

Radcot Bridge and Newbridge

By MISS M. R. TOYNBEE

[It was originally planned to publish a joint account of Radcot Bridge and Newbridge by Miss Toynbee and Mr. Leeming, similar to their article on Cropredy Bridge in *Oxoniensia*, III. But when Mr. Leeming left Oxford he was unable to consult the necessary materials for his section, and Miss Toynbee's historical account is therefore now published by itself.—EDITOR.]

RADCOT BRIDGE

RADCOT is the first bridge over the Thames after the river has entered Oxfordshire. Camden, writing in 1586, noted: 'In parte vltiori, Isis cum Wiltonienses pertrinxerit, Oxonienses adit, statimque Rodcottano ponte coercitus Bablac praeterfluit.'¹ It is not only the first Thames bridge in Oxfordshire, but it is reputed to be the oldest bridge in the river's whole course. It is thought possible that Radcot may be the site of the stone bridge mentioned in a grant of land made by King Eadwig to the thegn Eadric in 958.² The earliest certain record of a bridge at Radcot appears to be that contained in the Patent Rolls of the reign of John, who, in March 1208/9, gave notice: 'Sciatis nos recepisce in custodiam et protectionem nostram fratrem Aylwin qui reperacionem pontis de Redcot suscepit et homines et res suas'.³ Three further references in the Patent Rolls inform us of the means employed in the 14th century to keep the bridge in repair. In November 1312 Edward II made a grant for five years, at the request of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke (who was building a castle at Bampton at about this time), to Robert del Pultre and Robert de Kaar of pontage for the repair of the bridge of 'Radecote' upon all wares for sale carried across the bridge.⁴ In April 1347 Edward III granted to Robert Stevenes and Henry de Wodecote pontage for five years for the repair of the bridge of 'Radecote'.⁵ In October 1393 Richard II granted to John Symond and John Fissher of Radcot pontage for two years for the repair of the bridge:⁶ it has been

¹ *Britannia*, p. 197.

² *V.C.H., Berkshire*, IV, 491, n. 57. The grant is printed in Birch's *Cartularium Saxonicum*, III, 228.

³ *Calendar of Patent Rolls* (1835), pp. 87b-88a.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1307-1313, p. 515.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1345-1348, p. 283.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1391-1396, p. 329.

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suggested⁷ that this last repair may have been necessitated by the damage inflicted on the structure in December 1387 as described below. At a later date an arrangement was made whereby the northern or Oxfordshire half of the bridge was repaired by the lord of the manor of Radcot (*ratione tenurae*) and the southern or Berkshire half by the lord of the manor of Faringdon (by reason of his perception of tolls).⁸ This arrangement, which is referred to in a lawsuit of the year 1823,⁹ held good until 1930, when these responsibilities were taken over from Christ Church, Oxford, and Lord Berners respectively by the County Councils concerned.

Although it is now over a backwater, the navigation channel being spanned by a much newer bridge, Radcot has figured twice in history as the scene of a skirmish. The first occasion was on 20 December 1387 when Richard II's favourite, Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford and Duke of Ireland (1362-1392), was intercepted in Oxfordshire by the forces of the revolted Lords Appellant as he was attempting to march on London at the head of troops which he had raised in Lancashire, Cheshire, and North Wales. A full discussion of the contemporary evidence—'diverse, contradictory, and not always intelligent'—leading up to this incident has been given by Mr. J. N. L. Myres in an exhaustive article entitled 'The Campaign of Radcot Bridge in December 1387', to which the reader is referred.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that the account of the events at the bridge itself provided by the Continuator of Knighton was, Mr. Myres concludes, derived from the evidence of an eye-witness Leicester dependant of John of Gaunt, and it is therefore a valuable authority. This account, which stresses the importance of Radcot Bridge and its condition, is worth quoting in part :

