

DOCUMENTS RELATING TO THE PROGRESS OF THE LONDON to CAMBRIDGE CANAL

Part 6

British Library

ADD 35691 folio 6

Letter from Geo Duckett to Lord Hardwick

56. Pall Mall. 3rd Feb. 1824.

My Lord,

Your Lordship is so thoroughly aware that the present is or ought to be the best period for promoting the Cambridge Canal that I have endeavoured to excite the attention of the town of Bishops Stortford to the subject trusting that the temperance and judgments (of) all parties may firstly be circulated. I cannot however boast of such success. In the meantime my Lord I have given notice of an intention to apply to Parliament for powers to make at my own expense a cut between the Regents Canal and the Lea Navigation and I do myself the honour of sending you a sketch.

It is my hope that the benefit to the Regents Canal will induce that Company to look to Cambridgeshire as an essential source of profit and improvement.

For this purpose no better method perhaps exists that the improvements which are now either in execution or agitation at the two ends of the great line Lynn and London.

I have etc.

(Eau Brink at Lynn End)

ADDENDUM

The Hockerill Highway

F. H. Maud p 41

On the 1811 plan put forward, the canal would have crossed the turnpike road at five places - on the new road near Common Down in Bishops Stortford, in Birchanger, in Quendon, at Sparrows End and in Littlebury. With a wharf in Saffron Walden it would have intercepted much of the goods from N.W. Essex, particularly malt, that was, in the existing conditions put on the water at Bishops Stortford. The loss of tolls to the Turnpike Trust might have been diminished by an alteration of the position of the [toll] gate but the damage to Bishop Stortford town whose extensive malting business had been developed around the canal, would have been serious. The opposition of the turnpike trustees was little more than formal; that of the town was vigorous. The Act was passed with the promise that £425,000 of the estimated necessary capital should be paid up before 1st January 1816. This was not done and the Act lapsed.

The Essex Review

NOTES ON AN ESSEX CANAL

By F.H. Maud

One of the accompaniments of the great increase of industrial activity in the middle of the eighteenth century was the development of canal traffic in this country. From earliest times merchandise had been largely water-borne; the condition of the roads rendered them less suitable for heavy goods. At no time was this more probable than at the close of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries. The necessity for easing transport in the new circumstances was the cause of the steps taken for the improvement of the roads and for the development of a canal system.

Although water traffic was no novelty in England, canal traffic was. France had had a developed canal system for centuries before Brindley constructed the Bridgewater Canal. But thereafter the number of canals increased rapidly. One effort, an early one, was the canalisation of the Stort, giving access through its junction with the Lea, from Bishop's Stortford to London. This was in 1768. Twenty years later it was proposed to link up the Stort with the Granta. It is this proposed canal that is the subject of these notes.

King's Lynn was an important distributing centre for the Eastern Counties. Heavy goods were brought sea-borne from London and the North and were transported as far south as Cambridge by the Great Ouse and its tributaries. In the other direction were sent grain, wool and some other agricultural products. But sea transport had serious risks and the idea of an inland waterway linking London and King's Lynn and serving by means of its connections a large section of East Anglia was obviously attractive.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Collar, of Saffron Walden, I have been allowed to see papers in his charge dealing with this project or, rather, projects. These papers are of two kinds, printed pamphlets dealing with the question in general and a considerable number of manuscript documents, mostly concerned with interest of Saffron Walden in the scheme. The evidence is obviously incomplete, but it is possible to form a coherent story of this project and its ultimate failure

The Corporation of London, through its Thames and Canal Traffic Committee, was taking a considerable interest in the canals of the country and the first project originated there. Representatives of the Corporation were present at the local meetings, sometimes in the chair, and the solicitor had his office in the Guildhall.

The first meeting in connection with the scheme was held at Chesterford on 25th July, 1788, and was attended by 'all the proprietors likely to be affected by his canal.' No vote was taken, but it appeared; says the correspondent, that a large majority of those present favoured the scheme 'if indeed any man or means can be found to carry it through.'

The local support sounds rather tepid, but the borough of Saffron Walden, which was apparently not represented at the meeting, was keen in its favour. On the other hand, Lord Howard de Walden, who had spent £100,000 on his shrubberies and plantations, was afraid these would be ruined by the draining away of water.

The town was anxious to save the heavy charge by road carriage from Bishops Stortford on its malt and coal. These charges were at the rate of fifteen pence and thirteen pence halfpenny per ton per mile. But there was a difficulty. The canal as planned would have gone from Bishops Stortford to Ugley and then, going slightly north-west towards Wenden and Duxford, till it reached the county boundary between Chesterford and Fulmire, by-passing Saffron Walden by two or three miles. The town naturally made efforts to get the plan modified and there are numerous papers giving estimates, sometimes with exaggerated detail, of the amount of traffic actual and prospective that would come from the town.

These figures were doubtless put before the meeting at Chesterford on 5 September. This was a more formal affair than the previous one, with a city alderman in the chair. Opposition was here more apparent than at the earlier meeting, for, apart from Lord Howard, who once more voiced the claim of his shrubberies and the rector of Duxford who put forward a number of objections, one being that the proposed canal would lower the price of grain in his parish – this scheme had to meet the hostility of the town of Cambridge. The opponents were mainly the carriers who naturally feared the competition [of] a canal by which it was proposed to carry goods to London at a rate of sixteen shillings a ton against the thirty-five shillings charged by the land carriers. But the meeting approved the resolution in favour of the canal by a large majority.

