

The Times view on moving the Oxford v Cambridge boat race: Bridge of Shame

Next year's boat race has fallen victim to Britain's crumbling infrastructure

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Of course it's just one race. And at least this one is only being relocated, unlikely so many other elite sporting events that have either been postponed or cancelled. Nonetheless the decision to move next year's boat race between Oxford and Cambridge from the Thames to the Great Ouse in Cambridgeshire should be a source of national shame. Not because the new course is short and straight and so will rob the event of much of its drama, but because of the reason for the decision. The boat race is not another victim of the pandemic. It is being relocated for only the second time in its 175-year history out of concern for the safety of the oarsmen whose lives could be at risk were they to pass beneath the crumbling and now closed Hammersmith Bridge.

The saga of the bridge has already become an international embarrassment, highlighted in an article in *The New York Times* as a symbol of Britain's decay and decline. It is six years since the first cracks were discovered in the ornate ironwork of this Victorian river crossing designed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette. Yet the vital repairs needed have fallen victim to a three-way tussle between a cash-strapped Labour council that owns the bridge, a financially stretched London mayoralty that is responsible for transport in the capital, and a central government that for seemingly partisan political reasons refuses to help.

The result is that the structural weaknesses have worsened to the point where the bridge was closed to all road vehicles in 2019 and to pedestrians and cyclists this year, while boats are forbidden from passing beneath it. Yet even now there is no agreement as to who should pick up the £140 million bill for repairs, a task that the council reckons will take three years. Meanwhile various imaginative schemes to establish temporary bridges or ferry services have so far come to nothing. Yesterday the council produced a new proposal designed by Foster and Partners, the architects, to suspend a new temporary double-decker bridge within the existing structure.

The failure to fix the bridge is indeed a symbol of a deeper malaise. Two years after a suspension bridge collapsed in Genoa, the Italian government this year opened its replacement. During the Second World War, the British army extended Bailey bridges across wider rivers in days, often under enemy fire. Yet Hammersmith council reckons that merely building a temporary bridge for pedestrians and cyclists would cost £27 million and take six to nine months. Furthermore the RAC estimates that there are more than 3,000 substandard road bridges across Britain that are not capable of supporting the heaviest vehicles. In 2019 the World Economic Forum ranked Britain 36th for the quality of its road infrastructure, far behind other advanced economies.

It is at least encouraging that the chancellor has set out a national infrastructure strategy and committed £27 billion next year to transport, energy and digital projects. But the risk is that a prime minister with a longstanding fascination for eye-catching prestige projects will neglect the urgent but unglamorous task of updating the nation's crumbling transport infrastructure. The real test of Boris Johnson's commitment is not whether he can fulfil his dream of reopening railway lines closed by Dr Beeching more than half a century ago. It is when it will be safe for the boat race to return to the Thames.