

EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCHEMES TO MAKE THE WEY NAVIGABLE, 1618-1651

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ONE of the earliest of English rivers to be made navigable was the Wey in Surrey, between 1651 and 1653. In a scheme promoted by Guildford Corporation, a series of canalized sections were cut interlinking with the old river course to form the 15¼ mile Wey Navigation from Guildford to the Thames at Weybridge.

It is evident that even before the 1650's certain stretches of the old river course, both above and below Guildford, were being navigated. In the sixteenth century boats were carrying wood into Guildford from upstream, for a petition from the Mayor to the Lord Chancellor appeals to him to direct the King's Commissioners of Sewers to inquire into the blocking of the river between Cranleigh and Guildford by boughs and trees, which were preventing the passage of boats and causing a

destitution in wood and fuel from which the inhabitants of Guildford are suffering.¹

Some navigation was also possible on the lower reaches of the Wey, near its confluence with the Thames, since in 1624 James Johnstone was granted a licence to build a wharf at Chertsey on the River Wey, for convenience in carrying goods on that river and the Thames.²

The extent of navigation must have been seriously restricted by the numerous mills and water-gates that were a common obstruction on any waterway. Apart from these man-made barriers there were shallows and dangerous currents, so that craft navigating sections of the river would have had to have been fairly small and able only to take very limited loads.

Guildford Corporation had, however, been alive to the possibility of making the whole of the River Wey below the town navigable, and tried to obtain authorization for this by Act of Parliament in 1621.³ To attempt to secure this by Act of Parliament as early as the 1620's was unusual since in the first half of the seventeenth century regular meetings of Parliament were something of a rarity. It was far more common at this time to obtain authorization for such a project either through Letters Patent, under which for example the Warwickshire Avon was made navigable in the 1630's;⁴ or by the decrees of a local Commission of Sewers appointed by the Crown, as was attempted in 1600 in a scheme

NOTES

¹ Sixteenth century; N.D. Surrey Rec. Soc., No. xxix

² *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1623-5*, 347.

³ *Journals of House of Commons*, I, 539.

⁴ Willan, T. S., *River Navigation in England, 1600-1750* (1936), 24.

to make the Medway above Maidstone navigable.⁵ By the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the drawbacks that attached to the ineffective powers of a Commission of Sewers were generally apparent as far as navigation was concerned, whilst the powers of the Crown through the issue of Letters Patent had been considerably whittled down. Authority obtained through Act of Parliament came to be the most successful method of engaging in schemes for river improvement, as the outburst of Parliamentary activity in this direction between 1662-5 demonstrated.

When in 1621 Guildford Corporation first petitioned the House of Commons⁶ they based their case for improved river navigation, like advocates of similar schemes, on the necessity for cheaper carriage of goods. Yet there was a more direct and fundamental reason for the Town's ambition to make the Wey navigable at this time. In their petition they explained this as being the need to provide a new artery of trade as a counterbalance to the declining woollen industry of the town.⁷

Guildford's woollen cloth industry had been the mainstay of the town's rising prosperity for the previous 300 years.⁸ The death throes of the old woollen cloth industry throughout England in the first half of the seventeenth century posed a likely sudden end to the basis of Guildford's prosperity. The depression in the cloth trade of 1630 was particularly severe in Surrey,⁹ but the Corporation's petition of 1621 was already complaining that

now the said trade is for the most part left off.

They declared that

the inhabitants there are in decay and the poore poeple for want of work are in great want,

but added that all this might be alleviated if the River Wey, which

extendeth its length from Guildeford Bridge to Waybridge . . . might be made navigable for vessels of reasonable burthen to carry upon timber of divers sorts, coal, cornne and other stuffs.¹⁰

In fact at about the same time, in the 1620's, signs that the trade in corn was expanding is shown by the rapid rise in tolls at the Corn Market at Farnham,¹¹ a town that was later to have very close connections, in the corn trade, with the Wey Navigation through Guildford.

