

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



London Bridge in America

Travis Elborough

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About the Book

In 1968 the world's largest antique went to America.

But how do you transport a 130-year-old bridge 3,000 miles?

And why did Robert P. McCulloch, a multimillionaire oil baron and chainsaw-manufacturing king, buy it?

Why did he ship it to a waterless patch of the Arizonan desert?

Did he even get the right bridge?

To answer these questions, it's necessary to meet a peculiar cast.

Fleet Street shysters · Revolutionary Radicals · Frock-coated industrialists · Disneyland designers · Thames dockers · Guinness Book of Records officials · The odd Lord Mayor · Bridge-building priests · Gun-toting U.S. sheriffs · An Apache Indian or two

And a fraudster whose greatest trick was to convince the world he ever existed.

Roll up, then, for the story of one of the strangest events in Anglo-American relations. Curious, clever and sharp, this is history to delight in.

About the Author

Travis Elborough is the author of three acclaimed books, *The Bus We Loved*, a history of the Routemaster bus; *The Long Player Goodbye*, which lamented the passing of vinyl; and *Wish You Were Here*, a history of the British beside the sea. He regularly appears on Radio 4 and writes for the *Guardian*.

Also by Travis Elborough

The Bus We Loved: London's Affair with the Routemaster

*The Long Player Goodbye: The Album from Vinyl to iPod
and Back Again*

Wish You Were Here: England on Sea

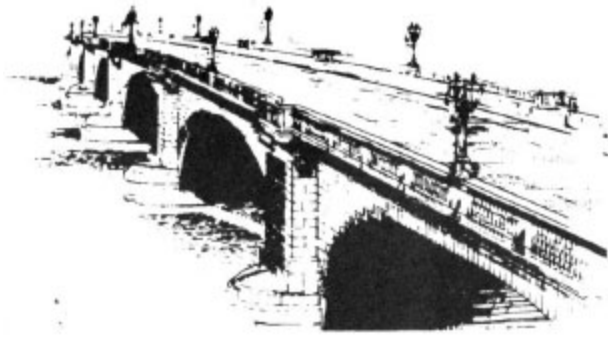
for
David and Sydneyann Shook
and Richard Boon

'If it was a question of an Imperium, he said to himself, and if one wished, as a Roman, to recover a little of the sense of that, the place to do so was on London Bridge.'

Henry James, The Golden Bowl

'This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

*The Man Who Shot Liberty
Valance*



London Bridge in America

The Tall Story of a Transatlantic Crossing

Travis Elborough



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Like a Rolling Stone

On 23 September 1968, the McCulloch Oil Corporation invited members of the world's press to attend a rather unusual ceremony in Lake Havasu City, Arizona - the purpose-built city it had founded in the desert just five years earlier. In the intervening period, many a journalist, eager young cub reporters and grizzled fedora-wearers alike, had been flown out to Lake Havasu City to enthuse over the landscaping of its freshly laid Civic Center Park. Or marvel at the luxuriousness of the suites in the brand new Nautical Inn Hotel. Or commend its fully stocked bar and state-of-the-art water-sporting facilities. All expenses paid, naturally.

But today was quite different.

Far from being asked to salute the up to date, the throngs of photographers, television crews and newspapermen who gathered here were expected to admire the arrival of a foundation stone from a granite bridge that was over 130 years old. A bridge deemed so arcane by its original owners in England, the City of London, that it was consequently surplus to their requirements.

What could Robert P. McCulloch, the multimillionaire oil baron and chainsaw-manufacturing king, possibly want with this old junk? First catching sight of him standing beside a tall gentleman with what looked like a badger on his head and wearing, in the 90-degree heat, a long black robe trimmed with gold, a lace ruff, knickerbocker breeches and a pair of snowy white gloves, it wasn't hard to imagine he'd

succumbed to some occult sect. An impression further enhanced by the appearance of a small party of Apache Indians. Decked out in deerskins, beads and ornate feathered headdresses and carrying drums and shaking sticks, they launched into a tribal dance, whooping and chanting as they spun around, to the evident delight of the figure in the black robes - now formally introduced to the crowd as Sir Gilbert Inglefield, 'the lord mayor of London Town'.



When the dance was over, Sir Gilbert gave a short speech and presented McCulloch with a small green bottle full of a brackish-looking liquid; water, he explained, from the River Thames. And then beneath a trio of flags - the state of Arizona pennant, the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack - with a crank of a winch handle and to rapturous applause, a stone that had travelled over 4,000 miles by ship from the Surrey Docks in Rotherhithe to Long Beach, California, and a further 300 miles by road from there to Lake Havasu, was slowly lowered into place.

The first piece of London Bridge had fallen down in America.

