

## Old Thomond Bridge

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The dating of the older Thomond bridge, taken down in 1838, to the reign of King John is shown to be incorrect. The evidence, from a variety of sources, does however indicate that an earlier bridge, made of wood, had quite likely been erected by the early thirteenth century which accounts for the later mistaken association.

The present Thomond Bridge was opened in 1840 and replaced an earlier medieval stone bridge, the date of which has been a matter of some debate. On the one hand Lenihan, Barry and O'Keeffe & Simington attribute the bridge to the time of King John<sup>1</sup>, while Leask and Stalley both suggest at least one wooden predecessor<sup>2</sup>. In 1814 the architect James Pain produced a detailed plan and elevation of the old bridge<sup>3</sup>. He also noted that the bridge was raised on wicker centring, which is generally accepted to be a later medieval construction technique. Those who favour the early date for the bridge dismiss this fact, but for both Leask and Stalley it is a major argument for a 14th century date.

It is now possible to prove conclusively that the old stone Thomond Bridge dates to the 14th century or later and is definitely not attributable to King John. The evidence is in the form of a petition from the Corporation to the King's Council, the text of which, translated from medieval French, is as follows:

A petition to our Lord the King from the Mayor and Corporation of his city of Limerick: the stone bridge which is started between the said city and the Irish of Thomond, enemies of the King who have seized the castle of Bunratty which was the key to the western coastal lands of Ireland, has no fully completed arches, and the stone pillars which were raised there in olden times are on the point of crumbling to the great prejudice of the King and of the said city, for horsemen can neither cross to make arrests nor to undertake raids on the said enemies. For this reason, the aforesaid Irish arrive daily at the end of the said bridge, have occupied all the lands in the direction of Thomond and have driven out or destroyed all the English, so that not a single person has remained outside the city, to the great prejudice of the King and of the city itself, whose Mayor and Corporation now petition our Lord the King that it please him for the salvation of his city to order forthwith that the said bridge be repaired and completed, in order that the people of Limerick might cross at will to strike against the said enemies and recover their lost lands, for, if the King does not order the repair and completion of the said bridge, it will certainly impossible to recover either the lost lands or the Castle of Bunratty, and so his city will be in great peril.

*Verso*

May the Justiciar of Ireland be informed by letter that he should enquire as to by whom the said repairs and completion may properly be carried out, as to the advantages to the King and to his city of Limerick of completing the said bridge, and the disadvantages of not doing so,

<sup>1</sup> M. Lenihan, *Limerick; Its History and Antiquities* (Dublin 1866) p. 50; J. G. Barry, 'Old Limerick Bridges', *Journal of the North Munster Archaeological Society* 1 (1909) no. 1, pp 8-9; P. J. O'Keeffe & T. Simington, *Irish Stone Bridges, History and Heritage* (Dublin 1991) pp 124-32.

<sup>2</sup> H. Leask, 'The Ancient Walls of Limerick', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* 2 (1941) no. 3, pp 96-7; R. Stalley, 'William of Prene and the Royal Works in Ireland', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 131 (1978) pp 43-6.

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced in Barry, 'Old Limerick Bridges'.



and as to the sum of money for which the said bridge may be adequately repaired and completed.<sup>4</sup>

The petition does not bear a date, but the editor assigns it to the reign of Edward III, on the basis of the reference to Bunratty taken by the Irish in 1332<sup>5</sup>. From this document it is quite clear that an arched bridge did not exist, but that a start appears to have been made upon construction of one at an earlier unspecified date. This ties in neatly with a reference to William of Prene, Master of the Kings Works in Ireland, whose alleged faulty workmanship on a bridge at Limerick, some time between 1282 and 1292, caused eighty people to drown<sup>6</sup>. While Thomond Bridge is not specifically named it is clearly the bridge in question. The fact that the Master of the Kings Works was paid £20 from exchequer funds is proof of royal involvement, while two later documents demonstrate that the Crown accepted liability for the bridge. An inquisition was held in Limerick in 1321-2 to investigate royal liability to repair the 'great bridge' of Limerick,<sup>7</sup> which resulted, in 1325, in a royal order to pay for the repairs:

Whereas our progenitors Kings of England and Lords of Ireland from the time of the building of the bridge at Limerick and the tower thereto adjacent have been used to repair, maintain and keep the same at their own expense, We command you [the barons of the exchequer] that you cause the said bridge and tower to be repaired, sustained and kept out of the issue of your bailiwick<sup>8</sup>.

