Journal of British Studies 61 (October 2022): 863–883. doi:10.1017/jbr.2022.55
© The Author(s), published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the North American Conference on British Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

"The Battle of the Bridges": Temporal Modernity in the Reimagining of Interwar London's Cityscape

Stephen Heathorn

Abstract The impending collapse of Waterloo Bridge (built 1811–1817) in 1923 led to wide-ranging debate among professional and political elites about the need for preserving or replacing the bridge and about London's inadequate river crossings in general. Over a fifteen-year period, cabinet-level discussions on the problem of the Thames bridges occurred every year; the government struck a number of committees and a royal commission on solving cross-river traffic issues. A powerful elite lobby formed to fight for the preservation of old Waterloo Bridge, and the building of a new bridge at Charing Cross, a constitutional squabble arose over the respective authorities of Parliament and of London municipal government over the bridges, and a rancorous debate among politicians, town planners, architects, engineers, and the general public raged over the issue of the existing and proposed new bridges. A number of issues were at play and are discussed, but ultimately this article argues that it was competing, temporally connected conceptions of modernity that divided the two camps into *preservationists* and *rebuilders*.

In October 1923, Waterloo Bridge started to fall down. One pier of the London landmark, built between 1811 and 1817 by the engineer John Rennie, was found to be subsiding rapidly—it had dropped sixteen inches (40 cm)—and was moving out of plane in relation to the others.[1] An attempt to stabilize the pier only accelerated the settling. Within weeks, the pier had sunk twenty-eight inches (70 cm) below level. Huge cracks appeared in the walls and roadway, and the arches had to be propped up with hurriedly erected scaffolding. The cause, it was surmised, was the scour of the river's tides, significantly intensified by the building of the Thames Embankment in the mid-nineteenth century. The problem was thus not a new one. In 1882, £62,000 had been spent on protective steel sheet piling and the laying of gravel around the piers,[2] but these measures had evidently not solved the problem. The London County Council's chief engineer,

---

Stephen Heathorn is professor in the Department of History, McMaster University, Canada. He thanks the audiences at very early iterations of this article at the University of Manchester in 2008 and at the University of Huddersfield and McMaster University, both in 2009. He also appreciates the helpful comments of the peer reviewers and the *Journal of British Studies* editorial team. Please direct any correspondence to heaths@mcmaster.ca.

[1] "Old Waterloo Bridge: Diary of Events Leading to Its Demolition," Royal Fine Arts Commission, 1934, The National Archives, Kew, BP 2/24. (Hereafter this repository is abbreviated as TNA.)

[2] Mott and Fitzmaurice to Humphreys, 4 June 1924, London Metropolitan Archives, CE/RB/1/14. (Hereafter this repository is as LMA.)

G. W. Humphreys, reported on 19 March 1924 that the foundations were at their end. Without radical remedial measures, the bridge was doomed.[3]

This alarming development brought about an intensification of the long-standing debate about central London's clearly inadequate river crossings, which would drag on until the outbreak of the Second World War. Waterloo Bridge's fate was soon entangled in controversy over a number of other existing and planned bridges, most particularly the Hungerford/Charing Cross Railway Bridge and its proposed replacement and the long-delayed St. Paul's road bridge.[4] In fact, Waterloo's subsidence would directly initiate cabinet discussions on the inadequacy of the Thames bridges every year until 1938; the striking of government committees on London traffic flows and a hastily mandated royal commission on Thames crossings; the activation of a powerful elite lobby group made up of the establishment arts, architecture, and civic reform societies; dozens of proposals submitted for what was arguably the most expensive town-planning scheme proposed in Britain prior to 1945; and a constitutional squabble over the respective authority of Parliament and of London municipal government.

All these developments occurred within a rancorous public debate among politicians, town planners, architects, engineers, and lay critics—the "battle of the bridges" as it came to be widely called—that raged in the daily press and in a broad variety of both technical and popular periodicals from 1923 until 1938. Although it was a London issue, many perceived the battle of the bridges as a national concern. Between late 1923 and early 1938, the London *Times* alone published fifty-nine editorial leading articles and more than eight hundred letters on the bridges: this was roughly the same order of magnitude as all *Times* editorials and correspondence on the topic of armaments and disarmament over the same fifteen years.[5] Eventually old Waterloo Bridge—regarded by many within the British arts establishment at the time as an architectural masterpiece—was demolished and replaced during World War II by the modernist five-span bridge on the river today. St. Paul's Bridge was built some seventy-five years later as the pedestrian Millennium Bridge. The Hungerford/Charing Cross Railway Bridge remains on the river, strengthened and enhanced by the striking Golden Jubilee footpaths.

Over its fifteen-year course, the battle of the bridges incorporated numerous contributory debates. One was between local and national governments on who had responsibility for monuments, summarized in the exasperation of A. R. Powys, the chair of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, in his exchange with the chair of the Ancient Monuments Board in 1934: "There can, we think, be no precedent for the pulling down of a national monument by a Local Authority when Parliament has on two separate occasions decided that it should be preserved."[6] A second conflict was between aesthetic and utilitarian interests, described by one author as the "classic battle of the artist against the engineer, the aesthete against the philistine."[7] I touch on both of these perspectives here, but the unifying focus of this article is the competing temporal visions of London's modernity in the early twentieth century. The battle lines drawn between opponents in the debates reflected two distinct, if equally modern, understandings of time in relation to urban space within the modern city.

---

[3] London County Council Improvement's Committee, 19 March 1924, LMA, CE/RB/1/14.

[4] George Swinton, "The Troubles of London's Traffic," *Quarterly Review* 244, no. 484 (1925): 360–75. The proposed St. Paul's Bridge was shelved in the interwar years for fear the vibrations from increased traffic would imperil St. Paul's Cathedral dome.

[5] These figures were compiled using the online search engine of the London *Times*. Terms searched were "Waterloo Bridge" and "Charing Cross Bridge" versus "armaments" and "disarmament" in the editorial and correspondence categories between 1923 and 1938. There were approximately 1,050 items for "armaments" and "disarmament" in the same period.

Cultural and urban historians and geographers have tended to study the rise of urban modernity primarily in spatial terms and to concentrate on the relationship between space and place.[8] In many studies, the modern city is the product of attempts to discipline the urban environment and create order through residential segregation, zoning, efficient transportation, and the easy circulation of people, products, utilities, and waste—an order, however, that is in tension with the functional diversity of the city, with the non-conformity of property uses, and the cultural pluralism of modern urban populations.[9] So James Winter's depiction of nineteenth-century London has at its core a tension between the "promoters of the municipal ideal, liberals most of them," who "tried to balance their vision of a London that was ordered, rational, efficient, healthy, and safe, in other words 'modern,' with a sense that the freedom of the modern thoroughfare disclosed what it meant to be English."[10] Susan Pennybacker, meanwhile, demonstrates that the pre-1914 progressive London County Council's grand "programmes of social amelioration or cultural enlightenment" actually tended to result in municipal "intrusion and supervision."[11] These works and the other scholarship on housing and slum clearance, suburbanization, the regulation of leisure, the spatial ordering of entertainment, and changing patterns in retailing and consumption[12] have been intimately connected with the notion that it was the development of ordered urban spaces that allowed for the formation of the public sphere and, therefore, of a modern polity with its distinctive constellation of political, social, and cultural contestations.[13] In such analysis, the rational ordering of space was about freeing up the circulation of the city, maximizing mobility and efficiency.[14] Even when such spatial planning collides with countervailing desires of the population, the temporality of concern is that of managing the present for the future, to adjust to the onward march of progress.[15]

---

[6] A. R. Powys to Sir Lionel Earle, 20 June 1934, Giles Gilbert Scott Papers, Royal Institute of British Architects Archives, ScGG89/175b, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (This repository is hereafter abbreviated as RIBAA.)

[7] Maureen Borland, *D. S. MacColl: Painter, Poet, Art Critic* (Harpenden, 1995), 259.

[8] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989), 218–22; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, 1991); Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London, 1993).

[9] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity.* See also Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 1983); N. J. Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (London, 1996).

