

The Westgate Street Bridge and Trams article by Mike Smith

This article was sent on an email to members by GSIA Chairman Steve Mills on 20th May 2023

I enjoyed Mike's article and found it very interesting and well researched. It encouraged me to study the postcard closer and to think of various memories I have of the area around the Westgate Bridge. It inspired me to write my thoughts down and undertake some research into the general area.

In his article, Mike raises two questions. The first is with regard to whether Sam Priday was related to the Priday Metford Co in Gloucester Docks and secondly whether the two "Castle" pleasure craft had any involvement with the Sissons Company. I was hoping I might be able to obtain some answers to these two questions through a few contacts I have. Unfortunately, I have found nothing conclusive.

I live in the Parish of Corse, and I know a family of Priday's who are agricultural contractors, as was his father before him. I went to see him some while ago with Mike's article to ask whether he knew of any family connection with Sam Priday, the owner of the boats "Winsdor Castle" and the "Berkeley Castle", and also any connection with the Priday Metford company in Gloucester Docks. He has been studying his family tree but had not yet found any definite connection, but he will let me know, if, and when, he does. Priday is not a very common surname, although there are a few around in this northwest corner of the County. All the Pridays here are involved with farming and corn growing. Another branch of the family of farming Pridays still live in Redmarley D' Abitot. (As an aside, and sadly, one of their family, Corporal TW Priday, was killed in action in France on 9th Dec 1939 to become the first British casualty of the second World War.)

However it does seem to me, it would be strange if there to be no family connection, due to the following :-

- (1) the farming Pridays living close to the River Severn,
- (2) the miller of the corn mill at Over many years ago was also a Priday,
- (3) with Sam Priday the boat owner,
- (4) Priday Metford in the docks with their corn sacking company.

We have not quite found the connection yet.

Mike also wonders whether there is any link with the Sissons company from Gloucester in respect of the two vessels. I have made enquiries with two chaps who worked at Sissons (not as far back as Sam Priday's time I hasten to add!!) but both have some records of Sissons projects, but, again, neither have not been able to provide any proof of a connection.

In the book titled "Gloucester A Pictorial History" published in 1994 by John Jurica, it shows a photograph (Plate 159) of the steam launch "Berkeley Castle". The caption reads: - *"For many years pleasure boats plied the River Severn between Gloucester and Tewkesbury and Worcester. The steam launch Berkeley Castle, which is moored at a new landing stage above Westgate bridge possibly for a works outing, was probably built at Gloucester by Charles Priday in 1887. The Windsor Castle, her sister, was launched by Priday in 1887. The bridge completed in 1816 was demolished in 1941 The horses on Oxlease probably worked on the river towpath".*

On various editions of the "Know Your Place" maps, a small building is indicated alongside the landing stage on the city side of the river, tucked under the side of the northern retaining wall of Westgate Bridge. Throughout the revision dates, the building varies in size but always roughly in the same location. One revision shows it as two small buildings. This building(s) is unlabelled on all the maps with the exceptions of the "1852 Local Board of Health" map when it is notated as a "Workshop" and again on the "1898 - 1939 O.S 25" 3rd Edition" when it is labelled as a "Boathouse". This notation was to be removed on the next edition dated "1921 - 1943" and the building to have disappeared entirely from the map on the "1947 - 1965" edition, never to reappear again.

Referring again to Jill Voyce in her book "Pocket images The City of Gloucester", (Page 58) she includes a photograph dated 1908 which includes the building against the north retaining wall on the city side. The sign writing on the side of the wooden building can be seen, but unfortunately it is unreadable. I have tried to enlarge the sign writing but it soon becomes too blurred to read. However, Jill states - *this is Price's boathouse*". Presumably this would have been Samuel Priday's boathouse in previous years. This same photograph is published on page 32 in the book "Gloucester Photographic Memories" by Keith Haynes dated 2001. Keith has captioned the photograph as *"Westgate Bridge 1906 - This photograph proves that the people of Gloucester enjoyed the waterways of the city in the earlier part of the 20th century. We can see*

a steam launch and the cabin (boathouse/workshop of Samuel Priday possibly?) of a pleasure boat builder on the left of the bridge –"

I have gleaned several other interesting aspects of the area from a study of the maps available on the "Know Your Place" website following Mike's initial article.