Its new home, as some of the less charitable souls imbibing complimentary martinis in the bar later couldn't help but observe, was a conspicuously dry, not to say outright dusty, plot of land. Work on a channel over which this famous span was destined to arch, it emerged, was yet to begin – the water was only to be diverted from the lake when the bridge itself had been completed, and 10,000 tons' worth of granite blocks reassembled piece by piece. And that arduous task was set to take another three years.

* * *

London Bridge, we were told, was in America. The 'real London Bridge', that was. Mrs Sergeant, a teacher who sported floor-length burlap skirts and long, lank centre-parted hair and rarely passed up an opportunity to whip her acoustic guitar out in lessons, was quite explicit about that. It was morning assembly and we'd just finished singing the – *that* – nursery rhyme. Yes, London Bridge, the real one, she had said quite blithely while fiddling with her capo, was now in America. To a curious child – in every sense of the word – at a primary school on the south coast of England in the mid-1970s this seemed outrageous. The real London Bridge in America? She might as well have said the moon. I'd been to London. Once. Its name also topped the odd local road sign, which always made it seem a possible, and therefore eminently plausible, destination to me, in line with, say, Brighton or Chichester nearby. America, on the other hand, was like outer space. It was something you only ever saw on television. In fact, with a handful of exceptions, most of the aliens beamed into our living room spoke with American accents.

And who had landed on the moon? Americans, surely?

America was a planet of wide-open spaces and vast gleaming cities inhabited by a tall, bronzed people gifted with immaculately coiffed hair who drove monstrous cars,

all leering chrome grilles, aluminium siding and wood panelling. When not shooting each other with big, silvery guns, they appeared endlessly tasked with placing massive, handle-less brown paper bags full of food on to kitchen surfaces. Or withdrawing oversized milk cartons (were they? they definitely weren't bottles) from fridges the size of garden sheds.

A great-uncle had emigrated to California following the Second World War. For all the contact the family had with him after that, he could have died in the Blitz like his younger sister. The odd birthday card. A letter now and again with a photograph of some corn-fed second or third cousins we never expected to meet. A telephone call one Christmas. What with the static, the relatives clustering around the receiver chipping in questions, and the sheer disjointed brevity of the responses, this felt like a seance. Certainly the voice that emanated from the phone, an echoey baritone with an accent that hovered between native Redhill and adopted San Francisco, sounded like a ghost's.

Aged five, I vowed to go to America when I grew up. Much as back then I vowed to go to Mars.

When I finally went to the States as an A-level politics student in my late teens, the shopping malls, drive-through burger joints, bars, multiple television and radio stations, trucks - and their fridges - remained exhilaratingly, enchantingly other. A branch of Gap was a novelty and Rolling Rock beer a completely unknown quantity.

Typing these words in London over twenty years on, I can only reflect on how radically things changed. The increased reach and power of global brands and multinational corporations and the arrival of the Internet have all conspired to whittle away at national differences as never before. From the laptop I am using now, it is as simple to stream NPR as BBC Radio 4, watch *America's Next Top*

Model as Britain's Got Talent, and as easy to read the *New York Times* as *The Times* of London.

I am married to an American and we visit the States about twice a year. Yet Facebook updates and online Flickr photo albums mean I sometimes feel I have a far more intimate idea of my in-laws' daily lives in Indianapolis and Richmond, Virginia, than my own less Web-savvy parents' fifty miles down the road. Though since both sets of parents have houses in the suburbs, depend on their cars to get anywhere and do nearly all of their shopping in large out-of-town retail parks, their lives oddly appear to possess greater similarities to each other, than to us in London.

In her memoir *Dear London*, the New Jersey-born writer Irma Kurtz maintained that when she first came to the British capital in 1963, it 'was less like an American city' than any she'd known. To her the whole town reeked of 'wet wool and river mud, coal smoke, boiled cabbage', and almost everything, from turning a gas fire on in a bedsit to obtaining a refill of a cup of execrable coffee in a café, seemed to require a steady outlay of heavy copper coins.

Close to fifty years later, the streets of London are paved with coffee shops and a greenhorn is likely to encounter the same international lingua perfuma of Issey Miyake, fried chicken and Krispy Kreme donuts on Tottenham Court Road as they might find on 7th Avenue. Topshop has a branch in New York. Abercrombie and Fitch two in London. And so it goes on.

Nevertheless our backdrop here, with a good deal of backstory from centuries past (and we must begin in the mists of the capital's known history), is the late 1960s – a time when each country was still capable of appearing substantially much more exotic to the other. This was a period of quite unprecedented stateside Anglophilia. London was considered 'swinging' by *Time* magazine. And American enthusiasm for a land of hope and glory that was part Princess Margaret and part the Dave Clark Five – regal yet

rocking, say, historically classy but perceived to be less class-bound – was at its zenith. Conversely, British politicians and leading architects found inspiration in the thrusting modernity they saw gleaming across the Atlantic, and it was this that precipitated their desire to redevelop London into a modern car-friendly metropolis along American lines – the initiative that led the City Corporation to replace Rennie's 1831 London Bridge with a new span in the first place.