[10] James Winter, *London's Teeming Streets, 1830–1914* (London, 1993), xi.

[11] Susan Pennybacker, *A Vision for London, 1889–1914: Labour, Everyday Life and the LCC Experiment* (London, 1995), 241.

[12] Lynn Hollen Lees, "Urban Networks," in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain: 1840–1950*, ed. Martin Daunton (Cambridge, 2000), 59–94; Richard Denis, "Modern London," in Daunton, *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 95–150; F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Rise of Suburbia* (Leicester, 1982); Ken Young and Patricia Garside, *Metropolitan London. Politics and Urban Change, 1837–1981* (London, 1983); J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment: Policy and Practice in England, 1918–1945, with Particular Reference to London* (London, 1992); Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Los Angeles, 2000); Erika Rappaport, "Art, Commerce, or Empire? The Rebuilding of Regent Street, 1880–1927," *History Workshop Journal* 53, no. 1 (2002): 94–117; Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford, 2020).

But historians and philosophers of history have pointed to another way in which conceptions of time have helped define the meaning of modernity. In his 1985 study, Reinhard Koselleck argued for the notion of modern time: the continual iteration of the new and different. The premodern period was characterized by a conception of time that was largely static. Renaissance thinkers saw themselves in the same moral and cultural universe as the classical world. But the Enlightenment, French, and industrial revolutions ruptured this logic. Modern temporality recognized the present as a state of transition to an uncertain future, marked by constant and escalating concerns over the seeming acceleration of time and pace of life.[16] Koselleck's arguments, along with more recent explorations of the altered sense of temporality in the nineteenth century—such as Peter Fritzsche's *Stranded in the Present*—help explain the growing importance of collective remembrance in modern western societies since the Enlightenment.[17] The fleeting, uncertain trajectory of modernity's unrepeatable time resulted in the privileging of remaining traces of the past: what Pierre Nora famously labelled *lieux de mémoire*.[18] Particular sites, objects, and symbols from the past came to be given special meaning in order to reconstruct individual and collective identities and to counter *anomie*, the often-observed disorientation of urban modernity.[19]

These two differing uses of temporality undergird the debates about what to do about Waterloo Bridge. On one side of the debate were those who advocated for the removal and replacement of Waterloo Bridge by a new and expanded traffic artery and the replacement of the Charing Cross rail bridge with an equally functional road bridge. These reformers—whom I refer to collectively as the *rebuilders*—connected their essentially nineteenth-century spatial conception of what made a city work with an intensely future-oriented sense of what made a city modern. This vision, first articulated in the urban renewal and transportation projects of the 1860s, was pursued vigorously by the London County Council after it was formed in 1889.[20] Due to his position as both leader of the London County Council Labour Party and minister of transport during the 1929–1931 minority Labour government, Herbert Morrison became the figure most associated with the rebuilder position. For the rebuilders, pulling down old Waterloo Bridge and replacing it with a new one would improve the circulation of the city, provide employment, and be both a spur to and symbol of rational, future-oriented urban planning. The rebuilders also saw the Charing Cross rail bridge as an opportunity for further spatial reorganization and future-oriented reform: primarily, slum clearance and property redevelopment on the south side of the Thames. Improving and managing traffic flows had come to practically dominate planning concerns within London since the Royal Commission on London Traffic in 1903, eclipsing late-Victorian concerns about housing.[21] Design and aesthetics were still important—the rebuilders viewed the existing Charing Cross bridge as an eyesore too—but style, if not exactly subservient to function, still needs to flow from it. In this view, the structures and spaces of the city ought to be instrumental, engineered to serve the needs of people in the present and future, not just pay homage to the past. Such a view is connected, of course, to the development of architectural modernism. However, few of the rebuilders could be said to be champions of modernist ideas or style. For Morrison and his supporters, the replacement of the "beautiful" Waterloo and the "ugly" Charing Cross bridges were a means to a future-oriented, rational modernity, regardless of the style of building that got them there.

---

[13] Jurgen Habermas, *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1989), 31–43; Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, 1992), 289–339.

[14] For example, see Simon Gunn and Susan Townsend, *Automobility and the City in Twentieth Century Britain and Japan* (London, 2019).

[15] Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008), is the perhaps the preeminent account to date in which temporality is connected to spatial needs, even in the case of bridges.

[16] Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004).

[17] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, 1987); Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, 1993); Helga Nowotny, *Time: The Modern and the Postmodern Experience*, trans. Neville Pierce (Cambridge, 1994); Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York, 1995); Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time* (New York, 1997); Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley, 2000); Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, 2004).

[18] Pierre Nora, ed. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–1998); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989); David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (London, 1990); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York, 1992).

[19] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life (1903)," in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, ed. Jan Lin and Christopher Mele (London, 2013), 23–31.

Conversely, those who argued unyieldingly for the saving of the old Waterloo Bridge (for simplicity known hereafter as the "preservationists") evoked the importance of heritage preservation, commemoration, and aesthetics. The modern city envisaged by the preservationists required the presence, indeed the physical protection, of *symbols* of the past every bit as much as it required planning for the future. Although many preservationists were politically conservative, their position on the bridges ought not to be regarded as a reactionary or nostalgic. For while there are parallels to the conservative impulse, pilloried by Patrick Wright and Robert Hewison in the 1980s, of nostalgic whitewashing and elitist romanticization of the national past in the service of ruling class hegemony,[22] the interwar Waterloo Bridge preservationists were not railing against the idea of a modern city or of modern life: many of them were town planners and architects interested in constructively reshaping the urban landscape. Their concern to save Waterloo Bridge revolved around their understanding of the structure as a monument that spoke to London's long-term importance. In Nora's terms, the bridge was a *lieux de mémoire*—an object whose accumulated meanings helped to provide the stability of historical continuity, a palliative to the uncertainties of modern urban existence. The object therefore needed to be saved in its "authentic" form (or as close to it as possible), even if this reduced its potential utility. Similarly, the preservationists supported a new Charing Cross bridge to accompany the preserved Waterloo crossing. They argued the two could complement each other aesthetically and symbolically, the new bridge could be made a commemorative monument to the greatness of the empire or to victory in the Great War, and the refashioning of central London entailed by both bridges would revitalize both the aesthetics and utility for generations to come. Concerns for preservation and commemoration were thus combined in their own positive vision for the future. But for them, the symbolic linking of the past and present to that future, rather than maximizing efficiency, was key. Consequently, the preservationists would be uncompromising on the aesthetics of the new Charing Cross Bridge or on the layout of its approaches—which, they argued, had to be monumental and convey grand ceremonial meanings as well as alleviate traffic congestion.

---

[20] See Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth Century London* (New Haven, 2000); Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Capital* (Stroud, 1999); Stephen Halliday, *Underground to Everywhere: London's Underground Railway in the Life of the Capital* (Stroud, 2001); David Bownes, Oliver Green, and Sam Mullins, *Underground: How the Tube Shaped London* (London, 2012); C. López Galviz, "Mobilities at a Standstill: Regulating Circulation in London, c. 1863–1870," *Journal of Historical Geography*, no. 42 (2013): 62–76.

[21] Russell Haywood, "Railways, Urban Form and Town Planning in London: 1900–1947," *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 1 (1997): 37–69, at 39.

[22] Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford, 2009); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).

Many of the champions of this position were members of the London Society and had been featured in the 1921 book *London of the Future*, edited by the architect Sir Aston Webb.[23] David Gilbert has astutely characterized the collective position of this group as akin to the "conservative modernity" that Alison Light discerns in interwar literary culture.[24] But both sides in the debate were dominated by professional architects, planners, surveyors, and engineers who, along with the politicians, thought themselves uniquely (indeed, the only) qualified men who ought to be entrusted with reshaping the face of the city after 1918. As Helen Meller, Maureen Flanagan, and others have argued, the grand plans of urban reformers rarely considered the views or place of women or their needs in their schemes.[25] The debates about the bridges thus reflected an unambiguously elite masculine set of views of urban space in relation to time. And the bridges were not the only aspect of central London's landscape in this period that can be seen as a clash over how the past would be made to fit London's future; the debate over what to do with the increasingly unused city churches, many designed by Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London, was another.[26] Similarly, another facet of these concerns about connecting the past with the modern future is evident in the efforts of the London

---

[23] Helena Beaufoy, "'Order out of Chaos': The London Society and the Planning of London, 1912–1920," *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (1997): 135–64.

