



Ancient stone bridges with water pouring over the parapets, their narrow arches choked by fallen trees and debris washed down swollen rivers, have been recurring images in reporting the myriad floods of the past sodden years – and the bridges have often been blamed for damming the rivers' flow and causing misery to nearby communities.

As torrential rains wash away the snows, causing more floods in many parts of the country, English Heritage is launching a pilot study to establish whether the 7,000 listed bridges in its care are the villains or the victims of flooding.

"There is often a terrible knee-jerk reaction when there is a problem to say, 'Where's the old stuff? Let's just get rid of it,'" said Simon Thurley, the chief executive of English Heritage. "What we should be asking is, 'What are we doing wrong?' In the case of the bridges, the problem seems to be that so much water is getting into the rivers so fast, and that has far more to do with farming practices and development than the bridges themselves."

Many of the bridges, built more than 500 years ago for pack horses and wagons, still carry cars and trucks every day. The massive stone slabs of Tarr Steps, a pedestrian bridge over the river Barle in Somerset believed to be more than 1,000 years old, were washed away in floods last month, and engineers are now studying how to rebuild it.

English Heritage first began to assess bridges across the country after the floods of 2009, when several collapsed, or were left so structurally unsafe that they were demolished, in Cumbria alone. A policeman, Bill Barker, died while directing traffic away from the floods when the Northside Bridge in Workington collapsed and pitched him into the river Derwent. The county has 350 listed bridges, and many more which are not listed but regarded as of historic local interest.

A pilot project is being launched along the river Aire, in parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, assessing the importance and vulnerability of scores of road, rail and footbridges, and measures to protect them in case of flooding. Nationally, the plan aims to highlight areas where historic bridges are at the highest risk, due to the rate at which flood water rises, and the speed of its flow.

The project is one of a number being launched by English Heritage in a year of celebrations of the centenary of the Ancient Monuments Consolidation Act of 1913. The act, which established statutory protection for the country's most important historic buildings and monuments, was introduced by Herbert Asquith's government at the urging of Lord Curzon who was aghast at the prospect of Tattershall Castle in Lincolnshire, now in the care of the National Trust, having its medieval interiors and fittings stripped and shipped to the United States. His lordly solution was to buy the castle and change the law.