'Denique Robertus Ver dux Hiberniae cum omni populo suo numero quasi inter quatuor et quinque mille pugnatorum venit in vigilia sancti Thomae apostoli in comitatum Oxoniae, tendens iter versus pontem de Radecote quae distat ab Schepying Norton per iv leucas. Quem pontem si forte pertransisset securus ab omni timore fuisset de omnibus inimicis suis ; sed interceptus est a proposito suo. Nam comes Derbyae posuerat custodes ad caput pontis viros armatos et sagittarios qui transitum duci prohibuerunt, et pavimentum pontis interruperunt in tribus locis, adeo quod non potuit nisi solus eques simul pertransire, ac etiam pro majori securitate pontem in tribus pessulis munierunt.'¹¹

⁷ J. N. L. Myres, 'The Campaign of Radcot Bridge in December 1387' in *English Historical Review*, January 1927, pp. 25-6, n. 1 ; E. Jervoise, *Ancient Bridges of the South of England* (1930), p. 3.

⁸ J. M. Davenport, *Oxfordshire Bridges* (1869), p. 9.

⁹ *The English Reports*, cvii, 84, King's Bench Division, *Richards v. Bennett*.

¹⁰ See note 7 : the whole article covers pp. 20-33. I am indebted for this reference to Mr. W. A. Pantin.

¹¹ *Rolls Series*, 92b, 252.

According to this source Oxford attempted to fight, and although some of his men were reluctant to support him, tried to force the bridge. Finding it too much broken for his gallant attempt, he was compelled to retire, and being equally foiled in his efforts to escape along the river bank by the arrival of a fresh enemy force, finally in despair he threw away most of his armour and 'immersit se in aquam Thamesiac, et sic mirabili ausu evasit ab eis'. Oxford got safely to the Continent, but his failure at Radcot is of considerable importance since it brought about the surrender of Richard to the Lords Appellant and the summoning of the Merciless Parliament of 1388.

The second skirmish occurred during the Civil War, in the evening of 7 May 1645. The opposing forces were those of George, Lord Goring, who had been ordered by Charles I to leave his command in the West and join him near Oxford, and a 'horse quarter of Cromwell's'. Occurring as it did little more than a month before the disastrous Battle of Naseby, it was among the last successes (if indeed it was not the very last) scored by the King's arms and was one of the 'prosperous omens' which were hailed by Royalist writers as attending the opening of their master's march from Oxford, that same day, for the summer's campaign. The chief contemporary accounts are to be found in the Royalist journal *Mercurius Aulicus*¹² and in *Anglia Rediviva*,¹³ a history of the new model army composed by Fairfax's chaplain, Joshua Sprigge, and published in 1647. The incident is also briefly noticed by Sir Edward Walker,¹⁴ Richard Symonds,¹⁵ and Clarendon.¹⁶ It is hardly necessary to state that, while *Mercurius Aulicus* seeks to magnify the Royalist victory, Sprigge is equally bent upon belittling it. The unvarnished fact is that Goring, on his march from the West, recovered Radcot Bridge¹⁷ from the enemy who had got wind of his plan to beat up Cromwell's quarters near Faringdon and relieve that town. Cromwell 'sent a party over the river, to discover his [Goring's] motion; where major Bethel engaging too far, in the dark, was taken prisoner, and about four men more lost, and two colours, several wounded' (Sprigge). *Mercurius Aulicus* puts the rebel losses considerably higher and has a good deal to say of its own side's plucky stand against superior numbers: 'though their body was twice as strong as both his, he [Goring] broke them all to peeces . . . Thus Master Cromwells 1000 Horse were shamefully beaten by 400 of His Majesties'. Allowing for some

¹² Thursday, May 8, and Friday, May 9, 1645, pp. 1580-2.

¹³ New edition (1854), pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ *Historical Discourses upon Several Occasions* (1705), p. 125.

¹⁵ *Diary of the Marches of the Royal Army during the Great Civil War*, p. 165.

¹⁶ *History of the Rebellion*, ix, 28.

¹⁷ Sprigge is the only authority who precisely locates the skirmish as taking place at Radcot: *Mercurius Aulicus* merely reports 'neare New Bridge', 'neare Bampton on the Bush'; Symonds has 'neare Burford'; and Walker 'a passage over Isis'.

