

**READING
BRIDGE
1923-2023**

**100 years of
crossing the
Thames at
Caversham**

HOW DID THE NEW BRIDGE CHANGE ITS ENVIRONMENT?

Thornycroft
Engines on
Elliotts Joinery
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Reading Bridge and surroundings, 1928
© Historic Environment Scotland

The paddling and yachting pool, much bigger in 1928 than today

Arthur Hill was a former mayor of Reading and the half-brother of Octavia Hill, the social reformer and founder of the National Trust. He presented a facsimile of the Bayeux Tapestry to Reading in 1895. Following Hill's death in 1909, his son sold the land to Reading Corporation.

Caversham Mill had ceased soon after 1910 and was taken over by British Metal Powders in 1934.

The Mill Island, now Heron Island

The Mens Swimming Baths, built in 1879 by Reading Corporation and, at that time, the largest pool in the South of England. They were demolished in the 1950s.

The elegant Ladies Baths, now Thames Lido

King's Mead, the River Thames and environs, from the east, 1920. © Historic Environment Scotland

North and south of the Thames, land had to be purchased and cleared to build the approach roads to the bridge.

On the Reading side, De Bohun Road led to the river from Vastern and Kings Meadow Roads. The MacDuff Temperance Hotel was purchased by the Corporation before the

outbreak of war and then used for billeting soldiers. East's Boat Building Company Limited, immediately next to the bridge, received a settlement for lost business.

On the Caversham side, George Street only extended just past the end of the Reading and Caversham Laundry Co Ltd; beyond it were

grazing meadows previously owned by Arthur Hill. The road had to be raised and the laundry entrance moved to connect with the new road across the embankment to the bridge.

Access to the river and a new promenade was by stairs down from the bridge deck on both sides of the river, and pedestrian arches under the bridge approaches.

As early as July 1923 a quote was submitted for installing a paddling and yachting pool in Christchurch Meadows at a cost of £2718. The pool opened in 1924.

In 1936, the now iconic avenue of 24 Lombardy poplars was planted along George Street to commemorate the coronation of King George VI.



OS Six Inch, 1888-1913: Oxfordshire LVI.SE, Revised 1897, Published 1900; Berkshire XXXVII.NE, Revised 1898, Published 1900. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland



Image: Reading Libraries

A BRIDGE FIT FOR PURPOSE...



Reading Bridge. Opened Oct 3rd 1923.
C.G.R.

Photo of postcard: CADRA

Before the opening, a spectacular trial was conducted. Bridges had been known to collapse, and there was concern for public confidence as a span of this length was largely unknown.

The designs assumed a load of as many traction engines of 20 tons each as the roadway would carry. Mr A.C. Cookson, from the office of the Engineer to Great Western Railway Co, was appointed at a fee of 50 guineas to put this to the test.

On 25 September 1923, 30 traction engines and Foden wagons, in three rows of ten engines each, rolled onto the bridge. Their combined weight was almost 372 tons, well above the standard rolling load of 293 tons laid down by the Ministry of Transport – yet deflection at the centre was less than ¼in. Mouchel reported that ‘the test demonstrated the great strength of the bridge and can be considered as eminently satisfactory’.

The formal opening on 3 October 1923 was marked by rain and high winds. John Wessley Martin, Chairman of the Borough Extension



Image: Reading Libraries

Committee, opened the bridge. Bronze plaques on either side of the bridge were unveiled and the bridge opened to traffic. The first vehicle to cross from Caversham was a van from the Reading and Caversham Laundry Co Ltd.

...FOR THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS



A different kind of stress test: in 1967, Rosie Brooks took this photo ‘when the circus left King’s Meadow’.
(Reading Libraries)

The bold decision to build an innovative structure that required little maintenance held good for over 80 years, but by the early 2000s, the cracks were beginning to show.

The Portland Stone parapets, originally installed by stonemasons A.F. Jones, had begun to crumble as a result of oxidation and road salt. Still in business 91 years on, A.F. Jones was commissioned to carry out the repairs using a higher grade of Portland Stone.

By 2013, the pressure of 27,000 vehicles crossing daily, and the erosion of the structure by the elements, were also taking their toll. With the help of a £3 million government grant, the Council commissioned VolkerLaser to devise and install thin, strong, flexible carbon fibre plates that would strengthen the bridge without changing its appearance.



Scaffolding allowed for a detailed inspection which identified hollow points across the whole structure. (Photo: VolkerLaser)

Over six weeks, 16 lorries a day delivered 1500m³ of foam concrete to pump into the structure. The concrete was then allowed to settle before being sealed. Shear bolts were fixed to the abutments to make the structure stronger. The roadway was stripped so that carbon plates could be fitted to the underside of the bridge deck and beams, and carbon wrapped round the spandrel columns.



A lampstand with fittings for hanging baskets (Photo: Kim Pearce)

The globes, banding and caps of the lights were first replaced in the 1960s. Some of the lampstands were damaged around 2020; at that time, all Reading streetlights were also being converted to LED. The lampstands were repaired and fitted with new globes, bands and connections, and the iconic line of lights was back in action.



Reading Bridge was opened on 3 October 1923. It is a remarkable example of modern bridge construction in reinforced concrete, simple yet striking in appearance and set off by Portland stone parapets and an elegant line of lamps. Reading Bridge had the longest single span in the UK until 1928. Many other bridges of this period are Grade II or II* listed.

This booklet was developed by Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA) to mark the centenary of the opening of Reading Bridge on 3 October 1923.

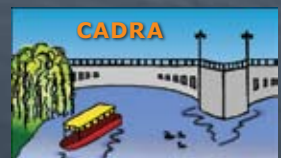
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Caversham & District
Residents' Association