



Chester and the Navigation of the Dee, 1600-1750.

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FROM the close of the Middle Ages Chester's position as a port was seriously threatened by the condition of the river which gave it access to the sea. The Dee was faced with the problem of the "loose, light, white, skittering sand,"¹ that wind and tide drifted into its channel and the movement of which was supposed to foretell "the future ill or good" of England and Wales.² The task here was to maintain a navigable channel to Chester, but long before the seventeenth century the city was losing its position as a port, for the larger ships were already anchoring five or six miles below it.³ Until the very end of the seventeenth century no decisive effort was made to improve these conditions. A Commission of Sewers failed, in 1607, to carry out measures which might have improved the navigation,⁴ with the result that Taylor found the river "spoyled and impeached by a bank of stones all over it, onely for the employment of a mil or two."⁵ In 1646 the Council ordered the Dee Mills and the causey, which dammed up the water to feed them, to be pulled down within four months at the charge of the city.⁶ They were then in the hands of Francis Gamull, a delinquent,⁷ but the State found it more profitable to farm them at £220 per annum than to destroy them.⁸ The mills therefore remained despite petitions of the merchants⁹ and the deterioration of the Dee to "the worst river in the Kingdom."¹⁰

After the Restoration, the Mayor and citizens of Chester petitioned the king for a commission to view the river¹¹ and the Commons for an Act for that purpose.¹² It was said that the sea had "wrought its course into rivulets along the Welch shore, to the lessening and choaking up the grand river, which now affords not (except at spring tides) water sufficient to bring up a vessel of two tunns."¹³ In 1674 Yarranton surveyed the Dee and, finding it choked with sand, suggested a cut as far as Flint Castle at a cost of £15,000.¹⁴ Thirteen years later, Andrew Barry and others offered to make the Dee navigable if they were granted a lease of the land recovered for ninety nine years.¹⁵ and in 1693 a somewhat similar proposal was made by Evan Jones, but it was not until 1698 that this idea was adopted. In that year the Mayor and Corporation of Chester entered into an agreement with Francis Gell, a London merchant, whereby Gell was to make the Dee navigable for vessels of 100 tons at all tides. Gell was to receive tolls and the land reclaimed¹⁶ and in return deposit £2,000 as security and spend £300 for every £100 received in tolls until the work was finished.¹⁷ This agreement was opposed by Sir Roger Mostyn, the gentlemen, freeholders and inhabitants of Flint and the Commoners of Saltney Marsh.¹⁸ The basis of the whole opposition was the grant of reclaimed land to Gell, which the petitioners maintained would destroy "their ancient Inheritance" in the commons.¹⁹

Despite this opposition, an Act of 1700²⁰ empowered the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Councillors of Chester to appoint seven Commissioners, of whom the Mayor and two Justices of the Peace should be three, to trace the course of the new channel which was to be cut by Gell. If there were disputes over compensation, the Corporation should choose three arbitrators and the persons complaining three. Appeal lay to the Chief Justice of Chester. The tolls were limited to 1½d. a barrel of coal and 2d. a barrel of lime brought to the city by land or water and there unloaded. The duty on coal brought by land was explained on the ground "there's nothing can come by water which will

bear the charge."²¹ Little is known of the work Gell carried out, but in 1707, when Nicholas Jennings offered to improve the navigation of the Dee, his offer was rejected on the ground that the river was already navigable at spring tides for vessels drawing nine feet.²² Some improvement was probably effected, for Defoe mentions a new wharf and landing place for goods on Roodee, which were destroyed by floods.²³

