

## **The Rise and Fall of the Medieval Stone Bridge**

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### **Abstract**

'One of the great engineering achievements of the middle ages was the construction of an extensive network of stone bridges. Large arched bridges are recorded in England just before 1100, and thereafter spread throughout the country. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the great majority of bridges over major rivers were built of stone with just a few exceptions, for example on the Thames between Reading and Kingston. Stone bridges were erected in all locations: there were bridges with arches of spans of almost 30 m over northern rivers subject to torrential flash floods, long bridges founded in deep water in estuarine waters and even longer bridges and causeways. Equally important were the large number of small bridges over streams and rivulets. This paper will trace the diffusion of stone bridges through the middle ages and examine who was responsible for their construction, noting the vital role played by private and local initiative rather than the state.

From 1500 to 1750 there was remarkably little change. For the most part, especially in the south and midlands, the bridges standing in 1750 were the same as those extant 250 years earlier; as a result there are images of many of the structures. When bridges were damaged they were patched up as they were after arches were removed during the Civil War. From the 1760s all changed and a period of wholesale demolition followed until the rise of the conservation movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But demolition was very patchy: on some rivers, such as the Severn all the bridges were demolished or fundamentally altered, on others, eg. the Wear, most bridges survived – a finding which has important implications for explaining the demolitions.'