

Three Bridges

By severing our closest way into Suffolk the temporary closure of Mill Lane for bridge repairs reminds us how important the river crossing must have been in establishing the position of the original Anglo-Saxon settlement at Dedham. This was the lowest point where the Stour could normally be crossed; the ford at Flatford could only be used at dry times or seasons. Dedham's ford was downstream from the present bridge near the first bend of the river. It is thought that a track to it may have led directly from the corner of Brook Street behind Dedham Hall and through what is now the site of the Sewage Treatment Works. In the medieval period, when the first bridge was built in a position near the present mill, Mill Lane was realigned to approach it. We do not know the date but it is likely to have been earlier than 1548, when some of the proceeds from the sale of church plate were used to pay for building a bridge. This may have been only a footbridge but the prosperous wool trade in the fifteenth century would already have ensured the need for convenient transport of merchandise.

The earliest representations of the bridge at Dedham Mill show a wooden structure supported by two pairs of sturdy posts standing in the river and abutments at either end. Flatford bridge which was built in this way provides an example of traditional bridge construction all along the Stour. After it

had been renewed in the early twentieth century using thirty tons of English oak there was a proposal in 1927 to replace it with an iron bridge. A fundraising campaign for a traditional wooden bridge was finally successful and resulted in 1951 in the construction of the present replica, made in Burmese wood to the original design.

The freight business introduced by the Stour Navigation Company, created in 1705, dominated the river during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the traffic it generated meant that the central openings of earlier bridges had to be widened to accommodate the breadth of the barges. Moreover to allow for heavier weights being transported over the bridges, it was necessary to add a central vertical support between the existing two on either side. Stress on the timbers meant that repairs were constantly needed and bridges often had to be rebuilt. The Navigation was responsible for repairs but by the end of the nineteenth century it was failing and on the verge of bankruptcy; so the local authorities had to take over. The ever-increasing load of heavier traffic over Dedham bridge meant that the traditional wooden structure was first replaced by an iron bridge in 1900 and then rebuilt in concrete in 1974. Nearly half a century later the concrete bridge itself requires major maintenance. Suffolk County Council is currently carrying out this essential work, which includes replacing the bearings at the south end and installation of new movement joints.



Dedham bridge in 1898, showing its central opening with three supporting posts on either side. On the right is the decking carrying the tow path across the tributary.



Flatford bridge, a replica of the original bridge constructed in Burmese wood in 1951, illustrating the traditional construction of bridges along the Stour



Dedham's iron bridge installed in 1900.

A bridge at Stratford St Mary was first recorded in 1441. This was on the edge of Dedham parish at the bottom of Gun Hill and lay on or near the road which had been the main route from Colchester to Ipswich since Roman times. It was clearly important to our village because in the early sixteenth century wealthy Dedham merchants Thomas Webb and his son both bequeathed money for repairs to this "great bridge" and John Webb also left money to repair the highway between Stratford bridge and Dedham church. St John's chapel, recorded in 1523, stood just south of the bridge until it was demolished in 1826. The highway became a turnpike road in 1725 and the toll house on the Dedham side survived until 1926. A watercolour by John Constable shows it in 1800 with a gate the full width of the entrance to the bridge. A cast-iron sign on display by the toll house, now preserved in the porch of Langham Church, implored drivers to spare their horses on dangerously steep Gun Hill:

THE DUMB ANIMALS HUMBLE PETITION
 REST, DRIVERS REST,
 ON THIS STEEP HILL,
 DUMB BEASTS, PRAY USE,
 WITH ALL GOOD WILL
 GOAD NOT, SCOURGE NOT,
 WITH THONGED WHIPS
 LET NOT, ONE CURSE,
 ESCAPE YOUR LIPS.
 "GOD SEES AND HEARS".

Stratford bridge has been rebuilt many times. A wooden bridge was threatened by floods in 1614 and repairs to it, or perhaps its successor, were carried out

in the 1660s. In the late eighteenth century a new bridge was built to the design of the Essex County Surveyor John Johnson (1732-1814) with Essex and Suffolk County Councils jointly liable for maintenance costs. In less than ten years it was swept away and in 1795 Johnson built another wooden bridge relocated to the east of the earlier crossing, this time with brick abutments at either end. Ninety years later this was replaced by an iron bridge, which in turn was superseded by the present concrete version of 1928, described on a contemporary postcard as the County Bridge because it links Essex with Suffolk.

Lying between Dedham and Flatford, Fen Bridge provides a direct route between Dedham and East Bergholt. In the late eighteenth century the painter John Constable went that way on his daily walk from his home in East Bergholt when he was a pupil at the Grammar School in Dedham. Built on the site of an earlier ford, the bridge had fallen into a dilapidated state by the time it finally collapsed in the late 1930s. It was demolished in the 1940s and not replaced until 1985 when the Suffolk County Council built a new single-span footbridge, constructed mainly off-site and installed with some difficulty. The plan was for a Chinook helicopter to lift the main section into position in February but unfortunately on the day the downdraught from the helicopter's rotors was too strong to allow it to be accurately positioned. The engineers had to wait for the water meadows to dry out in the spring before a mobile crane

could be brought in to complete the job the following summer. The total cost was £14,000.

