

**Attributed to Edmund Garvey (1740-1813)**  
**THE OLD DEE BRIDGE, CHESTER, c.1765-80**

Oil on canvas 62.3 x 99.5 cm

Purchased with support from the V&A Purchase Grant Fund, Art Fund,  
the Alfred Upton Bequest through the Grosvenor Museum Society  
2001.156

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**The Painting**

The view is taken from Edgar's Field on the south bank of the river Dee, looking east-north-east.

The boat at the far left is a 'Mersey flat', which was used to service the buildings which lay between Skinner's Lane and the Dee. These comprised the workshops of animal skinners and an acid factory, plus several warehouses and small mills, all demolished in 1830. The high octagonal tower behind the boat was built in 1692 to raise water from the Dee and pipe it into the city. This had been built onto the medieval Bridgegate, which stood at the city end of the Old Dee Bridge, but both gate and tower were demolished in 1781.

To the right stand the Dee Mills, where corn was ground. Through the arches of the bridge may be seen the weir, which was built across the Dee

in 1093 to provide power for water mills. Having been burned, repaired and enlarged several times, the Dee Mills were finally demolished in 1910.

A wooden bridge had existed across the Dee from at least the 11th century, but was destroyed by floods on several occasions. In 1387 the city was given permission to rebuild the bridge in stone, and the Handbridge end of the bridge was rebuilt at the end of the 15th century. The bridge provided the only approach to Chester from Wales, and was therefore guarded with gateways at both ends. The gate at the Handbridge end, shown in the painting, was demolished in 1781.

The church of St John the Baptist, to the right of the mills, was founded by King Aethelred of Mercia in 689. It was re-founded as a collegiate church in 1057, and between 1075 and 1095 was the cathedral of the diocese of Lichfield. St John's became a parish church after the dissolution of the college in 1547, and all four arms of the cruciform building were shortened. The 16th-century upper part of the great west tower collapsed in 1881, changing Chester's skyline for ever. Both the large red-brick houses near the church had been built by 1745: the one to the left later served as the bishop's palace, while the taller house was demolished in the 1860s.

Through the three smaller arches of the bridge may be seen The Groves, originally laid out by Charles Croughton in 1725. Visible through the largest arch are the Handbridge Mills on the south bank. These were established by 1119 and were used for fulling, a process in cloth manufacture. During the 18th century fulling was replaced by snuff, needle and paper-making mills, and the tobacco factory which succeeded these buildings was demolished in the 1960s.

At the right of the painting is one of the outcrops of red sandstone to the south of the river, which had provided an easily accessible quarry for the vast amounts of stone required to build the Roman fortress. Situated a little behind the artist's viewpoint is Greenway Street, where the Dee salmon fishermen lived. The painting shows two of their boats in the foreground, together with their net-drying stakes.

The painting is surprisingly accurate in its perspective, scale and detail, and includes only two notable examples of artist's licence. The painter has significantly exaggerated the scale of the sandstone outcrop, and has added a second weir downstream from the bridge. Both of these features

enhance the visual interest of the scene in accordance with contemporary pictorial taste.

### **The Artist**

Michael Liversidge (University of Bristol) and Elizabeth Einberg (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art) have suggested that the painting may be by Edmund Garvey.

Edmund Garvey was a landscape painter in both oils and watercolours, who was born at Kilkenny and died at London. He studied in Ireland and Rome. He first came to London before 1764, where he exhibited at the Free Society of Artists and the Royal Academy of Arts. He became an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1770 and a full Academician in 1783. From 1768 he practised at Bath, where he was friendly with Gainsborough, and then settled in London from 1778. He sometimes returned to Ireland and painted Irish views, and since Chester was frequently used by passengers *en route* for Ireland, Garvey very probably visited the city.

### **The Date**

As we have seen, the buildings in the painting suggest a date within the period 1745-80, but the costumes point to a dating of 1760-80.

One woman, towards the right, is wearing a long apron. Decorative aprons were an important fashion accessory throughout the 18th century. They became particularly popular from the 1760s, but by the 1790s had been discarded except for domestic duties.

Two of the women are wearing large 'bergere' straw hats, with their very distinctive shape. They became popular in the 1730s, and were in vogue several times from then until the end of the century, being particularly fashionable in the 1760s.

The dates of the buildings and the costumes, together with those of Edmund Garvey (assuming him to have been the artist), suggest a date for this painting within the period 1765-80.