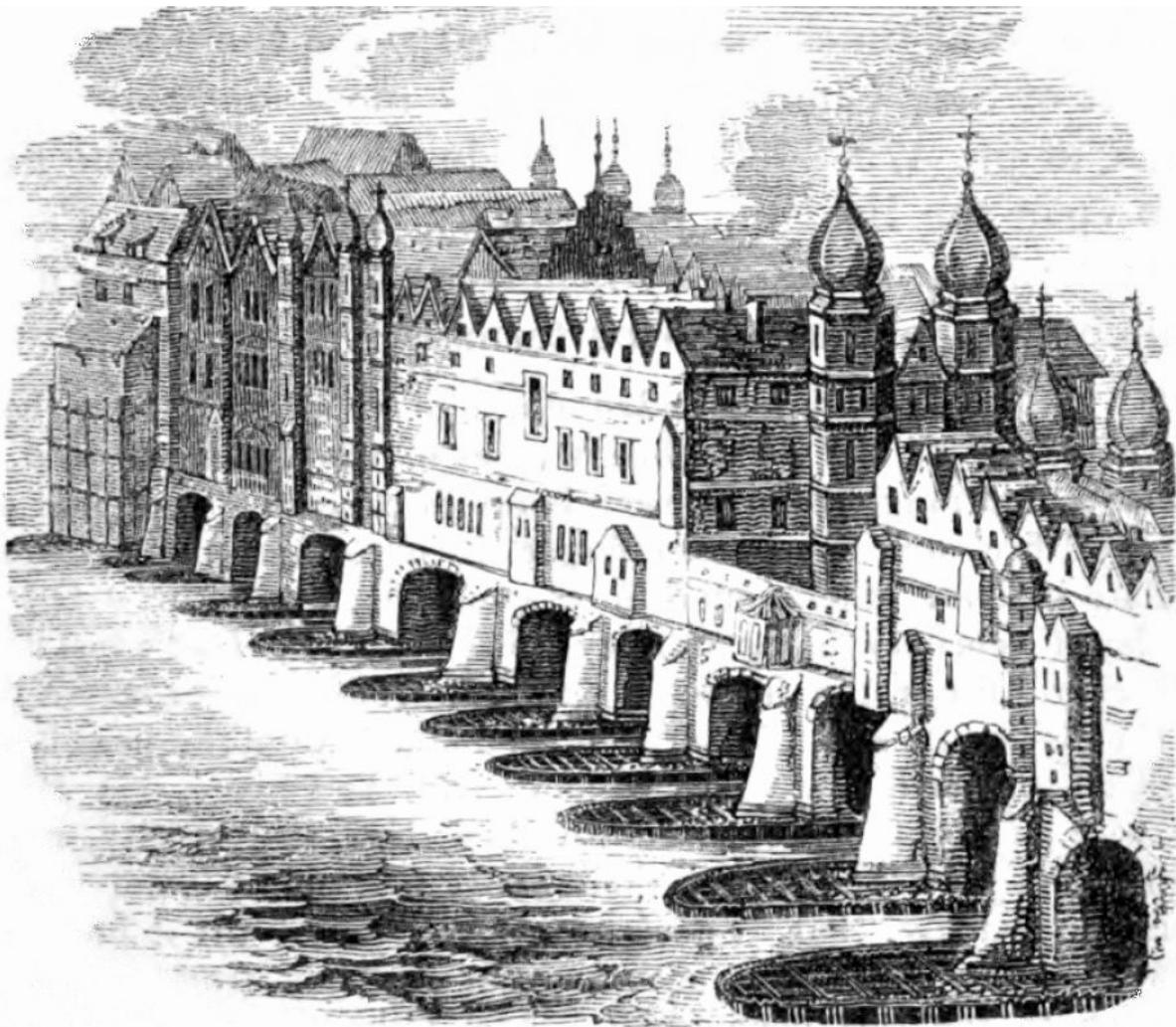


CHADDESSEN AND THE MERMAIDS ~ A TALE OF OLD LONDON BRIDGE

In the Middle Ages, London Bridge was an engineering wonder on the 'must see' list of every visitor to the capital city. An earlier wooden structure was replaced between 1176 and 1209 by a new stone bridge with nineteen piers and a drawbridge to allow larger ships to pass through, and was only replaced in 1831.