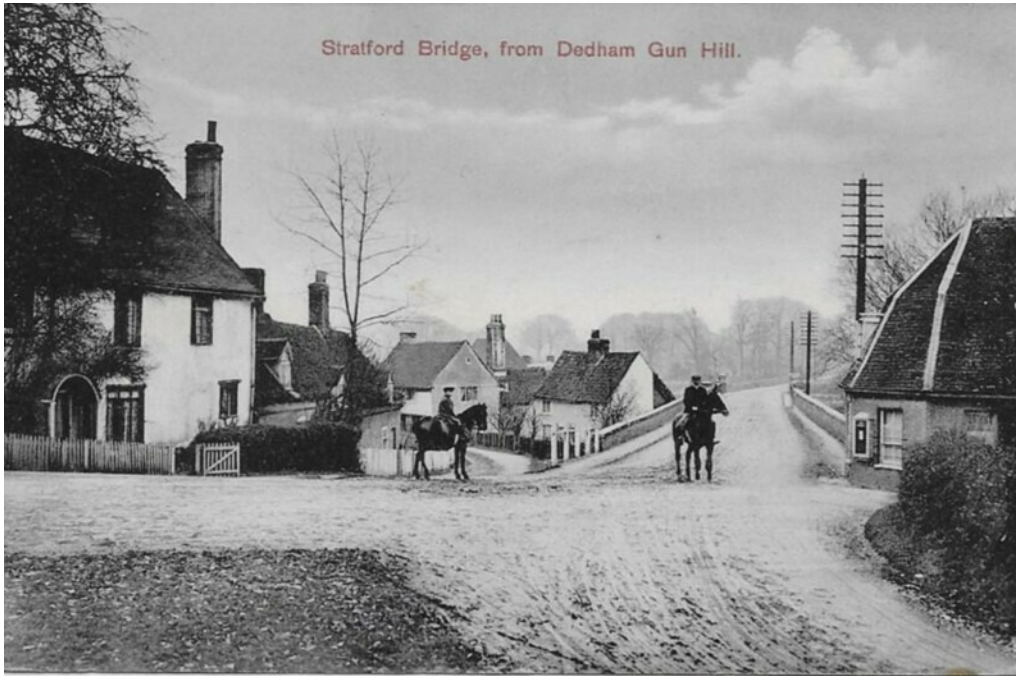
Fen Bridge carries both the Stour Valley Path and St Edmund's Way across the river. Sadly structural problems mean

that it is currently closed for an indefinite period, suspending one of Dedham's favourite round walks. It is sorely missed.

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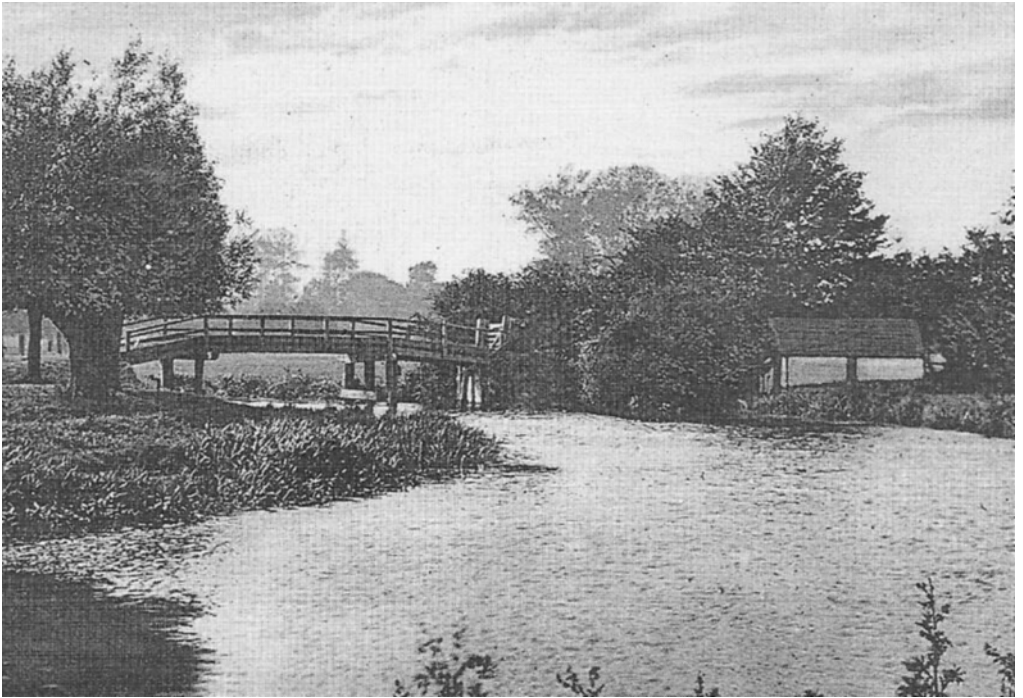


Ted Eley's photograph of barges parked up beside Dedham bridge (one of its rivets can be seen bottom left) in the early twentieth century. After they were introduced in 1705 bridges had to be altered to provide a wider central opening.



*A postcard showing Stratford bridge before 1926, when the toll house (on the right) was demolished.
A postcard showing Stratford St Mary's concrete bridge at the bottom of Gun Hill, which was built in 1928*





*Fen Bridge in the early twentieth century.
Lifting the new Fen Bridge into place, February 1985*