It is questionable that this order was acted upon because only a few years later the appeal to King's Council, cited above, was made, resulting in further enquiries. The arched bridge was probably not started until after 1358-9, when Edward III granted an aid to the building of a bridge in Limerick 'in the direction of the Irish enemies of Thomond' and erecting a tower at the end for repelling them<sup>9</sup>. A later grant, dated to 1400, refers to repairs, which suggests that the bridge had been built by then:

Grant with the assent of council to the citizens and communality of Limerick in Ireland of 20 marks yearly for 19 years from the issues of the "Laxwere" by the city to be expended on the repair of the bridges and walls of the city by supervision and control of John Arthur and Thomas Spicer of the city.<sup>10</sup>

It is, however, unlikely that the town was entirely without a bridge for the period 1280-1360 and that some makeshift arrangement was in place using the existing fabric.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. O. Sayles, *Documents on the Affairs of Ireland before the King's Council* (Dublin 1979) no. 246, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> The document can probably be dated quite close to the event c. 1332-5. However, since Bunratty is the determining factor for dating, there seems to be no inherent reason why the date could not be 1318, when Lady Clare abandoned the castle after the battle of Dysert O'Dea, see George Macnamara, 'Bunratty Co. Clare', *N. Munster Archaeological Society Journal* 3 (1915) no. 4.

<sup>6</sup> H. Sweetman, (ed.) *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1285-92*, p. 519.

<sup>7</sup> PRO C47/10/18/12.

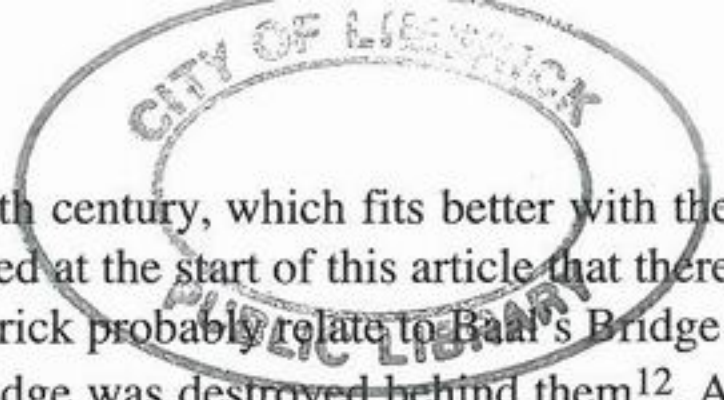
<sup>8</sup> *Chartae, Privilegia et Immunitates* (Dublin 1829) p.52; translation from O'Keeffe and Simington, *Irish Stone Bridges*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> *Rotulorum patentium et clausorum cancellariae Hiberniae calendarium* Dublin 1828 p.74 no. 82. It is interesting to note that Stalley, *op. cit.*, p. 45 translates as "build" what O'Keeffe and Simington, *op. cit.*, p. 129 translate as "repair".

<sup>10</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1399-1401*, p. 318.

<sup>11</sup> That this could be so is demonstrated by one of Dineley's sketches of Thomond bridge in the late 17th century, which show a wooden trestle span where one arch has collapsed or been destroyed. See O'Keeffe and Simington, *op. cit.*, fig 42b. Dineley's drawing of O'Briensbridge may also represent a trestle bridge, see discussion in Hodkinson, 'Montpelier or Portcrusha Upper?', *NMAJ* 40 (2000) pp 96-7.





Although old Thomond Bridge can now be dated to the 14th century, which fits better with the evidence of the wicker centring, it is quite clear from the text cited at the start of this article that there was an earlier bridge. The earliest references to a bridge in Limerick probably relate to Baal's Bridge. When the Anglo-Normans retreated from the town in 1177 a bridge was destroyed behind them<sup>12</sup>. A retreat towards Dublin across the Shannon is highly unlikely so the reference must be to Baal's Bridge. The bridge seems to have been newly built, because a description of the original Anglo-Norman assault on the town specifically states that there was no bridge and goes on to describe the fording of the river.<sup>13</sup> A royal property grant of 1199 mentions a bridge but again it is not a clear reference to Thomond Bridge.<sup>14</sup>

The 13th century Pipe Rolls contain a certain amount of information about bridges. The roll for 1234-35 (19 Henry III) makes mention of pontage, a bridge toll, while the roll for the 1261-2 (46 Henry III) contains an entry for '10s expended in joists bought to repair the bridge at Limerick.'<sup>15</sup> The first unequivocal mention of Thomond Bridge, however, is in an inquisition of 1275 which refers to 16 carucates of land lying waste and uncultivated owing to the war of the Irish on the other side of the bridge of the city towards Thomond<sup>16</sup>. Two further references from the Pipe Rolls, dated 1277-78 and 1280-81 refer to watchmen on the tower of the Bridge to Thomond<sup>17</sup>. The former accounts for two men in the tower, while the latter is for an unspecified number of archers. So while the first clear mention of Thomond Bridge is in the latter part of the 13th century, these references demonstrate the existence of an earlier bridge than the stone one. There is, therefore, every possibility that this precursor of the arched bridge dates from the reign of King John, and hence his later association with the old stone bridge<sup>18</sup>.