The work of constructing the bridge was a colossal task. First of all gangs of men working from boats would drive wooden piles of oak or elm, shod with iron, as far as possible into the river-bed at low tide to make a series of small enclosures which were then filled with rubble laid in mortar to create the bases of the individual piers. Because the piers only had such shallow foundations, even larger piles were then driven around them and once again filled with rubble to create the 'starlings' which can be seen in the drawing below.¹ Although they helped to stop the piers being undermined by the sheer force of the river, the starlings greatly impeded the flow of water, almost turning the bridge into an impromptu dam – it was said that, depending on the tide, the variation in water levels at the bridge between upstream and downstream could be in the region of five feet, making navigation through the structure extremely perilous for vessels of all sizes.



The north end of London Bridge

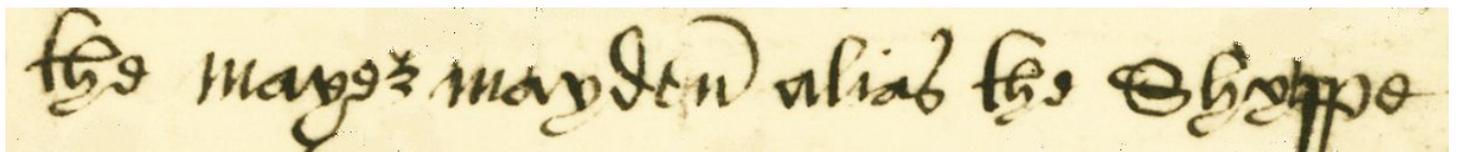
London Bridge was notable for being extremely congested because of the many shops and houses actually built on it, and simply trying to cross it in, say, the fifteenth century might take the best part of an hour. In walking across the bridge at this point in time, a pedestrian would have passed a building called *The Mermaids*; curiously this property (sometimes known as *The Ship*) actually belonged to the chantry established in Chaddesden Church in the late fourteenth century, having

¹ Other sources call these enclosures sterlings, or jetties.

apparently been gifted by Nicholas and Geoffrey de Chaddesden in 1374. It is possible that *The Mermaids* was an inn or a shop, but this is by no means certain since many other properties on the bridge were also given names for identification purposes.

The illustration featured above is taken from Richard Thompson's *Chronicles of London Bridge* first published in 1827, and used the Venetian copy of Visscher's *View of London* as source material, which was itself based on an earlier drawing of 1600 by John Norden entitled *Civitas Londini*. In it we can see the buildings at the northern end of London Bridge before they were destroyed in a fire of 1633. Although *The Mermaids* is known to have been situated in St. Magnus' Parish, this is of little help in determining its exact location since most of the bridge properties lay in the same parish, however, an old street in Southwark about half a mile away from the southern end of the bridge is called *Ship & Mermaid Row* ... coincidence or not, I wonder?

Here in Chaddesden the chantry, which was founded by the executors of the will of Archdeacon Henry de Chaddesden (died 1354), was served by four priests. To accommodate them, the original church building was significantly enlarged after the Archdeacon's death, and substantial endowments of land, including the London property, were made over to the chantry to ensure the establishment was adequately funded. However, when King Edward VI seized all chantry assets in 1547 (concluding the process begun by his father, King Henry VIII), the chantry priests at Chaddesden were ejected and all its property made over to the Court of Augmentations, which promptly sold it on to various land speculators. A document of 1549 notes the transfer of *The Mermaids* into private ownership and thereafter this interesting building on London Bridge vanishes from the pages of Chaddesden's history.



An extract from a 16th century document mentioning the property

Should you happen to be in London with some time to spare, then pay a visit to the church of St. Magnus the Martyr in Lower Thames Street to see their very detailed, 4 metre long scale model of the old London Bridge as it would have been in the fifteenth century. As mentioned above, St. Magnus' was also the parish in which *The Mermaids* lay, and has another Derbyshire connection in that Henry Yevele, the master mason from Yeaveley near Ashbourne, was a parishioner ... he rebuilt the chapel of St. Thomas Becket on London Bridge, served as a bridge warden, and was buried in the chapel on his death in 1400. Yevele would almost certainly have known members of the de Chaddesden family, and was sometimes supervised by Geoffrey Chaucer, acting in his capacity as Clerk of the King's Works!