On the "1780 City of Gloucester" map, it indicates a Pound, to impound stray animals. This was situated on the west side of the bridge on the northside of the road. A later map shows it moved further to the west.

Another interesting item shown on the "1898 - 1939 O.S." map and also the "1921 – 1943 O.S." map, is a tank, on the west side of the bridge on the south side of the road. Jill Voyce in her book "Pocket images The City of Gloucester" has a 1908 photograph of Westgate Bridge (on page 58). Jill tells us that *"The tank shown on the right-hand side of Westgate Bridge was a water tank used for holding river water to be transferred to the Corporation water sprinkler which was used to clean the streets. The tank was removed in about 1927"*.

Street lighting columns can also be seen in this photograph with two elaborate street lamps mounted on the bridge itself.

All the O.S. maps show an O.S. Bench Mark on the centre of the span of the bridge – I would not have thought this is best practise due to possible movement etc. however, they are all consistently notated at 47.4 feet. However, they are intermediate Benchmarks and would not have the accuracy of a Fundamental Bench Mark that would be to 3 decimal places. The Bench Mark at this location on the crest of the bridge would have the advantage of height.

The comings and goings of the Landing Stage and launching slip.

Mike's postcard of about 1909 shows the vessel at the landing stage. This was on the eastern bank (the city side) along the northern abutment of the Westgate bridge. Access to the river at this location by City folk has clearly been in existence for a very long time.

Illustration No 2 in the book by John Jurica ("Gloucester A Pictorial History") of Westgate Bridge dated 1796, shows a track cut into the river bank leading down to the river at this same point. It shows an anchorage with two vessels tied up to it.

I noticed also from Mike's latest article "Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Token" that was issued by Chairman Steve Mills in an email dated 27/11/2023, shows a coloured painting of the Bridge and area dated 1806. Clearly shown, is the same rudimentary ramp at this location. My study of the maps available on "Know Your Place", shows access to the river since the year of 1844. The access was unlabelled until the "1894 – 1903" map when it is called a "Landing Stage"; Its final designation was labelled as a "Slipway" on the "1947 – 1965" map.

These are my memories of the Westgate Bridge area - during the late 1940's and early 1950's, I can remember the landing stage and launching ramp leading down to the water's edge. The landing stage floated with the rise and fall of the tides and the river flows. I can recall some half a dozen rowing skiffs were tied up alongside. These were available for hire for a pleasant row up and down the river. Wide concrete steps led down to the river with the graded ramp to the side These can be seen on the Aero photos of 1941.

In 1958 my brother and I took advantage of this landing stage and ramp having taken the train from Gloucester with our homemade canvas canoes to Shrewsbury. From Shrewsbury we paddled and camped our passage down the River Severn back to Gloucester. We finally landed at Westgate Bridge onto the landing stage from where we carried our canoes the mile or so, home (*More about the landing stage later.*)

The Tramway across the Westgate bridge

I noticed that none of the maps I studied on "Know Your Place" show any tram rails across Westgate Bridge. Looking again at Jill Voyce's "Pocket Images City of Gloucester" book, another photograph shown on page 58 was taken from the west side of the crown of the bridge looking back towards the city. The photo was taken at a low level and allows a wide expanse of the bridge road surface to be seen, almost from kerb to kerb but there is no sign of any tram rails. This photo, unfortunately, is undated. Clearly, there must have been some rails as Mike's photo shows a tram travelling over the bridge.

Even more curious is the map "1844 – 1888 O.S. 1st Edition" and map "1879 – 1888 Town Plan" that show the tramway rails as single track in Westgate Street but it does not continue beyond St. Nicholas Church. At this point the track has just split into a double track but immediately finishes a short distance later. None of the later maps on "Know Your Place"

show the tramway even as far down Westgate Street as St Nicholas Church. They show the rails finishing a short distance into the Westgate Street from The Cross. This is in distinct contrast to the other tramlines that commenced at The Cross and spread out along Northgate, Eastgate and Southgate Streets. In these cases, they travelled some 4 miles, 2 miles and 3 miles respectively.