These plans, if completed, would have resulted in The Strand becoming a dual carriageway and Covent Garden being obliterated by a motorway and rows of glittering office blocks. Indeed, their New London Bridge, standing to this day, would have more in common with the Westway (London's new motorway opened in 1970) than its classical predecessor. In the Corporation's vision, Los Angeles or New Jersey, rather than Jerusalem, was to be built on the capital's grey and bomb-scarred land.

And yet for all these Utopian schemes – and it's worth noting that Thomas More, whose severed head wound up on a spike on London Bridge, placed his original Utopia somewhere near America – the late sixties was also an era of increasing anxiety about the future, when for some the past, or a partially imagined version of it, only grew more appealing. In the year of London Bridge's sale, Enoch Powell made his odious rivers of blood speech, Richard Nixon entered the White House, Martin Luther King was assassinated and protests raged about the Vietnam War on both sides of the Atlantic. Amid all this turmoil, Hollywood gave the Oscar for Best Picture that year to *Oliver!*, the all-singing-dancing version of Charles Dickens' tale of Cockney wallet-swipers. These were, as they say, interesting times.

Bridges are liminal structures. They lie between two banks, suspended over water, and for the suicidal (or the unfortunate victims of the KGB's poisoned umbrella stings) between life and death itself. That potency and their

metaphorical potential have never been lost on artists, poets, novelists and harmonic vocal folk duos with choppy liquids on their minds. Accordingly, this book is really an attempt to examine what this story tells us about the Old World and the New one, England and America, then and now. As much about artifice as architecture, and lies as landscape, what follows is perhaps as serpentine as the Thames, with many loops and eddies, and possibly some high and low tides. But then a bridge crossing two continents is rather a wayward thing to span.

PART ONE



CHAPTER 1

Mind the Gap

LONDON BRIDGE HAS always been a structure that is as mythic as monumental, with its precise origins still remaining decidedly, and appropriately perhaps, foggy. The oldest written documentary proof for the existence of a river crossing at Southwark hails from a Saxon record of a witch trial. The bridge is mentioned, almost in passing, as the site of a witch's execution, with the unfortunate spell-maker being thrown off it and drowned.

But London Bridge is certainly older than that. For instance, the Romans constructed some kind of bridge in the vicinity when they first conquered Britain in AD 43. In his chronicle of the invasion campaign, the historian Dio Cassius describes the Roman commander Aulus Plautius and his troops, having landed on the Kent coast, advancing in pursuit of fleeing local tribesmen to 'the river Thames at a point near where it emptied into the ocean and at flood-tide forms a lake'. He writes that the Britons, knowing the terrain, initially evaded their pursuers by crossing the river on an area of firm ground. While some Romans actually swam after them, others used 'a bridge a little way upstream' to get over the water, 'after which they assailed the barbarians from several sides at once and cut down many of them'.

Cassius was writing 180 years after the event, and his description is vague enough to place this 'bridge', most

likely an age-old ford or a hastily whipped-together military pontoon rather than a bridge per se, at either Westminster, Brentford, Battersea or Fulham. Informed opinion generally tends to favour Westminster. But the ground at Westminster, then an isle irrigated by both the Thames and the River Tyburn, was extremely marshy. And having subdued the natives, temporarily anyway, the Romans would look elsewhere for a suitable location to establish a settlement on the Thames estuary, one that could consolidate their hold in the region and eventually connect to roads to their eastern capital Colchester and its northern twin St Albans. They found the perfect spot on the upper side of the river on the high ground between Cornhill and Ludgate Hill. Above the sodden floodplain, but served by the freshwater Fleet and Walbrook, the Thames here was also narrow enough for the construction of a strategically essential wooden bridge, probably at about twenty feet downstream of the present London Bridge, and reaching over to a gravel ledge at their 'southern defensive works' in the largely boggy Southwark.

What became of this London Bridge, eventually a solid timber fixture with a drawbridge by about AD 120, following the Romans' departure 290 years later is not known. Until the conquering Saxons reoccupied the ancient city walls in the ninth century (largely to defend themselves against incessant Viking raids) it would appear that they lived further west along the river by the Strand, and probably left Londinium and the wooden London Bridge to rot in the interim. But by the tenth century, a Saxon bridge, even if acclaimed mostly as a convenient means to dispatch witches to their deaths, starts to make more regular appearances in contemporary records. Toll rates for boats passing under the bridge – a halfpenny for a small craft with fish, a penny for a larger vessel – were listed in King Æthelred's London Laws of around 978.

