



**CAVERSHAM BRIDGE
1926–2026**

**A centenary
& nine centuries
of history**

The crossing at Caversham

The first written reference to a bridge is dated 2 May 1231 and signed by Henry III, commanding the Sheriff of Oxfordshire to go 'to the chapel of St Anne on the bridge at Reading over the Thames one side of which is built on the fee of William Earl Marshal'.

Bridge chapels were a common feature where travellers would stop to pray for a safe crossing and give alms which helped fund repairs. Poorer folk generally crossed by ferry.

The funding from alms ceased with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538. Henry VIII took possession of the stone chapel on the island and sold it to his cofferer Anthony Brigham. There were disputes over funding, with the responsibility for repairs split down the County Boundary in the Thames.

In April 1643, when a Royalist relief force failed to relieve the siege of Reading, there was fierce fighting at



▲ The eel bucks to the west of the bridge (here just out of sight to the left) were used for trapping eels for food and gave Buckside its name. They, and the small islands seen here, were later removed. Image: CADRA

Caversham Bridge and huge loss of life. In 1647 Charles I spent time as a prisoner at Caversham Park where he saw his older children for the last time before crossing Caversham Bridge on his way to execution.

Funding remained contentious, and complicated tolls applied. Reading Corporation had to find money to keep the wooden section in repair, while the big estates north of the Thames had feudal duties to repair the Oxfordshire section. Even so, in 1813 the King brought an action against Earl Cadogan, a former owner of Caversham Park, for a 'nuisance in not repairing Caversham Bridge'.

◀ During the Civil War, in October 1642, Charles I and his army intended to march over Caversham bridge to Reading but found a section had been removed by the Parliamentarians. His letter to the Mayor demanding it be reinstated went unheeded. Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, R/Z6/1/1/1

► The earliest images of the bridge date from the 18th century, such as this one by Samuel Ireland (1790). Image: Reading Library Services

▼ Map: Oxfordshire Sheet LVI, Surveyed: 1877 to 1878, Published: 1882. © National Library of Scotland



At the time, only one vehicle could pass, with refuges for pedestrians to dodge out of the way; the roads leading to the bridge on either side were inadequate. The stone arches on the Caversham side limited the size of boats which could pass through, though there was better clearance under the wooden section on the Reading side.

The Caversham Bridge Act 1868 empowered the Corporation of Reading to improve or rebuild the bridge. The cost was split with Oxfordshire, whose share was reduced by £700 from the owners of Caversham Park and other estates. The Act proved controversial, prompting petitions that 'provisions in the bill were injurious to the inhabitants of Oxfordshire'.

► By 1714, no evidence remained of the chapel on the island; instead a house had been built there for the waterman. Barges were built on the wharf on the Reading bank. Image: Reading Library Services



The iron bridge

The Caversham Bridge Act was passed on 25 June 1868, allowing rebuilding works to start.

The Waterman's cottage on the island by the old bridge would have impeded the wider iron bridge so, on 29 January 1869, the three-storey building – weighing 150 tons – was moved about 25 feet eastward by hydraulic and screw jacks.

Despite delays from flooding in February, the bridge was completed and opened to traffic on 24 July 1869. It was built in wrought and cast iron, with lattice work girders. It took 12,000 rivets to assemble the flooring. The roadway was 20ft (6m) wide, with 1.5ft (1.5m) wide footpaths.



▲ The new iron bridge was initially constructed over the old stone arches, with pillars driven into the riverbed by a screw action, using a capstan. Image: Reading Museum, 191.120.1

The new bridge and the improved roads either side provided better access to the river and marked the beginning of a great boom in pleasure boating.

One very successful boat building and hire business was that of Edward Cawston, from Lambeth, who set up in Caversham in 1871. He owned several islands, including the central island with Waterman's Cottage. Cawston is buried in St Peter's churchyard, his grave marked by the large cross and stone anchor.



▲ An expedition on one of Edward Cawston's five steam launches, the Starlight. Images: The Cawston Family



▲ Bridge Street before the road was widened, c. 1910. The Thames Valley Hotel, on the left, was a temperance hotel. Image: CADRA



▲ Photo taken before 1911, when the Thames Conservancy and Reading Corporation removed the eel bucks and small islands west of the bridge to reduce flooding. Image: Papers of the late Mary Kift / CADRA

By 1869 several regattas had been established in other towns along the Thames and also prompted a revival of the Reading Amateur Regatta (RAR), which had had mixed fortunes since it was established in 1842.

