

Marlow Bridge 1957 - 1962

This is a personal memoir so all its faults and mistakes are attributable to me. But it could not have been written without extensive material collected at the time by Alan Coster to whom I am most grateful.

From 1955 to 1961 I represented Marlow on Buckinghamshire County Council. I was glad to be put on the Education Committee because that was my profession. I was not particularly excited to find myself also on the Highways Committee which sounded rather tedious. How wrong can you get?

In the autumn of 1957, Marlow Bridge was 125 years old and counting. Not for the first time concern was being expressed about its safety. One story was that it had been damaged by tanks crossing during the war. Or it could be just wear and tear. The County Surveyor asked the Highways Committee to ask the Ministry of Transport to make an order reducing the weight limit from 5 tons to 2 tons, a severe restriction for trade and commerce in the town.

From what I heard at Aylesbury, the defects found in the Bridge might be serious and questions were being raised about the future of the whole structure.

To Repair or to Replace

I soon discovered that some senior officials and some senior aldermen (those were the days) and councillors were in favour of, even enthusiastic for, a big new bridge with two or four carriageways. A few 'modernists' in the town expressed similar views. It seemed to me that the future consequences would be unhappy for those who lived in or visited Marlow.

On 4 November 1957 I wrote to a number of citizens alerting them to the developments and inviting them to a meeting. Those who accepted were Canon Amies (Vicar of Marlow), Alan Coster (Secretary of the Marlow Chamber of Trade and Commerce), Councillors George Currall and Brooke Furmston, Dr Richard Henry, Gerry Lake, Forbes Liston, Freddie Wedlake (of Cripps and Shone), Commander Owen Wethered, and Sir Evelyn Wrench.

The meeting was held on 18 November 1957 and our Marlow Bridge Preservation Committee came into being, with Alan Coster as secretary, Freddie Wedlake as treasurer, and myself as Chairman. Through the activities of our members we were able to build a network of supporters, local, regional and national. On 2nd December 1957 we wrote a letter to 16 groups within the town, including Marlow Town Council, Marlow Chamber of Trade, the Regatta Committee, the 3 major political parties, John Hall MP, the Parochial Church Council, the Rotary Club and the Round Table.

In this letter we made the case for preserving the existing Bridge on two grounds. The first was the intrinsic value of a grade one building as part of a place of scenic beauty, widely known. The second ground was that a new widened bridge, built to take vehicles of all weights, would introduce heavy traffic into the town which would become a thoroughfare and would fundamentally alter its character. (I later discovered that thought had already been given to taking down the south side of Spittal Street to ease the traffic flow).

We argued that the Bridge could be strengthened to take 5 - 8 tons. We urged those to whom we wrote to express their views to the Clerk of the County Council.

On 15 January 1958 we achieved what, at first sight, seemed like a break-through. The Clerk of the County Council reported that the Highways Committee had decided that if the Bridge could be strengthened to take loads of at least 5 tons for a considerable period, and if this could be done at reasonable cost, the Bridge should be repaired rather than replaced.

This was a statement of intent but heavily conditioned and we regarded it with some suspicion. We also knew that Berkshire County Council, who bore 25% of the local authority financial responsibility, had long been in favour of a new structure. Above all we knew that the greatest share of the total expenditure would be borne by the

Ministry of Transport and that their decision would, eventually, be determinative.

The Bridge and the Bypass

We published a pamphlet called 'The Future of Marlow Bridge' where we sought to broaden the perspective by noting that the Bridge was a major crossing place of the Thames and lay between two trunk roads: to Bath and the southwest, and to Oxford and the midlands.

It was clear that a link between these two main routes (soon to be motorways) would become necessary. But there was an alternative to the strengthening or replacement of Marlow Bridge. The County Plans of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire both included a road that would by-pass Marlow, crossing the river half a mile downstream. Our pamphlet urged this course of action as a solution. But we also needed to be assured that a strengthening of the Bridge at Marlow was feasible. Bucks CC had employed Rendell, Palmer and Tritton as consulting engineers. We consulted Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners and on 18 December 1957 Freddie Wedlake and I met their representative. As a result of their inspection we were able to say that "the suspension bridge at Marlow could be put into good shape for a modest capital cost".

Costs and Limits

With effect from 14 July 1958, Bucks and Berks CCs applied a "temporary" 2 ton limit to the Bridge. This serious restriction caused some hardship to traders in the town and demands were made that immediate action be taken to remedy the defects. When the 2 ton limit was made 'permanent' on 1 September 1958 the need for both short and long term decisions became acute. But they were not to be forthcoming. Too many public and private organisations were involved and the costs of different solutions varied considerably. The two County Councils said they were awaiting a report from their consulting engineers when they would decide the measures that should be taken with regard to the strengthening of the Bridge "or its replacement".