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possible exaggeration here, Clarendon's summing-up is probably just : ' And it was indeed a very seasonable action, to discountenance and break such a party in the infancy of their new model ; and did break their present measures, and made Fayrefax to appoint a new place of rendezvous for his new army, at a greater distance from the King's forces '. Naturally the news of Radcot fight, which reached him in Woodstock Park next day, was very acceptable to Charles and procured Goring a hearty welcome. Sprigge's contemptuous : ' This is the total routing of Cromwell's forces, as the king, in his letter to the queen of this engagement near New-bridge, relates it to be ', cannot conceal his real chagrin at the event.¹⁸

There was a minor Royalist ' fort ' at Radcot, the chief importance of which, since it was on the road to Faringdon, was keeping open the lines of communication. It was summoned by Fairfax on 11 May 1646, and surrendered on honourable terms on the 24th, having previously been ' blocked up '.¹⁹ This fort is almost certainly to be identified with the entrenched meadow, 400 by 500 feet in dimension, known locally as ' The Garrison ', just west of the bridge on the Oxfordshire side.²⁰

There is an engraving of Radcot Bridge in Samuel Ireland's *Picturesque Views on the River Thames* (1792), I, p. 39. A tinted drawing, by Mrs. J. M. Davenport, dated 1845, is contained in her ' Sketches of County Bridges ' (16) in the County Record Office at the County Hall, Oxford. A small pencil sketch, showing the appearance of the bridge in the second half of the last century, will be found in MS. Top. Oxon. d. 218, p. 144, in the Bodleian Library. PLATE VII, A, shows the bridge as it is to-day.

NEWBRIDGE

Newbridge, which witnesses the junction of the Windrush with the Thames, is said to retain the name originally awarded it to distinguish it from the old bridge at Radcot some eight or nine miles higher up the river. Support is given to this theory by Mr. H. J. Tollit's observations in his *Report upon Oxford County Bridges*, published in 1878. He writes in his account of Newbridge:²¹ ' It is observable that a very ancient Bridge at Radcot . . . although smaller than this, is exactly similar in the shape of the Arches, the arrangement of the Arch-ribs, and in general features '. From this it would appear that when

¹⁸ I have been unable to trace this letter. No letter from Charles to Henrietta between 4 and 14 May 1645 is published in *The King's Cabinet Opened* (1645), the source from which one would expect Sprigge to have taken it. I should be very grateful if any reader of *Oxoniensia* could give me information regarding it.

¹⁹ F. J. Varley, *The Siege of Oxford* (1932), p. 85, and Falconer Madan, *Oxford Books*, II (1912), 1864.

²⁰ See V.C.H., *Oxfordshire*, I, 332, and J. N. L. Myres, *op. cit.*, p. 26, n. 1 : opinions as to the origin of ' The Garrison ' are there advanced.

²¹ p. 72.

Newbridge was built, probably in the 15th century,²² it was copied on a larger scale, from Radcot. It is an interesting fact that the only two mediaeval Oxfordshire Thames bridges which have survived should be thus closely related to one another.

John Leland, writing towards the middle of the 16th century, thus describes Newbridge: 'I rode thens a 2. myles and halfe thorowghe fayre champayne ground, frutefull of corne, to Newbridge on Isis. The ground ther al about lyethe in low medowes often ovarflowne by rage of reyne. Ther is a longe cawsye of stone at eche end of the bridge. The bridge it selfe hathe vi greate arches of stone'.²³ In the following century Anthony Wood records of Newbridge: 'Neare to this towne [i.e. Standlake] is a bridge called Newbridge leading from London into Gloucestershire, built as 'tis said (or at least repaired) tempore Henrici VI, by John Golafre, whom some stile "esq.", some "kt.". But this bridge being fallen into decay about 2 Edw. IV. < 1462 >, severall complaints were put up by the men of Kingston-Bakepuze and Stanlake for to have it repaired. Wherupon one Thomas Briggs, that lived in an Hermitage at that end of the bridge next to Stanlake, obtained license to require the good will and favour of passengers that came that way and of the neighbouring villages: so that money being then collected, the bridge was repaired in good sort'.²⁴ Wood does not record the authority responsible for the upkeep of Newbridge at the time when he was writing, but it was probably already in the joint care of the counties of Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions records in the custody of the Clerk of the Peace date only from 1687,²⁵ but four years later, in 1691, we find Sir Edmund Warcup, William Aylesworth, and Robert Perrot ordered to view and report on the condition of Newbridge and 'what the County has done in the past'. Warcup accordingly inspected the part 'alwais rep^d by the County'. These phrases suggest that the arrangement of joint responsibility, whereby Oxfordshire repaired the northern half and Berkshire the southern half, and which holds good to this day, had been in operation for some time before the end of the 17th century.