In 1732 the idea of cutting an entirely new channel from Chester to the sea was resumed. This project was opposed by most of the engineers who maintained that the interests of navigation were being sacrificed to a desire to reclaim land.²⁴ Some, but not all, of the Cheesemongers of London opposed on the ground of too high a tonnage duty and too shallow a depth of water in the proposed cut.²⁵ They in turn were attacked by the inhabitants of the county and city of Chester, who maintained that their monopoly of cheese buying was detrimental to the farmers and could only be broken down by better navigation and the arrival of more ships.²⁶ Finally, the Corporation of Liverpool opposed the new cut in conjunction with Sir Roger Mostyn, who owned most of the land at Parkgate where goods were then loaded and unloaded. It was held that the new work would prejudice the port of Liverpool and especially Hoylake.²⁷ This objection was answered by the citizens of Chester who supported the project of forcing the river into its old course by the Welsh side. This would not silt up Hoylake, for the sand driven out would be forced up the old channel, and in any case the "present Navigation of Chester is so very bad, that it is impossible to make it worse."²⁸ This plea was accepted and Nathaniel Kinderley took charge of the work which he estimated would cost from £40,000 to £50,000 and regain 6,000 acres.²⁹ By an Act of 1733 he was appointed nominal undertaker³⁰ and proceeded to nominate forty others as his assignees.³¹ Tolls were to be levied only from sea-going vessels and varied according to the port of destination or departure. The new cut was completed in 1737,³² but the need for more money

led, four years later, to the incorporation of the proprietors into a company with an authorised capital of £52,000.³³ By 1744, when a new Act³⁴ reduced the tonnage duties, the company had spent £56,461³⁵ but it was not apparently until 1775 that any dividend was paid on this.³⁶

NOTES.

- 1 Ormerod, *Chester*, i. 170.
- 2 Drayton, *Poly-Olbion, Works*, iii, 849.
- 3 Harl. MSS., 2,003, f.192; Ormerod, *Chester*, i. 170.
- 4 Willan, *River Navigation in England 1600-1750*, pp.18-21.
- 5 Taylor, *Part of His Summer Travels*, p.29.
- 6 *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1645-7, p.475.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Cal. of the Committee for Compounding*, iii. 1,875.
- 9 *H.M.C.* vi. 172.
- 10 *H.M.C. Egmont*, i. 338.
- 11 *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1665-6, p.436.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 1670, p. 87; *J., H. of C.*, ix. 109. 125.
- 13 *H.M.C.* viii. App. pt. i. 388.
- 14 *England's Improvement*, i. 191-2.
- 15 *Cal. of Treas. Books*, viii. pt. iii. 1,380.
- 16 A grant of reclaimed land was the usual reward for fen drainers, Lipson, *Economic History*, ii. 375.
- 17 *A Case, Relating to the making Navigable the River Dee (1700?)*
- 18 *J., H. of C.*, xi. 689. 713.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 689; Sloane MSS., 3,323, f.267.
- 20 11 Will. III, c.24. Parliamentary activity had begun before the agreement with Gell, *J., H. of C.*, xi. 672.
- 21 *Reasons for Recovering the Navigation upon the River Dee*. This pamphlet is dated 1730? in the Brit. Museum catalogue, but it really belongs to this period.
- 22 *H.M.C.* viii. App. pt. i. 394.
- 23 Defoe, *Tour*, ii. 469.
- 24 Badesdale, *New Cut Canal, Cp., A Bill to Recover and Preserve the Navigation of River Dee (1732)*.
- 25 *The Case of the Cheesemongers, In and about the Cities of London and Westminster (1733?)*; but see *J., H. of C.*, xxi. 80, for a petition from the Cheesemongers in favour of the bill.
- 26 *The Case of the Inhabitants of the County and City of Chester (1733?)*.
- 27 *Liverpool Records*, ii. 92.
- 28 *The Case of the Citizens of Chester, in answer to Several Petitions from Liverpool, Parkgate, and the Cheesemongers (1733?)*. Printed in the *Chester Weekly Journal*, May 23/30, 1735.
- 29 *J., H. of C.*, xxi. 813.
- 30 6 Geo. II, c.30.
- 31 Add. MSS., 11,394, f.30.
- 32 *Canals and Waterways Commission*, Second Report, iii 1.
- 33 14. Geo. II, c.8.
- 34 17 Geo. II, c.28.
- 35 *J., H. of C.*, xxiv. 600.
- 36 Jackman, *Development of Transportation*, i. 200, n.

