

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

### **SWAN-SONG**

Reasons of intent and space has meant that little consideration has been given to the importance of the river in the local economy for purposes other than that of navigation. Yet these other uses were important. A proper utilisation of the river was important to most riparian land-owners, millers, fishermen, basket makers, and many industrialists. Even the proper care of swans was an important task.

However the temptation to mention one other usage cannot be resisted. On 10 April 1714 the News Letter included the following report: <sup>1</sup>

Yesterday a very unhappy and no less strange passage happened at Tottenham. A bargeman walking on the bank of the river saw a man standing in the water breast high or thereabouts, having his clothes on, and asking him what he did there, the man answered 'what's that to you?' So the bargemen went on and left him. About two hours after, coming back, he found him in the same place, and observing him to look very ill, and to give no answer though he spoke to him again, he called some people, and went down and pulled him out, though with some difficulty, he having tied himself by a rope about his middle to a stump of a tree in the river. As soon as they took him out of the water he died, without speaking a word, nor can it be discovered who he is, he had good clothes on, money in his pocket and a gold ring on his finger.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1. Hist. Mss. Com., Portland, v.414.

## **REPRISE**

The history of the river Lea between the 1570s and 1767 is an unusual one, it does not conform to the normal pattern of development for an important river navigation during this period, to that pattern illustrated by Jackman in *The Development of Transportation in Modern England*, and by Professor Willan in *River Navigation in England 1600-1750*, or in his numerous studies of individual rivers (see Bibliography).

The river Lea did experience the same expansion in traffic that was a feature of other existing river navigations but unlike these and many newly created navigations, the Lea was not improved by canalisation. A pound lock and three new cuts were introduced during the 1570s but all fell into disuse in the 1590s; a pound lock was built next to Ware

Mills in 1658 when a new route was opened between Hertford and Ware; and the owners of Hackney Waterworks built a pound lock on their own initiative in 1762. Other than that the Lea remained an 'old-fashioned' flash-lock navigation after the experimental system introduced during the 1570s was dropped during the 1590s. Definitely not the norm.

For a short period during the second half of the sixteenth century the Lea was the subject of intense interest, when the City of London and then the central authorities sponsored and encouraged efforts to improve transport facilities along the valley. The favoured method of improvement however, was not canalisation, but rather the construction of a canal from the Lea to London and a different method of improving that part of the river between Ware and the canal.

The consideration of at least three separate canal schemes by the City of London was notable, even though none was ever built. There was a short-lived interest in canal building in Elizabeth's reign, and one was actually built, but those considered by the City were the most ambitious, and there is little evidence of such an intense interest in canals elsewhere in England at this time, or indeed, in the ensuing century and a half.

Furthermore, later developments showed that the three canal schemes considered by the City were sensible proposals which took full advantage of a terrain suitable for canal building. Variations on these Tudor schemes were to crop up frequently in the ensuing centuries. In particular, the initial proposal for a canal from Hoddesdon to Islington must be seen as the germ of the idea which was to become the New River, even though no evidence of a direct link has been discovered.

The failure to construct a canal did not mean that the impetus for improvement was lost. A unique experiment in river improvement was introduced instead. An experiment based on the principle of removing weirs and other obstructions from the river and controlling the flow into a defined navigable channel, with the hope that there would be fewer interruptions to the passage of the barges and that the current of the water would of itself prevent the formation of shoals, thus precluding the need for frequent dredging.

This experiment was successful in that it stimulated a rapid expansion in the barge traffic. The Lea became an important transport artery serving the capital, a role which had all but disappeared before the improvements were made. Furthermore the success meant that a pressure group emerged, determined to use and maintain the navigation.

It is difficult to evaluate whether the experiment was such a success technically. No evidence remains as to whether it worked as expected, whether it needed frequent maintenance or not, or whether it allowed a regular timetable to be established.

The experiment ended as a result of persistent opposition from competing road carriers, who eventually took advantage of legal technicalities to justify their actions. The fact that the experimental navigation was not restored after 1595, when the Star Chamber confirmed the rights of the bargemen to use the Lea, might suggest that the experimental

system had been less than satisfactory. Indeed the bargemen seem to have made no effort to preserve it, but concentrated on preserving their traditional rights along the river. It also can be noted that the experimental system was never introduced along other rivers.