[24] David Gilbert, "London of the Future: The Metropolis Re-imagined after the Great War," *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 1 (2004): 91–119; Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991).

[25] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); Helen Meller, "Planning Theory and Women's Role in the City," *Urban History* 17, no. 1 (1990): 85–96; Maureen Flanagan, *Constructing the Patriarchal City: Gender and the Built Environments of London, Dublin, Toronto, and Chicago, 1870s into the 1940s* (Philadelphia, 2018).

[26] P. Norman and A. G. B. West, *The London City Churches: Their Use, Their Preservation and Their Extended Use* (London, 1921); "The Nineteen Threatened City Churches," *Journal of the London Society*,

Underground's Frank Pick, who, as Michael Saler has demonstrated, in the interwar years sought to marry nineteenth-century arts and crafts with modernist art in an effort to humanize industrial culture, using the buildings and furnishings of the Tube as his canvas.[27] The battle of the bridges was thus one of a number of contests about modernity and its relationship to artistic modernism, which within England, as Alexandra Harris has detailed, was very much a negotiation between experimentation and tradition.[28] Before turning to how these arguments played out over the arches on the Thames, a brief narrative of the bridges' political saga will provide the necessary context for this larger debate.

THE POLITICAL AND BUREAUCRATIC BATTLE

With Waterloo Bridge's settlement temporarily contained in April 1924, the London County Council's chief engineer reported that it would have to be reconstructed from the foundations up, at a cost of at least £1 million.[29] Given the terrible traffic congestion on most of London's Thames bridges, the prospect of reconstruction led to calls to widen the bridge to at least four lanes of traffic from the existing three. Money to do so, and to build the temporary steel bridge needed for the duration of the rebuilding process, was voted by the council. The Port of London Authority immediately objected that navigation of Waterloo Bridge was already difficult, and a wider roadway with the same narrow archways presented increased problems for river traffic.[30] Even louder objections were raised in the press on aesthetic grounds.[31] Faced with concerted opposition, the council referred the issue to a special committee, which reported in February 1925 after extensive engineering consultations that the old bridge was, in fact, "worn out" and should "be taken down." It recommended that an entirely new bridge of not more than five arches and accommodating six lanes of road traffic be built in its place.[32]

The uproar over this proposal was even greater than over the first plan. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings commissioned its own engineering report that claimed the original bridge could be preserved by underpinning.[33] With this report in hand, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Royal Society, the Town Planning Institute, the Architecture Club, and the London Society formed a

---

no. 28 (1920): 4–8; Christopher Hussey, "The Menace to the City Churches," *Country Life* 60, no. 1556 (1926): 733–42.

[27] Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (Oxford, 1999).

[28] Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010).

[29] "Rebuilding of Waterloo Bridge," *Times* (London), 31 March 1924, 9. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to the *Times* and other newspapers are to London publications.

[30] Messrs. Stephenson Clark and Co. to London County Council Improvements Committee, 16 May 1924, and Lord Devonport (Port of London Authority) to London County Council Improvements Committee, 6 June 1924, LMA, CE/RB/1/14. See also "Waterloo Bridge Scheme before LCC," *Times*, 1 April 1924, 7.

[31] "Rennie's Waterloo Bridge," *Times*, 31 March 1924, 13. See subsequent letters to the *Times*, 1 April 1924, 15; 3 April 1924, 15; 4 April 1924, 13. The architectural press warned against widening the bridge even before the London County Council's report; see *The Builder* 125, no. 4215 (November 1923): 754.

[32] "A New Waterloo Bridge," *Times*, 16 February 1925, 7.

[33] "The Case against Demolition: RIBA and Underpinning," *Times*, 25 February 1925, 9.

lobby group called the Thames Bridges Conference for the preservation of the bridge. In June 1925, the group sent a deputation to the London County Council to argue for careful repair of the structure in its original form. The council countered by engaging two more engineering consultants, who recommended that underpinning was too dangerous and probably only a short-term remedy; they pointed to the similar situation that had arisen at Southwark Bridge (which had been entirely rebuilt) and concluded that Waterloo Bridge had reached the end of its life.[34] The council then canvassed the Institution of Civil Engineers directly, which replied that the council should take the advice of its consultant experts,[35] and that the best-known British architect of the day, Sir Edwin Lutyens, had in his own report of October 1925 concluded it must be rebuilt, since he believed it was impossible to widen the existing bridge in a way that did not "mar its brave appearance."[36] In December the council decided by a three-to-one majority to demolish the old bridge and fund a five-arch, six-lane replacement.

The preservation lobby then appealed directly to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to delay demolition,[37] and preservationist parliamentarians launched attacks on the London County Council's plans in both the Commons and the Lords. An amendment to the council's 1926 Money Bill aimed to strike out the expenditure for reconstructing the bridge but was defeated by a vote 158 to 96, with the minister of transport, Wilfrid Ashley, publicly questioning the propriety of the House overriding the wishes of the democratically elected London County Council in whose responsibility Waterloo Bridge lay.[38] But in an effort to dampen the growing controversy over the bridges, Baldwin appointed a Royal Commission on Cross-River Traffic in June 1926 under the chairmanship of Lord Lee of Fareham. The proceedings were rushed through in a mere four months but purported to offer solutions for London's traffic problems in perpetuity. The commission suggested that a six-lane bridge at Waterloo would be unnecessary (it need only be expanded to four) if a road bridge was built at Charing Cross instead. The total cost of the commission's proposals was estimated at £27 million, of which, it was suggested, the London County Council borrow £19 million over sixty years, to be guaranteed by yearly payments of £1 million from the Government's Road Fund. In March 1927, the government indicated that it was willing to pay the recommended sum for an undefined "series of years," and in July the council also agreed to the proposals, but on the condition that the government's contribution amounted to 75 percent of the total costs.[39] For the next five years, the fate of Waterloo Bridge thus became entangled with that of the Charing Cross bridge scheme.

---

[34] "Waterloo Bridge: Appeal against Demolition," *Times*, 4 July 1925, 15; "Waterloo Bridge to be Rebuilt," *Times*, 16 December 1925, 14.

[35] "Waterloo Bridge: Expert Opinion against Underpinning," *Times*, 21 January 1925, 11.

[36] Report by Edwin Lutyens to Clerk of the London County Council, 8 October 1925, reprinted in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 33 (1925): 53.

[37] Minutes of the 26th meeting of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, 18 March 1926, TNA, BP 1/1; Blomfield to Crawford, 28 May 1926, TNA, BP 2/23. The D. S. MacColl Papers, University of Glasgow Archives, contain correspondence with all the petitioners.

[38] "Waterloo Bridge: Debate in the House of Commons," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 33 (1926): 419.

[39] London County Council Improvements Committee, 17 July 1929; Minutes of the London County Council, 30 July 1929, LMA.

