

The Manningtree Bridges and Hermit of Cattawade

Like me, you may have thought there are just two bridges over the river Stour at Manningtree. If so where is the 'Middle' bridge? It crops up in several places in the historic record. 'Middlebridge' creek also appears on modern maps of the estuary as it flows past the town.

The most famous reference to a 'Middle' bridge is to be found in a statement given as part of Matthew Hopkins' investigation of so called witches in March 1645.

Richard Edwards was a wealthy Manningtree Brewer who was tormented by the elderly widow Elizabeth Clarke. As well as turning batches of Edwards' beer bad, she asked her spirit to meet him at the 'Middle Bridge' on his return from a night out in Bergholt. The plan was to scare his horse so he might be 'thrown down and never rise again'. In the event he did rise again and lived to make a statement to Hopkins confirming what had happened that night on the bridge, though denying actually coming off his horse. He was also prosecuted by magistrates that same year for supplying beer to an unlicensed ale house in the town, much to the grievance of the local minister. All a very different attitude from his upstanding father who had generously donated land to Manningtree church in 1633. For her part Elizabeth Clarke was hung for witchery.



Aerial photographs taken by Ida McMaster in 1976 & 1990 show the course of an early southerly meander in the estuary, sweeping across Stoney field in Lawford, close to the railway line. It may well have surrounded the Bronze Age burial site in the fields between the two tributaries, before silting up. The remnants of this lost arm of the river now flow out under the A137 road in what is only a small culvert, lined with rushes and known as Hall Fleet. This would have joined up with Wignall Brook flowing out at the bottom of Cox's hill, the exact route now lost under the engineering work for the Victorian railway, station and pond to supply water needed for the steam

trains. Further down it would have joined Middle Creek somewhere near the railway bridge, at the end of the Strand.

This lost third bridge means the 'middle' bridge was where the White Bridge is now, it being named after the colour of the previous six arched bridge.



The crossing at the other end can be dated even further back, linked to Wimer de Cattiwade in 1256 when Henry III gave him a five year respite from serving as a Knight in order to carry out his duties as warden of the bridges of 'Cattiwade'. The same year the Bishop of Norwich, Walter de Suffield gave one Mark to help repair the bridge. This would have been a wooden construction, possibly only wide enough for pedestrians, as horses could have forded a greater depth. The construction of the long causeway across the marshes was just as important and just as expensive to maintain. There were no civic authorities at that time so it fell to local land owners and those using the bridge to fund all the required works.

In about 1285 the Rector of Bergholt acquired lands whose income was used for the upkeep of the bridge and the construction of a chapel and associated buildings. The chapel was to be used for religious services and prayers for all those who gave money for the bridge, such as Ralph de Braham who provided it with an endowment out of his estate.

By the time of Edward III, around 1350, Roger de Kenton is keeper of the bridge and a grant of a plot of land one hundred feet long by the causeway is being requested in order to build another chapel. This one in honour of the Virgin Mary, in which services were to be held every day, forever, for the King and all the benefactors of the bridge and causeway.

Things did not go according to plan as by early 1359 the Chapel was not to be seen, but a Hermit was. This was Brother John atte Welle, who along with John Canes of Brantham was now keeper of the bridge and causeway between 'Cattiwade and Manytre'. The setting up of a Hermitage for a bridge, ferry, lighthouse or other public work, was common in an age before local government and a natural extension of monastic life. Religious houses also had access to the specialist architectural and building skills needed. Long distant travel was rare, so a blessing before setting out was essential

particularly when crossing water and definitely before setting foot on Brother John's rickety bridge!

As well as the ongoing works the Hermit still needed money to build the Chapel. So with John Canes he asked for the King's permission to seek alms and donations, without which they could not raise the money required. It was likely that the Hermit also had to generate, or beg for money just to keep his own body and soul together.

The costs of the bridge were relentless and just after Richard Edwards was trotting across them the Essex Court was shelling out £105 for repairs with another £250 in 1680.

The 'Cataway' bridge was still made of timber when Daniel Defoe crossed it during his 1722 tour and in 1774 Essex justices considered the estimate for rebuilding it far too high. In 1791 they examined the costs in detail but despite all this in 1796 high tides again caused extensive damage.



The later three arched, brick build construction we see today has fared better, though no longer carries traffic, whilst the spiritually troubled Middle Bridge has been replaced several times.

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