The restoration of the traditional flash-lock navigation did not mean that the advantages gained during the previous decades were lost. The evidence shows that the barge traffic quickly adapted, that there was no immediate interruption or decline in use of the river, and that this was to remain the case for another century and a half.

The flash-lock navigation was 'old-fashioned' compared to an efficient canalised river navigation. Reliance upon flashes meant that at best it might take two or three days, and often four or five, to travel from Ware to the lower reaches of the river or to London. There was the distinct possibility of even greater delay as a result of arguments with millers or fishermen over the provision of flashes, and total interruption during particularly dry weather or during floods. There was also a severe constraint on the quantity of goods that could be carried back upstream against the current. Indeed many barges travelled back empty to avoid paying for flashes. Nevertheless there is sufficient reason to regard the flash-lock navigation as being adequate, as being an example of appropriate technology.

It was an adequate navigation because for over 150 years it sufficed, and there was a slow but considerable expansion in the quantity of bulky goods carried. It was adequate because the time taken on the journey was not that important for the brewers or bakers who were the main beneficiaries. Indeed the navigation was sufficiently reliable for the brewers to store much of their malt at Ware and Stanstead rather than on site at London. It was adequate because the demand for coal in upstream communities was not sufficiently high, so the fact that less could be carried upstream was not that important until the eighteenth century.

If it had not been adequate it is likely that there would have been much more evidence of schemes to radically improve it by canalisation. If it had not been adequate the improvement act of 1739 would have been more ambitious, in fact it was one of the least ambitious river improvement acts to ever pass the legislature. If it had not been adequate, then traffic along the river would have declined drastically, for the short distance between Ware and London meant that road carriers could have provided effective competition even for the bulky items if carriage costs along the river rose too high.

The flash-lock navigation was also adequate in that it accommodated the demands of other parties interested in using the river. The passage of barges does not seem to have interfered too greatly with the fishing or the cultivation of osiers, both of which were declining in economic importance at this time anyway. Indeed by the eighteenth century the income from tolls may have been as important a source of income to the fishermen as the sale of fish. There is also no reason to suspect that the navigation harmed the needs of riparian landowners with regard to drainage and watering.

More importantly the flash-lock system does not seem to have stopped the expansion of milling capacity along the river. It is difficult to be precise, more expertise and research is necessary, but the gradual expansion in the width and depth of head streams, the use of additional head streams at Waltham Abbey Gunpowder Mills, the introduction of millponds at Sewardstone, the erection of additional mills at Waltham Abbey, Sewardstone and Tottenham, all suggest that expansion did take place.

Such expansion meant a conflict of interest, for extra capacity required extra water to power the mills. There is evidence of conflict between the millers and bargemen over the provision of water, often serious, but compromise was always reached. Sensibly, the bargemen accepted the encroachments made by the millers, they did not insist on the letter of the law.

Smeaton accurately criticised the deficiencies of this system, as compared to the better arrangements which were possible from canalisation. The passage of flashes downstream did mean great variations in the head of water available to drive the mills, did mean that there could be frequent interruptions to the workings of the mills, and did mean that too much water could run to waste. After canalisation, the supply of water to the mills could be better regulated, to provide a greater and more consistent power to the mills.

The retention of the flash-lock navigation for so long may have retarded the expansion of milling capacity, but the millers had to accept that the bargemen did have traditional rights to navigate along the river, and that their own activities had to be accommodated to this fact. Any initiative for change had to come from the bargemen, the millers as a group were too disparate to replace the existing system, they merely tried to alter existing arrangements piecemeal to their own advantage, as long as this did not arouse too much opposition from the bargemen. That the bargemen never took any sustained initiative to replace the flash-lock navigation until the 1760s is in itself an important indication of how adequate the river was. The barge-owners, maltsters and factors at Hertford, Ware and Stanstead were not impoverished. They were upwardly mobile, and within two or three generations had become accepted as gentlemen. The community had sufficient money, enough self-interest, and enough social and political power. If they had chosen too, they could have organised the canalisation of the Lea much earlier.

That they did not, was because the navigation was adequate, because it was cheap to maintain, and because the administration of the Commissioners of Sewers, and later, after 1739, of the commissioners and the Trustees was sufficient for the task of ensuring that the navigation was kept open and that a balance was maintained between the competing interests. Under such circumstances there was little incentive to replace the flash-lock navigation. Despite the admitted inadequacies, it worked.