This meeting further recommended that the old course of the Great Ouse, known as the West River, should be cleared thus opening a through route from St. Ives and Huntingdon to King's Lynn. At the time of the great drainage of the Fens the Ouse had been deprived of a large part of its water between Earith and Denver by the cutting of the Bedford channels. The clearing of the old bed and allowing sufficient water to go over it to carry barge traffic would have been a reversal of the century-old policy. The Fen dwellers naturally objected to the damage to their lands and the proposal was eventually abandoned.

The agitation of Saffron Walden to have the canal brought to the town was more successful. Unfortunately we have no plan of the new route and have to rely on the notification to the clerks of the peace of the names of the parishes through which it would pass. No certainty is possible, but it would appear that the promoters, while adopting the Saffron Walden route, had not abandoned the original plan as an alternative. The places named suggest two plans; the original one through Ugley and Wenden and a new one turning north-east from Bishop's Stortford through Birchanger, Elsenham, Broxted and Debden to Saffron Walden. There it turned north-west to Littlebury and probably between there and Chesterford the two routes coincided. On leaving Essex the canal followed the course of the Granta as far as a few miles below Ely, when it turned north-east to a junction with the little Ouse, probably near Brandon, thus avoiding a bad part of the Great Ouse near Littleport.

Among the documents at Saffron Walden is one that may be regarded as a prospectus of a new company. It begins thus:

'It is intended to apply to Parliament at the ensuing session for leave to bring in a bill extending the navigation in the town of Bishop's Stortford, through the northern part of the county of Essex to the town of Saffron Walden and thence through the counties of Cambridge and Suffolk to join the Brandon river and also for making a cut from the navigation to the Burwell or Reach Lode near Newmarket'

The capital was put at £175,000 in 1,750 shares of £100, which seems a very modest figure for such an undertaking. The estimate of the tonnage to be carried was 100,000 a year, a figure which looks optimistic in view of the fact that the actual tonnage carried in 1791 on the Stort canal, not the least promising section of the route, was less than 19,000 tons.

The bill was presented in February, 1790. Saffron Walden appointed two representatives to give evidence before the committee. There the story stops, and we must consider the bill was a failure.

Nothing more was done for over twenty years, except a rather more ambitious project, which does not seem to have got beyond the stage of preliminary advocacy. But in 1812 the project was revived, this time under the patronage of the Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire, Lord Hardwicke. Saffron Walden was ready to give evidence in favour of the scheme, and requested the two county members, Admiral Harvey and Mr. John Archer Houblon, to support it. The opposition this time came not from Cambridge, although one merchant there gave evidence against it, but from Bishop's Stortford. The malting trade there was very important and, in fact if one may judge from a description published some years later, was not far from being the life-blood of the town. The maltsters and others connected with the trade were obviously alarmed at possible competition, that might be favoured by the new canal, and their evidence which is not reported in detail, was emphatic. One witness declared that the scheme was visionary, highly injurious to Bishop's Stortford, and would be of no use at all. There was more to the same effect. There was support, however, from farmers and others from the more northerly areas and, of course, the usual conflict of expert testimony. Mr. Benny (*Benjamin Bevin*), for the opposition declaring that the line of canal was the most difficult one was with which he was acquainted, while Mr. Rennie, the engineer of Waterloo Bridge, declared that it was very easy. There were further technical details about the size of the reservoirs and so on but the sting of the matter so far as Saffron Walden was concerned was Rennie's emphatic support of the western route by-passing the town.

When it became clear that this would be the route adopted, the merchants of the town agreed unanimously that the proposed canal no longer concerned them, and that they would continue to put their malt on barge at Bishop's Stortford.

In spite of the defection of Saffron Walden and the opposition of other towns the bill passed. The capital required for the main route from Bishop's Stortford to Clayhithe was £524,000 - a striking contrast to the modest £175,000 of 1790. A condition was attached

that £425,000 must be subscribed before 1 January 1816; otherwise the act was null and void.

The closing years of the Napoleon Wars were not very suitable for the launching of such a scheme, and as nothing further has been done in the matter of extension, we may conclude that the scheme failed because of inadequate financial support.

We need not regret the failure. The canal would have opened up no new areas in the county and would have been crushed inevitably with the advent of the railway. The portion north of Bishop's Stortford would have become a useless waterway, derelict - possibly dishevelled and unpleasing.

POSTSCRIPT

Herts Record Office

D/P 21 29/32

This postscript comes from the welcome brochure of the Lee Conservancy Board to the official re-opening of the River Stort on 4th July 1924. Charles N.Tween was the Manager and Engineer of the Lee Navigation.

EXTENSION OF THE STORT NAVIGATION TO CAMBRIDGE AND THENCE TO THE WASH (NORFOLK).

In the year 1778 the Engineer to the Common Council to the City of London, Mr. Whitworth, was instructed to make surveys as to this project, and reported that public advantage would accrue by making a Canal from Bishops Stortford to Cambridge; the length would be 28 miles.

In 1812, an Act was obtained for making this Canal, called "The Company of Proprietors of the London and Cambridge Junction Canal," and a further Act, 1814, was passed to amend the former with a capital of £570,000 (now about 2¼ millions*), but as the money was not subscribed, the Act fell through. The latter scheme was engineered by Mr. Rennie.

If a large scheme is wanted for utilising "Unemployed Labour," here is one !

CHAS. N. TWEEN.

July 2nd 1924

**That was in 1924. In 2010 the equivalent value would be £56,700,000 !*