

# **The Swansea Slip Bridge**

*A local structure of Special Historic Interest*

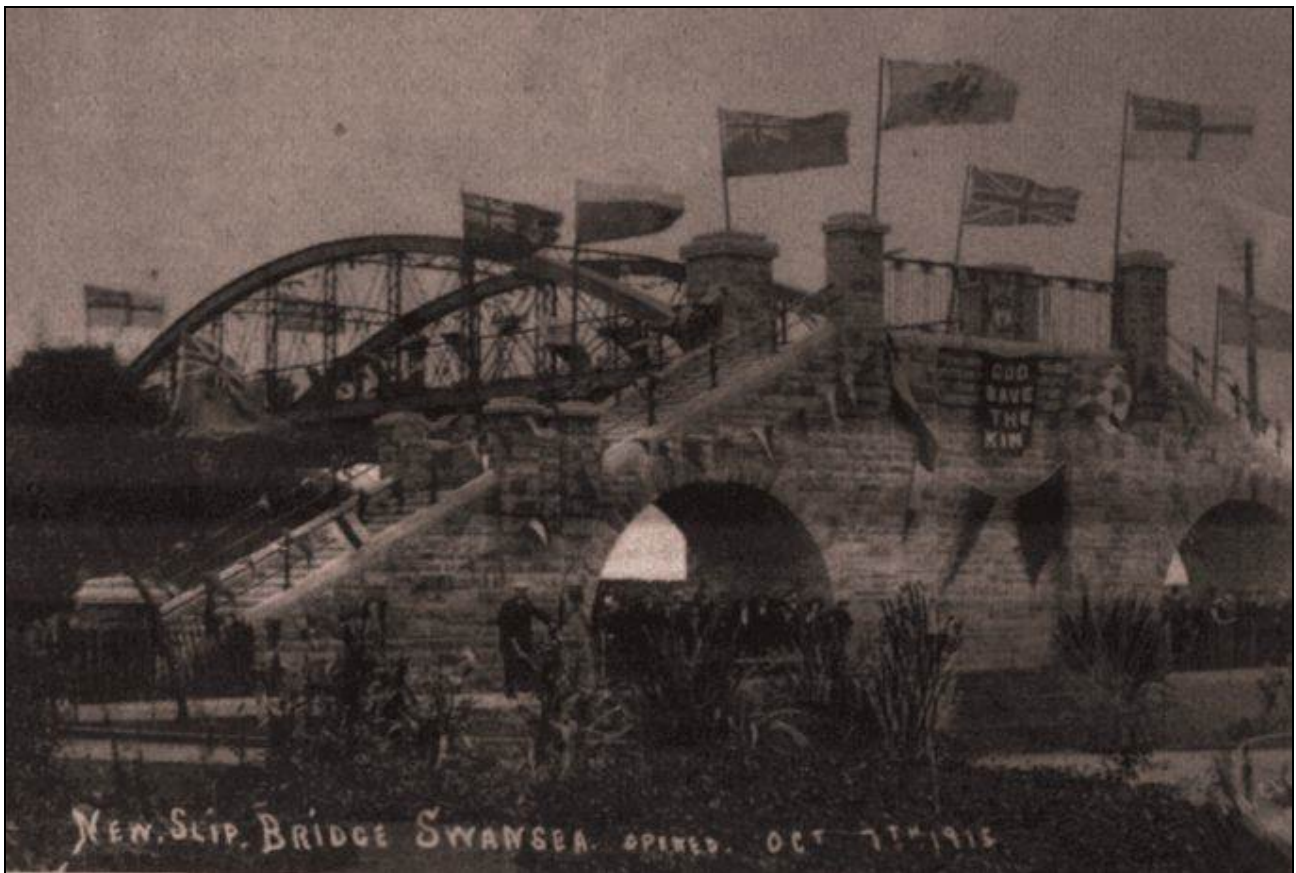
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# The Swansea Slip Bridge

## The Swansea Slip Bridge, St Helen's, Mumbles Road, Swansea.

The Swansea Slip Bridge is a pedestrian footbridge that has been partially dismantled and is currently under threat of demolition. Since its completion in 1915 the bridge has been the focal point of Swansea Beach and is a landmark structure known to generations of residents and visitors. Since it was built the bridge has provided safe access across the 4-lane highway of Mumbles Road. The Bridge is an icon of Swansea's historic past as a tourist centre for the early twentieth century industrial communities of the Swansea Valley. The steel deck of the bridge was controversially removed for maintenance in 2004 in the face of considerable public opposition and a promise that the bridge would be replaced as soon as possible. In the face of growing public concern over the future of the bridge, Swansea Council launched a public consultation exercise to canvass options for its refurbishment. Even though there was an extremely large majority of respondents in favour of the refurbishment, the Council has consistently refused to honour the promises and commitments they made to take care of the structure. Even though the steel deck has now been removed, the most substantial and expensive part of the bridge namely the extremely distinctive pennant sandstone abutments, remain in good condition.



