

= London Bridge Is Falling Down =

" London Bridge Is Falling Down " (also known as " My Fair Lady " or " London Bridge ") is a traditional English nursery rhyme and singing game , which is found in different versions all over the world . It deals with the depredations of London Bridge and attempts , realistic or fanciful , to repair it . It may date back to bridge rhymes and games of the late Middle Ages , but the earliest records of the rhyme in English are from the seventeenth century . The lyrics were first printed in close to their modern form in the mid @-@ eighteenth century and became popular , particularly in Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century .

The modern melody was first recorded in the late nineteenth century and the game resembles arch games of the Middle Ages , but seems to have taken its modern form in the late nineteenth century . It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 502 . Several theories have been advanced to explain the meaning of the rhyme and the identity of the " fair lady " of the refrain . The rhyme is one of the most well known in the world and has been referenced in a variety of works of literature and popular culture .

= = Lyrics = =

There is considerable variation in the lyrics of the rhyme . The most frequently used first verse is :

In the version quoted by Iona and Peter Opie in 1951 the full lyrics were :

The rhyme is constructed of quatrains in trochaic tetrameter catalectic , (each line made up of four metrical feet of two syllables , with the stress falling on the first syllable in a pair ; the last foot in the line missing the unstressed syllable) , which is common in nursery rhymes . In its most common form it relies on a double repetition , rather than a rhyming scheme , which is a frequently employed device in children 's rhymes and stories . The Roud Folk Song Index , which catalogues folk songs and their variations by number , classifies the song as 502 .

= = Melody = =

A melody is recorded for " London Bridge " in an edition of John Playford 's The Dancing Master published in 1718 , but it differs from the modern tune and no lyrics were given . An issue of Blackwood 's Magazine in 1821 noted the rhyme as a being sung to the tune of " Nancy Dawson " , now better known as " Nuts in May " and the same tune was given in Richard Thomson 's Chronicles of London Bridge (1827) .

Another tune was recorded in Samuel Arnold 's Juvenile Amusements in 1797 . E. F. Rimbault 's Nursery Rhymes (1836) has the same first line , but then a different tune . The tune now associated with the rhyme was first recorded in 1879 in the US in A. H. Rosewig 's Illustrated National Songs and Games .

= = The game = =

The rhyme is often used in a children 's singing game , which exists in a wide variety of forms , with additional verses . Most versions are similar to the actions used in the rhyme " Oranges and Lemons " . The most common is that two players hold hands and make an arch with their arms while the others pass through in single file . The " arch " is then lowered at the song 's end to " catch " a player . In the United States it is common for two teams of those that have been caught to engage in a tug of war . In England until the nineteenth century the song may have been accompanied by a circle dance , but arch games are known to have been common across late medieval Europe .

Five of nine versions published by Alice Gomme in 1894 included references to a prisoner who has stolen a watch and chain . This may be a late nineteenth century addition from another game called " Hark the Robbers " , or " Watch and Chain " . This rhyme is sung to the same tune and may be an offshoot of " London Bridge " or the remnant of a distinct game . In one version the first two verses have the lyrics :

== Origins ==

Similar rhymes can be found across Europe , pre 1400 dating the records in England . These include " Knippelsbro Går Op og Ned " from Denmark , " Die Magdeburger Brück " from Germany , " pont chus " from sixteenth 16th century France ; and " Le porte " , from fourteenth 14th century Italy . It is possible that the rhyme was acquired from one of these sources and then adapted to fit the most famous bridge in England .

One of the earliest references to the rhyme in English is in the comedy *The London Chaunticleres* , printed in 1657 , but probably written about 1636 , in which the dairy woman Curds states that she had " danced the building of London 14th Bridge " at the Whitsun Ales in her youth , although no words or actions are mentioned . Widespread familiarity with the rhyme is suggested by its use by Henry Carey in his satire *Namby Pamby* (1725) , as :

The oldest extant version could be that recalled by a correspondent to the *Gentleman 's Magazine* in 1823 , which he claimed to have heard from a woman who was a child in the reign of Charles II (r . 1660 ? 85) and had the lyrics :

The subsequent verses followed this form , each repeating in the lines below in place of " London bridge is broken down " :

The earliest printed English version is in the oldest extant collection of nursery rhymes , *Tommy Thumb 's Pretty Song Book* , printed by John Newbery in London (c . 1744) , with the following text :

A version from James Ritson 's *Gammer Gurton 's Garland* (1784) is similar but replaces the last verse with :

== Meaning ==

The meaning of the rhyme is not certain . It may simply relate to the many difficulties experienced in bridging the River Thames , but a number of alternative theories have been put forward .

=== Viking attack theory ===

One theory of origin is that the rhyme relates to the supposed destruction of London Bridge by Olaf II of Norway in 1014 (or 1009) . The nineteenth 19th century translation of the Norse saga the *Heimskringla* , published by Samuel Laing in 1844 , included a verse by Óttarr svarti , that looks very similar to the nursery rhyme :

However , modern translations make it clear that Laing was using the nursery rhyme as a model for his very free translation , and the reference to London Bridge does not appear at the start of the verse and it is unlikely that this is an earlier version of the nursery rhyme . Some historians doubt that the attack ever took place .

=== Child sacrifice theory ===

The theory that the song refers to the burying , perhaps alive , of children in the foundations of the bridge was first advanced by Alice Bertha Gomme (later Lady Gomme) in *The Traditional Games of England , Scotland and Ireland* (1894 ? 1898) and perpetuated by the usually sceptical Iona and Peter Opie . This was based around the idea that a bridge would collapse unless the body of a human sacrifice were buried in its foundations and that the watchman is actually a human sacrifice , who will then watch over the bridge . However , there is no archaeological evidence for any human remains in the foundations of London Bridge .

=== Age and damage theory ===

Until the mid 18th century the Old London Bridge was the only crossing on the Thames

in London . It was damaged in a major fire in 1633 , but in the fire of 1666 this damage acted as a fire break and prevented the flames from further damaging the bridge and crossing to the south side of the Thames . With its 19 narrow arches , it impeded river traffic and flow . Central piers were removed to create a wider navigational span . Widening and the removal of its houses was completed in 1763 , but it remained relatively narrow and needed continual and expensive repairs . In the early nineteenth century it was decided to replace the bridge with a new construction . New London Bridge was opened in 1831 and survived until it was replaced in 1972 . It was then transported and reconstructed in Lake Havasu City , Arizona .

= = = " Fair lady " identity = = =

Several attempts have been made to identify the ' fair lady ' , ' lady gay ' , or lady ' lee / lea ' of the rhyme . They include :

Matilda of Scotland (c . 1080 ? 1118) Henry I 's consort , who between 1110 and 1118 was responsible for the building of the series of bridges that carried the London @-@ Colchester road across the River Lea and its side streams between Bow and Stratford .

Eleanor of Provence (c . 1223 ? 91) , consort of Henry III who had custody of the bridge revenues from 1269 to about 1281 .

A member of the Leigh family of Stoneleigh Park , Warwickshire , who have a family story that a human sacrifice lies under the building .

The River Lea , which is a tributary of the Thames .