I was beginning to doubt whether the Westgate tram did ever travel over the Westgate Bridge when considering:

1. the small amount of population it would serve on the west side of the bridge apart from the occasional fairground on the Oxlease.
2. St Nicholas Church was about the limit to where floods rose to in that area and may have had an influence.
3. The photo mentioned above, albeit undated, showed no tram lines set into the surface of the road surface over the bridge.
4. Reading Mikes's statement about "touching up" of postcard, of the tram style and appearance by a colourist, I was beginning to wonder whether the whole tram had been painted in to increase interest value.

It was at this point, I read the website that accompanied Mike's original article. It would seem that on two occasions, a tram service had been provided down Westgate Street and both times, they were withdrawn due to being uneconomic.

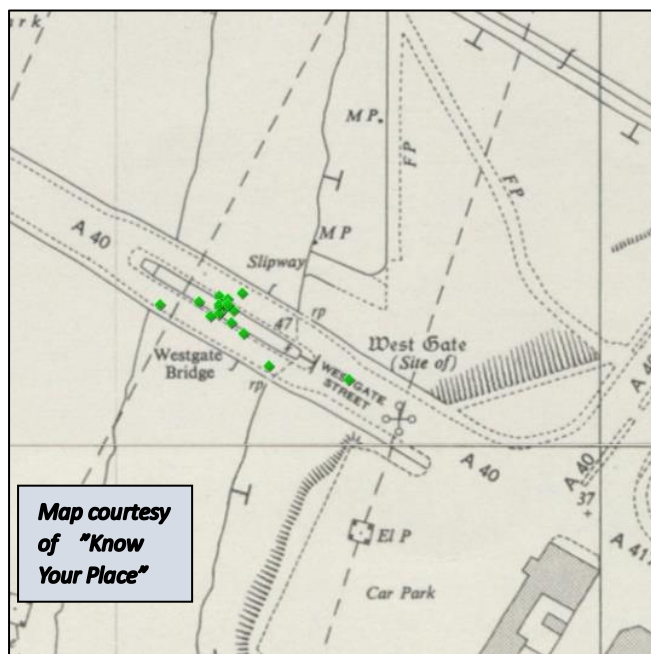
This confirmation was followed almost immediately, when I discovered two photos to fully convince me. The first from John Jurica's book "Gloucester A Pictorial History" (Illustration 141) shows the *"electric tram service between The Cross and Westgate bridge was discontinued in 1917. This photograph, taken near the bottom of Westgate Street below the junction of Lower Quay Street, looks westwards and shows the Admiral Benbow, one of several buildings demolished in 1909 to widen that section of road"*. Lower Quay Street is further west than St Nicholas Church. It is not possible to see beyond the tram to view further down Westgate Street to have possibly seen the tram rails.

The second picture is produced in the book "A Century of Gloucester – Events, People and Places over the 20th Century" by John Hudson on page 26. Dated 1907 in Autumn, it was taken from the west side of Westgate bridge looking to the south. It overlooks the Barton Fair on the Oxlease. Squeezed into the lower left-hand corner of the photograph can be seen a short length of tram rail – success - now, I believed. Presumably the maps I had viewed have "straddled" the two occasions when the trams ran down Westgate Street.

Interestingly, it was the installation of the tramway in Barton Street which is east of The Cross, that caused Barton Fair and the Mop Fair to be relocated from Barton Street to The Oxlease in 1904.

Westgate Bridge in during recent years

The "1947–1965 O.S. National Grid" map (below) shows the war time temporary replacement Westgate Bridge and a Slipway to the river - does not show the boathouse/workshop.



In Sept 1941 two sections of temporary pre-fabricated truss bridges, probably Bailey bridges, were installed to replace the earlier stone Westgate Bridge. They rested on the abutments of the stone bridge. This was to be a temporary wartime measure but resulted in remaining for 33 years. The two single span sections were placed side by side. One carried a single line of traffic westbound and the other carried one single line of traffic eastbound. Each bridge section had an unnerving sag in the centre, but they stayed the course until replacement in 1974.

Each bridge section had a narrow footway on the left-hand side. They were 450mm wide, thus placing pedestrians dangerously close to passing traffic. In addition to the road traffic on the pedestrians' right-hand side, on their left, there were wide open unprotected gaps in the bridge steelwork with the murky river beckoning from below. When Barton Fair and the visiting circuses arrived on the Oxlease, the public would pour across these bridges taking precedence over the vehicles.



