

# York Bridgemasters' Accounts

Translated by Philip M. Stell



*Photo: S. I. Hill*

## Volume 2 Fascicule 2

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### Introduction

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York had two main, central, bridges in the medieval period: one over the Ouse and one over the Foss. There were also three other bridges over the Foss leading out of the town or lying outside it — Castle Mills Bridge, Monk Bridge and Layerthorpe Bridge — but these are not the subject of this work. It is not known when Ouse Bridge and Foss Bridge were built, but the earliest documentary reference to Ouse Bridge is in a charter of 1189 x 1200, and to Foss Bridge in 1145 x 1148 in the Cartulary of Whitby (*EYC* 1, 176; 2, 218). The wardens of Ouse Bridge are first mentioned in the cartulary of Fountains Abbey: Albreda, the widow of Walter de Acum, gave a plot of land in Little Bretegate to the Abbey, with the permission of the wardens of Ouse Bridge. Albreda also sold a plot of land to Nigel, father of Agnes, who also gave a plot of land to the Abbey. The latter gift was witnessed by Hugh de Selby, then mayor of York. He was mayor of York intermittently during the period 1217 to 1235, so that the first gift by Albreda presumably dates from this time (Lancaster 1915 1, 269–70). The wardens of Foss Bridge are not mentioned separately at this time, nor are the functions of the bridgemasters.

The bridges obviously needed to be maintained, and the problem of funding was formalised in 1393 when Richard II granted to the city the right to acquire land, tenements and rents to the value of £100 to pay for the upkeep of the two bridges and the chapel on Ouse Bridge. Presumably St Anne's chapel on Foss Bridge was not mentioned because it had not yet been built: the same charter gives permission to build foundations for a chapel which the mayor and citizens intended to build on Foss Bridge, and which Drake tells us was consecrated in 1424 (*YMB* 1, 143–5; Drake 1736). These estates were managed by the bridgemasters, and it is presumably no accident that bridgemasters' accounts survive from shortly after the date of this charter: from 1400 for Ouse Bridge, and 1406 for Foss Bridge. However, Rees Jones describes the similarities between the Ouse Bridge estates and the Bridge Fund which was established for the support of the fabric of London Bridge and its chapel (Rees Jones 1987 1, 190–2; Wright and Harding 1995). She points out that it may

well be that the Ouse Bridge estate was established long before York gained full autonomy, and that the charter of 1393 for York recognised a long-established system. Indeed she suggests that the estate might have been established to generate money to pay for rebuilding in stone of the timber bridge which collapsed in 1154 (Aylmer and Cant 1977, 37; Wilson and Mee forthcoming).

The bridgemasters themselves were presumably all freemen of the city, a *sine qua non* of holding civic office. The type of man who filled the post in the second half of the 15th century has been studied by Carpenter, who found that the post of bridgemaster was held on average nineteen years after taking the franchise. About half of the bridgemasters worked in the victualling, leather and textile trades, 20% were craftsmen, 20% were merchants and most of the rest were in professional occupations. In the period 1387–96 only 2.5% of bridgemasters became chamberlains of the city, and none rose higher up the civic ladder. By the last decade of the 15th century 55% of bridgemasters went on to become chamberlain, 19% became sheriff and 5% became mayor. Carpenter divides the bridgemasters into two groups: those in rank A were likely to rise higher up the civic ladder, they were more wealthy than those in rank B and were likely to be members of the Corpus Christi Guild. For those in rank B the office of bridgemaster was the pinnacle of their civic career (Carpenter 1996, 16, 25, 34, 36, 67–9). Lists of the masters of both bridges survive from 1357, and these are presented in Appendix One (pp.467–76) (YCA, Register of Admissions to the Freedom of the City, D1, *passim*).