It is instructive to study from the Quarter Sessions records the constant attention which was bestowed upon Newbridge (in common with other Oxfordshire bridges) from the close of the 17th century. Previous to the

²² It is possible that Newbridge figured in the campaign of Radcot Bridge. See J. N. L. Myres, *op. cit.*, and particularly p. 32, n. 1, where he says: 'I find no certain evidence that Newbridge was in existence at this time, e.g. there are no grants of pontage for its repair in the *Patent Rolls* previous to 1400, as there are for Radcot Bridge. There is no inherent reason, however, why the present structure should not be of the fourteenth century'. I have been unable to find any grants of pontage for the repair of Newbridge subsequent to 1400.

²³ *Itinerary*, x, 73, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith.

²⁴ *Life and Times*, ed. Clark, I, 272-3.

²⁵ The Berkshire Quarter Sessions records do not begin until 1703, as I am informed by Mr. P. S. Spokes.

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inspection by Warcup, the bridge had been examined by two other authorized persons 'with the advice of two able masons', and an estimate of £42 15s. for repairs was submitted. The work was ordered to be taken in hand, and in the Accounts for Easter 1693 we find that £30 had been paid out by the county. From the Quarter Sessions Minute Book (1687-1768) and the Accounts we learn that smaller repairs were paid for in 1707, 1719, 1737, 1738, 1739 ('the watery way'), 1746, 1747, and 1759, and there are many other entries of orders to view and report on necessary repairs which presumably had a sequel. On one occasion, however, the county authorities appear to have been guilty of negligence. At Epiphany 1747 occurs the significant entry: 'Treasurer of the North to pay the Cl. of the P. 12/- for the process agt the County for the reparaire of New Bridge and 6/6 for discharging the presentment'. This is followed by an entry ordering the payment of three bills amounting to £24 4s. 10d. for 'mason's work and materials used in the reparaire of the County of Oxfords part of New Bridge'. Of this sum only £9 11s. 8d. actually figures in the Accounts. In the 19th century the Oxfordshire portion of the structure was repaired in 1826 and again in 1830, and a strengthening repair was carried out in 1880.

During the Civil War Newbridge was strategically important, for there was no bridge between it and Radcot, Tadpole Bridge, which now lies between, not having been built until 1802. The adjacent Gaunt House was accordingly garrisoned for its special protection. In May 1644 the two Parliamentary armies commanded by Essex and Waller were planning to surround Oxford and capture the King. On the 27th Waller reached Newbridge and was repulsed. In the words of *Mercurius Aulicus*: 'He had before attempted (upon Monday morning) to passe some of his forces over the *Thames* at a place called *Newbridge*, in the way betwixt *Abingdon* and *Witney*: which were so gallantly received by some of His Majesties *Dragooners*, who lay there of purpose to guard that passe, that they were beaten back both with shame and losse before His Majesties Horse which were quartered about *Charlbury*, and had quickly taken the *Alarme*, could come in to help them. The shame of which repulse did so vex their Generall that finding in foure dayes no other way to vent his fury, he purposed to revenge himselfe upon *Abingdon Crosse* . . . which they most manfully assaulted and pulled downe to the ground'.²⁶ But *Mercurius Aulicus* crowed too soon. Next week a less favourable report of affairs at Newbridge had to be published. Writing of the events of Sunday, 2 June, it was forced to record: 'This day began ill . . . For the first newes of the morning was, that *Waller* had the day before attempted once againe to obtaine the passage at *Newbridge*, which was maintained against him by

²⁶ The 22 Weeke, ending June 1. 1644. Friday. May 31, p. 1003.

