

John Nichols
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ILLUSTRATIONS
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OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

...

BY JOHN NICHOLS, F. S. A.

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MR. JAMES ESSEX, F. S. A.

One of Mr. Gough's most voluminous correspondents, was Mr. James Essex, an intelligent surveyor at Cambridge. A memoir of him has been published in the "Literary Anecdotes *;" and there are numerous allusions to him interspersed in the several volumes of that work †. Some extracts from his Correspondence shall here be appended.

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* Vol. VI. p. 624.

† See the various references in vol. VII. pp. 188, 562.

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35. "Dear Sir, Cambridge, Sept. 22, 1783.

"I received yours with Mr. Herbert's sheets by Mr. Nichols. I have examined Lambarde's account of Rochester-bridge, but find a difficulty in understanding him. The manuscript from which he has taken the account is curious, but does not contain particulars sufficient to give an idea of the structure of the bridge; it only mentions the works that were to be done by particular people. All I can collect from it is, that the bridge consisted of nine piers, which I suppose were built with timber (but of this I cannot be certain); it had eight arches or passages, over which the sylls were laid from pier to pier, and on them the planks which formed the floor of the bridge. The whole length was 26 yards, or rather poles, equal to 429 feet, including the abutments; these, I suppose, were about 10 feet each, the seven piers about 16 feet each, and the arches about 32 feet each, the breadth of the bridge about 17 feet clear, except over the two middle arches, which I believe were wider by three or four feet. The number of sylls or beams, which were about 40 feet long, was 97 or upwards; 28 of these, with about 26 rods of planking,

belonged to those who built or repaired the nine piers, the rest to those who made or repaired the railing on both sides. I

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would have explained all this by a plan *; but, Mr. Nichols leaving Cambridge so soon, I had not time. If you think it necessary I will send it with my Observations on Croyland-bridge, &c. which I fear you will think too long, if not impertinent, though not yet complete. I am, yours affectionately, James Essex."

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* The subject of this letter will be illustrated by the following from the Rev. Owen Manning to Mr. Gough:

"Dear Sir, Godalming, Sept. 18, 1783.

"As I never heard of the small History of Rochester you speak of, or ever looked into Lambarde before, I was consequently a perfect stranger to the Bridge in question.

"The first thing observable in respect to this bridge is, that the floor of it consisted of nine unequal portions of planking, to be kept in repair by nine different sets of persons; whence it is plain that what the author of the Text. Roff. calls piers, were not what we call such, viz. the supports, but the intervals between, or what in stone-work we call the arches.

"As $26\frac{1}{2}$ of our rods are equal to $437\frac{1}{4}$ feet, there can be no doubt but that the word *gyrd* was our rod. The river, you say, was but 431 feet wide; but they might think proper to extend the floor a yard at each end into the bank, in which case the bridge would be 437 feet long, and require so many feet, or $26\frac{1}{2}$ rods of planking.

"*Syll* was a large piece of timber hewn square, and applied either perpendicularly or horizontally; in the former case it was a column or supporter, in the latter it answered to our ground sill, plate, or joist, according to the different places it occupied. In the present instance I take the *syyles* to have been the joists which lay across the bridge from side to side, to which the planking was nailed.

"You complain that you cannot find *lyccan* in the Saxon dictionary. You must not expect to find, in a dictionary where the orthography is preserved as much as possible, the false or degraded manner of spelling words, in a century or two after the language ceased to be properly Saxon; but though you do not find the word *lyccan* there, you will find *Lecgan*, *ponere*, as well as *jacere*. I am yours, &c. O. Manning."

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44. "Dear Sir, Cambridge, May 3, 1784.

"Since my last I received two letters from you, one of which was written before you received mine. I am not yet in a condition to consider your queries relating to Rochester bridge. As soon as I am permitted to amuse myself with things of that kind, I will consider them; but I have been too ill to apply to any thing since I received them. This is the first day for some time that I have been able to ride for an airing, being confined with a blister on my head, which is not yet healed, though laid on this day was se'nnight.

"I hope I may be able to get to town on this day three weeks, though my stay will be short. If I can call on you in my way home, I will; and am, with best respects to Mrs. Gough and all friends, yours affectionately, James Essex."