The tram terminus on the Reading side had its own cast iron public convenience to serve passengers. This is still in use at the Chiltern Open Air Museum, where it was moved in 1991.



▲ The new Thames Promenade opened to the public in 1906 and became very popular. Image: CADRA



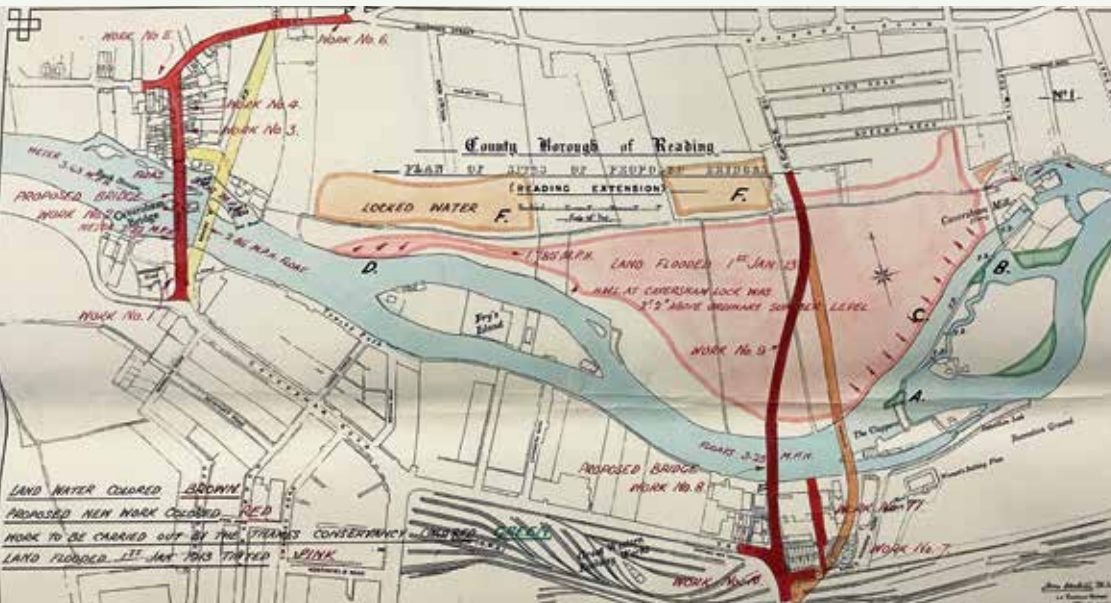
The bridge supported new utility cables, and a huge new gas main being hung apparently prompted a new coat of paint. New gas lights were installed and repairs carried out in 1904, but the bridge was increasingly inadequate for the rapid growth in the area.

◀ The tram terminated on the Reading side of the bridge. Image: CADRA

Planning for growth

The Reading Extension Order in 1911 brought Caversham into Reading and provided for a new or wider bridge. In anticipation of the bridge works, Reading and the Thames Conservancy jointly bought the three small islands west of Caversham Bridge and the eel bucks which, along with the buck hedges, were removed later that year to reduce the effects of floods.

Studies completed in 1912 included options in steel, but the new bridge had to meet the requirements of the Thames Conservancy for river flow and navigation, which also required major changes to the weir. It became clear that as well as a new Caversham Bridge, another new road bridge would need to be built first: Reading Bridge (see *Reading Bridge 1923–2023*).



▲ An alternative line for the replacement bridge (shown in yellow) might have terminated on Church Street, near the junction with Hemdean Road.

Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, R/Box782

The Borough Extension Committee, which was to supervise the work on the bridges, was established in November 1913. It commissioned the consulting engineering practice L.G. Mouchel & Partners Ltd to provide a first report with designs and costs for both the new Reading Bridge and the proposed replacement for Caversham Bridge. Mouchel presented designs that were based on using the Mouchel-Hennebique

system of reinforced concrete. This method supported a long span with a flat curve, providing headroom for navigation and preserving an approach defined by the buildings close to the bridge.