What produced the greater part of the opposition to the proposed Act, in the form of a counter-petition,¹² appended to which were 138 signatures and marks,¹³ was the means by which Guildford Corporation

⁵ Chalklin, C. W., 'Navigation Schemes on the Upper Medway, 1600-1665,' *Journal of Transport History*, v, No. 2 (1961).

⁶ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/30, 1621 ?

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *V.C.H. Surrey*, II, 342.

⁹ *V.C.H. Surrey*, II, 347.

¹⁰ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/30.

¹¹ *V.C.H. Surrey*, IV, 429.

¹² G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/31, 1621 ?

¹³ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/31/2-6.

intended to finance the undertaking. It was proposed to make the river navigable

at the cost and charges of the inhabitants of the hundreds of Wokinge, Godalmyng and Blackheath.¹⁴

Resorting to an Act of Parliament to achieve this was somewhat ahead of its time, but the method of financing the project by a direct levy was of an older tradition. The assumption behind the direct levy was that all the inhabitants in the area of the improved river would benefit from it, and so should contribute to its initial cost.

In one other proposal, however, the Corporation's petition in favour of making the river navigable was, again, ahead of its time. The Corporation, who were also the prospective undertakers, realised that they could not make the river navigable simply by improving its old course, but that it would be necessary to make 'new cutts'.¹⁵ This was in marked contrast to a number of unsuccessful schemes in the first half of the seventeenth century to make continuous stretches of old river courses navigable, before it became acknowledged that natural and technical difficulties usually prohibited such projects.

The opposition to the proposed Act came from the landowners and inhabitants along the route of the river and from villages such as Worplesdon, the Clandons, Ockham, and Merrow,¹⁶ though it is interesting to note that Sir George Stoughton, a considerable landowner, but also a prominent inhabitant of Guildford, signed the second Guildford petition in favour of the river's improvement.¹⁷

Apart from the direct financial implications in the proposed scheme the opposition had as one of its main objections to making the Wey navigable the fear of those who would come to work on the river, who they described as

The worst and meanest set of people such commonly as by experience is found in rivers of greater breadth as the country and inhabitants shall endure great damage by filching and stealing of their goods.¹⁸

In the face of mounting opposition Guildford Corporation decided to submit a second petition to Parliament which set out both to answer charges in the counter-petition of the rural inhabitants and to make certain amendments to the Corporation's first petition.¹⁹ This new petition now declared that no one was to be charged for the proposed undertaking, 'otherwise than he shall willingly contribute.'²⁰ The opposition from land carriers to improved river navigation was perhaps the most genuine, and the Guildford petitioners were aware of this when at their second attempt they tried to overcome the opposition by accusing the country inhabitants of including in their counter-petition the names of

¹⁴ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/30.

¹⁵ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/30.

¹⁶ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/31/1-6.

¹⁷ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/32, 1620's.

¹⁸ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/31/1.

¹⁹ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/32.

²⁰ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/32.

nyne persons beinge all very poore and not of habite to keep a cart or Teeme.²¹ The inference being that they had nothing to lose by having the river improved.

Guildford's modified petition went on to claim that a navigable River Wey would be beneficial not only to that town itself but to the population of the hundreds of Blackheath, Godalming, Farnham, and even parts of the adjoining counties of Sussex and Hampshire; and that it would also

bringe a great reliefe to an infinite number of poore people . . . [whose] gayne shoulde farr exceed their losse,

if any loss at all.²² But in the House of Commons Mr Alford did not share the convictions of Guildford's latest petition and was not satisfied that the hundred of Blackheath would receive any benefit from the river's improvement.²³ Even so the Bill went into Committee and, yet despite the fact that it was ordered to be engrossed a few weeks later,²⁴ it never in fact reached the Statute Book.