Stalley suggests that the earlier bridge must have been in timber<sup>19</sup>, but one of the main reasons O'Keeffe and Simington opt for an early date for the arched bridge is that the location is unsuitable for a wooden one. Apparently the bridge is sited on a rock shelf so there is no way to anchor a wooden bridge into the bed of the river.<sup>20</sup> Neither seems to have considered the possibility, first suggested by Leask,<sup>21</sup> of a wooden trestle bridge on stone piers, which could account for the 1332-40 description of 'stone pillars raised there in olden times'. In a footnote in Lenihan's *History*<sup>22</sup> there is a description of a more rustic but similar style of construction existing at Carrick-on-Shannon well into the 19th century. The 1261-2 reference to joists fits well with this possibility.

If the first bridge was a trestle bridge on stone pillars, then the likelihood is that the tower on the bridge, first mentioned in the later 13th century, was a free standing structure within the river (cf. Cashlaun-na-Corran on the Laxweir). The tower stood until 1761 when it was demolished and replaced by the tollhouse visible in many prints of the bridge.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>12</sup> A.B. Scott & F. X. Martin (eds), *Expugnatio Hibernica* (Dublin 1978) p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> G.H. Orpen, *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (Oxford 1892) lines 3415-21.

<sup>14</sup> H. Sweetman (ed.), *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland* (London 1875) vol. 1, p. 15, no. 97; for discussion of this and the previous two references see B. Hodkinson, 'The Topography of Pre-Norman Limerick', *NMAJ* 42 (2002) pp 1-6. Baal's Bridge never appears in royal accounts or documents so the Crown does not appear to have been responsible for its upkeep.

<sup>15</sup> *Report of the Deputy Keeper of Public Records Ireland*, vol. 35 pp 35 & 41 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> H. Sweetman (ed.), *Calendar of Documents Ireland 1252-84*, p. 214

<sup>17</sup> *Report of the Deputy Keeper of Public Records Ireland*, vol. 36, pp 40 & 51.

<sup>18</sup> Edward II's use of the plural, in the 1325 document, perhaps, confirms this.

<sup>19</sup> Stalley, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> O'Keeffe & Simington, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Leask, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> J. Ferrar, *An History of the City of Limerick* (Limerick 1767) p. 67.



Limerick Museum holds copies of several maps, dating from the 17th century through to Pain's plan of 1814, showing the tower and bridge. It is interesting to note that all of those that show the piers of the bridge have cutwaters fore and aft but there are none associated with the tower (Fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> These also show the tower to be wider than the bridge. Philip's *Prospect* of the city in the late 17th century also shows the tower with a double-pitched roof (Fig. 3).<sup>25</sup> This is probably incorrect, however, because such a roofing arrangement suggests an internal cross wall within the building, which is unlikely given the tower's size and function.

