

History of Scanlan (or “Scanlon”) Bridge, Hythe

The bridge, now commonly called Scanlon Bridge in Hythe, was originally known as Hang Gallows Bridge or Gallows Bridge. Its history is closely connected with the construction of the Royal Military Canal in the early nineteenth century.

Origins of the Bridge and the Canal

The Royal Military Canal was built during the Napoleonic Wars as a defensive barrier against a possible French invasion. Construction of the canal dramatically altered the landscape and road network around Hythe. Old routes were cut off and replaced with new roads and bridges.

One important route affected was the old path from Hythe towards West Hythe and St Mary’s. Before the canal was built, roads converged on Red Lion Square, but after it was built, routes were diverted. Rampart Road, running along the north side of the canal, became the main alternative route.

The canal construction records are especially valuable because they show the “before and after” effects of the canal. Older routes appear as dotted silhouettes, revealing how much the local road system changed once the canal was completed.

Gallows Bridge

The bridge was originally known as Hang Gallows Bridge, and nearby maps also show the junction of Dymchurch Road and the A259 labelled as “Gallows Corner.”

A major storm in 1808 caused severe damage along the coast and swept away the original flimsy wooden Gallows Bridge. Following the storm, the Government strengthened the canal defences by purchasing land where the sea had broken through and building reinforced embankments between Marine (Ladies) Walk Bridge and Town Bridge.



The wooden Hang Gallows Bridge was named after a nearby gallows

After the destruction of the wooden bridge, Gallows Bridge was rebuilt as a much stronger masonry bridge, which survived later floods and storms.

Station Houses and Smuggling

The canal bridges were protected by small guard buildings known as Station Houses (or Guard Houses). Their original purpose was military defence against Napoleon's army, but because an invasion never happened, they became more important in preventing smuggling.

Smuggling was extremely common along the Kent coast during this period. Soldiers stationed along the canal were meant to stop smugglers, although many were bribed. The Station Housekeepers, however, were given bonuses for successfully preventing smuggling.



The 1872 map of Hythe shows:



Station House No. 1 at Town Bridge
Station House No. 2 at Hang Gallows Bridge
A wharf and boathouse near the bridge
A weighing machine near the area now occupied by
the RH&D Railway, probably used for weighing shingle and other canal goods
The nearby Shingle Wharf handled material taken from beach fields purchased
in 1807 to provide shingle for the military service road beside the canal.

Cornelius Scanlan and the Renaming of the Bridge

The bridge gained its modern name from Cornelius Scanlan.

In 1841, Cornelius Scanlan was living in Aldington with his wife Julia Ann, who had been born in Limerick in 1805. They had married in Limerick on 10 November 1826. Scanlan was a Chelsea Pensioner, meaning he was a retired soldier.

By 1851, he was serving as the Station Housekeeper at Gallows Bridge. By 1861, he had moved on, and another Irish Chelsea Pensioner had taken over the position. However, by then, local people had already begun referring to the crossing as "Scanlan's Bridge."

Over time, the name changed through local pronunciation and word of mouth, becoming widely known as “Scanlon Bridge.” Although technically incorrect, the mistaken version became permanently established in local usage.

Scanlon’s Bridge is a much altered and largely modern brick and concrete bridge crossing the Royal Military Canal. It has been heavily modified over time, with modern additions such as ramps and surrounding construction. Because of these changes, Scanlon’s Bridge is not considered an original historic structure and is often excluded from official heritage scheduling. The area around the bridge includes road links, parkland, and sections of the canal bank, with some traces of older features such as parapets remaining only in small parts.



Scanlans Bridge, Hythe Canal, looking East — No. 27



Hythe Canal & Scanlans Bridge.

H. W. S. F. & L. No. 558.

Conclusion

Scanlan (or “Scanlon”) Bridge in Hythe reflects the layered history of the Hythe and the wider impact of the Napoleonic Wars on the Kent coastline. Originally known as Gallows Bridge and later Hang Gallows Bridge, its earliest form was part of a disrupted medieval road network that was reshaped by the construction of the Royal Military Canal, built for national defence against invasion.

Destroyed and rebuilt after early nineteenth-century storm damage, the bridge evolved from a simple wooden crossing into a more durable masonry structure, while also becoming part of a militarised landscape guarded by station houses intended to deter invasion and later suppress smuggling. Its most lasting transformation, however, came through people rather than engineering: Cornelius Scanlan, a Chelsea Pensioner and station housekeeper, left his name in local memory, which gradually shifted into the modern “Scanlon Bridge.”

Today, the bridge itself is largely modern and altered, but its story preserves a clear record of how military needs, coastal change, and local life combined to reshape Hythe’s infrastructure and place names over time.