On 25 March, 1624, 'An Act for prostrating Wears upon the River of Wey' was introduced into the House of Commons²⁵ (on the same day as a reading was fixed for the Bill to make the Thames navigable to Oxford). At the end of May the Wey Bill on its second reading was ordered to be engrossed,²⁶ but like its predecessor in 1621, it too failed to culminate in an Act of Parliament.

The 1624 project was probably also promoted from Guildford, for a paper printed in 1670 entitled 'A Reply to a Paper Intituled: An Answer to the Pretended Case . . . concerning the Navigation of the River of Wye, in the County of Surrey . . .', mentions that,

About the year 1625 Doctor Abbot . . . being Born at Guildford in Surrey, and desirous for the Benefit of the Town, to have a River made, caused a Survey to be taken, but Charge and Difficulty discouraged him.²⁷

However, this view is not substantiated by any other source.

One of the undertakers, and the civil engineer of the successful scheme, 1651-3, to make the Wey navigable (until his death in May 1652) was Sir Richard Weston. Over the previous three decades he had already been acquiring extensive knowledge of river navigation.

On the death of his father in 1613 Richard Weston,²⁸ Esquire, of West Clandon, Surrey, inherited an additional estate at Sutton Park, two miles to the north-west. Through part of this newly acquired estate, four miles from Guildford, the River Wey weaved a slow, meandering course, with the lush meadows based on rich alluvial soil adjoining the river prized as a highly valued agricultural asset. Yet much of the remainder of the estate was at the other extreme, on very poor Bagshot sand left as

²¹ G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/32.

²² G.M.R., Loseley MSS 1331/32.

²³ *Journals of House of Commons*, I, 539.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 560.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 749.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 795.

²⁷ B.M. 816. m8. (57). 1670?

²⁸ Knighted 1622. See Harrison, F., *Annals of an Old Manor House* (1893).

barren heathland, which had always been regarded as useless for cultivation. William Cobbett, in the early nineteenth century, expressed the view that Surrey had both some of the best and some of the worst lands, 'not only in England, but in the world'. Just outside Sutton Park he noted that

for five miles on the road towards Guildford the land is rascally common, covered with poor heath.²⁹

It was this problem of the wasted acres within Sutton Park that Weston, from the time of his inheritance, was determined to tackle. He spent a lifetime in searching and experimenting with agricultural innovations, in soil improvement, new crops, and in developing crop rotations. This concern as one of the pioneers of new agricultural techniques provided the link that introduced him to the study of inland navigation and its technical difficulties. His knowledge from his own experience of both river navigation and agriculture was considerably enlarged by the information he gained while visiting the Low Countries. But long before Weston wrote *A Discours of Husbandrie used in Brabant and Flanders*³⁰ and introduced clover as a crop rotation into England he had plans afoot in the early seventeenth century to greatly enlarge the acreage of water meadows at Sutton Park. To do this he intended to cut an artificial channel, three miles long, from Stoke Mills on the River Wey, just outside Guildford, to his estate.³¹ The idea was that by the operation of a lock at Stoke the water level in the channel would be controlled, and that at certain times of the year, most likely during the winter months, the water would be allowed to overflow the surrounding land. This would provide the early grass with a protective covering against frost and by mid-March give a luxuriant feed long before the normal growth.

Weston began drawing up agreements for the purchasing or leasing of land in 1618 on the route the cut was to take. In May of that year he obtained on a thousand year lease some mills and land at Stoke from Sir George Stoughton.³² Weston was given the right to

cutt, digg, and make a trench or watercourse in and through the lands and groundes of . . . Sir George Stoughton.³³

In the same year agreements were drawn up with three more land-owners.³⁴ Sometimes there was no sale or lease of land to Weston, but merely a grant of liberty of access, usually for a specified period of time,

to bringe in, digge, cast, and throw up earth and turffs, to make and rayst bankes upp on both sides of the sayd trenches and watercourses.³⁵

In the case of an agreement that only granted temporary access for the purpose of making the cut there had also to be provision for the repair

²⁹ Cobbett, W., *Rural Rides* (London, 1885 edition), II, 115.