The railway bridge at Charing Cross dates from the 1860s, though it was sited on the piers of the earlier Hungerford pedestrian suspension bridge, completed in 1845 by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. From the time of its completion, this railway bridge was widely derided as a blight on the riverscape; in 1916, Labour MP John Burns labeled it an "ugly red-oxide Behemoth."[40] Its removal was lobbied for unceasingly by the London Society from its founding in 1912; the society saw a new road bridge as a practically inevitable prospect.[41] The royal commission had recommended the building of a steel double-decked bridge of no more than five arches downstream of the existing one, providing for six rail tracks on the lower level and a roadway of sixty feet wide on the upper, with additional walkways of fifteen feet each. This plan also envisioned building a new Charing Cross station, still on the north side of the Thames, which would itself cost at least £7.5 million. Daunted by this price tag, the London County Council and the Ministry of Transport embarked on an initiative to get the Southern Railway Company to move its railway station to the south side of the Thames, thereby freeing up the possibility of a single-deck road bridge replacing the iron rail bridge and negating the need for expensive property acquisition on the north side of the river.[42] The London County Council was especially supportive of this idea, as it would aid property development on the Surrey side of the river. Editorials in various London publications were ecstatic.[43]

The London County Council thus rescinded its earlier resolution to demolish and reconstruct Waterloo Bridge and integrated both bridge projects into new budgeting plans. In 1930 the council promoted in Parliament a money bill for its preferred scheme. As Labour was now the governing party, albeit in a minority, the bill easily passed second reading.[44] But the sheer magnitude of the proposed scheme led to extensive opposition. The most vocal opponents, led by the Thames Bridges Conference, argued that money issues were secondary to the possibility of a major refurbishment of the imperial capital. As this was a once-in-a-century opportunity to refashion the face of central London, the aesthetic and town-planning opportunities should not be squandered by penny-pinching, haste, or road or river traffic expedients.[45] Other petitioners against the scheme had more prosaic complaints.[46] The Parliamentary Committee duly rejected the bill, suggesting that the current plan would retard rather than stimulate property development on the Surrey side of the river.[47]

---

[40] As quoted in House of Commons, Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on Private Bills, London County Council (Charing Cross Bridge) Bill, Tuesday 25 March 1929, TNA, RAIL 648/46, 20.

[41] George Swinton, "A 'King Edward' Bridge," *Nineteenth Century and After*, no. 69 (January 1911): 94–107; T. Raffles Davison, "Beautiful London," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 21 (1914): 453–71; "A London Eyesore," *Times*, 5 June 1914, 12; articles by John Burns, Aston Webb, and Reginald Blomfield, in the *Observer*, 8, 15, and 22 October 1916, respectively, reprinted by the London Society as a pamphlet, *New Road Bridge at Charing Cross*, Guildhall Library, Pam 321; George Swinton, "Castles in the Air at Charing Cross," *Nineteenth Century and After*, no. 80 (November 1916): 966–80; "A Great Scheme," *Times*, 17 November 1916, 9; "Bridges," *The Builder*, 113 no. 3885 (20 July 1917): 31, 37–40; "The Emblems of Victory," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 19 (1919): 1–2. Swinton republished his articles and surveyed many of the other schemes: George Swinton, *London: Her Traffic—Her Improvement and Charing Cross Bridge* (London, 1924). The *Journal of the London Society* published proposals, reports, and updates on Charing Cross Bridge schemes in practically every issue throughout the 1920s.

[42] Ministry of Transport Report of Messrs. Mott, Hay and Anderson, and Sir George Anderson, as to Proposed Bridge at Charing Cross, 4 April 1928 (HMSO, 1928), TNA, MT 39/381.

[43] For example, *London Mercury* 18, no. 107 (1928): 449.

[44] By a vote of 230 to 62; see 19 February 1930, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol. 235 (1930) cols. 1481–546.

After seriously debating the constitutional implications of overthrowing a Parliamentary Committee's decision, Herbert Morrison, now minister of transport in the Labour government, advised against a recommittal of the bill.[48] Instead, he and the London County Council hoped to diminish the objections by appointing a new advisory committee that represented the various stakeholders (including the council, the Ministry of Transport, affected local councils, the Port Authority, the Underground, and all the major architecture, engineering, and planning societies). The advisory committee was charged with preparing a modified plan within nine months and within a strict budget of £12.5 million.[49] When presented in July 1931, the committee's report was not unanimous and did nothing to quell public controversy. At this point, Morrison dropped the government's pledge of funding—citing the continuing controversy but mandated by the wider financial crisis.[50] London County Council immediately announced that, because of this decision, Waterloo Bridge would have to be demolished and rebuilt to take more road traffic. In early 1932, with the Charing Cross scheme now considered indefinitely postponed and Labour replaced by the National government, the new minister of transport, John Pybus, agreed to give a 60 percent grant toward a new Waterloo Bridge.[51] The budget for the project was set at £1,295,000, and the London County Council adopted the design of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, with the building to be undertaken by the engineering firm of Rendel, Palmer and Tritton.

This scheme provoked a new round of petitions to Prime Minster Ramsay MacDonald, including from Lutyens and Scott himself.[52] Before they could be considered, however, the London County Council's annual money bill was brought before the Commons, and the preservationist lobby managed, after a long and intense debate, to excise from the bill the loan appropriation required for the demolition and rebuilding of Waterloo Bridge.[53] Noting that "the government cannot provide a grant for something which the House disapproves," the Ministry of Transport advised the (Conservative) Municipal Reformer–led London County Council that they had little choice but to recondition the old bridge.[54] After six months of vigorous lobbying against this position, the council reluctantly conceded in February 1933, much to the fury of Morrison, who had resumed his position as head of Labour in London.[55] But just as tenders went out for the rebuilding work, a clear Labour majority was elected to the council for the first time, largely on a platform of increased spending on municipal projects.[56] In their very first vote as a governing majority in March 1934, Labour reversed the February 1933 decision. This was the fourth time the London County Council had voted to demolish the bridge and replace it with a new structure. Yet when Morrison pressed the new minister of transport, Leslie Hore-Belisha, for a grant from the Road Fund, Hore-Belisha replied that given the prior vote in the Commons, funding "would be out of the question, and indeed unconstitutional."[57] Parliament confirmed its view that Waterloo Bridge should be reconditioned by denying the request of the London County Council to borrow money for a new bridge in May 1934.[58]

---

[45] The engineering consultants for the London County Council collected some 170 published criticisms of the official scheme. Rendel, Palmer, and Tritton to Minster of Transport, 5 February 1930, TNA, MT 39/381/2.

[46] See the Report of the City Engineer, L. J. Veit, to the Law and Parliamentary Committee, 3 October 1929, Works Committee Minutes, Westminster Archives. See also Law and Parliamentary Committee Report, 13 February 1930 and 3 March 1930, Westminster City Council Minutes, Westminster Archives.

[47] "Charing Cross Scheme: Rejection by Commons Committee," *Times*, 7 May 1930, 11.

[48] Report of meeting between London County Council and Morrison, 9 May 1930; Herbert Samuel to Morrison, 16 May 1930; R. W. Perks to Ramsay MacDonald, 23 May 1930; Godsell to Morrison, 29 May 1930, all at TNA, MT 39/381/4. See also 1 May 1930, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th Series, vol. 239 (1930), cols. 395–72.

[49] Montague Cox, Clerk of Council, London County Council to Herbert Morrison, Minister of Transport, 4 June 1930; 9 July 1930, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th Series, vol. 241 (1930) cols. 417–18.

[50] 29 July 1931, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol. 255 (1931) cols. 2305–6.

[51] 10 February 1932, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th Series, vol. 261 (1932) cols. 848–49.

[52] Letter from Royal Fine Arts Commission to PM and First Lord of Treasury and Minister of Transport, 3 February 1932, TNA, BP 2/24; petitions collected in files of London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee, TNA, MT 39/388B.

Consequently, in June 1934, Morrison and the London County Council voted to pay for a new bridge entirely out of the London rates. Morrison and George Strauss, the council member for Lambeth, were photographed the day after the vote smashing a piece of the bridge's parapet with sledgehammers.[59] The sight of these two Labour councilors symbolically attacking the old bridge was widely condemned in the conservative press.[60] Further attempts by the council to get the government to subsidize the new bridge were defeated in Parliament.[61] Morrison then began deliberately slowing down other ministry-funded improvements around London and suggesting that without money for Waterloo Bridge, the London County Council would have difficulty fulfilling its other Road Fund obligations.[62] In October 1937, Leslie Burgin, minister of transport in Neville Chamberlain's new government, urged cabinet that cooperation with the council was essential to solve London's overall traffic congestion. Using the language that has come to color posterity's view of his premiership, Chamberlain agreed, telling the cabinet "he wanted a general appeasement with the London County Council" and that "the settlement of Waterloo Bridge took the place in the negotiations that the Colonies took in those with

---

[53] 1 June 1932, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th Series, vol. 266 (1932) cols. 1231–93.