Plans were drawn up to widen Church Road, Church Street and Bridge Street. Reading Corporation bought multiple small plots in 1914, with more purchases completed in



▲ ▼ Bridge Street ca. 1905 (top) and 1910 (bottom), before the road was widened. Images: Reading Library Services

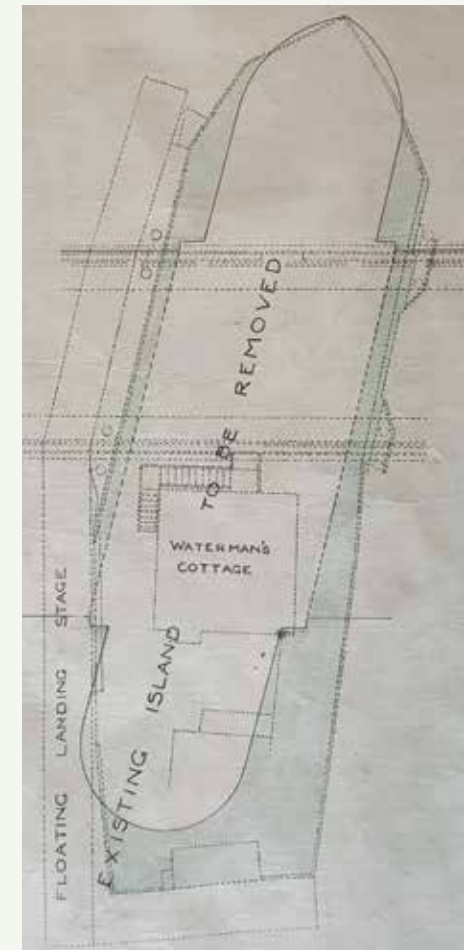


1921. This included the frontage of Caversham House on Church Street, where a tunnel had allowed pupils of the Academy to cross safely to the school playground, now the site of Caversham Library.

In return for transferring Waterman's Cottage and the island on which it stood to the Reading Corporation, Mr Cawston was granted rights to construct and maintain a footbridge from Caversham Bridge to Piper's Island – which he also owned – for as long as the island was used for boat letting.

► The central island supporting the existing bridge, occupied by Waterman's Cottage and Mr Cawston's boat yard, would need to be substantially cut away to accommodate the central abutment of the new bridge.

Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, R/acc4447.55



Concrete design

Arched bridges have been used for over 3000 years using a variety of materials that must be kept in compression by filling the areas between the bridge deck and the supporting arches (spandrels) with masonry. Reinforced concrete allows lighter, longer, flatter arches where the deck is supported by vertical spandrel columns.

Caversham Bridge was designed to have two relatively flat arches, one with a span of 38.5m (126'4½") and the other 32.4m (106'4½"). Most arches cause their supports to spread apart, so large mass concrete block foundations were needed on each side of the river. The two spans



▲ The river arches are formed of six ribs 1143mm (45") deep at the springing and 737mm (29") deep at the crown. The spandrel columns rise from the arches to support longitudinal and transverse beams and the 165mm (6.5") thick deck. Photograph: Anke Ueberberg

