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By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

London Bridge wasn’t “falling down, falling down, falling down.” But it *was* slowly sinking into the River Thames because of the increased weight of 20th century traffic: Trucks and buses are, after all, heavier than horses and carts.

But instead of demolishing the bridge and building something with a sturdier foundation, officials in London sold their bridge ... to a man in Lake Havasu City, Arizona. Where he figured it could be a tourist attraction.

The relocated London Bridge officially reopened on Oct. 10, 1971 — 55 years ago Saturday.

FROM THE RIVER THAMES ...

Romans began building wooden bridges over the River Thames when they occupied Great Britain between 50 to 1176 A.D. The “old” London Bridge mentioned in the nursery rhyme was built with stone between 1176 and 1209.

A new London Bridge was opened in 1831 and stood for 137 years, surviving strafing runs by Nazi planes during the London Blitz of World War II.



London Bridge in 1900, when it was crowded with horses, carts and commercial traffic.

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But due to increased traffic — and heavier vehicles crossing the bridge — the 930-foot span was found to be slowly sinking into the Thames, at a rate of an inch every eight years. By 1924, the east side of the London Bridge was three to four inches lower than the west side.

Shoring up the historic old structure was not an option. The solution had to be an entirely new bridge, engineered from the start for modern traffic loads. In the mid 1960s, a London city councilman floated an odd idea: Offer to sell the old bridge.

... TO WESTERN ARIZONA

The sale caught the attention of real estate developer, entrepreneur and boat motor and chainsaw manufacturer Robert P. McCulloch Sr. He had begun a development on a former Army Air Corps base on the shores of Lake Havasu, about 150 miles south of Las Vegas on the border between Arizona and California. The idea of selling London Bridge was “the craziest idea I have ever heard,” he said. Naturally, McCulloch was in.



Reconstructing the bridge's arches was simplified by simply piling sand into lumps carefully piled to match the shapes needed.

BBC

McCulloch paid \$2.46 million for the bridge, which was disassembled in London and the individual stones numbered, so they could be re-assembled. U.S. Customs officials declared London Bridge an antique so McCulloch wouldn't have to pay a tariff. Folks called it “the largest antique ever sold.”



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Visitors can still find numbers on the stones.

A NEW FRAMEWORK; THE ORIGINAL STONES

The 10,276 stones were loaded onto a ship, transported through the Panama Canal and unloaded in Long Beach, California. A new steel interior was built to bear the weight of hoped-for modern traffic. The stones were then placed atop the frame, in their original positions. The hollow spaces within that frame meant the completed bridge weighed just 30,000 tons — as opposed to the 130,000 tons it had weighed in London.



Only after the bridge had been reassembled were the mounds of sand removed, leaving the bridge's arches.

BBC

Foundation stones were laid on Sept. 23, 1968. Included in the sale — and in the reconstruction — were ornate lampposts made from melted down cannons captured in 1815 from Napoleon's army at the Battle of Waterloo. It took slightly more than three years to complete the bridge.



GO LAKE HAVASU The lampposts

FIRST, THE BRIDGE AND THEN, THE WATER

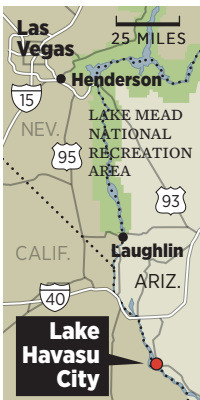
McCulloch had his bridge rebuilt over dry land, on a peninsula jutting out into Lake Havasu. Once work was done, he then brought in a crew to dredge a canal running beneath the bridge and cutting off the peninsula to create an island. This would give McCulloch more waterfront acreage where he could build resort and shopping centers and develop residential neighborhoods.



The one-mile-long Bridgewater Channel Canal was dredged beneath the reconstructed bridge.

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Work on the bridge was completed and rededicated on Oct. 10, 1971. The opening was marked with a musical variety TV special broadcast on NBC, hosted by Tom Jones and Jennifer O'Neill. More than 50,000 people visited the still-small Lake Havasu City for the celebration.



A TOURIST SENSATION

Sales of lots for homes and other developments picked up right away. It wasn't long before McCulloch and his business partners had recouped all the expenses of buying and moving the bridge. Just north of London Bridge, McCulloch built an open air mall in a faux English style, complete with a hedge maze, a red British-style phone booth and a history museum. His “English Village” has since been converted to condos.



London Bridge is now the center of booming waterside residential and vacation properties.

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Today, more than 57,000 permanent residents live in Lake Havasu City. Tens of thousands of visitors tour London Bridge each year, where they find two-hour guided walking tours and six-hour boat and jet boat tours of the bridge area and Lake Havasu.

The bridge is home to bats that live in its nooks and crannies. Thousands of swallows build nests on the underside of the bridge. A persistent rumor is that the bridge is haunted. Residents and visitors claim they've sighted a London police bobby patrolling and a woman dressed in black roaming along the bridge.