THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article 22 : BISHOP'S BRIDGE, NORWICH
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Bishop's Bridge spans the River Wensum providing access from Norwich's Cathedral quarter to the eastern suburb of Thorpe Hamlet. It is one of the oldest medieval bridges in the country still in everyday use. Until the opening of the first road bridge across the river Wensum in 1811, Bishop's Bridge was the only footbridge over the Wensum between the city and Thorpe Hamlet. It is believed that a river crossing at this point was in use from Roman times and that possibly there was a Roman Road between the crossing and Bawburgh, forming part of what is now the Dereham Road.

Norwich Cathedral records show that the Prior was granted a license in 1275 by Edward 1 to build a bridge over the river at this crossing point. It is thought that it became known as Bishop's Bridge, or sometimes Bishop's Gate, because it gave access to the Bishop's Palace. It was a wooden bridge giving the monks from the Cathedral Priory access to their daughter house, St Leonard's Priory, which was situated at the top of what is now known as Gas Hill. The way up this hill is directly opposite the bridge and in the Middle Ages pilgrims used this route over the river, on their way to visit the shrines at St Leonard's Priory and at Walsingham. The bridge gave people on foot, horse back, or with horse drawn carts, access to not only the chalk and flint workings on the Thorpe side but once they crossed over the river there were numerous pathways they could follow. The area on the east bank of the river consisted mainly of wet, marshy ground, leading to a rural hinterland which remained undeveloped until the early nineteenth century. Thorpe



The Norwich City coat of arms, incorporating a lion and a castle, are carved in stone over tthe central arch of the bridge.

Hamlet did not became a separate parish, independent of Thorpe St. Andrew, and within the Norwich City Boundary, until 1852.

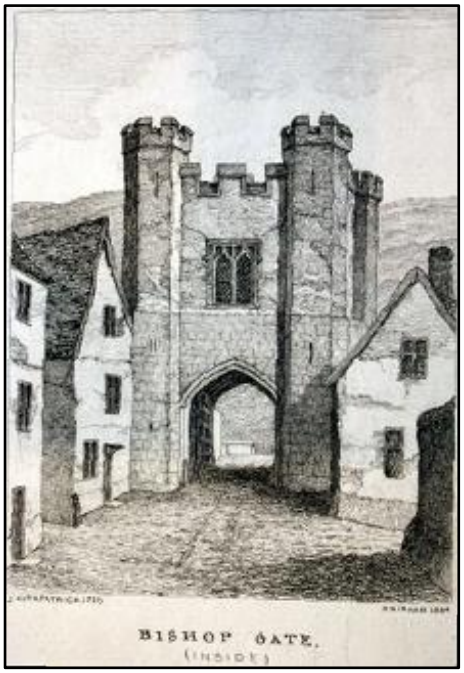
The current bridge was built in 1340 by Richard Spynk and is the only surviving medieval bridge in the city. It was constructed of stone, brick and flint and was the first bridge in Norwich to include stone in its construction. The bridge was twenty feet wide, with three supporting arches and a large fortified gatehouse on the city side of the bridge ormed part of the city defences along the eastern side of the river Wensum.

Fifteenth century records show that only one soldier controlled the gate, letting people in and out of the city. In 1486 two wooden posts were fixed at the Thorpe end of the bridge to mark the boundaries of the city's liberties. Many people left money in their wills for the repair and upkeep of the bridge and gate house. The executors of Alderman John Gilbert in 1467 agreed to pay 50 shillings to the city towards repairing and maintaining the bridge and river banks.



View from Thorpe, the east side c. 1700

The bridge suffered serious damage during Kett's rebellion in 1549, when Robert Kett and his 20,000 followers marched on Norwich. They were unable to break through the stronger defences on the other side of the city so they set up camp on the less well defended eastern side of the city, at the top of Gas Hill, on what became known as Kett's Heights. The rebel gunners then bombarded the gate with cannon balls. demolishing a large part of the wall and towers of the gate house. They stormed the bridge, over powering the guards, broke down the wooden gates and entered the city. After the rebellion the gates were repaired with wood from Whitefriars Bridge and the damaged stone work of the gate house was replaced or repaired. The bridge and gate house were obviously well repaired as in 1578 Elizabeth 1 crossed over the Bishop's Bridge on her way into Norwich.

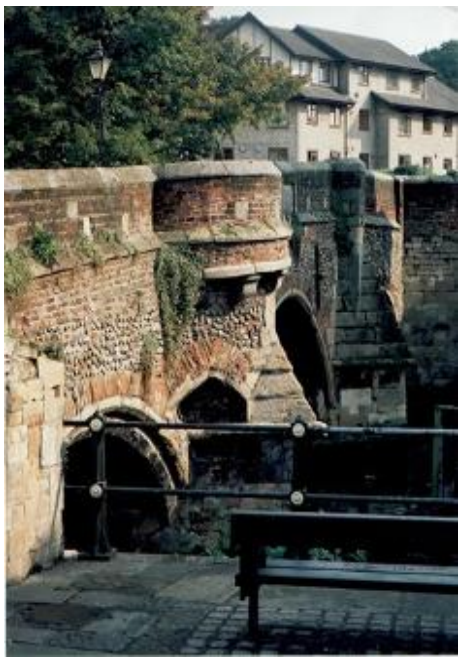


View of the gate house from the city side c. 1720

These early 18th century sketches of the gate house and bridge show the towers complete with battlements and everything appears to be good repair. The view from the city side shows the gate house with its four turrets and a room over the archway with a decorative mullioned window. Both of the drawings show houses and buildings abutting the bridge on both sides. Unfortunately a survey carried out in 1790 showed that the weight of the gate house had damaged both the first

and central arches of the bridge. The first arch under the gate house had larges cracks and the foundations needed strengthening and repairing. As the arch of the gateway was only 9 feet wide it obstructed the passage of loaded carts, so rather than carry out expensive repairs and building work a decision was made to demolish the gatehouse. and just carry out repairs to the bridge. The gate house was subsequently demolished between 1791 and 1808.

In the early twentieth century the city authorities embarked on a programme of modernisation and in 1923 it was proposed that Bishop's Bridge be replaced with a wider, more modern bridge. However the newly formed Norwich Society wanted to preserve the bridge as part of the city's heritage. Their campaign to save the medieval bridge was successful and they managed to protect it by having it designated Grade 2 listed by the Ministry of Works. Although the bridge is now closed to traffic many people, on foot or bicycles, still cross over it every day going to or from Thorpe Hamlet to the Cathedral and the city.



This modern photograph shows that today the only remaining part of the gate house is a semi-circular projection on the side of the bridge.