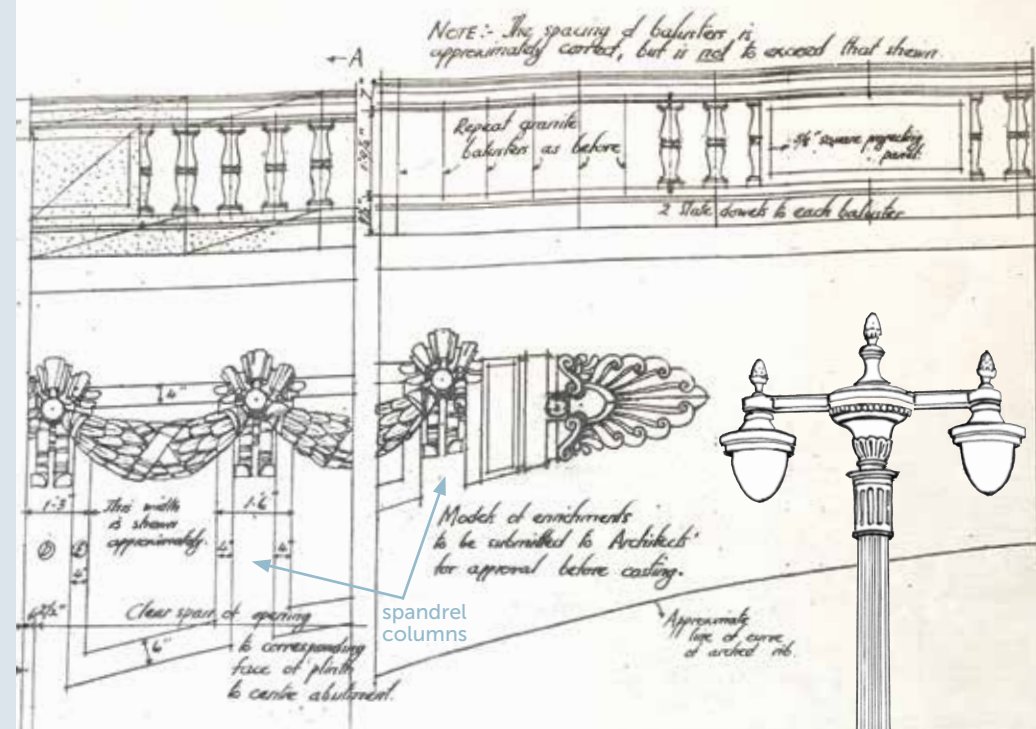
▼ Drawing for the design of Caversham Bridge, seen from the east. To the right of the central abutment the stairs down to Piper's Island are shown. Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, R/acc4447.55

meet on the island near the middle of the river. The 1:30 approach ramp on the south (Reading) side was to be contained by concrete retaining walls, and the 1:24 north (Caversham) ramp by a retaining wall and existing buildings. The total length of the structure was 139.5m (457'6") and 17m (56') wide between parapets, and the bridge would be skewed at 78° to the river.

The maximum thrust is 3,500 tons at the southern abutment. For the central support, the two arches tend to balance each other.

As the new Reading Bridge neared completion in 1923, the plans for Caversham Bridge were being finalised. The engagement of the prominent architect Sir Henry Tanner for the general design of the new Caversham bridge reflected its significance and long history. Sir Henry was well known for his use of reinforced concrete in public buildings and had been President of the Concrete Institute.

Mouchel produced a model on the basis of Sir Henry's design, which used setbacks – stepped recessions – to relieve and break up the mass effect of the concrete abutments. Semi-circular promenade bays on either side of the bridge, stepped down from the carriageway and surrounded by a concrete balustrade, would afford fine views of the river. The parapets would be built of Aberdeen granite.

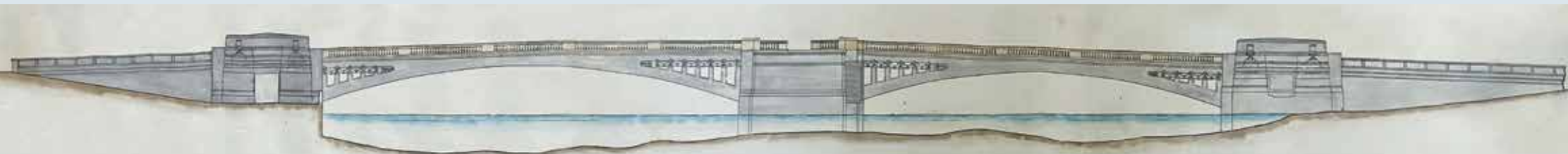
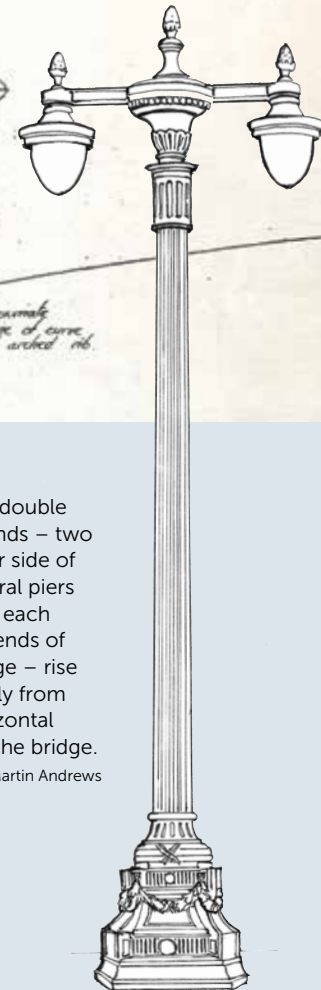


