

Then and Now 11 - London Bridge



Top Picture - London Bridge - 1884 by George Ernest

“London Bridge is falling down, falling down,” is a 17th century children’s nursery rhyme referring to the poor state of London’s medieval Bridge, one of the oldest and most famous bridges in the World. The image above from 1884 by George Ernest is of the New London bridge which was built 30m upstream of the Old London Bridge, which was demolished in 1831.

London Bridge

1: The first London bridge was across marshy land by Roman soldiers based in Londinium in about 50 AD so that army could reach south of the City quickly to deal with any rebellions. It was also used for trade, bring goods in and out of London from the ships moored next to London Bridge. Although wood was quick to build it was vulnerable to fire, so the earliest wooden pontoon bridge was replaced with stone in about AD55.



© Museum of London – Romans in London

2: London Bridge fell into disrepair after the Romans left London in about 400AD. It was rebuilt several times, probably by the Saxons and

then by King William I in 1066. In 1176 King Henry II wanted a new London Bridge with a chapel in the middle dedicated to Thomas Becket, the murdered Archbishop of Canterbury. Although started in 1176 it took 33 years to build. The chapel was gradually surrounded by other buildings. The 200 or so houses on the old bridge made it very famous. Some houses at the North end of the bridge were destroyed in a fire in 1633 and not replaced, which meant that the bridge did not catch fire in the Great Fire of London of 1666 as there was a natural fire break. However, by 1750, when the bridge was over 600 years old, the narrow passage for crossing over the bridge by pedestrians or thorough the narrow arches of the bridge in a boat had become a real problem. The bridge was literally falling down. By 1762 the rest of the buildings on the bridge were demolished. The old medieval bridge replaced with a new bridge in 1831.