The duties of the bridgemasters were laid down in their oath, which is reproduced in Appendix Two (p.477), and which can be summarised as showing that the bridgemasters were responsible for collecting the rents of the properties assigned to the bridges, for paying all the expenses arising from these properties and for paying the expenses of running St William's Chapel on Ouse Bridge. There is no mention of the duties of the masters of Foss Bridge; however, the heading speaks of four bridgemasters, so the oath was probably meant to cover Foss Bridge because there were two masters for each bridge. St William's Chapel is mentioned in every Ouse Bridge account that survives in full, showing annual payments for the stipend of the chaplain and clerks, and payment for materials such as communion wine and candles. In contrast, St Anne's Chapel appears only once in the Foss Bridge accounts, in 1475 when Richard Fraunk was paid 6s. 8d. for ringing the bell every morning at mass. In addition to collecting and disbursing money, the bridgemasters' duties included supervising the repairs of the city's properties (YCA, Bridgemasters' Rolls: Ouse Bridge, C83:10, 2 dorso). They had little, if any, responsibility for the bridges themselves; nor did they collect tolls which were levied on Ouse Bridge. In the 13th century these tolls appear in the accounts of the Sheriff of Yorkshire, but what happened after the city acquired its own sheriffs in 1396 is not clear; certainly these tolls did not appear in the city chamberlains' accounts. The cost of repairing the bridges was met in part by a toll on traffic crossing Ouse Bridge: every bound wain was to pay 4d. to the repair of the bridges of Ouse and Foss in 1483 (YCR, 53; YMB 1, 123). There was a tollbooth on Ouse Bridge which appears in the accounts for the bridge, but only in the guise of a small shop next to the

tollbooth. Repairs to some of the properties and to the bridges themselves are to be found in some of the Chamberlains' rolls (Dobson 1980).

The bridgemasters' rolls themselves survive from about 1400: 17 rolls survive for Foss Bridge between 1406 and 1488, 27 rolls survive for Ouse Bridge between 1400 and 1499. However, the rolls for many years are incomplete. The complete rolls can be divided into two major parts, the first being the rent rolls arising from the properties, and the second being expenditure on maintaining the properties. The Ouse Bridge properties were spread widely throughout the city, whereas the Foss Bridge properties seem to have been initially on the bridge itself because the earlier accounts for Foss Bridge do not identify a specific site. By 1453 properties in the fish shambles were being mentioned. The roll for 1468 for Foss Bridge includes properties in the aforementioned sites, with the addition of Walmgate and Fossgate. Fishergate and the area outside Walmgate Bar were added in 1472 and Threshour Lane in 1486. The number of properties assigned to Foss Bridge had grown from 31 in 1407 to 82 in 1486. It is strange that from 1444 onwards some of the properties on Foss Bridge itself were assigned to Ouse Bridge. Possibly this indicated an increased need for finance for the latter bridge. The expenses were occasionally for other purposes, for example, payment for cleaning St William's chapel after the 'great rains' in 1445 and for breaking ice on the river in 1446 x 1447 (YCA, Bridgemasters' Rolls: Ouse Bridge, 82:11, m.4 dorso; 83:1, m.3 dorso).

The rolls can be split into two sections, as noted above, and each of these can be broken down into sub-sections based on individual streets or adjacent streets grouped together. Looking at the sums of money raised and spent, it is noticeable that the sub-totals for each sub-section are often inaccurate. Of course this discrepancy may be due to errors either by the original scribe or by the present editor. However, any errors should be random, whereas there is a pattern in some rolls in which the individual receipts add up to more than the sub-total for that sub-section, that is, more cash was received from individual tenants than was handed over to the chamber (an example of errors in arithmetic is seen in roll C80:8). Furthermore, the individual amounts claimed in expenses often add up to less than the total for that sub-section, so that more was reclaimed than had been disbursed. Although these discrepancies raise the question of deliberate fraud this is very difficult to prove or disprove. Presumably the accounts were audited, but there is no irrefutable evidence of this.

From 1440 for Ouse Bridge and from 1451 for Foss Bridge marginal computation marks appear. These have been interpreted here, where possible, using the information given in Hector (1966, 42–3). They have been called computation marks rather than auditors' marks to avoid giving the impression that they were made by auditors. It is difficult to ascertain who made them: if the marks were indeed made by auditors it is strange that they almost always agree with the totals in Roman numerals even when these seem to be wrong, and they almost never pick up errors made by the scribes. Occasionally they differ from the scribes' figures, but almost always when the scribes' figures are correct. Because of the various discrepancies the totals have been checked against the individual amounts and a

note is made as to whether the individual amounts add up to the total or whether there appears to be an error. Despite any inaccuracies, deliberate or otherwise, there was generally a surplus which was handed over to the city chamber; for example, in the very first roll of Foss Bridge accounts for 1406 £12 8s. was surrendered.