▲ Mouchel produced detailed drawings of the moulded concrete ornamentation: swags, ribbons and terminals at the heads of the spandrel columns break up the heavy character of the edge beams. Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, R/acc4447.55

The bronze lampstands would be produced by the highly regarded Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts, who specialised in traditional skills, at a cost of £1425.

The Guild had been awarded a Royal Warrant in 1909 for the main gates to Buckingham Palace, and in 1911 they had produced the Liver Birds which topped the Royal Liver Building in Liverpool. It was a very early example of a building constructed in reinforced concrete, also built by Mouchel. Caversham Bridge was to be in exalted company!

► Eight double lampstands – two on either side of the central piers and two each at both ends of the bridge – rise gracefully from the horizontal lines of the bridge. Drawing: Martin Andrews



Construction commences

In October 1923, the provisional cost for Caversham Bridge was £74,500 and the Ministry of Transport agreed a grant of 50%. Work started on 13 March 1924 with the construction of a 6-foot wide footbridge and the transfer of gas, water and electricity mains.

The Waterman's Cottage was removed to make space for the eastern central abutment. During the excavations, workers discovered the masonry foundation of the old chapel, joined to the arches of the old bridge. It was photographed and recorded before its removal, stone by stone.



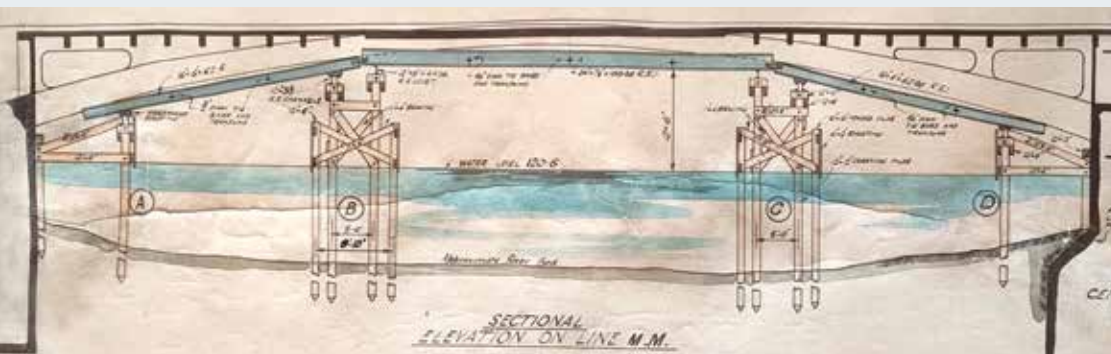
▲ An old flint arch from the early bridge.

◀ The northern end of the temporary footbridge passed over Freebody's land on the Caversham riverside. Images: Reading Library Services

A total of 12,000 tons material was excavated for the abutments, but the chalk found during the process turned out to be of poor quality, so the foundations had to be deeper than expected: 11,200 tons of concrete were placed, supplemented by 11m (35') long driven piles.

Steel sheet piles were invented between 1902 and 1906, so both Caversham Bridge and the recently completed Reading Bridge were 'cutting edge' structures using the latest techniques.

▼ Drawings for extensive timber falsework erected in the river by Holloway Brothers to support the shuttering for the concrete main spans. Image: Royal Berkshire Archives, D/TC/CA/3/2/9/1



▲ The shuttering for casting the main spans. Image: CADRA

▼ Utility services are laid under the footpaths. The Crown Inn was remodelled to accommodate the bridge. Next to it on the main bank are Freebody's boat premises. Image: Reading Library Services



The abutments were constructed within steel sheet piled cofferdams, with water being continuously pumped away. In January 1925, construction work was suspended due to the high flood levels.

The two main spans were constructed simultaneously, ensuring that horizontal loads remained in balance at the central pier.

