

A name that defies all attempts to find common ground

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The two oldest bridges in Norwich are Whitefriars Bridge, which goes from Palace Plain across the river towards Barrack Street, and Fye Bridge, which leads from Tombland to Magdalen Street.

It's obvious that Whitefriars Bridge got its name from being situated by the friary of the Carmelites, who were also known as the White Friars, which was on the site where the Jarrold St James Mill building now stands. (The bridge which takes St George's Street over the Wensum is similarly called Blackfriars Bridge because of the nearby Dominican friary.)

But what about Fye Bridge? Why is it called that?

One theory is that this name derives from the Norfolk dialect verb to fye, "to clean up" or "clear out". My grandmother often had a good old fye out when she wanted to tidy up her cottage.

One specific suggestion along these lines is that at the point where Fye Bridge is located, the river was narrower than elsewhere, and so the water flowed more rapidly between the banks there and fyed out the bottom.

Another explanation is put forward by Fiona Williamson in her fascinating book *Social relations and Urban Space*:



■ Fye Bridge over the river Wensum in Norwich.

Picture: DENISE BRADLEY

Norwich 1600-1700. Along this part of the river, there were large numbers of privies which drained into the Wensum.

Bedding Lane (originally Baddings Lane), which runs from Palace Plain down to Quayside, was also known as Three Privy Lane.

This, and industrial pollution from tanning and dyeing works, led to frequent efforts by the authorities to dredge and fye out the river:

However, none of these accounts actually seems to be correct, because the earliest known form of the name of the bridge is *Fybrig*, "Five Bridge", recorded in 1130. But where did that name come from?

It couldn't have been because it was the

fifth bridge in Norwich: chronologically it was the first or second. And it wasn't the fifth one geographically either, whichever direction you travelled in along the river.

The most likely explanation was put forward by place-name expert Dr O K Schram in 1961, and endorsed by Prof K I Sandred in 1989.

This is that the name, which was perhaps somewhat jocular in origin, meant "the bridge that is five times the width of an ordinary footbridge".

It was the most important river crossing in the city, situated on the main north-south road, and so it would not be at all surprising if it was the largest of our bridges.