

## Dukes Head Bridge, Hythe: Historical and Archaeological Overview

### Introduction

Dukes Head Bridge is one of Hythe's most significant historic crossings, spanning the Royal Military Canal and serving both military and civilian traffic for over two centuries. Located on the A259 through Hythe, the bridge has undergone several reconstructions and adaptations reflecting changing transport requirements, military needs, and engineering practices.

Archaeological investigations undertaken by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust in 1996 revealed a complex history of bridge development together with important evidence for canal-side infrastructure and logistics.

### The Name of Dukes Head Bridge

Dukes Head Bridge takes its name from the nearby Duke's Head Inn, a Grade II listed building that stood beside the bridge for many years. The inn was an important local landmark and naturally gave its name to the crossing.

During the early nineteenth century, the inn was a popular meeting place for local residents, soldiers, and their families. During the rebuilding of the bridge in 1813, it served as a gathering point for military personnel stationed in the area.

As of 2026, the former inn is being converted into residential flats and a restaurant.

### Strategic and Military Importance

Dukes Head Bridge formed an important crossing over the Royal Military Canal, one of Britain's key Napoleonic defensive structures.

The bridge marked the defended eastern perimeter of the Royal Staff Corps barracks located on the north bank of the canal. Its position made it vital for military communications, troop movements, supply transport, and coastal defence operations.

For more than 200 years, the crossing has played an important role in both Hythe's transport network and military history.

### Archaeological Investigation and Structural Evolution

Excavations carried out by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust identified six major stages in the bridge's development.

#### 1805 – Original Timber Swing Bridge

The earliest bridge was constructed in 1805 as a timber swing bridge, allowing navigation

along the Royal Military Canal. No surviving structural remains from this stage were identified during excavation.

#### 1808 – Fixed Oak Bridge and Wharf Construction

In 1808 the swing bridge was replaced by a fixed oak deck bridge supported by brick abutments. At the same time, a substantial stone wharf and loading bay were built adjacent to the bridge, providing facilities for canal transport and military logistics.

#### 1813 – Major Reconstruction

The 1808 structure was demolished and replaced in 1813 with a stronger fixed timber bridge supported by large stone foundation blocks. This rebuilding formed part of continued military investment in the canal's defensive infrastructure.

#### 1827 – Brick Bridge Conversion

In 1827 the timber bridge was replaced by a substantial single-span brick bridge. The new structure was built directly around elements of the 1813 foundations, demonstrating continuity of the crossing and the reuse of earlier engineering works.

#### 1940 – Wartime Strengthening

During the Second World War, the bridge underwent structural strengthening to accommodate increased military traffic and support wartime operations. These modifications reflected the bridge's continuing strategic importance.

#### 1989–1993 – Modern Reconstruction

The final stage relates to the bridge's twentieth-century replacement following serious structural deterioration, resulting in the demolition of the historic bridge and construction of the present concrete structure.

### **Wharf and Canal Infrastructure**

Archaeological excavations uncovered significant remains of the canal-side wharf associated with the bridge.

The wharf was constructed from large, irregular ragstone blocks supported by substantial oak plank foundations. Dedicated mooring points and a loading bay enabled vessels using the Royal Military Canal to transfer goods and supplies efficiently.

One of the most intriguing discoveries was a vertical shaft located within the wharf bank. The purpose of this feature remains unknown and has not been conclusively identified by

archaeologists.

These remains provide valuable evidence for the canal's role in military supply operations and local commerce during the nineteenth century.

### **The 1989 Structural Crisis**

In May 1989, a routine safety inspection revealed that Dukes Head Bridge had become structurally unsafe.

The findings led to the immediate closure of the bridge to traffic. As the bridge carried the A259 coastal route through Hythe, significant traffic management measures were introduced.

These included:

- Diversion of Marsh-bound A259 traffic onto Military Road.
- Conversion of Military Road into a temporary two-way route.
- Adjustment of traffic-light sequences at Scanlon's Bridge.
- Initial estimates suggesting emergency works could be completed within fourteen days.

The closure highlighted the deteriorating condition of the historic structure and ultimately led to its complete replacement.

### **The 1992–1993 Reconstruction Project**

#### Demolition

In early 1992, the historic bridge was permanently closed, dismantled, and demolished. A temporary bridge was erected to maintain traffic flow during construction.

#### Construction of the New Bridge

The replacement structure was designed as a modern concrete beam bridge supported by driven piles. The new bridge was engineered to accommodate modern traffic demands while maintaining the vital A259 route through Hythe.

#### Reopening

The new bridge reopened to public traffic in mid-October 1993.

Following reopening, contractors completed reinstatement works along the canal bank and removed temporary bridge structures. The project was fully completed by December 1993.

## Conclusion

Since its original construction in 1805, Dukes Head Bridge has undergone a remarkable evolution. From a timber swing bridge serving a newly built military canal to the modern concrete structure carrying today's A259 traffic, the crossing reflects more than two centuries of engineering development, military significance, and community history.

Archaeological investigations have revealed not only the bridge's successive stages of construction but also important evidence of associated wharf infrastructure and canal operations. Together, these discoveries demonstrate the bridge's enduring role in the development, defence, and transport history of Hythe.

## Sources

Canterbury Archaeological Trust (1996)

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- 11 May 1989 – Bridge closure, traffic diversions and emergency safety measures.
- 23 September 1993 – Reconstruction progress, reopening timetable and project completion details.