

"He carries his griefs on a shoulder": Archives of construction and collapse

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On the afternoon of 24th May 2016, Eastham Bridge collapsed. The 18th century brick structure dissolved, abruptly and spectacularly, into the River Teme. A bus full of local schoolchildren had a narrow escape, and a small village in north-west Worcestershire briefly found itself in the centre of a media storm.

The dust settled, leaving a community cut-off and authorities with a multitude of problems. This paper explores the impact of the loss of a bridge. What happens when a symbol of permanence and human ingenuity collapses? How does a community respond to the loss of a crossing point which has connected residents for centuries to the far bank of the Teme, and their markets and livelihoods beyond?

Archaeological evidence for earlier fords and medieval fortifications on the site suggest that Eastham has been a significant crossing point long before the construction of the bridge. The loss of the bridge represents a profound shift in a community's relations to the wider world.

Thanks to the diligence of local historians and landowners, the bridge's history is illuminated in extraordinary detail through a comprehensive documentary archive. As work progresses to replace the structure, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service is faced with the challenge of continuing that archival legacy by documenting the re-instatement of Eastham's bridge. In doing so, we are compelled to confront the tensions surrounding the identity of a structure that is defined both by aesthetic qualities and by the function of connection.