[54] Pybus to Simmons (London County Council), 13 June 1932 vol. 33, Stanley Baldwin Papers, D.3.11, Cambridge University Archives.

[55] Bernard Donoghue and G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London, 2001), 203.

[56] Gwilym Gibbon and Reginald W. Bell, *History of the London County Council, 1889–1939* (London, 1939), 114.

[57] "Old Waterloo Bridge: Diary of Events Leading to Its Demolition,'" TNA, BP 2/24; Cabinet Memorandum "Waterloo Bridge," 22 March 1934, TNA, CAB 24/248/86 (34); Cabinet Conclusions, item 6, 28 March 1934, TNA, CAB 23/78/13 (34).

[58] *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series (1934), vol. 290, cols. 260–321.

[59] Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 204; "Look Your Last on Waterloo Bridge," *Sphere*, 137, no. 1797 (1934), 508–9.

[60] Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 204.

[61] Cabinet Memorandum, "Waterloo Bridge," 8 May 1935, TNA, CAB 24/255/93 (35).

[62] Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 205.

Germany."[63] So the 60 percent grant for a new bridge was approved, though it was made clear to Parliament that not a penny had been given to the London County Council toward the demolition of the old bridge. Work on the new bridge continued throughout the Second World War, with a largely female work force and at the cost of several lives. It was completed in April 1943. The temporary bridge was removed, and Morrison, now lord president of the Privy Council and leader in the Commons of the first majority Labour government, formally opened the new bridge on 10 December 1945.

Thus was old Waterloo Bridge replaced by the structure on the river today, and a new Charing Cross Bridge was never built—despite a plan to resurrect the project in 1934 that mollified *nearly* all the opposition but would have cost at least £32.5 million (more than had been spent on all London schools between 1870 and 1936).[64] But as will become evident, beneath the claims and counterclaims of sectional politics and special-interest lobbying in the battle of the bridges, it is possible to discern the two different conceptions of time's relationship to spatial planning in modern London.

THE DEBATE BETWEEN THE PRESERVATIONIST AND REBUILDERS

The claim that Waterloo Bridge was a significant and beautiful monument was propounded from first to last by the preservationists and conceded by many who argued for its replacement.[65] Similarly, most of those preservationists who wanted to save the old bridge also wanted an aesthetically appealing and commemorative new Charing Cross road bridge. These concerns were not just about picturesque vistas. How London's riverscape was presented was tied to the city's global historical importance and to the need to remind citizens and visitors alike of that history. Concerns about the aesthetics of the bridges were thus connected to their perceived function as commemorative monuments that helped forge a sense of connection to the past.

The chair of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, the Earl of Crawford, called Waterloo Bridge (somewhat ironically given its subsidence) "the most permanent and enduring building in London . . . the only bridge in London with a name of British significance and perhaps the only London monument of the 19th century commanding world-wide admiration."[66] Similarly, Sir Reginald Blomfield who, after his rival Lutyens, was perhaps the best known of living British architects in the interwar years, was nonetheless adamant on the "supreme architectural quality" of the structure: "From an aesthetic point of view, I believe it to be the finest bridge ever built."[67] Waterloo Bridge, he added the following year, "is a noble monument and it carries with it memories and associations of a period of tremendous stress, far too profound to be tampered with by anybody."[68] The chair of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, A. R. Powys, similarly claimed that Waterloo Bridge was both a rare national monument and "the finest tangible expression of English civilization of the first years of the nineteenth century."[69] The art critic D. S. MacColl summed up many of the aesthetic arguments in 1932, stating, "to demolish Waterloo Bridge was to tear the heart out of that superb view of which St. Paul's was the crowning feature."[70] The *Times* consistently editorialized in favor of saving the bridge as it was originally designed, arguing that to widen it would be a "crime against beauty—tantamount, it may be suggested, to breaking up the Venus of Melos and making a new one twice as fat."[71] In the Commons, Sir John Simon suggested that Waterloo Bridge was as important to the generation that erected it as was the Cenotaph to the current generation, and that pulling down the bridge would be akin to pulling down Nelson's Column on the basis that it interfered with traffic.[72]

---

[63] "London Traffic Problems and Relations with London County Council," 14 October 1937, TNA, CAB 24/271/243 (37); Cabinet Conclusions, item 15, 1 December 1937, TNA, CAB 23/90/45 (37).

[64] Gibbon and Bell, *History of the London County Council*, 465–66.

[65] "Notes of the Month: Waterloo Bridge," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 173 (1932): 98.

[66] "The Case against Demolition: RIBA and Underpinning," *Times*, 25 February 1925, 9.

[67] Reginald Blomfield to the *Times*, 1 April 1924, 15.

[68] Reginald Blomfield, "On the Lutyens Report to the LCC," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 21 (1925): 54; see also "Notes of the Month: Waterloo Bridge," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 179 (1933): 3.

Meanwhile, the proposed new Charing Cross Bridge held significance for the preservationists because it would both beautify central London and provide an opportunity for a truly worthy new memorial to the empire or to the nation's participation in the Great War, or both.[73] The *Observer* summarized succinctly this point of view: "From the days of early Rome onwards man has invested the road-bridge with a certain sanctity. It has had a mystical meaning for him as a symbol of union, an enduring link spanning all that is transitory. . . A bridge at Charing Cross for us who build it as a memorial of the Great War must be rich in associations."[74]

Public dissenters to the beauty and commemorative importance of Waterloo Bridge were few, though George Bernard Shaw, in typically mischievous fashion, claimed, "The wave of enthusiasm for the inviolable beauty of the Waterloo Bridge has not carried me away."[75] And the painter Walter Sickert, displaying his incipient modernism, called for a replacement to the "out of date" bridge that ought to "satisfy modern necessities, and be, at the same time" a work of pure engineering that as "a perfect machine" would be beautiful.[76] After all, he added, the river was "not a museum."[77]

But fewer still had anything positive to say about the existing Charing Cross Railway Bridge. Again, the contrarian George Bernard Shaw disputed the ugliness of the bridge and compared it favorably with that of Waterloo, and Roger Fry expressed the view of some nascent architectural modernists that Charing Cross at least had the functional beauty of bare cylinders supporting a rectangular block, and for that reason it "pleased him more than most of London's bridges."[78] Such objections were angrily brushed aside by the preservationists, who reverted to their contention that those with aesthetic judgment were resolutely on their side on the need for replacing the Charing Cross bridge.[79] In their submission to the London County Council's special committee on the bridges in January 1925, the Royal Institute of British Architects noted: "A bridge is only beautiful if its artistic form is a true expression of its construction; and it is therefore essential, if London bridges of the future are to be worthy of her great river, that aesthetic considerations in their design should be taken into account at the very beginning."[80] Later, Home Secretary Herbert Samuel wrote in despair to Baldwin after the London County Council scheme for Charing Cross was shelved: "The hideous bridge at Charing Cross spoils what might be the finest river view in any great city in the world; its retention can only be described as a disgrace to the capital city of the Empire."[81] For the preservationists in particular, both bridges ought to be aesthetically in keeping with their surroundings at the "very heart of the nation and empire."[82]

---

[69] Evidence submitted by Mr. A. R. Powys, secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, on behalf of the Conference of Societies Interested in the Maintenance of Waterloo Bridge (1925), 1, TNA, MT 39/388B; A. R. Powys, "Can Waterloo Bridge Be Saved?" *Architectural Review*, no. 57 (1925): 248.

[70] "Waterloo Bridge: Report of the Emergency Meeting called by the London Society," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 172 (1932): 86.

[71] "Waterloo Bridge," *Times*, 6 July 1925, 15.

[72] "Waterloo Bridge: Debate in the House of Commons," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 33 (1926): 418–19.

[73] Typical was former London County Council chair Captain George Swinton's letter to the *Times*, 14 January 1920, 8.

[74] "The Right Memorial," *Observer*, 18 July 1920, 12.

[75] *Architecture*, 1 April 1924, cited in Borland, *D. S. MacColl*, 258.

