

## **Crossing the Thames at Walton**

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### **Abstract**

Walton-on-Thames, some 20 miles upstream of London, has been a crossing point of the River Thames for some thousands of years. The first bridge, replacing ferries, was a speculative venture, and opened in 1750. It was painted by Canaletto, and started to shape the towns of Walton and Shepperton, causing the highway network to develop.

The crossing was not without problems however. The first bridge rotted and was abandoned in 1782, the second bridge washed away in 1859, the third bridge was damaged by bombing in 1941 but continued in use until 1985, the fourth bridge was temporary, and the fifth bridge was opened in 1999 but was overwhelmed by traffic by 2011, when work on the present, sixth, bridge, a clear span thrust arch design, began.

Construction of the new bridge inevitably would be disruptive, so the builders took steps to engage the local community. A part of this was to work with the Local History Society, to prepare a book charting the history of the crossing, complemented by a quartet of poems by Thames-based poet Joseph Butler. The poems gave an alternative route to approach the history, whilst exploring a range of people's emotional connections with the bridges: river users, those crossing the river, financiers, local people and bridge builders. Both book and poems were highly acclaimed; the book sold out immediately and reprints continue to sell well.

The paper presents a history of the bridges, both as a formal narrative and as a quartet of poems, and also offers a perspective on how Costain explored innovative and imaginative routes to community engagement in its construction of the sixth bridge.