In October 1958, Marlow Town Council and Marlow Chamber of Trade restated their support for strengthening the Bridge but raised the limit to 8 tons. In November, we (the Preservation Committee) published a second pamphlet called 'Marlow Bridge, What Next'. This summarised the report of the consulting engineers of the County Councils. They had costed the types of flooring for the Bridge (1) timber covered with asphalt (as at present) (2) steel plate with asphalt (known as 'battledock'), (3) open mesh steel grid. The costs were:

Load (tons)

(The estimated life of 'battledock' was 60 years, the others 30 years)

Our pamphlet argued that the 5 ton limit was too low, and that the 'unlimited' category would cause heavy congestion in the town, as would the 12 ton limit. So we strongly favoured 8 tons. (This pamphlet was signed, additionally, by architect H C Constantine, L F Lunnon, R Laird, and Rev Vaughan Wilkes (the new vicar); Mrs Randall joined the Preservation Committee later.

In December 1958 came a significant and (to us) disruptive policy decision. Bucks and Berks CCs resolved to support a limit of 15 tons. Whether intentionally or not, this had the effect of reinforcing those who sought the replacement of the Bridge as it brought the estimated cost of repairing closer to the estimated cost of a wholly new structure. In February 1959 Marlow Town Council and Marlow Chamber of Trade rejected the 15 ton limit as being excessive but the County Councils reaffirmed their position, while seeking (they claimed) to keep alive the possibility of the Marlow by-pass.

The Arches and the Conference

The two County Councils then went further in what looked like a developing tactic. In October 1959 the Highways Committee of Bucks CC considered a report from their consulting engineers that the existing arches of the Bridge should be completely rebuilt to provide an 18 feet opening as compared with the existing 10 feet.

We strongly opposed such a proposal as it would, in effect, amount to a destruction of the Bridge and was likely, if supported at the Ministry level, to be followed by a proposal for a wholly new structure. At a meeting of the Highways Committee at Aylesbury on 30 October 1959, I moved a resolution that no further action be taken on the proposal. After much debate, my motion was defeated by 5 votes to 11 and the whole future of the Bridge was referred to a conference.

The conference was held at Court Garden, Marlow on 17 December 1959. In the morning the representatives of the two County Councils met with officials of the Ministry of Transport. This was followed by a meeting in the afternoon attended also by representatives of Marlow Town Council, our Preservation Committee, the Royal Fine Art Commission, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, the National Road Transport Federation and the motoring associations.

Along with the Town Council, Cookham District Council, Bisham Parish Council and the Marlow Chamber of Trade, we presented a joint memorandum with five propositions. These were:

1. That Marlow Bridge should be strengthened and preserved and that this work should be proceeded with without delay
2. That the Ministry of Transport should be pressed to accept, for ??? purposes of grant, a

strengthening to allow the bridge to carry ??? vehicles not exceeding 9 tons in weight 3. That the suggestions of the consulting engineers of two steel chains instead of one additional chain should be accepted 4. That the preservation and strengthening work should not involve the replacement of the existing arches 5. That the early construction of the Marlow - Bisham by-pass should be pressed for as vigorously as possible

The Minister Has Doubts

At meetings in January and March 1960, the County Councils in effect accepted these 5 propositions with the important exception that they continued to insist on a limit of 15 tons. On 19 August 1960 the Bucks County Surveyor wrote to me to say that the consulting engineers hoped to go out to tender on the strengthening of the Bridge by October and that he had made a formal application to the Ministry for the appropriate money grant. However, he added that he had been asked by the Ministry to supply details of the cost of a new bridge "and I assume that they wish to make a comparison between the cost of strengthening a single-lane bridge, with traffic lights, and a new bridge on the same site carrying two-way traffic." Back to square one was my first thought.

It was clear that the movement in Bucks CC to strengthen the bridge to 15 tons was by no means defeated. In October 1960, the local press carried a headline "Marlow Bridge may have to go", reporting that the Minister was

not persuaded that the bridge should be preserved. There were signs that he favoured the building of a new bridge with a 24ft roadway at a cost of £192,000. Meanwhile the 2-ton limit continued to concern the people and traders in the town.