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Rev. SAMUEL DENNE, F. S. A.

Of this intelligent and industrious Antiquary a memoir has been given in the *Literary Anecdotes* *, and his works have frequently come under notice †. He was one of Mr. Gough's most voluminous correspondents; and the following are the most important of a long series of letters.

1. The Rev. Samuel Denne to Richard Gough, Esq.

"Dear Sir, Wilmington, Aug. 23, 1783.

"A very bad state of health some time since made it necessary for Mr. Podmore, the Vicar of Cranbrooke, to absent himself from that place. I have a notion he may be returned home, and when assured he is, I will not fail to communicate to him yours and Mr. Nichols's application respecting some curious entries in the Register-book of that parish, supposed to have been inserted by his predecessor Mr. Johnson, for I shall be always ready to contribute the little in my power in assisting both of you in your intelligent and entertaining pursuits.

"It was a mortification to me to find that you had passed so near my house without giving me the pleasure of conversing with you; had I had the least hint what route you was taking

* Vol. III. pp. 528–31.

† See the various references in "*Literary Anecdotes*," vol. VII. pp. 108, 550.

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this should not have happened, for, my house being only a mile from Dartford, you could, with little loss of time, have had your refreshment at Wilmington Vicarage. Mr. Thorpe will, I know, be equally disappointed at not having seen you and your fellow-traveller. He called on Thursday afternoon, and missed me; but I propose to return the visit early in the next week, and acquaint him with your excuse.

"Possibly when you was at Rochester you saw Mr. Fisher, and if you did he doubtless told you of his intention to publish a new edition of the *History and Antiquities* of that place, &c. My partiality for a place where I so long lived has drawn me in to promise to revise and enlarge the work; but I find myself engaged in a more arduous task than I expected, especially as I cannot in my country retirement have several books I wish to consult. The description given of the old timber bridge in the present edition does not by any means satisfy me. After a careful perusal of the MSS. in the *Textus Roffensis*, relative to the repair of it, I am clear that the person whom Fisher employed to write that chapter was mistaken in his idea of the piers being placed at equal distances from one another; and, if the distance between some piers was not less than sixty-six feet, I cannot conceive how sylle (rendered by the writer beams) could be found of a sufficient length and bulk to support the weight of the planks, and of the heavy burdens which were to be carried over the bridge *. Your faithful humble servant, S. Denne."

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3. "Dear Sir, Wilmington, April 16, 1784.

"In your favour of the 26th of December last, which was accompanied with Mr. Essex's scientific and very curious remarks upon the old wooden bridge at Rochester, you was pleased to permit me to use them at my full leisure. Of this indulgence I have so freely availed myself that I should be inexcusable did I not account for not having sooner returned the MS. with my

* On this subject see in Mr. Essex's correspondence, before, p. 304.

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sincere thanks for the loan of it. The fact was, that I wished a few of the leading members of the Bridge Corporation to have the perusal of it, in hopes of inducing them to contribute to the engraving of a well delineated plan.

"Mr. Essex's MS. I have read with close attention, and am perfectly satisfied of the justness of the greater part of his observations. It is most likely that such doubts as I may have remaining proceed from my having no skill in architecture.

"Since I wrote last, I discovered in Tanner's *Bibliotheca Britannica*, p. 994, that Bartholomew Fowle, Prior of St. Mary Overy, wrote a book upon London Bridge. Tanner does not mention the MS. being extant, but refers to Pitt's Appendix, p. 839, for his authority. If the MS. be preserved, I however question its giving any description of the original Bridge, as Fowl was, comparatively, a very late writer, being the last Prior of his monastery *.

"The Inclosed memoir on Hokeday I will trouble you to communicate to the Society of Antiquaries, should you be of opinion it will afford them an evening's amusement †.

"I remain, dear Sir, yours faithfully, S. Denne."

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* Stowe quotes Fowle's authority; but it does not appear that the latter wrote a book on the subject.

† It is printed in the *Archæologia*, vol. VII. p. 944.

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<From the selection of Richard Gough's incoming correspondence published in one of the posthumous volumes of Nichols's 'Illustrations'. – C.F. May 2012.>