³⁰ Published anonymously by Samuel Hartlib (London 1650).

³¹ *M. & B.*, III, lv.

³² G.M.R., MSS 94/1.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ G.M.R., MSS 94/2, 94/4, 94/7.

³⁵ G.M.R., MSS 94/4.

and maintenance of the watercourse, and so some means of access through the land concerned of

laborers and workmen with all carts, carriages, and working tools.³⁶

By the following year the cut appears to have been completed, as a deed between Richard Weston and one James Russell, says that

their hath lately been made a new Ryver and watercourse.³⁷

This deed followed the pattern of further written agreements between Weston and various land proprietors, which were undertaken in the next five years,³⁸ whereby, following verbal agreement, Weston started work on sections of the cut, so that when the Scrivener eventually drew up the deed of conveyance, Richard Weston had 'already cutt' digged and made'³⁹ the new channel.

None of the agreements made between Weston and the landowners makes any reference to the purpose of this 'new Ryver', nor do they say whether it was ever intended for navigation. It is not until 1631 in a law suit in Exchequer, concerning a complaint about the watercourse, that its purpose is described as being

for the overflowing and watering of [Sir Richard Weston's] . . . parke and lands adjoining.⁴⁰

According to John Aubrey this channel enabled 'Six Score Acres of Ground' to be flooded, 'which before was most of it dry',⁴¹ though another account gives it as 'eight score acres'.⁴² Weston had thus been one of the first to experiment with the then novel idea of the floated water meadow, several decades before it was really popularized by Blith in *The English Improver* (1649).

The land adjoining the watercourse now yielded 200 loads of hay more per year, of which Weston sold about 120 loads.⁴³ Hay was particularly valuable in that part of Surrey, and when Adolphus Speed visited Weston he was told by him that that year 150 loads

of his extraordinary hay which his meadows watered with his new River did yield

were sold, 'at near three pounds a load'.⁴⁴

When Weston left England at the outbreak of the Civil War for a period of exile, he was able, he felt, justly to claim that he had improved his land,

as much as anie man in this kingdom hath done by fire and water.⁴⁵

This new cut was, however, no mere ditch. Weston had in addition to cutting the actual channel to make a cartway adjoining it to facilitate

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ G.M.R., MSS 94/8.

³⁸ G.M.R., MSS 94/5, 94/8, 94/9, 94/10, 94/12.

³⁹ G.M.R., MSS 94/9.

⁴⁰ P.R.O., E. 134, No. 5, 7 Chas I - 1631.

⁴¹ Aubrey, J., *Natural History and Antiquities of Surrey* (1719), III, 229.

⁴² P.R.O., E. 134, No. 5, 7 Chas I - 1631.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Speed, Adolphus, *Adam out of Eden* (1659), quoted in *D.N.B.*

⁴⁵ Weston, Sir R., *A Discourse of Husbandrie used in Brabant and Flanders* (1650), I.

maintenance, and build and maintain bridges over the watercourse.⁴⁶ It was estimated that the whole undertaking had cost him at least £1,500, and probably more.⁴⁷

But the cut was not to remain solely as an irrigation channel. On his exiled visit to the Low Countries in the 1640's Weston gained new information about the working of sluices, pound locks, and navigable channels. In the United Provinces, it must have impressed him as it did Andrew Yarranton, later in the century, that the Dutch made

cut rivers navigable in all places, where art can possibly effect it; thereby making Trade more Communicable and Easie than in other places.⁴⁸

Part of the original cut was obviously under consideration as forming a section of a navigable channel in conjunction with the River Wey, for as Sir George Stoughton's nephew, Nicholas Stoughton, was later to explain Sir Richard Weston, in the early 1650's

being one of the undertakers for making the River Wye . . . navigable . . . did convert the sayd Cutt [through land leased from Sir George Stoughton in 1618] soe made by him to the use of the Navigation of the aforesayd River.⁴⁹