### Architectural interest

The Slip Bridge was built in 1915 by the County Borough of Swansea to facilitate safe beach access across the various roads, railways and sea wall that separated the beach from the

community at this point. The bridge was needed because the site was the central focus of Swansea's tourism industry and thousands of visitors would regularly congregate at the site causing congestion and accidents as they waited at the level crossing to cross onto the beach at the adjacent slipway. The bridge takes its name from the 'Slip' a similarly famous slipway that provided access onto the beach for visitors for over a century. This part of the beach has been the focus of beach activity for Swansea residents and tourists since at least the early 1800s when the eastern parts of the beach closer to the river mouth were reserved for high class visitors and local people were prohibited from using any other part of the beach.

Although the bow girder bridge deck is of questionable rarity in a national context, the pennant sandstone abutments and decorative cast ironwork are particularly fine and rare examples of a once commonplace but now rare construction method and style. The City and County of Swansea does not have any similar bridges and the context and location of this example are rather unusual if not unique to South Wales. The cast iron bridge furniture displays a rare portrayal of the original Borough arms in a most striking form which is not replicated elsewhere in such a medium. It would be wrong to merely dismiss this structure as a railway bridge for that was barely part of its function. The bridge was primarily a landmark access and safety structure facilitating safe travel for families with children from Victoria Park and the tram stops over the various roads and railways to a safe arrival directly on to the beach. It is doubtless true that the existence of the bridge saved numerous lives by removing pedestrians (particularly young children) from danger on the Mumbles Road. With the (as previously promised) replacement of an architecturally sensitive deck the bridge can continue to provide safe access to the beach for future generations. A number of local groups have also advanced exciting plans for adaptive reuse of the structure to reflect changing needs for sustainability particularly transport, renewable energy, new landmark destination structures and a contribution to the Council's stated ambitions for Blue Flag status for the beach.

## **Historic Interest**

The location of the Slip Bridge is particularly significant as it represents a key historic location on the expanse of Swansea Bay. The site is the key medieval fork in the road where a traveller from the west would either travel to the town or travel to the Tawe ferry crossing. Indeed the original name for the site as being the 'place at the fingerpost' describes the place very well, and a fingerpost still exists at the point today. In the eighteenth century the site became the focus of early bathing and beach life and subsequently a site for a market and entertainments. The Slip Bridge and its namesake the adjacent Slip are structures that acknowledge historic continuity across centuries for generations of local working-class people. In addition to being an important element in Swansea's historical landscape, the Slip Bridge is clearly a significant local cultural asset for the social and cultural history of the community of Swansea and its historic interest must have substantial bearing on its status.

The Slip Bridge is in the ownership and care of the City and County of Swansea.

# Photographs

## 1. The seaward facing pennant sandstone abutment.



The highly distinctive seaward side abutment has successfully weathered nearly a century of tides, sand and weathering. It is a remarkable landmark structure which is visible from almost everywhere on the sweep of the bay. It is different in size and shape to the smaller landward abutment. The structure is constructed from high quality pennant sandstone and remains in good condition despite neglect by the owners.

The bridge was clearly intended to be the focal point of beach life, which is a function it is easily capable of regaining.



## 2. The Seaward abutment from the eastern side.



The stonework is of very good quality and although it has been argued that the steel deck had far exceeded its safe lifespan, the same is not true of the stone abutments. The County Council's refurbishment report of 2004 acknowledged that the stonework is in good condition. It is evident that the small deterioration that has occurred is a result of the withdrawal of maintenance by the Council rather than any problem with the structure.

### 3. The seaward eastern side stairway.



Much of the dilapidation here is simply because the bridge has been fenced off from regular use. The structure has coped admirably with drifting sand and the elements for almost a century. The establishment of vegetation on some of the steps is likely to threaten the integrity of the structure very quickly. This picture also gives some appreciation of the massive structure of the abutments. The original builders were clearly intent on building a high quality structure that was going to last for a long time.



#### 4. Close up of a cast iron column



This column still shows the painting of the last refurbishment exercise in 1994 which was completed with great care and attention by West Glamorgan County Council. The arms on the column are a particularly fine representation of the arms of the County Borough of Swansea. The detail even goes down to the fish in the beak of the osprey.



## 5. Pennant sandstone detail



Most of the remaining structure is of high quality stonework which reflects the status of the original structure. It is in good to excellent condition and would cost over £800,000 to replicate today.



## 6. The landward abutment



A view looking across to the landward abutment. The good repair of the stonework is evident. The removal of a number of ancillary structures in the arches have revealed the full grace of the structure. The right hand side arch contained a small beach side café for many years. Several of the re-use plans have a theme of using the arches as a basis for redevelopment. In the background is the Grade 1 listed Swansea Guildhall. Just behind the abutment on the left hand side are the remnants of the small botanical garden that used to compliment the setting. Most of the garden was ripped up to provide additional car parking or has been left unkempt and still contains building rubble left over from the demolition of the high quality toilets that used to stand there.

Completed by Nigel A. Robins on behalf of the Swansea Slip Bridge Support Group.