[76] Walter Sickert to the *Times*, 7 August 1925, 17.

[77] Walter Sickert to the *Times*, 30 July 1925, 10.

Rather than debating the aesthetics of the bridges, the counters to the national monument arguments varied from denying the designation itself to denying its relevance to pointing to the fact that such designations were purely arbitrary. Morrison's view of Waterloo Bridge was that the preservationists "were mistaking a bridge for a monument" and that "the function of a bridge in central London *is* to get people and traffic from one side of the river to the other as quickly as may be."[83] He and other critics pointed out that there was nothing intrinsic in the structure of a bridge that made it a monument; it was purely the name applied to the bridge that worked to commemorate something. The editors of the *Spectator* agreed: "There is such a thing as the beauty of utility which is in the nature of the case more courted by architects than by any other workers in the arts. It is not enough merely to cry 'Vandals' against those who are not content that for the sake of a sentiment, however beautiful or sacred, there should be a refusal to meet the public convenience, or the conditions of existence as they are today. An exquisite possession must not be turned into an Old Man of the Sea hanging round the neck of citizenship and throttling its life."[84]

A new Waterloo Bridge would carry the name and therefore would continue the historical association. Similarly, a new Charing Cross Bridge could commemorate the present or recent past and still function as the needed traffic artery for a great city. Spatial efficiency should come before commemorative considerations. The preservationists, however, were outraged, claiming that only the original Waterloo Bridge, the product of the time in which it was built, the mute witness to so much of the nation's history, could effectively symbolize those historical associations. Similarly, a new Charing Cross Bridge ought to be built with its monumental commemorative purpose in mind from the first: appropriate aspects and monumental views were necessary if it were to be worthy to be named a monument to the imperial legacy or to victory in the First World War. In an effort to thwart those on the London County Council who did not seem to understand this, Lord Rennell even moved in the Lords in July 1934 (unsuccessfully) "that the monuments, historical and architectural, of the capital city of the country are matters of national and not solely municipal concern" and should only be interfered with through the workings of Parliament.[85]

---

[78] George Bernard Shaw to the *Times*, 3 May 1928, 17; Roger Fry to the *Times,* 20 May 1921, 7.

[79] Christian Barman to the *Times*, 3 April 1924, 15; D. S. MacColl, "The Charing Cross Bridge," *Burlington Magazine* 29, no. 160 (July 1916): 171–72.

[80] Royal Institute of British Architects memo on Thames Bridges, January 1925, TNA, BP 2/24.

[81] Herbert Samuel to Stanley Baldwin, 2 June 1932, vol. 33, Stanley Baldwin Papers, D.3.11, Cambridge University Archives.

[82] Trystan Edwards, "The Battle of Charing Cross Bridge," *Town Planning Review* 51, no. 1 (1932): 32–33.

[83] Herbert Morrison, interview, *Star*, 6 July 1937, quoted in Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 205.

[84] "Waterloo Bridge," *Spectator* 134, no. 21 (1925): 274.

Others seeking to plan for London's present and future depicted the preservationists as meddlesome elitists, promoting ornamental views of London divorced from the realities of practical urban needs. The former Tory minister of transport, Wilfred Ashley, noted presciently that by helping kill the London County Council's Charing Cross scheme because it did not please their aesthetic sense, Crawford and the preservationists had made the destruction of Waterloo Bridge inevitable.[86] Moreover, the *New Statesman* railed against the fetishization of Waterloo Bridge, noting in 1930, "The combined influence of several London societies, manipulated by a brilliant group of propagandists, has created a religious belief that John Rennie designed a monument the artistic value of which is undeniable and imperishable as the granite of which it is built, and that, whatever the needs of modern London, that monument must be preserved."[87]

The arguments in favor of preserving Waterloo Bridge and of building a new Charing Cross Bridge were thus heavily freighted with differing ideas about the importance of commemorative monumental structures and vistas in the heart of the imperial capital. For the preservationist lobby, Waterloo Bridge's historical associations and its aesthetic values offered a tangible corrective to the *anomie* caused by the acceleration of the passing of time prevalent in the modern city. Similarly, the new Charing Cross Bridge would function in the same way for future generations, commemorating Britain's early twentieth century, just as Waterloo Bridge marked the early nineteenth. In contrast, opponents of preserving Waterloo Bridge, even if they favored building a new bridge at Charing Cross, were concerned with a different temporality, the necessity to unclog the vital arteries of the city, and speed up citizen mobility for the needs of the future. Their understanding of temporality in modernity thus focused on the needs of traffic.

It was conceded by just about everyone that Waterloo Bridge had always impeded navigation of the river. Opponents of its preservation argued further that hundreds of thousands spent on a structure, however ornamental, that did not fulfill its essential purpose—cross-river traffic—was not only a waste of public money but was no longer good architecture.[88] The London County Council's engineers even refuted the argument that the shape and width of the original Waterloo Bridge had been determined by aesthetics; they pointed to the original plans, which indicated Rennie had built it to meet the traffic requirements of its time, not those of a century later.[89] Indeed, the bridge's design suggested to the council engineers that "money must have been tight" when Rennie set to work.[90]

---

[85] Lord Rennell's motion in the Lords, 4 July 1934, notes, TNA, MT 39/388B.

[86] Wilfred Ashley to the *Times*, 20 May 1930, 12.

[87] "Charing Cross and Waterloo," *New Statesman*, 27 September 1930, 756.

[88] Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 204.

Toward the end of the saga, a pamphlet produced by the Institution of Civil Engineers was blunt in its assessment about why Rennie's structure had to be replaced:

> The bridge was not constructed as a national monument. It was originally built as a commercial undertaking for profit, and was given the name "Waterloo" bridge as an afterthought. It became a serious obstruction to river-traffic, and both its roadway and footpaths were too narrow for modern needs. Structurally it had failed . . . It could have been restored and, had it really been a national monument and not obstructing a commercial river, the heavy expenditure would have been justified. Viewed from the Embankment it was a beautiful bridge, but passing under or over it was disappointing. It had had its day and lived its life. Apart from its failure and consequent propping, it had passed from utility to obstruction by changing the conditions around it . . . All London, including the Authors, will regret the passing of Rennie's bridge, but a busy river is not a suitable site for an obsolete monumental structure.[91]

As the debate intensified, both sides argued that Waterloo Bridge had been underutilized by cross-river traffic compared to other bridges prior to its closure. The preservationists claimed that this demonstrated that a bigger bridge was thus unnecessary; the council argued the reduced traffic was the result of drivers deliberately avoiding the bridge and using other crossings, which were themselves now showing signs of being over-stressed. The preservationists then shifted to the position that the narrowness of the bridge itself was not the problem, but rather the narrowness of its approaches, arguing that a bridge needed two fewer lanes than did a busy street to carry the same amount of traffic, because vehicles did not stop, idle, or park on a bridge.[92] They also contended that it was preposterous to increase the flow of traffic across Waterloo Bridge because it would just increase congestion in the Strand. The rebuilders countered that they were planning for future, not present traffic conditions, that the growth in traffic intensity showed no sign of slowing down, and that it would be irresponsible not to plan for that expected growth. Waterloo Bridge could be left as it was only if there was cross-river relief via other bridges; if the Charing Cross scheme went forward, then old Waterloo Bridge could be saved.[93] But once Charing Cross Bridge was indefinitely postponed, some other traffic relief was essential.[94] The council demonstrated that, unlike other Thames crossings, Waterloo Bridge's approaches *could* be widened as needed, and a proposed subway under the Strand, connecting the bridge with the Kingsway, would reduce the traffic blockage at the Strand.[95] Moreover, by 1932, the rebuilders could point to the relief of traffic congestion in the Strand provided by the council's turning the Aldwich into a one-way roundabout.[96]

---

[89] Reported in "Waterloo Bridge: Immediate Steps for Reconstruction," *Times*, 11 April 1924, 11.

[90] Report of the Chief Engineer to the Royal Commission on Cross-River Traffic, 12 October 1926, LMA, LCC/CL/HIG/2/47.

