceeding 6 tonnes gross weight	2p	Goods vehicle with more than 2 axles	
- plus for each 2 tonnes gross weight in excess of 6 tonnes	2p	- per axle	10p

- The booth for toll collectors was also erected in the 1990s, after some were run down and injured by motorists – it is now reinforced at both ends with thick steel bars! And remains a popular spot for charity collections on bank holidays.
- On 3 December 2009 the bridge was auctioned by Allsop of London and sold for £1,08m to an as yet unknown buyer. Problems may yet remain regarding the accounts for expenses, ‘operating surpluses’ and returns on capital made since 2003 and especially the 2p (general) and 3p (repair) accounts which should have been separate but are only shown as such in 2008–2009.