

# A Tale of Two Bridges

– The work of William Tierney Clark –



by Duncan JD Smith

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The journey to Budapest starts at St Paul's Church in Hammersmith. It is one of London's forty or so Gothic Revival churches and, like many of those churches, it contains memorials from an earlier building. One such remnant at St Paul's is a wall tablet to civil engineer William Tierney Clark, who died in the parish in 1852.

**ABOVE:** The Chain Bridge across the Danube at Budapest was designed by Tierney Clark (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

The tablet is striking and stands out from others in the church. At the top is a delicate depiction of a suspension bridge. In the inscription below, there is mention of "the Danube at Pesh in Hungary." The tablet is a reminder of Tierney Clark's talent for bridge building and how it took him far from his Hammersmith home.

Born in Bristol in 1783, Tierney Clark's interest in engineering was piqued through an apprenticeship with a local shipwright. A stint at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire followed, where he

## MARLOW SUSPENSION BRIDGE

51° 34' 02" N / 0° 46' 01" W

## SZÉCHENYI LÁNCHÍD, BUDAPEST

47° 29' 08" N / 19° 03' 18" E

marvelled at the world's first cast-iron bridge. Inspired by fellow engineer Thomas Telford, he then relocated to London, where he drafted hydraulic works for the West Middlesex Waterworks Company. It was also there, in 1825, that he designed Hammersmith Bridge, the first suspension bridge on the Thames. Given that other Thames crossings were then constructed of wood or stone, Tierney Clark's graceful chain links suspended from Tuscan-style pylons were revolutionary.

Of Hammersmith Bridge today only the pylon foundations are original. The rest was reworked in iron during the 1880s by sewer supremo Sir Joseph Bazalgette. For an impression of Tierney Clark's bridge, one must instead head upstream to Marlow in Buckinghamshire. With the collapse there in 1828 of the town's wooden bridge, and Marlow's gradual shift from manufacturing hub to waterside resort, a more attractive crossing was required. That this should be modern without detracting from Marlow's traditional riverside charms made Tierney Clark the ideal architect.

As at Hammersmith, his design was novel. Whereas stone bridges presented little more than a hump in the road when viewed head on, Marlow Suspension Bridge was heralded by a pair of monumental stone pylons pierced by late-Georgian arches. Seen from the river, these contrast powerfully with the graceful (but impressively strong) flat chain links supporting the roadway. The bridge was relatively cheap to build, too, since it only necessitated the construction of two pylons, providing Marlow with what Thames observer Eric de Maré called "an example of that period

when engineering and architecture enjoyed a brief but happy marriage."

Spanning a distance of about 70 metres, Marlow Suspension Bridge opened in September 1832. Since then it has proved an attractive foil to the contemporary Gothic Revival church of All

Saints on one side of the river, and a handsome hostelry, *The Compleat Angler*, on the other. An increase in traffic inevitably threatened the tranquil scene, especially following the introduction of motor vehicles. That the pylons could only admit single-lane traffic proved so frustrating that by the 1950s there were calls to replace the bridge. Fortunately, a vociferous local campaign to save it was successful, and much

of the offending traffic was diverted via a new bypass.

Marlow Suspension Bridge today sports several commemorative plaques. As in the church at Hammersmith, it is one making mention of Budapest that raises an eyebrow. What, after all, could cosy Marlow have in common with the sprawling Hungarian capital? The answer is Tierney Clark.

So the story goes, in the same year Marlow's bridge was unveiled, a Hungarian count, one István Széchenyi, visited England as part of a Grand Tour. A fervent reformer intent on updating Hungary's antiquated transport infrastructure, he sought inspiration for a bridge to connect the towns of Buda and Óbuda on one side of the Danube with Pest on the other.

Seeing Tierney Clark's bridge in Hammersmith provided Széchenyi with the answer, and the count commissioned the engineer accordingly. Clark visited Hungary several times, and in 1839

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Marlow Suspension Bridge gracefully spans the River Thames. It opened in 1832 (photo © Andrew Chambers / dreamstime.com).

construction began using chains which were sent to Hungary from England.

The Széchenyi Chain Bridge (Széchenyi lánchíd in Hungarian) was inaugurated in November 1849. Measuring an impressive 375 metres in length, with chains suspended from massive piers of rusticated neoclassical masonry, it was the first permanent Danube crossing in Hungary (the protective stone lions crouching at each end were added three years later). As well as significantly improving transportation connections, the bridge was also a symbolic structure, foreshadowing the unification in 1873 of Buda, Óbuda and Pest as Budapest.

Only in January 1945 were the two banks of the river separated again, when retreating German troops blew up the bridge over the Danube. Tierney Clark's sturdy pylons, however, survived the blast and by 1949 the bridge had reopened. Today it looks just as it did originally, with the addition of a plaque on the Pest side commemorating Tierney Clark and his earlier effort in distant Marlow. ■

Duncan JD Smith is the sole author and publisher of the 'Only In Guides', a series of city guides aimed at independent cultural travellers. Titles in the series include 'Only in London' and 'Only in Budapest'. Find out more about Duncan's work at [www.onlyinguides.com](http://www.onlyinguides.com) and [www.duncanjdsmith.com](http://www.duncanjdsmith.com).