

IMPACT OF THE CANAL

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Last week we looked at the building of the Basingstoke Canal and the claims by the canal promoters that over 30,000 tons of goods would be carried annually on the waterway between the market town of Hampshire and the Wey Navigation at Woodham.

On only three occasions were such amounts carried, the first of which was in the 1830's when the canal was used to carry goods for the building of the London & South Western Railway!



A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that the Cobbett family ran not just a nursery business in Horsell (where Nursery Road and Rosehill Avenue are today), but also acted as coal merchants, supplying many of the other local nurseries in the area with fuel for their greenhouses, as well as numerous other businesses and individuals with coal for their fires. Their ledgers, now housed at the Surrey History Centre, show that in the build up to the opening of the railway (in May 1838) they supplied the railway with coal brought to their wharf by barge. Of course no sooner had the railway been built, than trade on the canal declined, although the Cobbett's continued for some time to import coal in that way to their wharf off Brewery Lane, where the houses between Horsell Moor and the WWF building are today.

This map from almost thirty years after the canal was completed to Basingstoke shows how little impact the canal had locally, with virtually no development along its course.

Cobbett's Coal Wharf appears to have been in the area of the houses off Brewery Road (below), between the car park (now the site of the WWF building) and Horsell Moor.



Part of the ledger for Cobbett's coal business showing transactions to the London & Southampton Railway from May 1838 (when the first trial run on the line was being carried out), until March 1839, by which time the line was opened to Winchfield in Hampshire.

The railway was opened to Basingstoke in June 1839, after which trade on the canal declined.

1838 London & Southampton				Wey Navigation Company			
May 14	To Coals	6	Cost Out 32	"	12	"	
June 7	To Coals	2	" " 33	"	4	"	
Dec 5	To Coals	1	Wen Smith 38	1	19	"	
20	To Coals	1	" " 40	1	19	"	
1839				1839			
Jan 1	To Balance			4	14	"	
10	To Coals	2	Cost Round 41	"	4	3	
19	To Coals	1/2	Wen Jun 42	"	19	6	
30	To Coals	1/2	" " 43	"	19	"	
Feb 5	To Coals	1/2	" " "	"	19	"	
19	To Coals	1/2	" " 44	"	19	"	
March 7	To Coals	1/2	" " 46	"	19	"	
				0	13	0	
				Jan 1	To Cash	15	10
				June 24	To Cash	15	17
				0 13 0			



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Scotland Lock
West Byfleet. 8.

The name 'Scotland Lock' has nothing to do with the country, but is a corruption of the fact that the canal here was built across Mr Escott's land.

There was a wharf too at West Byfleet by Scotland Lock, and later one by Bunkers Bridge (now called Monument Bridge) where coal for the gas works was off-loaded by the crane that partially survives on the up-stream side of the bridge. From there it was transported via a small tramway to the works in Boundary Road.

By Chertsey Road Bridge the first of a series of timber yards in Woking was encountered, where the skate-board ramp and hard-standing of Boundary Road Common is today. That was Spanton's, but there were also timber yards at the end of Clarence Avenue in Woking (more or less where Lockfield Drive now joins Victoria Way) and in Horsell Moor where Brewster's timber yard has now been succeeded by Jewsons.

Timber and coal seem to have been the main cargoes imported into the Woking area by barge, but what if anything was 'exported' by canal is uncertain, although before the coming of the railway in the 1830's it is possible that some plants from the local nurseries were taken by barge to London along the canal.

All in all it seems that the impact of the Basingstoke Canal on the development of the area was slight – at least after it had been built. But during its construction, the area was probably heaving with navvies employed in building up the embankments, cutting the cuttings, and making the many locks and bridges in our area. Where they stayed we do



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Later still a wharf by Monument Bridge served the Gas Works in Boundary Road. Part of the crane to off-load the coal can still be seen.



