

A Tudor Canal Scheme for the River Lea - A Note

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Since my article 'A Tudor Canal Scheme for the River Lea' (LONDON JOURNAL, 4 (1978), ii) was published I have come across a fresh source of information, and also an endorsement I had previously missed on one of the maps there reproduced. This new information requires a revision of some of the arguments then advanced, and permits a more accurate appraisal of the City's proposals to build a canal from the River Lea to the north side of the City.

When the City first sponsored their bill in 1571, they intended to build a canal from Hoddesdon to the Fleet Ditch, and not, as I previously argued, the canal reproduced in Figure 1 of the original article. This evidence of their initial plans emerges from an account drawn up some time in 1571 of some of the expenses incurred by the City in obtaining the act of parliament.¹

Besides meeting the expenses of several members who must have advocated the City's scheme in Parliament, the City also met the following expenses:

'xli pd to James Basendyne scottishman for his travell three daies to Consider howe the River of Ley might best be conveyed from hogesden to the Mantells² and so into Fleet diche & other expences bestowed upon him and others abowt the same xiiijs viiid more to him and Thomas -³ the late servant of Albert Stuges Joyning and conferring togethers to make the instrwement pfitt [perfect] to take the Leavell of the ground from hoggesdon nere to holborne bridge and for measuring and setting owt the distannce from stacion to stacion wch occupied them Sondrie daies for their reward in-monye xxiiis iiijd and for supps drinkinges and other repastes for them xs vid and in reward to a pooreman vid pd to Jaques Farrier Frenchman for making of a new plott for the River of Ley owt of the plott wch my L[ord] Keap[er]⁴ hadd owt of the p[ar]liament howse xxxs'

Unfortunately no plan, nor any other reference to this ambitious scheme remains.

The payment to Farrier might well suggest that Basendyne had revised still earlier plans, but nothing definite can be said on this point. A feature of this proposal was that it would have made use of existing wharfing facilities along the Fleet, whereas the later proposals for a canal to Moregate would have required the construction of such facilities close to the end of the canal. Though the wording of the act suggests that locks were not to be

built along the canal, the fact that the earliest scheme joined two existing river channels would surely have required some sort of regulating locks about which the act is silent.

Such a scheme shows that the City's plans were even more adventurous than I first thought, and were in fact the most ambitious plans to be formulated in Elizabethan England. The accuracy in surveying and construction techniques necessary to build a canal of such length along a level pound would have tested to the limit the existing levels of technology and expertise in England. It is interesting to note both the involvement of a foreign expert, and a special payment for making an instrument which could ensure the necessary accuracy in surveying.

Interesting comparisons can also be made between this scheme, and proposals which emerged during the following centuries which also envisaged bringing water to London along a level pound. In the late 1630s there were plans to bring water from Hoddesdon to supplement London's water supply,⁵ and in 1773 proposals were put forward to build a navigable canal between Waltham and Moorgate.⁶ Both schemes involved the construction of channels which lay on a level between the Lea Valley and London. That it was the lie of the land which suggested these recurring schemes is clearly illustrated by James Sharp's comments in 1773 that his interest in a canal had been stimulated after 'I had the Level taken from the Quarters in Moorfields, to see where it would run into the River Lee, and to my very great Surprise, I found it extend no less than thirteen Miles and an half, viz. so near Waltham Abbey, as to make that Place a most beneficial Point, for the Extension of the present Undertaking.'⁷ The New River built by Middleton in the early decades of the seventeenth century is a further illustration of the opportunities available.

With such an ambitious scheme in mind, it is obvious just what a setback the imposition of a veto on tolls by the Commons in 1571 must have been. Some form of tolls must have been envisaged, if the City were to finance such a scheme.

The City, however, considered other schemes whereby some of the advantages of their first proposal were retained, but at a greatly reduced cost. A scheme to build a canal across the Isle of Dogs between Bromley and Limehouse in 1573 was never carried out, but this was not, as I suggested, the end of the City's interest: new plans were made in 1577. The map reproduced in Figure 1, which I argued must have represented the City's original proposals, was in fact drawn as a result of new surveys taken in 1577, as an endorsement on it makes clear. Except for Fanshawe's letter (referred to in Footnote 1 of my article), there is no other evidence about these new plans, nor any explanation why the City should undertake such an initiative at this late date, for under the terms of the 1571 act, any canal had to be built by 1581. Presumably the City were stimulated by the improvements being carried out along the River Lea itself by a Commission of Sewers appointed in 1575 to carry out this work.⁸

The damaged endorsement on this map indicates that the surveyor who made it considered at least two new routes in 1577, that he first surveyed the shorter route between Lea Bridge and Moregate, that he came to prefer the longer route shown on the

map, which is inscribed 'This Lyne is for ye Newe Cutte'. No reason for this preference is given, but the difference in length can hardly have played an important part, for the two routes are given as 7378 yards and 7547 yards respectively. Closer examination of the damaged parts of the map suggest that it is complete, and that the favoured route left the river at the very top of the map shortly below Tottenham Mills. My suggestion that the shorter route was considered because it fell within the tidal limits of the river, and thus within the limits of the jurisdiction claimed by the City over the Thames cannot be substantiated. Later references to the City's jurisdiction over the lower Lea never refer to the tidal limits of the Thames, but to the mistaken notion that the City had built a canal as a result of the 1571 act.

Finally it should be noted that the City's original bill was first presented to the House of Lords on 5 May and not 21 May as originally stated, and that this bill contained clauses requiring the City to plant hedges or build fences between their towpath and the adjacent private property, so that this was not a clause inserted by parliament as implied. In Figure 1 the shorter canal was inaccurately shown starting from somewhere east of the River Lea, thanks to a block-maker's error.

NOTES

1. Guildhall Record Office, Chamber Accounts, Sixteenth Century, Vol. 1 f. 67.
2. The Mantells were fields, known as Commandry Mantells, lying between St John Street and Islington Town. They contained many springs which supplied the priory of St John, Clerkenwell, these might have been considered an useful additional source of water for the projected canal. I am grateful to Miss J. Coburn, Head Archivist of the Greater London Record Office for this information.
3. Blank in MS.
4. Sir Nicholas Bacon.
5. British Library, *Sir Walter Roberts his answer to Mr Fords Book entitled A Designe for bringing a Navigable River, from Rickmansworth in Hartfordshire to St Giles in the Fields* (1641), C1027 c32 or 1651/789(1) - (3).
6. Guildhall Lib., Fo Pamp 3349, James Sharp, *An address to the Right Honble the Lord Mayor, the Worshipful, the Aldermen, and Common-Council of the City of London on the Importance and great Utility of Canals in general; the Advantages which may be fairly be expected from the Canal now proposed to be made from Waltham Abbey and the necessity of promoting near the metropolis such improvements as are now carrying on in the more distant parts of the kingdom* (1773).
7. Ibid.
8. Bodleian Lib. MS Rawl Essex 11.