[91] Ernest James Buckton and Harry John Fereday, *The Demolition of Waterloo Bridge* (Westminster, 1936), 27–28.

[92] "Notes of the Month: Waterloo Bridge," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 163 (1931): 130.

[93] London County Council Improvement's Committee Report, 29 March 1927, LCC/CL/HIG/2/47, LMA.

[94] Note of interview between C. H. Bressey (Chief Engineer) and Pierson Frank, recommending design of new bridge, 21 October 1931, TNA, MT 39/388B.

Once it became clear that the Charing Cross scheme was too costly to consider in the short term, the preservationists believed their trump card was that preserving Waterloo Bridge could be accomplished for far less than the building of a new bridge. Inevitably, however, disputes arose about the various estimates. Throughout the controversy, preservationists clung to the appraisal of their engineering expert, Sir H. H. Dalrymple-Hay, who claimed he could underpin and rebuild the old bridge for as little as £690,000. This was less than 55 percent of the cost that the London County Council had estimated for its brand-new bridge, and only a third of what the preservationists believed the real cost of the new bridge would be (around £2 million).[97] The council countered that Dalrymple-Hay had not made a detailed examination of the bridge and instead based his proposals on the original plans, totally ignorant of the measures that had been taken to protect the already scoured piles in 1882.[98] Attempts to repair the bridge, they argued, if possible at all, would be dangerous, would further impede river navigation for a long period, and the repair might prolong the life of the bridge for only a few decades. This would be a false economy, as a new bridge could be made to last for centuries.[99]

Both sides also resorted to invective about their opponents' professional skill and taste to advance their positions. They debated the relative merits of engineers and architects for bridge building and divided over the appropriate aesthetic styles for the purposes of the two structures.[100] Some observers marveled at the lack of "forward thinking" among the architectural community. For instance, when preparing a reply to Lord Charnwood's 1932 motion in the House of Lords to save Waterloo Bridge, an official in the Ministry of Transport remarked, "While the architects are bringing forward in due succession Greek revivals, Gothic revivals, Queen Ann revivals, Sir Benjamin Baker produces the Forth Bridge which represents a bold step forward by a fearless pioneer, again unaided by Societies."[101] Similarly, a Ministry of Transport official argued that while the British had led the world in bridge engineering, "I am not sure that we have produced the most eminent art critics in the world."[102] The rebuilders taunted the preservationists—many of whom were architects—that they evidently had no faith in the creative abilities of modern British architects. Morrison frequently used this argument. As he noted in

---

[95] Report of the Special Committee on Thames Bridges, 2nd and 9th February 1925, LMA, LCC/CL/HIG/2/47.

[96] Report of the London County Council Improvements Committee (no. 2), 22 June 1932, TNA, MT 59/388B; H. Alker Tripp, memo, 5 February 1935, TNA, MEPO 2/4722.

[97] "Report of the Emergency Meeting called by the London Society," *Journal of the London Society*, no. 172 (1932): 82.

[98] Report by Chief Engineer to the London County Council Improvements Committee, 28 May 1924, 6, LMA, CE/RB/1/14.

[99] Report by Frederick Palmer to London County Council on Reconditioning Waterloo Bridge, October 1926, 11, TNA, MT 59/388B.

[100] This debate took off in the letters pages of the *Times* in August 1925 and between October and December 1928. See also Swinton, *London: Her Traffic*, 17–18.

[101] Points in Reply to Artistic Criticism, 2 March 1932, MT 39/388B, TNA.

[102] Points in Reply to Artistic Criticism, 2 March 1932, MT 39/388B, TNA.

1934, "I can never understand the assumption common among architects that the only architects capable of doing a job well are dead."[103] The preservationists countered such criticisms with the claim that the London County Council and the rebuilders were defaming the reputation of British engineers around the world by not entrusting them with an innovative underpinning scheme.[104]

Neither did the architects agree among themselves about what kind of aesthetic treatment ought to be given to the bridges. They disagreed over whether Waterloo Bridge could be modified at all, and they disagreed violently over what should replace the Charing Cross Railway Bridge.[105] The prospect of being commissioned to a once-in-a-lifetime project redeveloping central London brought about a flood of published plans. The preservationist lobby pleaded with architects to desist while the structure's future hung in the balance.[106] The pioneering urban planner Raymond Unwin, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1932, declared that he wanted to save Waterloo Bridge "because it would satisfy the wish, often emphatically expressed on behalf of the nation, for the retention of this great historic monument, architecturally related to Somerset House and recognized as one of the finest stone bridges in the Empire."[107] But he was alarmed by the rancor of the debate among the professionals over the Charing Cross proposals.[108] Indeed, personal rivalries were rarely far beneath the surface. Among the architects, Blomfield and Lutyens often clashed, the former suggesting that the latter's support for the official London County Council scheme for Charing Cross proposed in 1930 was "preposterous" and let down architects badly.[109] Blomfield was no doubt right that the reason the council had been so keen to get Lutyens on their team was his undoubted prestige, but it is far from clear that Lutyens was blind to the defects of the official scheme.[110] One suspects that Blomfield's attitude toward Lutyens was due to the rough treatment Blomfield received over his own proposals for the new bridge.[111]

As the controversy progressed, some observers suggested that the pitting of engineers supposedly intent on barbarous destruction against architects heroically pursuing preservation was a false dichotomy. The London County Council tried hard to counter this depiction of the situation, noting in 1934 that the real alternative was not between destruction or preservation but between a new bridge worthy of the legacy of the old or to so "mutilate the character of Rennie's bridge as to desecrate the memory of the great artist" while failing to provide for either cross-river or river traffic needs.[112] The debate was further complicated by the construction of the huge new power station at Battersea that began in 1929. This generating station required enormous amounts of coal (projections were of two tons daily) delivered by train and collier barges.[113] The river interests thus became more vocal in their demand for a navigable bridge at Waterloo.[114] The rebuilder position on the needs of traffic was increasingly bolstered by the support received from the Port of London Authority and the Tory-dominated collier and power-generating lobbies who argued the electrical and transportation needs of the city in the future trumped the concerns of those who sought to proclaim the importance of the past.[115]

---

[103] "Waterloo Bridge Debate at the L.C.C., 15 December 1925," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 33 (1926): 142–44; Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography by Lord Morrison of Lambeth* (London, 1960), 150.

[104] A. R. Powys, "Can Waterloo Bridge Be Saved?," *Architectural Review*, no. 57 (1925): 252.

[105] The correspondence of Giles Gilbert Scott is rife with acrimonious exchanges with and about other members of the Charing Cross Advisory Committee. See Giles Gilbert Scott Papers, RIBAA, SCGG/89.

[106] "Waterloo Bridge," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 33 (1926): 448.

[107] Unwin to London County Council, 22 February 1932, reprinted in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 39 (1932): 357.

[108] Unwin to Scott, 23 January 1931, Giles Gilbert Scott Papers, RIBAA, SCGG/89/64.

[109] Blomfield to MacColl, 22 December 1929, D. S. MacColl Papers, B282, University of Glasgow Archives.

[110] Frank Pick to Scott, 7 February 1931, Giles Gilbert Scott Papers, RIBAA, SCGG/89/30.

[111] Arthur Keen to Herbert Baker, 19 August 1931, Baker Papers, RIBAA, BaH 34/5; see also Blomfield to MacColl, 23 January 1930, D. S. MacColl Papers, B284, University of Glasgow Archives.

CONCLUSION

Despite the prominence of Herbert Morrison in the bridges debate, it would be a mistake to see this controversy as driven primarily by party politics or as the London County Council butting heads with Parliament. Nationally, the issue had no clear party lines. The minority Labour government of 1929–1931 continued the policy of its Tory predecessor, and it was the fiscal crisis of 1931 that forced their retreat from this position. After 1931, the Tory-dominated National government quietly supported the London County Council's calls for a new Waterloo Bridge, with the Earl of Plymouth publicly rebuking his colleagues in the Lords by asking why "there is a general assumption that everyone knows how to build a bridge, and particularly a beautiful bridge, except the London County Council, its engineers and advisers?"[116] It was the active, cross-party opposition in Parliament, not the government's position, that led to the impasse on subsidizing the rebuilding of Waterloo Bridge from the Road Fund.[117] Moreover, on the London County Council, there was great enthusiasm for the Charing Cross scheme, and members of all parties on the council supported the rebuilding of Waterloo at various times.