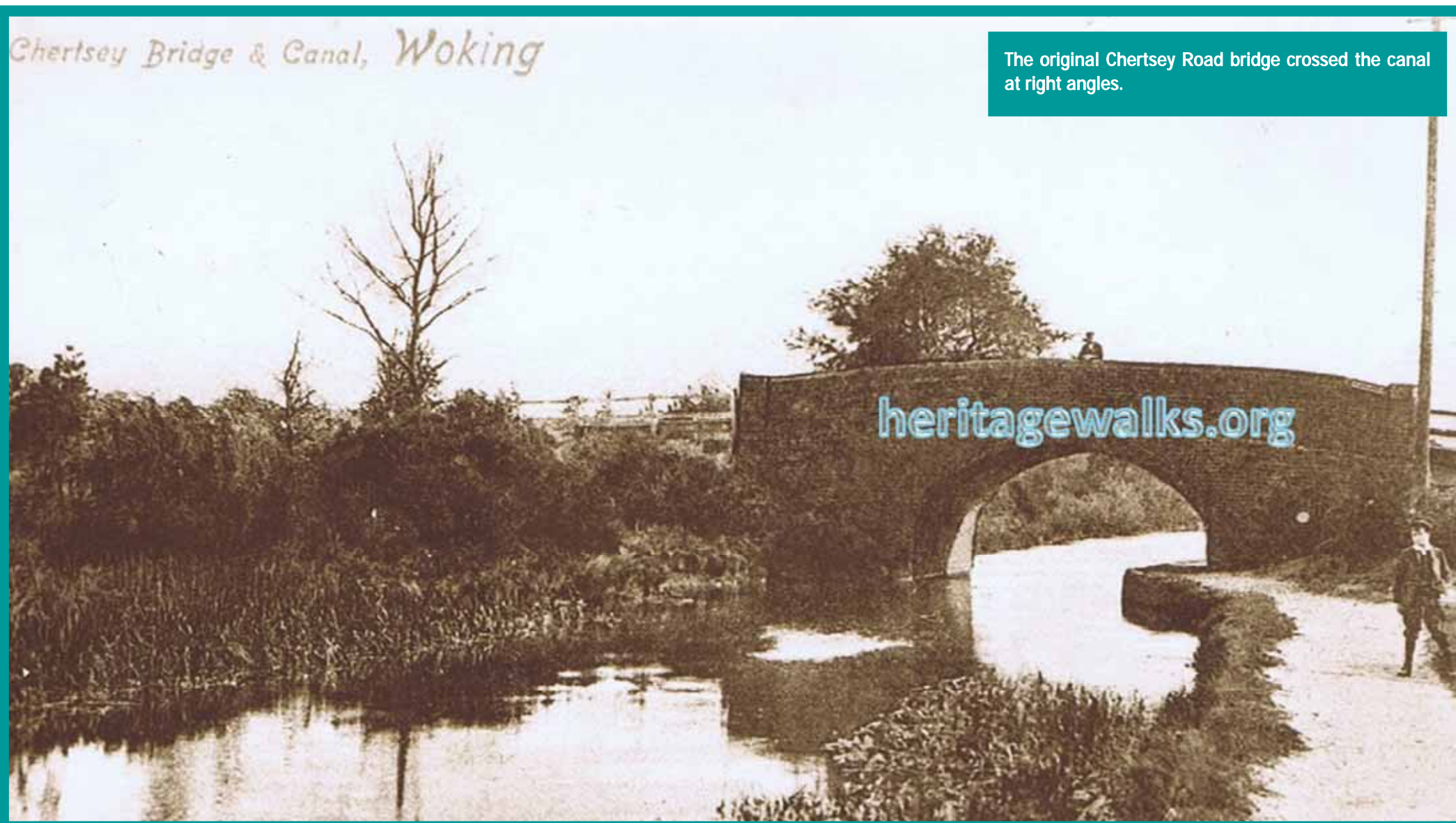
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Initially the canal did not have much impact of the immediate area, but eventually wharves were built for places like Spanton's Timber Yard by Chertsey Road Bridge

not know, although it has been suggested that the name 'Camphill Road' at West Byfleet commemorates the navvies camp there, and that the Wheatsheaf at Horsell and the Rowbarge at St Johns were both originally constructed to serve the thirsty workers. The latter was obviously named to encourage continued use by those using the waterway, but there is some doubt that the Wheatsheaf was ever a canal pub (see below) and its name is obviously more directed to a more 'rural' clientele.

One of the main legacies of the canal, as we touched upon last week, was the problem caused by its bridges in the early part of the 20th century. At Brookwood and St Johns it was the heavy traction engines supplying the barracks that were the problem, but in town it was the new-fangled motor-cars that were proving a nuisance. The problem was that when the old brick arches were built it was easier to build them at right-angles to the waterway and divert the road, but at Chertsey Road in particular that meant a double 'S' bend on

either side of the bridge, which in the early days of motoring appears to have caught some driver out. The result was that with cars careering around the corners at the un-heard-off speeds of 20mph, some couldn't quite get around the final bend with some drivers hitting the brick parapet of the bridge and coming hazardously close to ending up in the water. Eventually most of the road bridges in the Woking area were replaced, but that story will have to wait for another time.



WHAT CAME FIRST? - THE WHEATSHEAF OR THE INN

It has been suggested that the Wheatsheaf at Horsell may have been built originally to accommodate the navvies employed on the construction of the Basingstoke Canal, but the evidence unfortunately doesn't support that.