The information given in these rolls is valuable and could be utilised to illuminate many aspects of medieval York. Firstly, they provide an unusual insight into the system of leases of property. The commonest form of tenure was *libera firma*, that is, freehold tenure for a rent free of any services. However, this form of tenure does not appear until 1451 for both bridges. Whether this represents a change in the law or of scribal practice is difficult to judge. Before this date virtually all properties were let at farm, and this term continued after 1451. It is common to find this type of lease and free farm in adjacent properties; for example, in 1451 the eighth tenement on the southern side of Foss Bridge was let at farm, whereas the adjacent, ninth, tenement was let at free farm. Leases were generally for one year, divided into the Pentecost and Martinmas terms, the rent being due in advance. Thus the leasing year did not coincide with the accounting year which began on 2nd February (the author is grateful to Dr Jeremy Goldberg for pointing this out; it is impossible to understand the dating of these documents without this knowledge). In addition to these two types of renewable annual lease there were also a few leases for one term only; a few were for a term of years, a handful for a term of life, and a dozen or so by *tenementum liberum*, that is freehold (see Baker 1990, 337–46, and Simpson 1961 for further information on these technical details). Other terms whose precise legal meaning is difficult to ascertain include 'by a *scriptum*', 'for *perpetuum remansurum*' and '*superredditum*'. Palliser tells us that the term 'husgable' means a charge on a house payable to the king, or the archbishop, but the tenements paying husgable are repeatedly said to be the property of the *communitas*, and the payment of husgable was made to the sheriffs. Husgable appears thirteen times in both the Ouse Bridge and Foss Bridge rolls, the last occasion being 1488, always in the rent-resolute section, that is, of rents being repaid. Palliser also points out that the archbishop had rights including every third penny from Walmgate, Fishergate, the Fish Market and the Gild-garth. It might be significant that the first three properties were assigned to Foss Bridge in these accounts (*VCHY*, 31; Palliser 1978a, 82). Rees Jones has summarised the sources for medieval leases in York, in particular the House Books and individual leases deposited with the City Archives (Rees Jones 1987 1, 9–10). The rolls also tell of draconian measures for collecting rents, notably removal of the roof for slow payers. Even the great and the good were not exempt from detegulation: the Abbot of Clairvaux had the roof of his town house in Skeldergate removed in 1459 because of non-payment for several years, the tiles being re-used on a tenement on Ouse Bridge (YCA, Bridgemasters' Rolls: Ouse Bridge, C83:8, m.1 recto).

The second topic of interest is the materials used on buildings and their descriptive terms. The repertoire was fairly narrow and included sand, lime and *sabulum*; wood; nails; wall-tiles (i.e. bricks); and *thak*-tiles (i.e. roofing tiles). It is noticeable that thatch is never mentioned, although there are frequent references to straw-laths and straw-brods. An entry

for 1468 under the heading of expenses gives details of building a new council chamber, though it is not clear whether this chamber was in the council building on Ouse Bridge or in the new Guildhall begun in 1448 (Raine 1955, 137; YCA, Bridgemasters' Rolls: Ouse Bridge, C84:2, m.4 dorso).

Thirdly, these records are a rich source for family and urban history. They tell us not only people's names, but the actual houses in which they lived, rare information for later medieval York. From this and the list of freemen it is possible to deduce where trades were practised in particular areas of the town. Also they tell us about movement within the town, and could help to identify, for example, if there were ghettos where new immigrants tended to congregate.

## Notes on the records and their editing

Bridgemasters' accounts survive for Ouse Bridge from 1400 and from 1406 for Foss Bridge. Also, the city chamberlains' rolls for 1475/6 contain the Foss bridgemasters' account for that year (YCA, C3:6; the author is extremely grateful to Professor Barrie Dobson for bringing this to his attention). All the rolls are on parchment. Where one or more membranes are missing from the start of a roll the first surviving membrane is given the number 1. Where a roll consists of several membranes with writing on the back, the text on the front of the last membrane is generally followed by the text on the back of the last membrane the other way up. The text then proceeds on the back in the opposite direction to the text on the front. In the Ouse Bridge accounts the entries are arranged in sections, usually covering several streets that lie close together. The street names for each section are listed down the left-hand margin in the original, but their position in the margin bears no relation to their position in the text so that the street names for one section are all given here at the head of the section. The membranes are stitched end to end to form a roll in all cases except one, C83:10, in which they are mounted separately in a cover. As the membranes are fastened in a roll the presence of stitch-holes at the beginning or end of the roll indicates whether there were once further membranes. Almost all of the rolls bear the names of the bridgemasters, the current mayor and the king. The names of the bridgemasters and the mayor allow the date to be deduced from the Freeman's Register, and the name of the King allows the date to be calculated from the regnal years as shown in Cheney's Handbook (YCA, Register of Admissions to the Freedom of the City, D1, *passim*; Cheney 1991, 22–3).