And Æthelred was at the heart of one of the most legendary incidents concerning London Bridge. Known as the Unready, or ill-counselled, for his poor judgement and weak rule, he was forced into exile in Normandy, when the Danish king Svein Forkbeard and his son, Canute, or Cnut, conquered England in 1014. Svein died shortly after this, plunging the kingdom into one of those periods of regal chaos typically settled in this era by pan-Scandinavian pow-wows, invasions and/or massacres. Æthelred, seemingly invited to return by Englishmen suffering under the yoke of Cnut, then opted to forge an alliance with a former enemy, the Norwegian ruler Olaf Haraldsson, to regain control of the country.

Folklore and the Norse sagas have King Olaf sailing up the Thames to confront the Danish forces in London. He found Cnut's troops stationed on either side of the river. They had also taken up position on one of the city's bridges, described in Snorri Sturluson's Olaf Sagas as 'so broad that two wagons could pass each other upon it'. The Norwegian is alleged to have responded by rowing up to the bridge, tying ropes around its supporting piles and pulling them away, thereby plunging the Danes into the water.

Olaf's victory was celebrated in a poem by the Norse bard Ottar Svarte, a poem which is often taken to provide the origins of that famous London Bridge nursery rhyme. His verse epic, at least in some versions – and typically there are some variations and many doubts about its precise antiquity – begins:

London Bridge is broken down.
Gold is won, and bright renown.
Shields resounding,
War-horns sounding,
Hild is shouting in the din!
Arrows singing,
Mail-coats ringing –

Odin makes our Olaf win!

However, since the poem was apparently composed on pain of death, and subject to Olaf's approval, some experts suggest the magnitude of his assault on the bridge was quite possibly exaggerated.¹

Two years later, Cnut would regain London by sailing around the (rebuilt) timber bridge, using a ditch dug through the marshes of Lambeth. The bridge was similarly circumvented by William the Conqueror, who during the Norman Conquest chose to cross the Thames at Wallingford in Oxfordshire instead. However, the wooden bridge had a tumultuous hundred years ahead – it was carried away in a flood in 1091, only for the rebuilt structure to be consumed by a fire in 1136. The last wooden London Bridge was to be completed in elm in 1163, at which point the priest who'd overseen the work, Peter de Colechurch of St Mary Colechurch in Cheapside, petitioned to build a replacement in stone.

Most likely spurred on by the examples of arches in Islamic architecture encountered on the Crusades and pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the concept of building bridges as an act of piety had come into its own in Europe by the twelfth century. An order of Benedictine monks, the *Fratres Pontices* (or *Frères Pontifs*, Brothers of the Bridge), dedicated to building bridges and providing hostels for pilgrims and travellers was first founded in Italy, but became especially widespread in France. Revered for their great hospice in Paris and their charitable deeds throughout the country, one of the best examples of their constructions was the twenty-arch masonry bridge at Avignon in Provence. Its master builder, Bénézet, a former shepherd who claimed God had personally instructed him to erect a bridge over the River Rhône, was canonised for his good works and subsequently buried in a chapel on the bridge.² While less active in Britain, their example was followed by many local

abbeys and religious houses in England during the medieval period, with bridges built and maintained using donations, Church funds, tolls, and alms collected at chapels incorporated into their crossings.

Peter de Colechurch, and his successors, would do their utmost to encourage Londoners to donate land and money 'to God and the Bridge'. In the very long term, their panhandling efforts paid off. By 1968 the Bridge House Estates were able to fund the rebuilding of London Bridge themselves and, having amassed an impressive portfolio of properties over the centuries, its assets are currently estimated to run to several hundred million pounds. Back in 1176 when the first stone was laid (or more likely a supporting timber pile hammered in), levying a tax on wool, along with contributions from King Henry II, Richard of Dover (the Archbishop of Canterbury) and the Pope's legate, Cardinal Hugo di Petraleone, had been necessary just to get the thing off the ground.

Comprised of nineteen irregular pointed Gothic arches of differing widths, and a drawbridge, Old London Bridge was not far off an American idea of English dentistry rendered in masonry. And its cutwaters were rather like the teeth on a plankton-skimming whale, braking the river's flow and producing a drop in water levels of up to six feet.

The bridge took thirty-three years to complete and it is estimated that as many as 200 men were killed during its construction; the majority would simply have drowned in the Thames, with fatal blows from falling masonry and malfunctioning winches, badly aimed chisels and hammers most likely accounting for the others. Peter de Colechurch, while not one of the on-site fatalities, died just four years before it was finished. His body, though, was laid to rest in a chapel on the bridge dedicated to the martyred Thomas Becket, who had been christened in the priest-builder's Cheapside church as a child. Many pilgrims, like those Chaucer later imagined at the Tabard in Southwark, had to