

A Review of the evidence for English bridge chapels

Peter McKeague

Abstract

Once common place, today only a small number of bridge chapels survive in England, most notably those situated on the bridges of St Ives (Cambridgeshire) Rotherham, and Wakefield (both Yorkshire). However, chapels were also frequently situated at the end of bridges. Ruins of a chapel survive at the end of Cromford bridge (Derbyshire), whilst at Rochester (Kent) although the medieval bridge has long since been replaced its chapel survives as part of the headquarters of the Rochester Bridge Trust, which continues to maintain the present bridge.

Bridge chapels have been defined as buildings which physically form part of the structure of a bridge by being situated either on it or are attached to one end of it. However, the situation was more complicated as some chapels were situated along the bridge approach road. Other bridges possessed churches, hermitages or hospitals situated nearby which served the same function. The vast majority of these chapels no longer exist due to impact of the Reformation and post-medieval bridge rebuilding.

Ongoing research has identified over 200 locations across England where chapels and related structures, such as hermitages, once existed and in the process identified further extant chapels as at Taddipport (Devon) and reconsideration of Duxford Chapel (Cambridgeshire) as the chapel at Whittlesford Bridge. Although the vast majority of chapels no longer exist, there is a wealth of visual and cartographic evidence to discuss in considering the range of religious monuments associated with medieval bridges. This paper will present some of that evidence and consider the bridge chapel, and related structures, in their wider context including continental parallels from France, Germany, Italy and Spain.