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90 musketeers as long as their powder and shot lasted. But that beginning to be spent towards the evening, before the new supply which was sent came to them, the *Rebells* had got over the water in Boates at a little distance from the Bridge, and falling suddainly upon them killed and tooke prisoners 30 of them or thereabouts'.²⁷ Walker's account is in complete agreement with this. After recording Monday's success by 'our Dragooners', he relates how on Saturday 'on the other side Waller's Forces from *Abingdon*, attempted *Newbridge*, which was kept with about 100 Musqueteers; who being overpowered, and their Ammunition spent, the Rebels got over the River in Boats, took many of them, and so got that Passage over the *Isis* . . . It was not long e'er certain Intelligence was brought that the Rebels of Waller's Army had passed over that Afternoon [Sunday] 5000 Horse and Foot at *Newbridge*, and that some of them were advanced within three Miles of that place'.²⁸ This success of Waller at Newbridge was one of the deciding factors in impelling Charles to make his daring escape from Oxford during the night of 3-4 June.

In October 1644 Newbridge suffered damage at the hands of the Parliamentary forces. Major-General Browne reported from Abingdon to the Committee of Both Kingdoms on the 30th of the month: 'Upon the enemy's retreat by Wallingford, we having broken down Newbridge, a party of our horse met and skirmished with them'.²⁹ On 29 May 1645 Gaunt House was besieged, and on the 31st Colonel Rainsborough took it together with fifty prisoners.³⁰ On 14 May 1649 Colonel Reynolds's men retreated before the mutinous Levellers to Newbridge where, without fighting, they succeeded in preventing the latter from crossing the Thames. But the mutineers swam the river (or crossed by a ford) higher up and marched to Burford where they were crushed by Cromwell and Fairfax.

There is an engraving of Newbridge in Ireland's *Picturesque Views*, I, p. 47. A beautiful and accurate tinted drawing, by Mrs. Davenport, dated 1842, is contained in her 'Sketches of County Bridges' (10), and is reproduced as an illustration to this article (PL. VII, B).³¹ A pencil drawing will be found in MS. Top. Oxon. d. 218, p. 237. Finally, it should be noted that two coloured drawings purporting to represent Newbridge are contained in the Sutherland Collection now in the Ashmolean Museum (C. II, 376), the one by G. Shepherd (1826), the other by T. Athow. Both are erroneous, which makes Mrs. Davenport's record of the greater value.

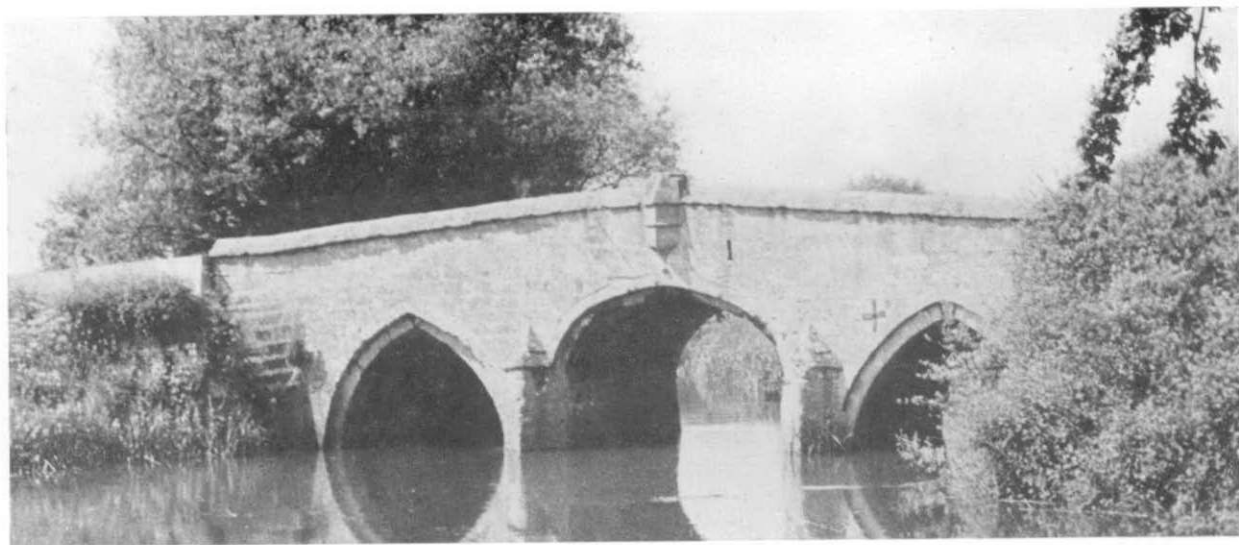
²⁷ The 23 Weeke, ending June 8. 1644. Sunday. June 2. p. 1007. I have again to acknowledge the courtesy of Queen's College in allowing me to consult its copy of *Mercurius Aulicus*.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