The text of the accounts for both bridges is mostly in Latin. The technical terms in Latin are translated here if there is no dubiety of meaning; they are left in the original Latin, in the nominative case, if more than one translation is possible, and are explained in a glossary, which gives only the nominative singular (this is the convention used in Palliser 1978b, 2). The word *sabulum* is a good example. Apparently it could mean either sand or gravel depending on the context. Most of the technical terms for building and building materials are in Middle English, and are left here in the original, firstly for those readers

who are interested in variant spellings of Middle English words, and secondly because an attempt to translate many of these terms would mislead and bestow more exactitude on them than the original will bear. Salzman states in his magisterial work on medieval building terms: 'medieval clerks often liked to vary their wording for the mere sake of variety and did not greatly worry if they used one term in several senses' (Salzman 1997, 317).

Several difficulties were encountered in translation. One involved the words *quondam* and *nuper*. The first means formerly, that is, a long time ago, whereas the second means lately, that is, quite recently. However, we read of a tenement in Petergate lately demised 47 years ago (C84:2, m.3 recto). It seems that these two words should be interpreted with caution and cannot be relied upon for dating a roll. A second source of confusion is the use of cardinal or Roman numerals rather than ordinal numbers for most series of tenements. Thus, for example, in roll C80:14 m.1 recto we initially have cardinal numbers for the rent for 'unius ten', followed by that for 'duorum ten'. These are followed by the Roman numerals for iij up to xxiiij. It is difficult to believe that this series means one tenement, two tenements up to 23 tenements; it is much more likely that this is a series from the first to the twenty third. Such series have been translated as ordinal numbers rather than cardinal when it seems clear that the tenements are being numbered serially.

The system of editing follows in general that used by Dobson (1980, xl–xlii). Words, numbers or phrases added to, deleted from, missing from or faded in the original are noted by the use of the following conventions:

- 1) added or interlined words and marginal notes are printed within round brackets with editorial comments in italics within the brackets ( );
- b) erased and deleted words are printed within brackets of the type < >, again with editorial comments printed in italics within the brackets;
- c) conjectural readings of faded or barely legible words are printed within brackets of the type [ ], again with editorial comments printed in italics within the brackets.

Words which have been left in the original Latin or French are printed in italics. Christian names and the names of occupations are given in the modern equivalent, but surnames and the names of places have been left in the original spelling. The names of streets, too, have been left in the original spelling, following the example of Joyce Percy (*YMB* 3). A Gazetteer of Street Names is presented (see pp.478–83) which includes variant spellings and definitions of obsolete street names, based on the work of Raine (1955) and Palliser (1978b, 2–16). Modern punctuation has been used throughout. Monetary values are given using the pre-decimal notation, as follows: a farthing ( $\frac{1}{4}$ d.) of which there were four to a penny, a halfpenny ( $\frac{1}{2}$ d.) of which there were two to a penny; a penny (d.) of which there were twelve to a shilling; and a shilling (s.) of which there were twenty to the pound. The mark, a money of account worth 13s. 4d., also appears in the Ouse Bridge accounts, but not in those for Foss Bridge, suggesting varying scribal practices resulting from different scribes for the two sets

of bridgemasters. Weights in the original are given in hundredweights, stones and pounds. There are fourteen pounds to a stone and eight stones in a hundredweight. Measures of length or area (ell, foot, rood) and of capacity (bushel, mel, mete, modius, potell, quarter, strake) are defined in the Glossary (pp.457–66). Dates are given by the modern calendar, that is, with the year beginning on 1st January rather than on Lady Day. The modern foliation is used throughout.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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I am grateful to many people for help with understanding these records, in particular Prof. J.H. Baker of the University of Cambridge; Bernard Barr, former Librarian of York Minster; Dr James Binns, Professor Barrie Dobson and Dr Sarah Rees Jones of the University of York; and Professor David Palliser of the University of Leeds. Any residual errors are entirely my responsibility. I am also very grateful to Paul Booth and John Harrop of the University of Liverpool who first fired my enthusiasm for palaeography and medieval Latin; to Rita Freedman, York City Archivist, and her staff for their unfailing cheerfulness, help and kindness, and to Beverley McJannett for the typing. The copyright to the map is held by the estate of Canon Raine, but attempts to find the holder of these rights have failed. Messrs. John Murray state that they have no objection to this map being reproduced in this work.

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