The original plan had required the underpinning of the Thames Valley Hotel at the north abutment; a small strip of land in front of the hotel had been purchased for this purpose, but the use of steel piles made underpinning unnecessary. The building is still in use 100 years later.

A royal opening

As the bridge neared completion, pedestrians were allowed on to the eastern side. In April 1926, work started to remove the temporary footbridge, but plans for a formal opening on 12 May had to be postponed because of the general strike that week. The bridge opened to traffic on 8 May, and the official event finally took place on 25 June.

A.L. Humphreys, a well-known author and publisher, and a good friend of Oscar Wilde, wrote the souvenir booklet.

▼ This silver gilt key, decorated in enamel with the arms of the County Borough of Reading on one side and a picture of Caversham Bridge on the other, was used at the official opening. Image: Reading Museum, REDMG:1997.123.5



▲ Crowds gather on the Reading bank and Piper's Island to watch the royal visit. Image: Papers of the late Mary Kift / CADRA

The opening of the bridge was part of an industrial visit to Reading by Edward Prince of Wales. Arriving in Reading by train, he inspected Reading's bulb and biscuit industries before proceeding to unveil the plaque on the bridge, which can still be seen at the south-eastern end. Cheered on by well-wishers, he travelled on by barge to Reading Bridge, from where he continued his tour of Reading's industrial, medical and educational sights.

The Borough Extension Committee, which had supervised the work for both Reading and Caversham Bridge, met for the last time on 12 October 1926. At the meeting, the contractor Holloway Bros Ltd submitted their final report: the bridge had cost a total of £70,649 5s 5d, just £18 over budget. Construction was completed in 25 months, five months over plan due to the additional work on the foundations and the suspension of construction due to flooding.



The new bridge prompted a significant transformation of Caversham and the area around the junction known locally as Berry's Corner – so called after Berry's harness and saddlemakers business that had been situated there, owned by a family with local roots dating back centuries.

The area immediately north of the bridge had already been a thriving commercial centre; the New Griffin Inn on Church Road – opposite the police station – had replaced the old coaching inn by 1906, and there were many shops and businesses in and around Bridge Street that served the

local community. But strategic land purchases from 1911, approval of plans for new statement buildings for Barclays Bank and Lloyds Bank, and the purchase and demolition or alteration of several existing buildings to enable the widening of Bridge Street and Church Street signaled change many years before construction began. Complex land transactions also prepared the ground for the linking of Promenade Road to Christchurch Meadows, making it more readily accessible to visitors.

The new bridge encouraged the continued growth of Caversham as a popular place to live.

▲ This photo from 1928 shows the wider junction to Bridge Street and the large area still in cultivation. © Historic England

Around Caversham Bridge

Downstream from the new bridge were the premises and swimming lidos of Freebody & Sons on the Caversham bank, and Arthur Cawston on Pipers Island. Both were prominent boat-building families.



The river around the bridge had long been used for bathing: there was a swimming club and the 'winter bathers', and nude bathing was common until the late 1880s, when the Thames Conservancy attempted to enforce 'proper bathing dress or drawers'.

◀ Freebody's Lido had a large slide and diving platform and remained open until the 1950s. Between the trees just beyond Freebody's stands the War Memorial, which was unveiled in 1928. Image: Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), University of Reading

There were facilities for swimming both in the river and at several pools in the vicinity, and swimming remained popular into the 1950s.

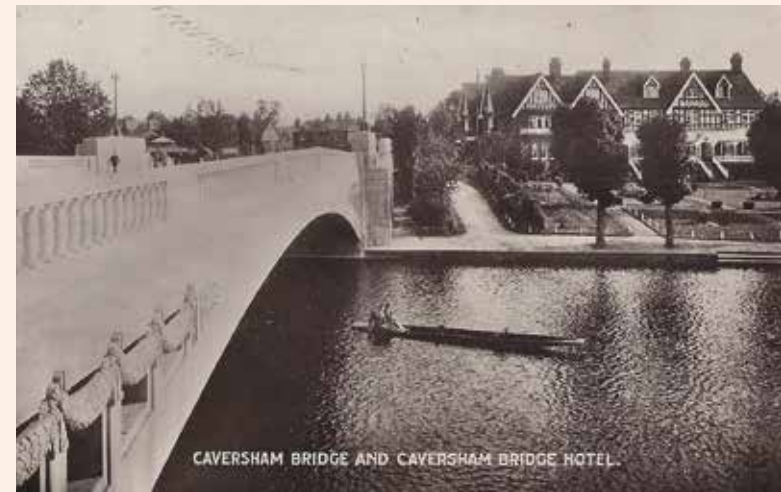
River swimming was not without risk from pollution – not least from dead animals thrown in the river – and by the 1930s the Thames Conservancy had River Purification Service inspectors on duty around the clock, with powers to enter premises or board any vessel.