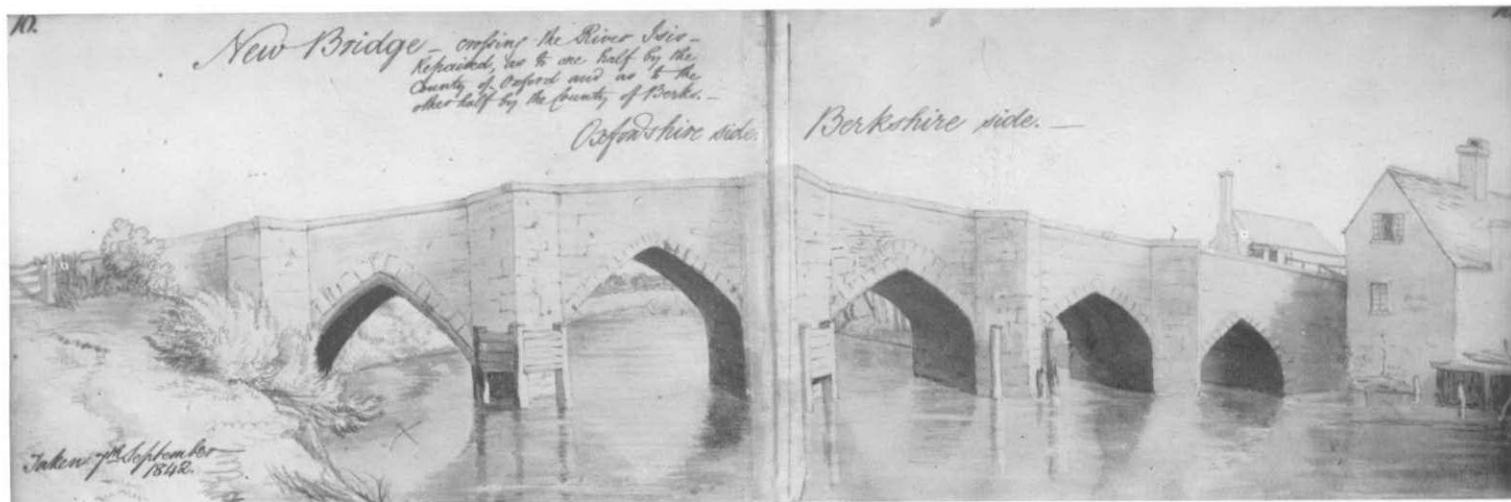
²⁹ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 1644-5, p. 84.

³⁰ F. J. Varley, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9.

³¹ By kind permission of the County Records Joint Committee. The drawing is here reproduced for the first time.



A



B

A. RADCOT BRIDGE (East side).

B. NEWBRIDGE (West side) in 1842. From a tinted sketch by Mrs. Davenport in the County Record Office. By courtesy of the County Records Joint Committee