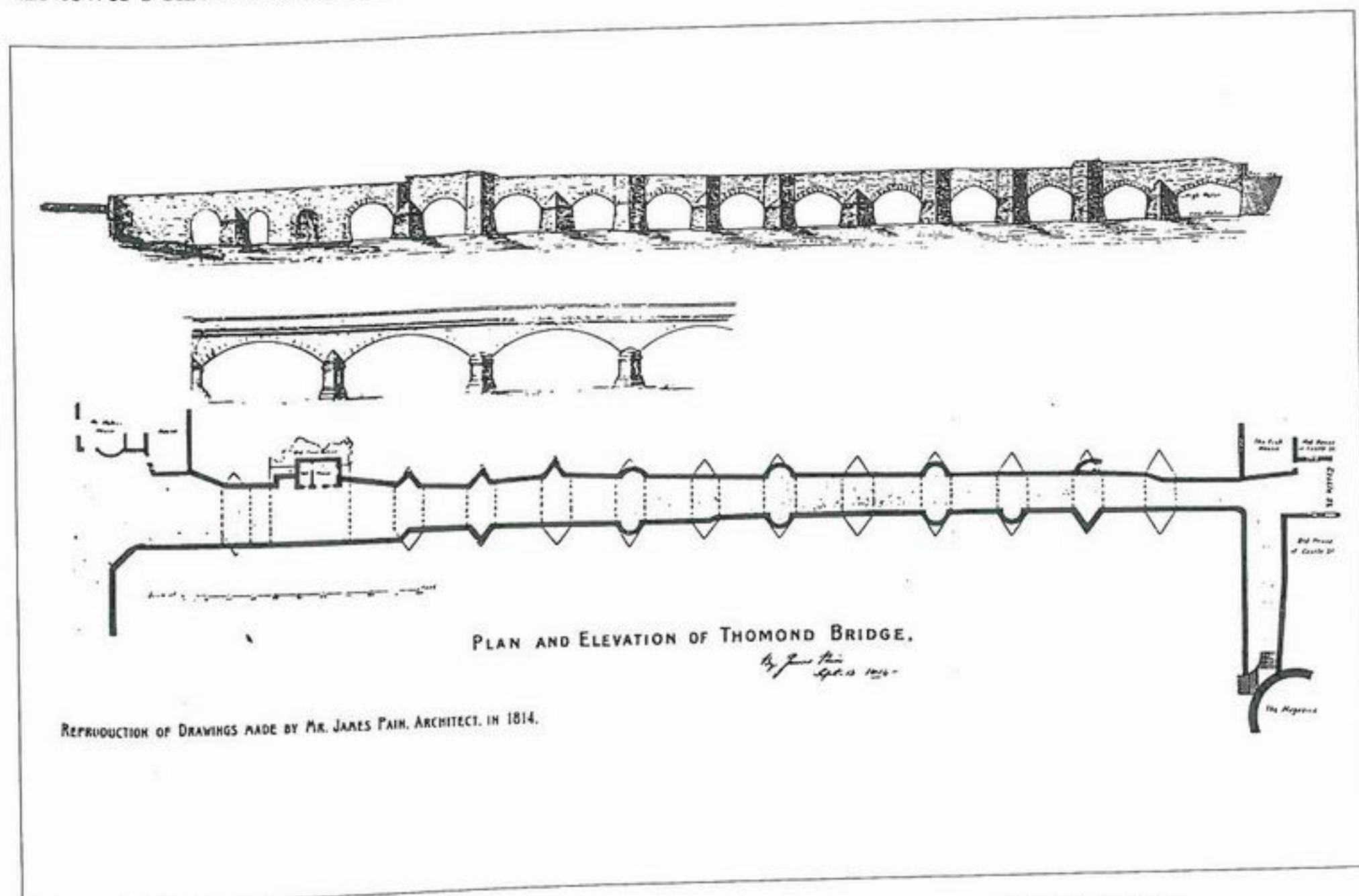


Fig. 1 Pain's plan and elevation of 1814, reproduced from JNMAS (1909).

The Museum also holds a number of views from the period 1761-1840, after the tower was demolished and before the old bridge was replaced, which again show a solid vertical wall in the former tower area and no cutwater.<sup>26</sup> These views are all from the north and on some there are the hints of older foundations or rubble beside the wall. There is only one view from the south, Pain's elevation, which shows what appears to be a blocked arch in the tower area. One has to ask why the other side of the arch is not visible on any of the views from the north side and why this is the only arch in Pain's drawing of the bridge with vertical sides, the remainder having a slight batter.