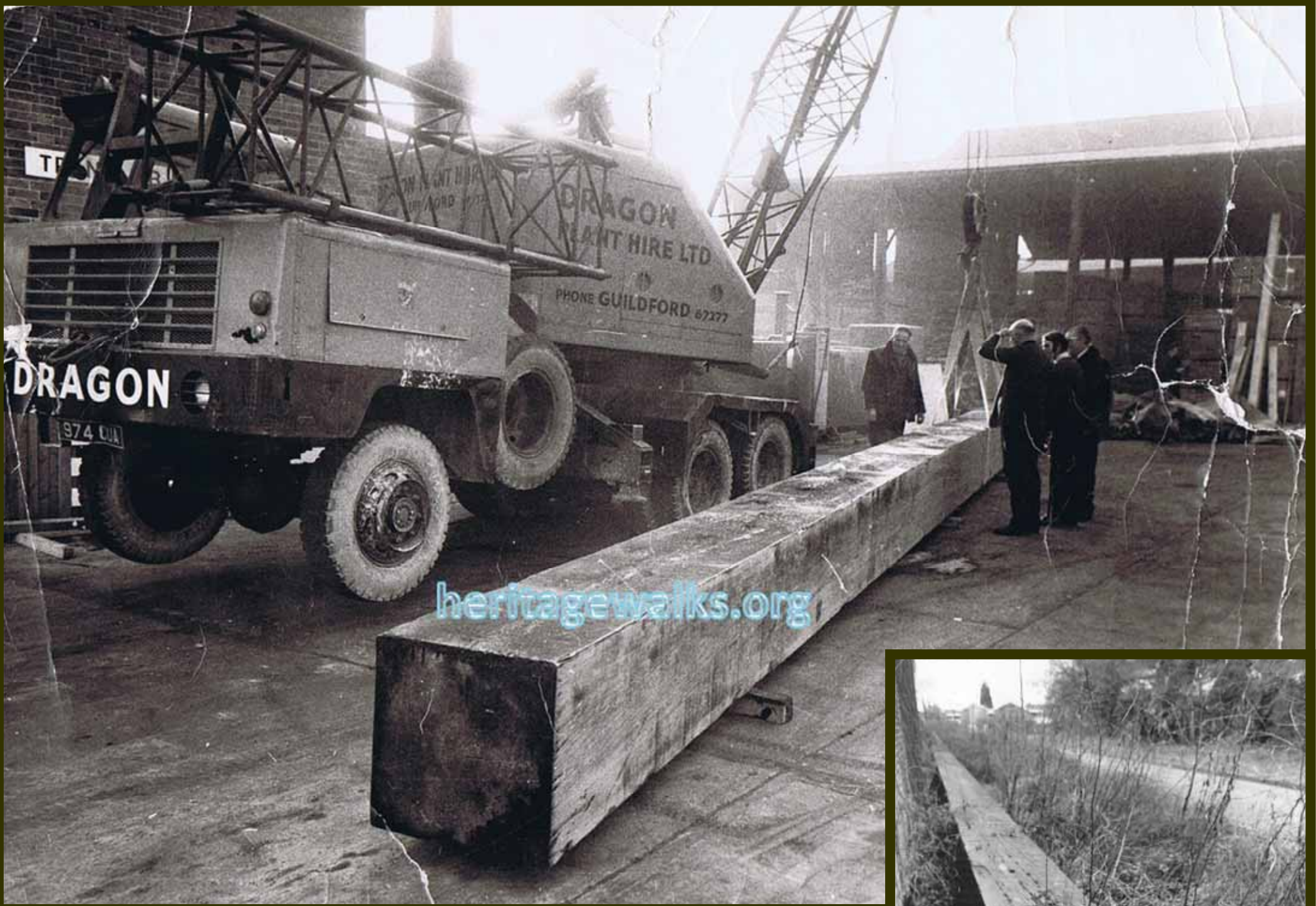
The name 'Wheatsheaf' is first recorded in the area in the late 18th century, but predates the building of the canal by at least fifteen years! Even then the name is not associated with an inn, but with a couple of cottages and a field, marked on later maps as 'Wheatsheaf Mead' (at the end of what is now Ferndale Road and The Grove).

On the 31st July 1773 an agreement was made between James Lipscombe, a farmer of Horsell, and James Roake (described as a wheelwright from Putney) for two cottages and a four acre parcel of land known as 'The Wheatsheaf'. They were not apparently 'public houses', just cottages, and indeed it is not until the 1851 census that we first have a record of a 'beer retailer' in the Wheatsheaf area.

That was a man called Reuben Percy who a few years later went on to build the original Albion Hotel in Woking, and it appears from the local title map at about that time that the building had just been constructed by a man called Arthur Smithers, a bricklayer recorded in the 1841 census, who also constructed the cottages nearby.



ANY OFFERS FOR 58 MILLION MATCH-STICKS



In the early 1960's Spanton's (who soon after merged with Brewster's) received an order from the North Thames Gas Board to import a huge log of timber for their gas-fired power station at Beckton in East London. At 71ft 5in long (and over 2ft square) it was the largest piece of sawn timber ever to be imported into this country. Unfortunately for one reason or another the order was cancelled, but by then the wood was already on the ship from Canada, so the merged company decided to put it on display outside their new warehouse in Arthurs Bridge Road.

When the supports became unsafe, and the old site was sold by Magnet Southern (the successors to Brewster's) to L A Fitness, the log was removed and 'stored' beside their building further along Horsell Moor. There it stays, rotting away, overgrown by bushes and neglected.

Apparently in the 1980's a competition was held to try to guess how many matches could be made out of the timber. The answer, as indicated above, was 58 million (although a few thousand have probably now been eaten away)!



A barge laden with timber near Step Bridge

