

## **Bridges, Engineering, Architecture, and Empire Dorman, Long and Co in the 1920s and 30s**

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### **Abstract**

Following the First World War, the British Empire, although victorious, found itself in a transitional situation, struggling to regain the pre-eminence that it had once enjoyed, particularly in fields like heavy engineering. The post-war recession in Britain and the rise of competition elsewhere in the world, as well as the loss of talent, energy and wealth resulting from the War, made recovery difficult. However, I argue that Middleborough-based Dorman, Long and Company – which expanded its steel-producing capacity to meet wartime demands for armaments and machinery – connected Britain's pre-war successes in heavy engineering to successful post-war work, by building bridges.

The move into bridge building came about by chance. The company seized an opportunity provided when the Cleveland Bridge Company from nearby Darlington dropped out of the bidding for the Sydney Harbour Bridge. At very short notice it took over the design created by the engineer, Ralph Freeman, of Sir Douglas Fox and Partners, and the architect, Thomas Tait, of Sir John Burnet and Partners, which became the winning bid. It created a bridge-building department from scratch which saw through the construction of the Sydney bridge, but also while it was being built, won contracts for further bridges in Britain, the British Empire, and world-wide. These included over the Limpopo River, joining Rhodesia and South Africa, the Nile in central Cairo, and central Bangkok over the Chao Phrya river. This paper, using material from the company archives and elsewhere, follows the narrative of the transition from steelmaker to a bridge-builder. It explores the collaborations with engineers and architects and how they employed new ideas and materials. It looks at the bridges themselves as Imperial achievements in the gathering twilight of the Empire, and how over ensuing years they joined some communities while dividing others.

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