Throughout much of 1961, the Ministry stalled. John Hall MP was told that before a decision was made there would have to be "an up to-date assessment of traffic in the area." The Ministry added that during the 3 years since the 2-ton limit was imposed there had been "a surprising lack of unanimity among local interests concerned about what ought to be done". So once again the Preservation Committee reminded the Ministry of the 5 agreed propositions from the Conference of December 1959 with which the 2 County Councils agreed (except for the 15 ton limitation). The newly formed Marlow Society now joined the combatants, working with members of the Preservation Committee

Typical of the many letters from the Ministry at this time, was that of 13 February 1961 addressed to the Marlow Chamber of Trade. This stated that the Minister was in full sympathy with the Chamber's concern; was doing what he could to reach an equitable solution as quickly as possible; but had undertaken not to reach a decision until there had been the fullest consultation with the local authorities and other bodies whose interests were involved. Nothing new there.

One signatory of ministerial letters on several occasions was 'A.O. Ridout' who said things like "The problem of the future of the bridge is a complex one which must necessarily take some time to resolve. I can assure you however, that it is under active consideration and that the representations of the many interests involved are receiving careful attention". But suddenly we were told that Mr Ridout "does not deal with Marlow Bridge matters" (as if we didn't know).

Nothing substantial was then heard from the Ministry until the summer of 1962.

On 17 August 1962, the Minister wrote to the two County Councils setting out his "preliminary conclusions" in response to the grant application made by them for the reconstruction of the existing bridge to carry a load of 15 tons. The Minister saw "considerable difficulty" in the proposal. The width of the carriageway would continue to be restricted, with a single line of traffic. An expenditure of £250,000 seemed quite "unacceptable" on a Class 1 road. The Minister, however, accepted that special attention had to be given to amenity and planning considerations. For this reason he would be prepared to consider an application for grant towards the construction of the proposed by-pass earlier than would be justified on traffic grounds alone. This would be a Class 1 road and would incorporate a Class 1 spur road leading into Marlow. Grant would be available for such a scheme between 1965 and 1968.

This would necessitate reconsideration of the classification of the existing A404 across the Bridge and through Marlow, depending on how much traffic was diverted onto the by-pass, with a possible loss of grant on that account to the County Councils.

The Highways Committee of Bucks C.C. now recognised that if their choice was for a new bridge on the existing site there would be no Ministerial grant for the by-pass for a great many years. There would also be strenuous opposition from many quarters, including the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on amenity and planning grounds. On the other hand, said the Highways Committee, replacing the Bridge with a modern structure could certainly result in a design which would harmonize with the surroundings. The by-pass would cost about £1m which would be substantially more than the cost of a new bridge on the present site. But the consequential costs of either scheme were difficult to estimate.

Local Marlow opinion continued to emphasise the need to limit traffic congestion in the town and other traffic problems in the whole area, and to provide unrestricted crossing of the river. All these advantages could be supplied only by a by-pass.

In the light of all these considerations, the Highways Committee decided that Bucks CC should accept the Minister's offer to bring forward the date of the

construction of the by-pass, rather than press either for strengthening the present Bridge to take 15 tons, or for the construction of a new bridge on the present site. The Highways Committee thought that "it would be unwise to express any views at this stage as to the loading which should be contemplated for the existing bridge." But the Committee must have realised that grant money would not be provided so as to enable the limit to be raised to 15 tons.

Berks CC informed the Ministry that while they were still of the opinion that a new bridge should be built on the present site, they would accept the alternative of a by-pass subject to the existing bridge and its approaches remaining a classified road.

It would be unfair to leave the impression that the Ministry of Transport agreed only reluctantly to the preservation of the Bridge. I well remember a senior bridge engineer of that Ministry at a meeting in Marlow, in 1961, who began his contribution by saying "I would not have thought you would wish to lose your beautiful bridge". Later I discovered he was a devoted member of the John Ruskin Society. So his aesthetics were sound.

Epilogue

So the decision was eventually taken by the Minister of Transport on a combination of sensible road policies and

sound economic investment. But what contribution did mobilised Marlow opinion make to the outcome?

First, that opinion saw off the destructive policies of a few establishment figures in faraway Aylesbury. Secondly, it enlisted the help of local and national societies anxious to preserve what is most valuable in our environment and the support of their patrons in high places.

Thirdly, Marlow opinion kept alive the principle that towns are, above all, places for people to live in, not to be exploited by other interests.

John Evans concluded in his survey of 'Marlow Through the Ages':

"In 1966 a repaired and strengthened suspension bridge was reopened to traffic, and the Marlow by-pass, with its own bridge, was opened in 1972. A second important outcome of the campaign was recognition of the need to establish an amenities protection society for Marlow and its surrounding area. Thus The Marlow Society was founded to protect, develop, improve and promote features of history or public interest, in Marlow town and its surrounding parishes".