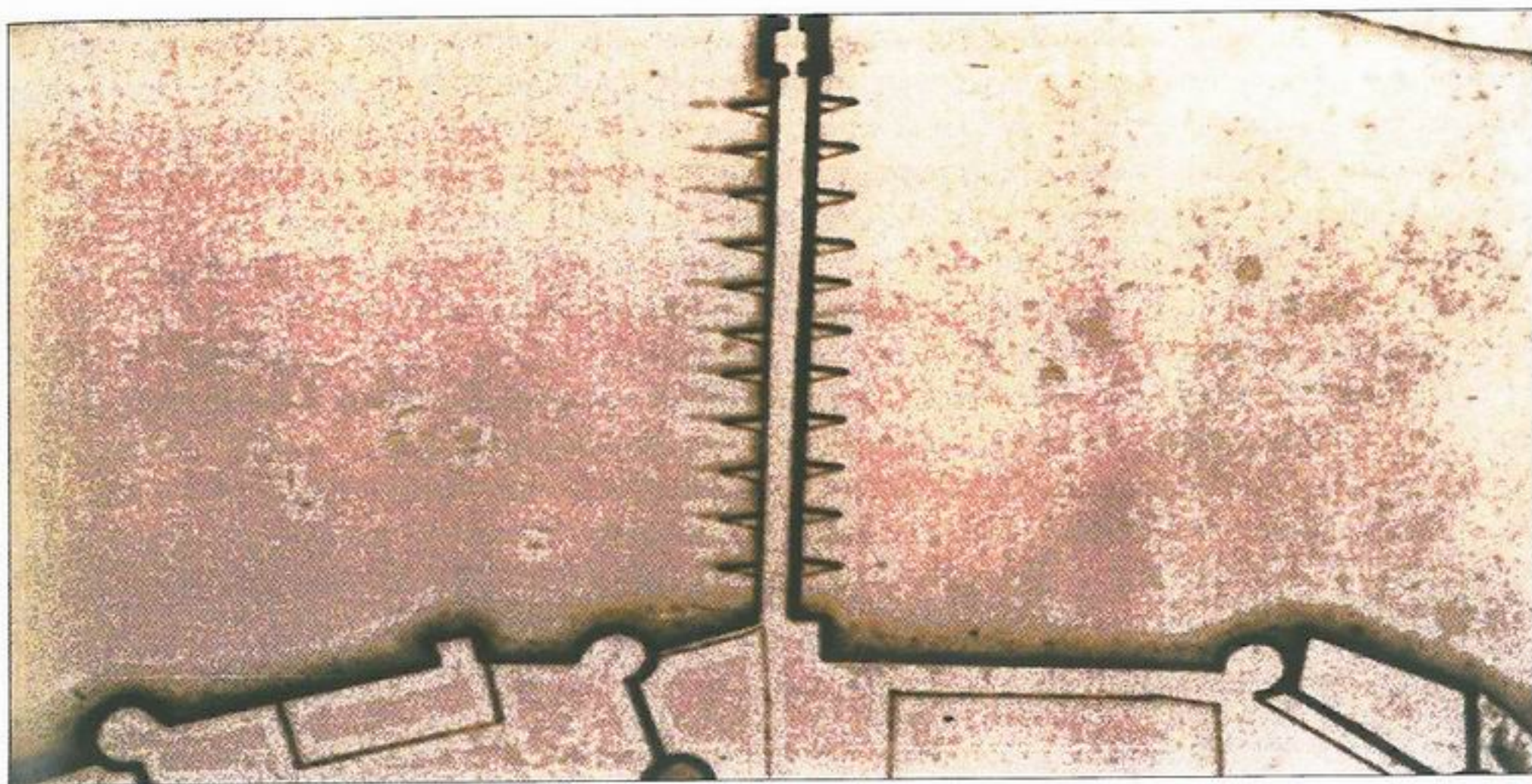
The explanation that springs to mind is that we are looking at the inside of the tower with the

<sup>24</sup> LM0000.1921 & 1922; (all prefixed by LM) 1978.0006; 1982.0024; 1987.0148 & 0149; 1988.0164, 0165, 0167, 0168 & 0169. Viewable on the online catalogue.