Had the Civil War not intervened it is possible that the Wey would have been made navigable before 1653, since in 1635 Sir Richard Weston was named as one of the Royal Commissioners in a scheme

to make a navigable Cut from Arundel in Sussex, to the Thames by the River Wye.⁵⁰

Although the river was surveyed and agreements made with some of the land proprietors along its route the project was abandoned due to

the greatness of the Charge and difficulty of the Work.⁵¹

It is also highly likely that certain inadequacies in the power of the Commissioners arose in their attempt to make the river navigable, judging from the shortcomings of similar Commissions elsewhere in England in the first half of the seventeenth century.

By the late 1640's Weston was back again in England eager to put to use the knowledge he had gained on inland navigation in the Low Countries. But in order to do so he first had to find someone in high favour with the Parliamentarians who would solicit the discharge of his sequestration. (He was under sequestration

as a Delinquent, and Recusant, upon Supposition that he had been in arms at Hereford.⁵²)

Weston realized that it would be even better if he could also induce such a person to take an interest in promoting his scheme for making the Wey

⁴⁶ G.M.R., MSS 94/4, 94/8.

⁴⁷ P.R.O., E. 134, No. 5, 7 Chas I - 1631.

⁴⁸ Yarranton, A., *England's Improvement by Sea and Land* (1677), 7.

⁴⁹ P.R.O., E. 134, No. 26, 26 Chas II - 1674. See H.M. Ordnance Survey, Sheet 170; Nat. grid ref. TQ 001511.

⁵⁰ B.M. 816, m8. (57).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

navigable. Such a man was to be Major James Pitson, Commissioner for Surrey under the Parliament, and a local Justice of the Peace.⁵³

James Pitson was a self-made man; a seventeenth-century Samuel Smiles. According to an essay written in the 1660's, during one of the disputes over the ownership of the Navigation, Pitson had started life as a Coverlet weaver,

a very meane inconsiderable person . . . of soe however a reputation that his credit would extend to be trusted for the value of 6L in the place where he lived.⁵⁴

The Civil War proved the turning point in his life. Joining Cromwell's army as a foot-soldier he quickly rose in the ranks to Captain and then Major.

By accident being in Lancashire at the Scots Route [Preston, 1648] he fell in with the company and acquaintance of John Noble.⁵⁵

When Pitson left the Army he was well rewarded, for in September 1648 a grateful Parliament bestowed on him £100 for bringing the particulars of the defeat of the Scot's Army, in addition to a further payment of £450 as compensation for Pitson having been 'taken prisoner and laid in irons' by the enemy.⁵⁶

In 1649 Weston entered into an agreement with Pitson, whereby Pitson would assist Weston both in the acquittal of his sequestration and forward his schemes for rendering the Wey navigable.⁵⁷ Pitson was successful in both instances. A Bill authorizing work on the River Wey, introduced into the House of Commons in December, 1650,⁵⁸ was received as an 'Act for making navigable the River Wye' on 26 June, 1651.⁵⁹

It was agreed that Sir Richard Weston should keep his own design to cut the River, since Pitson and the other undertakers

were wholly ignorant in things of that nature.⁶⁰

Work started on the Navigation in August, 1651.⁶¹

⁵³ P.R.O., E. 134, No. 7, 19/20 Chas 11 - 1667/8.

⁵⁴ G.M.R., MSS 129/45/35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ House of Lords MSS (Appendix, 7th Report H.M.C., 1879).

⁵⁷ *M. & B.*, III, lv.

⁵⁸ *Journals of House of Commons*, VI, 515.

⁵⁹ *Op. cit.*, 593. For details of the Act see Firth, C. H. and Rait, R. S., *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660* (1911).

⁶⁰ B.M. L.R.a.8. (5) - 1670.

⁶¹ P.R.O., E. 134, No. 26, 26 Chas 11.