Ultimately, the preservationist lobby's refusal to compromise on the aesthetics of either bridge, combined with the staggering cost of their proposals, led to the Charing Cross project collapsing, and with it any chance of saving old Waterloo Bridge. The preservationists frequently asserted that those on the London County Council who wished to replace Waterloo Bridge were beholden to powerful friends and unnamed interests. Presumably these were business interests allied with the progressives and municipal reformers on council, and union interests allied with Labour.[118] But compelling evidence of this is lacking; the river and coal interests, for instance, failed to carry much influence until after the decision to build the

---

[112] London County Council Parliamentary Committee Report, 7th June 1934, LMA, LCC/AR/CB/2/249.

[113] Stephen Heathorn, "Aesthetic Politics and Heritage Nostalgia: Electrical Generating Superstations in the London Cityscape since 1927," *London Journal* 38, no. 2 (2013): 125–50.

[114] London County Council to Ministry of Transport, 2 November 1932, vol. 33, Stanley Baldwin Papers, D.3.11, Cambridge University Archives.

[115] Draft of the London County Council (Money) Bill, 11 May 1934, TNA, MT 39/388B.

[116] 3 March 1932, *Parliamentary Debates,* Lords, 5th Series, vol. 83 (1931–1932), col. 815.

[117] Cabinet Conclusions, item 6, 28 March 1935, TNA, CAB 23/78/13 (34).

[118] D. S. MacColl, "Waterloo Bridge: A Parallel and an Appeal to the Nation," *Saturday Review*, 29 May 1926, 643.

Battersea power station, and the London County Council still vacillated on Waterloo Bridge for another seven years. Nor was the recurring claim accurate that Morrison and Labour were only interested in a new bridge so that it could carry electric trams —the staple, cheap mode of transport for working-class Londoners in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is true that this possibility was considered, but the proposal was dead long before the negotiations started on the Charing Cross Bridge scheme, killed in large part by the increasing popularity and flexibility of buses.[119] On the other side of the debate, it is evident that some of those who wanted to recondition Waterloo Bridge feared that a new bridge would end any prospect of a new road bridge at Charing Cross, a once-in-a-century opportunity to completely refashion the whole of central London in a manner appropriate to their aesthetic taste. But again, there is no compelling evidence that the key Waterloo preservationists were *solely* motivated by the potential of the Charing Cross opportunity, as Crawford made clear in his entreaties with the government.[120]

Nor was this a debate between pure aesthetes and utilitarian philistines. Acrimonious debate cut across the preservationist/rebuilder divide, for instance, about the aesthetic effects of corbelling out Waterloo Bridge so that it could take more traffic.[121] And the London County Council went to some lengths to commission a worthy design for the new Waterloo Bridge, hiring, in fact, Giles Gilbert Scott, who had gone on record as being in favor of preserving the original structure—so as to ensure that aesthetic considerations *were* considered. Rather, both sides held passionately to their respective positions because both believed that they alone understood what would maintain and enhance London's position as one of the world's foremost cities. These beliefs were ultimately shaped by subtly different perceptions of the importance of time and its relationship to modern urban space.

Morrison and the rebuilders, with their great concern about bringing future-oriented utility to the city, certainly drew on this space-time conception in their plans and arguments around the bridges. As one proponent of rebuilding put it in 1928: "Traffic is not architecture any more than circulation is anatomy, but a city which counters or neglects the habitual movements of its inhabitants and visitors is as little likely to flourish as a living organism which defies the current of its blood; and between the fate of a city with time and the hardening of arteries there is more than a fanciful analogy. The analogy can be pursued into that of beauty, and, as an aid to beauty alone, lipstick architecture is a bad substitute for improved circulation."[122]

Moreover, Morrison and the rebuilders appealed to rationality, efficiency, and the strength of local democracy pushing forward into the future against effete, reactionary elites. They pushed for an efficient bridge suitable for the traffic of the future, not a useless, timeless ornament on the river. As one Ministry of Transport official complained in 1932, "One might assume that we were no longer a maritime race and that the Thames, having ceased to be a commercial waterway, was now merely a haunt for watercolor painters."[123] And in later reminiscing on raising the rates by a penny to pay for the bridge, Morrison suggested it "was a modest price to pay for the democratic rights of the people of London."[124]

---

[119] "Editorial Notes," *London Mercury* 12, no. 70 (1925): 337–38; memo by Rees Jeffreys, April 1925, 2, TNA, MT 39/388B.

[120] Crawford to Ashley, 7 April 1925, TNA, MT 39/388B.

[121] See correspondence, November 1932 to October 1933 re: Corbelling Waterloo Bridge, vol. 33. D.11, Baldwin Papers, Cambridge University Archives; the Royal Institute of British Architects, Special Committee Minutes, September 1926, vol. 9, RIBAA; see also the correspondence and plans of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, Repair and Widening of Waterloo Bridge, TNA, BP 2/25.

[122] "Charing Cross Bridge. Past, Present and Future: An Exhibition of Designs," unattributed press cutting, 1928, Bridges: Charing Cross and Waterloo, General Correspondence Files, TNA, MT 39/376.

In contrast, the preservationists were determined to save a structure that, while not as efficient as it might be, was needed because (in the words of Crawford) it was one of the few worthy monuments of a "great century for Britain."[125] For the preservationists, Waterloo Bridge had become a *lieux de mémoire*. As A. R. Powys of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings wrote to Sir Lionel Earle, chair of the Ancient Monuments Board, in a desperate last attempt to get Waterloo Bridge listed as an Ancient Monument in 1934, "failing your taking the action that is here pressed upon you, future generations can only wonder at the weakness of an age which was unwilling to repair so great a monument."[126] By fighting to preserve Waterloo Bridge in its original form, to maintain its historical "authenticity" and thus its historical monumentality for the future, preservationists were arguing that physical connections to the past were vital to providing some stability in the onrushing chaos and accelerating time of modern urban life. Similarly, they argued for a new Charing Cross Bridge not on the grounds of future utility but on its importance to connect past and present sacrifice and achievement, as physical reminders of what made London and, indeed, Britain great. They hoped that a new Charing Cross bridge would, in time, be as important a part of the city's (and empire's) heritage as they believed Rennie's bridge already was. Paradoxically, this reverence for historic monumentality, something often derided by later twentieth-century modernist architects, was arguably also one of the hallmarks of a thoroughly modern relationship to time.

By the 1980s, the throngs of tourists enjoying their riverboat tours were being told by their guides that the current Waterloo Bridge was known to "true" Londoners as "the Ladies Bridge," since it had been completed by a largely female workforce during the Second World War.[127] Despite earlier championing of it as a symbol of the imperial capital and a monument to nineteenth-century British artistic and world historical greatness, the original Waterloo Bridge is long forgotten, the new bridge now heralded as a monument to the sacrifice and triumph of the Blitz and of women during the war. So, with the passage of time, Waterloo Bridge retains its function as a *lieux de mémoire*, only in a new form and with entirely new meanings undreamt of by those who worked so hard to save it.

---

[123] Points in reply to artistic criticism, 2 March 1932, TNA, MT 39/388B.

[124] Morrison, *An Autobiography by Lord Morrison of Lambeth*, 150.

[125] Report on the Deputation to London County Council by Royal Fine Arts Commission and Thames Bridges Conference representatives, 24 February 1925, *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, no. 32 (1925): 284–86.

[126] A. R. Powys to Sir Lionel Earle, 20 June 1934, Giles Gilbert Scott Papers, RIBAA, ScGG89/175b.

[127] I am indebted to Professor Penny Summerfield for directing me to the short film *The Ladies Bridge* (Concrete Films, 2006), http://www.theladiesbridge.co.uk/index.html.