Reading Amateur Regatta 1842 (RAR) is Reading's oldest sporting event, and Caversham Bridge provided the backdrop to its finish line. Just after the First World War,

RAR was saved from financial ruin (not for the last time) by Reading Rowing Club 1867 (RRC), whose boathouse now stands west of Caversham Bridge on the south bank.



▼ Swimmers frolicking at Freebody's, c. 1946. Image: Reading Museum, 1946.2.261



◀ An inn – the White Hart – stood on the Reading bank since at least 1830, replaced in 1890 by the Bona Hotel. The later Caversham Bridge Hotel was rebuilt in 1912 in preparation for the new bridge. It was replaced in 1988 by the Crowne Plaza Hotel (now The Village). Image: CADRA

The Women's Sculling Club – one of the earliest women's rowing organisations in Britain – was founded in 1894. Initially based at the Adams & Gynell's boathouse at the Clappers, it was the first sports club at what was then University College Reading, but women's 'rowing, racing and sculling' was deemed inappropriate and heavily regulated. Nevertheless, in 1926, Reading girls gained a narrow 8-point victory over Oxford girls in the first competition for style in women's fours.

When in 1926 the University of Reading received its Royal Charter, the men's Reading University Boat Club (RUBC) was established and entered elite rowing, competing initially against the University of London. By 1935, this fixture had developed into the Reading University Head of the River Race, now the only rowing competition that races under Caversham Bridge.

In the early 1930s, RUBC moved into a new boathouse, built by the university east of the north end of Caversham Bridge, the current finish line for the Head of the River race. In 1939, a separate boathouse for the RWBC was built next to the men's on the Caversham bank. Both are still located there today.



▲ Female students in 1924 still needed a medical certificate and permission from their parents and the Censor of Women Students to race on the river. Image: Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), University of Reading

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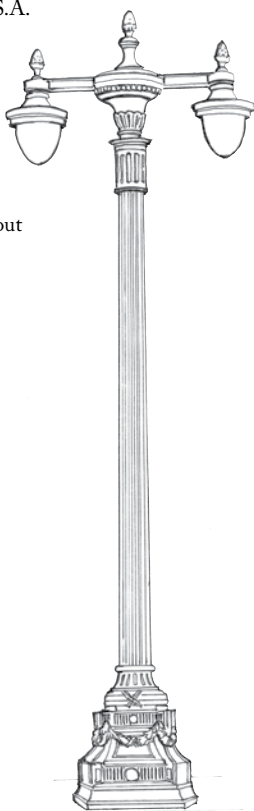
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Bronze lampstand by Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts. Drawing: Martin Andrews

'In a pageant of Caversham the historic bridge would of necessity play a chief part; in a pageant of the whole nation's history, it would well deserve a place.'

A.L. Humphreys, Souvenir Programme, 25 June 1926

Nearly 900 years after its first documented mention, and 100 years after the opening of its present incarnation, Caversham Bridge is still the historic gateway to Caversham. Since November 2018 it has been part of St Peters Conservation Area, and it is noted as a structure of interest by the Panel for Historical Engineering Works of the Institution of Civil Engineers.

This booklet was developed by Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA) to mark the centenary of the opening of Caversham Bridge on 25 June 1926. CADRA gratefully acknowledge the kind assistance of Royal Berkshire Archives, Reading Libraries, Reading Museum, University of Reading and MERL, Martin Andrews, the Cawston family, Gillian Clark, David Cliffe, Edwin Trout and Evelyn Williams. A list of sources is included with the online edition. Research and text: Helen Lambert & Paul Matthews Design and cover photographs: Anke Ueberberg

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