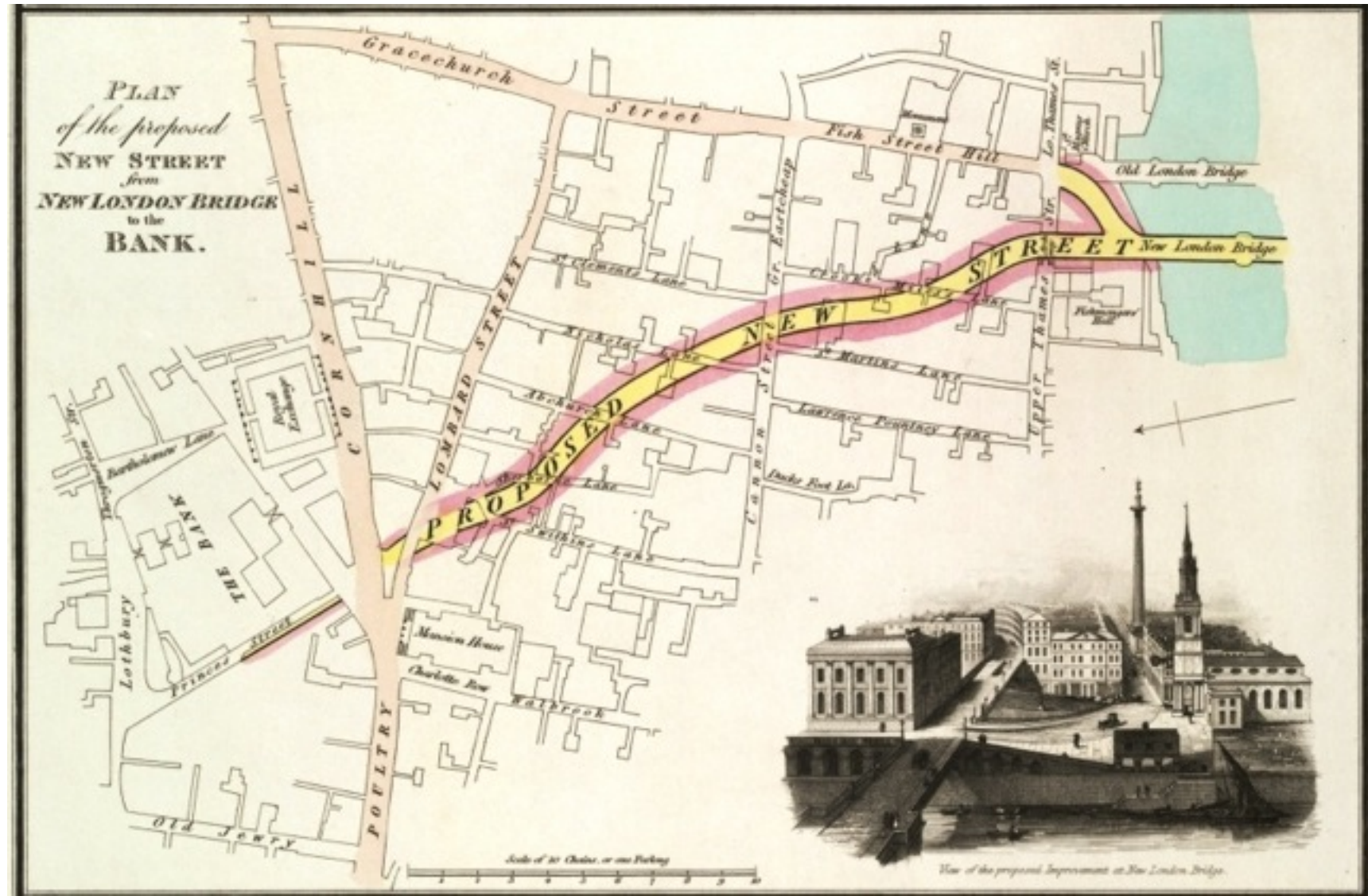


© British Library – London Bridge 1749 by Buck – looking North

Some of the images of the old bridge were not always accurate. This image from 1749, drawn shortly before the remaining houses were demolished still shows the houses at the North end of the bridge which were not rebuilt after a fire in 1633 and actually left a gap. The piers of the bridge are shown flat against the bridge but were actually sticking out into the stream.

3: The top image from 1884 by George Ernest shows the “New” London bridge, which was started in 1825 with wider arches to improve the flow of the River Thames underneath. It was built 30m upstream whilst the old bridge was still in place, as shown by this map from 1827. The

new bridge opened in 1831, the old bridge was then demolished. You can see from the map that the Old London Bridge lead past the door of St Magnus the Martyr Church, straight onto Fish Hill Street and up to the Monument to the Great Fire of London. The map shows a new street that became King William Street leading from the new London Bridge to the Bank of England, although today it is straight not curvy. Have a look at the modern street layout online and work out how it has been affected by history.



© British Library – Map of the new London Bridge and a new street - 1827

4: Compare the drawing of 1884 to the modern photo and to the drawing in the bottom right hand corner of the 1827 map. Today, you can stand on the steps at the southern end of London Bridge, in Southwark, looking North across London Bridge to the City of London and see almost the same view which George Ernest drew in 1884. The Victorian bridge built in 1831 was replaced with another bridge in 1973. That is the bridge we see today.

5: In the old drawings you can clearly see the tall spire of St Magnus the Martyr and just behind it the 62m tall column of the Monument to the Great Fire of London. Standing on the steps beside the riverside walk these are harder to see today as they are hidden by the modern office blocks next to London Bridge on the North bank. However, if you walk down the steps and then 30m East towards HMS Belfast and Tower Bridge you will find a plaque on the riverside wall that shows you are standing on the exact location of “Old” London Bridge. From this point you can see St Magnus and the Monument in a gap between the office buildings. The very large office block in the modern photo, shaped like a Walkie-Talkie is 20 Fenchurch Street, which has the Sky Garden at the top of the building. This gives an excellent free view of London Bridge from high up. If you stand in Fish Street Hill, in the City of London on the North bank, with The Monument on your left shoulder, look down the hill towards St Magnus and the River Thames (unfortunately you can’t actually see the river through the modern office block). You are looking at a street with nearly 2000 years of history. Roman soldiers would have walked up this street after crossing London Bridge from the South.

6: Probably the strangest thing you will see today on London Bridge are the Freemen of the City of London driving their sheep across the bridge. This is run by the Livery Companies of the City of London who bring the sheep in just for this event. It was first mentioned in records in 1237. Freedom of the City of London is granted to people the City think are worthy members of the community or have done something outstanding in their lives, such as actors or sports men and women. The sheep drive by Freemen on the last Sunday in September became an annual event for charity in 2013.