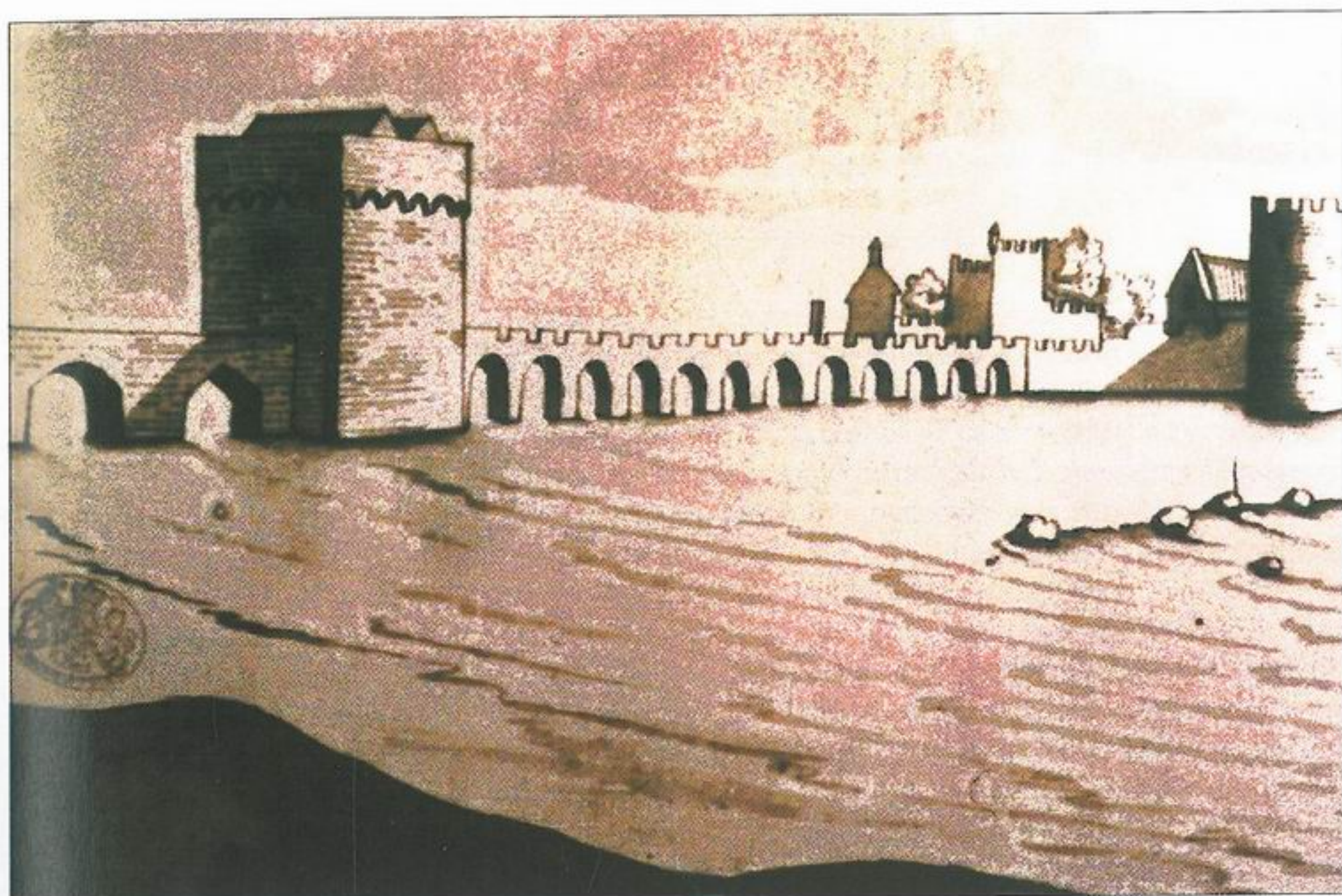
<sup>25</sup> LM1988.0161.

<sup>26</sup> LM0000.3549; 1981.0018; 1984.0023, 0029 & 0134, 1989.0230 & 1990.0265. All of these are from the north side of the bridge, with the cathedral and castle behind the bridge. One view in the opposite direction, LM1984.0032, has no buildings on the bridge and is thus of questionable validity. All viewable on the online Museum catalogue.





**Fig. 2** Detail of Thomond Bridge from an untitled French map c 1690-91 (LM1988.0167)



**Fig. 3** Tower on the bridge, detail from a copy of Thomas Philip's 'A Prospect of Lymrick' (LM1988.0161)



downstream end wall removed. It is known that the tower was equipped with a drawbridge<sup>27</sup> and so there are two possibilities, dependent on the type of drawbridge. A full turning bridge may have swung the roadway down inside the tower so that when it was removed there was a void within the tower. In this case the arch would have been inserted in 1760 when the tower was demolished. Alternatively, the arch may be contemporary with the tower and carry the road surface, while there was a counterweighted bridge turning in slots within the thickness of the tower wall. Whichever, it is suggested that the arch is not blocked, but that what is depicted is the back of the wall of the tollhouse seen through the arch.

One final feature of the bridge which is glaringly obvious on Pain's plan but which nobody seems to have commented on is the varying width of the bridge. At the town end the roadway is approximately half that at the 10th arch and one third that to the west of the tower. Why this should be is unclear, unless it is to allow two-way traffic on the bridge but restrict the gate at the east-end to single lane. The wider western end is probably the result of works connected with the removal of the tower in 1761.

### **Acknowledgements.**

My thanks to Darach Sanfey of the Department of French, Mary Immaculate College for help with the translation from medieval French.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. O'Keeffe and Simington, *op. cit.* fig 42d, and also the description of the premature raising of the drawbridge during the 1691 siege which led a massacre of retreating troops, Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 262.