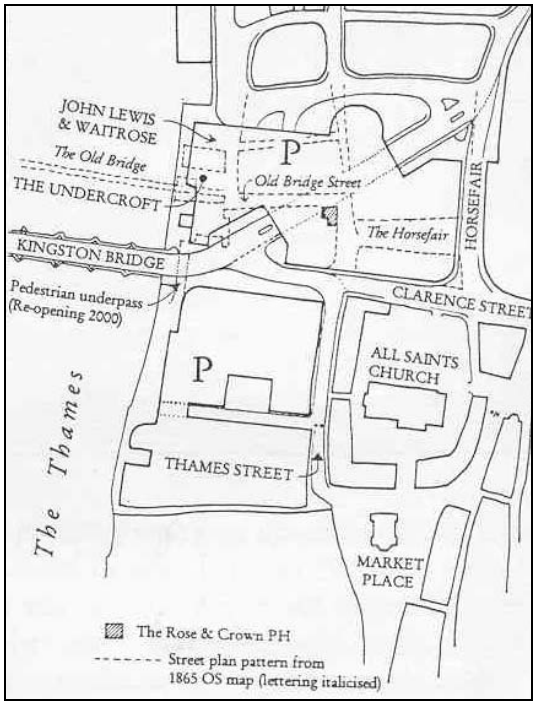
Conservation

The early bridge remains and the vault were judged to be important enough to be preserved when the area was redeveloped. They were lifted from their sites by a specialist contractor, Pynfolds Ltd, removed and stored till the basement of the new building was ready. They were then hoisted into position as closely to their original level and orientation as possible. The vault's position was changed from the top end of the street to a position within the John Lewis basement near the old bridge structures.

The entire vault was carefully excavated, encased in a concrete tray and lifted by giant crane in a single operation in 1986. In 1988 the vault and the bridge remains were restored to the riverside.

Location Plan



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Royal Kingston

Old Kingston Bridge and Undercroft

Down by Kingston riverside are the remains of Kingston's medieval bridge and the undercroft of an important medieval house. Both are now sited within the basement of the John Lewis store.

A painting by Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), showing Old Kingston Bridge from the downstream Kingston bank as it was in the late 18th Century.

The Old Bridge

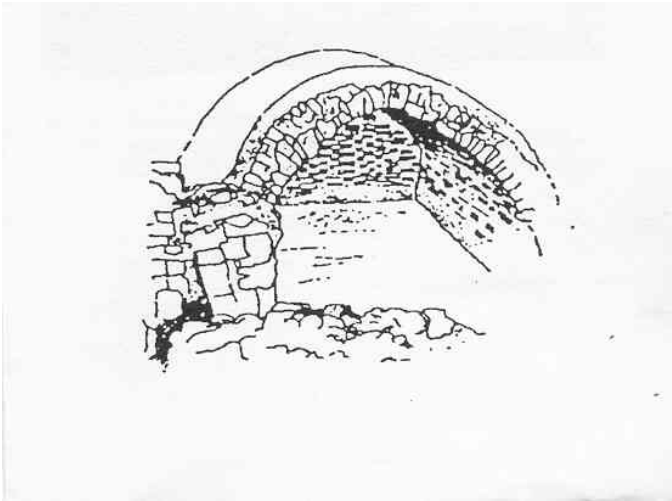
The original Kingston Bridge crossed the Thames about 100 feet downstream from the present stone bridge, which was built in 1828. The first bridge dated back to the 12th Century at least. It was the only Thames Bridge apart from London Bridge until a bridge was built at Fulham in 1729. The stone walls supported a roadway up to the bridge, which was made in timber. The huge north wall shows stages of building and many later repairs using bricks and flints. The space between the walls was filled with sand and gravel and paved with cobbles, some of which are used on the walkway showing the location of the old bridge landing. From this support, the first stone arch reached the first stone pier and so on onto the riverbank where the timber structure began. It was in constant need of repair for which tolls to use the bridge were charged until 1565 when Robert Hammond gave enough land to the bridgewardens so that the rents therefrom would pay for repairs.

John Aubrey writing about the bridge in the 17th Century said

There are twenty two piers of wood that support it, two great interstices for barges to pass through; which twenty two piers do contain 126 yards; besides at the east end thirty yards wrought up of stone and brick; and at the west end twelve yards; which contains in all 168 yards. In the middle of this bridge are two fair seats for passengers to avoid carts and to sit and enjoy the delightful prospect.

By the early 19th Century the structure was totally inadequate and a new stone bridge was built. The river was dredged to allow navigation by vessels with increased draft. Originally the waterway was wider, shallower and had 'beaches'.

Tolls were charged for crossing the bridge until it was made free in 1870 to much public rejoicing. The bridge was widened in 1914 to help accommodate the trams. It was widened again and strengthened in 2001 to cope with heavier, modern traffic.

The Undercroft

The chalk and flint barrel-vaulted cellar or undercroft was originally beneath the old Rose and Crown Inn at the north end of Old Bridge Street at its junction with Thames Street. The John Lewis underpass now crosses this spot—once very important as Bridge Street was the main thoroughfare leading to the old bridge. The medieval Rose and Crown had been a superior hostelry but lost its importance in 1828 when the new bridge opened upstream. The skill of the construction and its decorative checker pattern rear wall bear testimony to the work of the craftsmen and the quality of the building. Archaeologists excavated the vault and it is now preserved with the bridge remains in the John Lewis basement.