Bailey bridge photo courtesy of "GLOUCESTER from Old Photographs Images by John Rowden"

Map courtesy of Know Your Place

The area changed in 1974 when the "Westgate Gyratory" was constructed. The BCC Q2 Basemap 2019 O.S. map (above) shows the current layout without a slipway.

No pedestrian footways are provided across either the Eastbound or the Westbound bridges because a dedicated pedestrian bridge is provided between the two vehicular bridges. This pedestrian bridge also carries all the Public Utility Services across the river. This allowed the decks of the road bridges to be constructed with a slimmer deck and maintain the required Air Clearance for river traffic below. This also reduced the bridges crest height to keep the road approaches from the existing garage forecourt surface levels etc. to acceptable limits for gradient and forward vertical visibility.

The Westbound and the Eastbound bridges were separated, each having two lanes each. This allowed the eastbound carriageway to align more directly towards the direction of St Oswald's Road. This also assisted in reducing the amount of bridge "skew" and to design them as "square" as possible across the river, thus reducing costs. The river sheet piling allowed work on the foundations to proceed in dry conditions and also protected the foundations of the abutments. With the installation of the sheet piling, the landing stage and access to the river at this point was not reinstated. Perhaps the thinking was these facilities could be better available at the Quay and the Docks.

Since those days I have noticed that there has been a huge amount of silt build up on the outside of the bend i.e., looking downstream on the west side. The silt is above the normal river level to such an extent that it reduces the river width by almost 50% in this area. This silt bank is entirely covered in weeds and foliage, moreover several willow trees have established themselves having grown to a height of 5 metres.

The first of the two photos (below) taken on 19th July 2023, show the current west bound bridge roughly from the same location as Mike's postcard, but, at a greater height as it was taken from the current pedestrian bridge. It shows the north elevation of the westbound bridge. On the extreme left was the location of the former launching ramp (the confusing dark patch on the bank are not remains of the slipway but in fact the shadow of the bridge.) The eastern line of the sheet piling can also be seen.

The sheet piling on the west side is the silted area covered by the vegetation – the small tree, just discernible under the right-hand side of the bridge, is growing in the silt, with the sheet piling just behind it to the west Oxlease direction. The silt also lies alongside the west bank sheet piling for some considerable distance to both the north and the south of the bridge. At the time of the photograph the silt level was 1 metre above the river surface level.



The silver-coloured Land Rover on the bridge and the small tree underneath, are both on the riverside of the sheet piling

I suspect many things have contributed to this silting problem.

Possible causes of the build-up of silt could be: the sheet piling on both sides which forces the river into a controlled route causing it to slow its speed. Furthermore, its "corrugated" sides around this curve, could also cause a slowing of the river flow speed. There has also been a large reduction of large river traffic, and lack of maintenance, care, and funds. Possibly reduced rainfall and perhaps the river increasingly taking the west channel around Alney Island via the Maisemore route. Viewing the river upstream to the north of the bridges shows willow trees growing vigorously from both banks out over the water, each occupying almost a quarter of the river – it is like a scene from the African jungle and a setting for refilming "The African Queen".

I have always considered it a great shame that Gloucester with its frontage onto one of the great rivers in the land has never been able to make use of this asset, in comparison to the benefits gained by river side towns such as Shrewsbury, Worcester, and Tewkesbury. Gloucester seems to have turned its back on the river. I do wonder whether this may become the start of long term fully silting up of this east channel, when recalling a previous channel further up Westgate Street silted entirely many years ago reducing the 3 channels down to two.

I am aware of the problems of the high tides and the Severn Bore reaches the Quay and the uninviting colour of the water as the photograph shows, but just wish a way could be found to make it more attractive and beneficial to the City. How nice it would be if we could get back to the quotation by John Jurica in his book "Gloucester – A Pictorial History" where he states - *"For many years pleasure boats plied the river Severn between Gloucester, Tewkesbury and Worcester –"*

I ask the question – if they could do it then why can't we do it now ?

Derrick Hall December 2023