

The Battle of Hopton Bridge

There are two things people need to know about the bridge on 'The Walls' in Mistley, the first is the ornamental lake behind it was not there in the days of Matthew Hopkins and second, its name was originally 'Hopton'.

We know this from an extraordinary legal case started in the late 16th century fought to decide who was liable for expensive repairs needed at this strategic crossing point.

Strangely the water course that feeds it (let's call it the Sheddinghoe stream) starts in the field just south of Long Road before meandering its way round Acorn village. It is joined by the brook originating from springs at Dickley Hall that carved out the nasty dip in the Clacton road. It crosses Green Lane, going through Tunnel meadow and the railway culvert before looping back under New Road. Even with this catchment area, after flowing through the former environmental centre, it reaches the bridge with little weight of water.

This is a manmade environment and we have records from 1302 of the use of dykes, strengthened by trees, to help manage what was originally a large area of marsh. This was used for both pasture and rushes for thatching. The road we call 'The Walls' is in reality a causeway, built across this large stretch of marshland. It became an important highway between London and the military port of Harwich in Elizabethan times. The Sheddinghoe stream on its own could easily be forded by carts and horses, the problem is the tide. The dam built under the structure of the current bridge, to create the ornamental lake for Mr Rigby, also holds back the incoming flood. Before this, twice a day it would surge through the gap in the causeway to replenish a large basin of marsh.

This valuable piece of marshland passed down the centuries until John Barker of Ipswich bought it from John & Elizabeth Goodwyn in 1576, as part of the Manor of Sheddinghoe, which included half of Mistley and Manningtree. He later bought the other part from Henry & Ann Joffelyn. After John died in 1589 the estate passed to his son Robert Barker. It is then that things start to go wrong for the locals.

As part of his father's estate Robert inherited Manningtree Quay (now Jewson's) but may not legally had full rights to the Market or to the 3 day fair that took place in the Town twice a year. In 1595 he was taken to court by the attorney general who thought he did not have authority to make money from the market, take a percentage of everything sold at the fair or charge every boat, cart and horse that used Manningtree

wharf. It is not clear what the outcome of this case was, but this absent landlord was surely upsetting the locals. As Robert became Member of Parliament for Ipswich and was later knighted, he probably had the political clout needed to hold his own and continue to cream money off the Town's folk. It is the other legal case that came his way we now turn to.

Before the days of local government and the turnpike system, the roads were fairly much left to local landowners to maintain. They, more than most, needed to use them, and so this was often not a problem. Bridges however are a more expensive proposition.

When the tide was in, the Sheddinghoe stream/creek became impassable to all users. For this reason 'Hopton' Bridge had been built as a substantial wooden structure, large enough to take heavy, horse drawn carts (similar to the bridge at Flatford). It was clearly in need of repairs which Master Barker refused to carry out. The dispute first went to court in 1598 and ran on for nearly a decade.



By 1601 due to the decay of Hopton bridge the 'Queen's Liege people' were complaining that they could not get across due to the flowing of the tide. They later told the court the situation was becoming increasingly

dangerous and people were likely to get swept away trying to cross. At yet a further hearing they said the bridge was ruinous and decayed and the people greatly annoyed, "for when the tide is up ye country is constrained to tarry an hour or two until ye tide is gone before they can pass through." They were demanding it should be repaired as part of Barker's manorial responsibilities. It got them nowhere.

They pursued Sir Robert Barker again in 1604 and in 1606, still very 'annoyed', they took a different tack and tried to get the Parish to take responsibility for repairs. As this probably still meant funding from Barker's pocket, it didn't succeed either.

At one point they thought they had won only to have the case thrown out of court on two technicalities, one being the order for repair did not state which County Mistley was in and second it did not state what lands Barker actually owned.

The next year there was another reprieve for Barker when the court papers were lost.

Two squires were finally appointed in 1607 to take evidence from local witnesses. Edward Grimston from Bradfield Hall and Edward Waldegrave from Lawford Hall were given this task. They were required to return to court and report who was responsible and what the cost of repairs were.

The first to give evidence was George Pegrime a well-respected benefactor of the Town. He said that 4/5 years before he had been on a jury before the court presenting evidence about the ruinous state of Hopton bridge. They had given evidence that Barker had at least twice made repairs and they knew the carpenter he paid to do the work. Richard Peeke, another elder of the Town, also said that Barker's father had met the costs of maintenance, paying John Bateman, another carpenter, for the work.

Barnard Payne a yeoman of Mistley confirmed these statements as true, implying the manor had in the past accepted responsibility and should continue to do so.

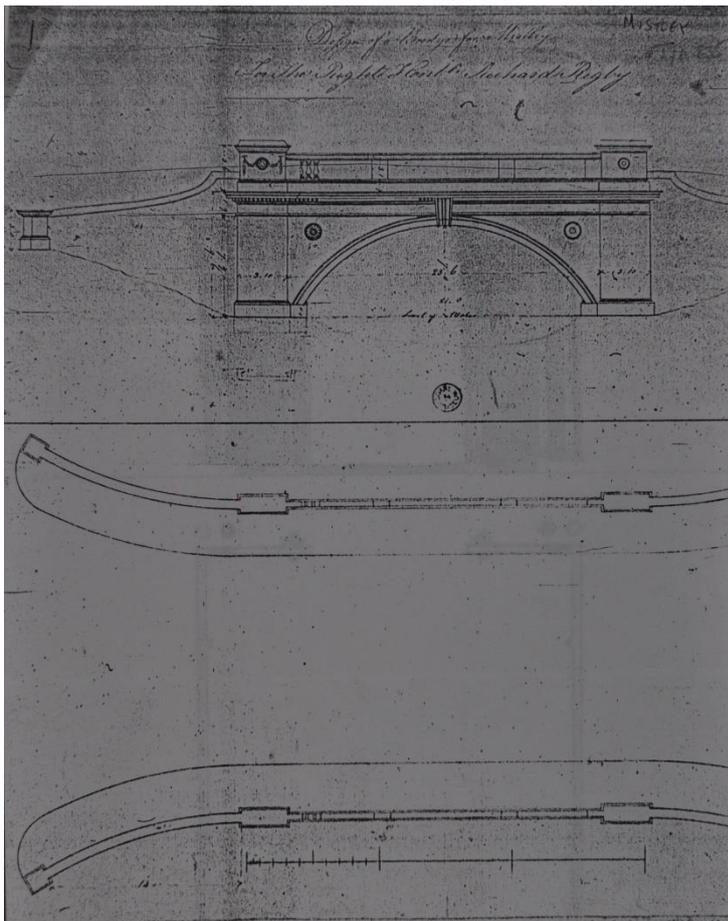
The case went back to court in 1618 and the locals finally got an order against Barker. The issue then went quiet, possibly because repairs were made, or because Barker's sudden death meant he was again able to dodge his responsibilities.

The 18th Century saw the name of the bridge changed to 'Hopping' and the marshes around called Hoppitts. Richard Rigby finally came along with the money to replace the wooden structure with brick, later enhanced through a design by Robert Adam in 1775.



It is interesting to note that this smart new bridge however proved too narrow and the ornate walling on the estuary side was taken down when it was later widened to accommodate more modern carts. The

original Rigby road was probably no wider than the current pavement and verge we can still see today.



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