

The Navigation of the Thames and Kennet 1600-1750.

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TO contemporaries, English and foreign alike, the Thames was almost one of the wonders of the world. "The Great and famous River of Thames," wrote Delaune, "deserves precedence, not only of all other rivers in England, but perhaps of the World; because of its breadth, depth, gentle, strait, and even Course, extraordinary wholesome Water and Tides, render it more commodious for Navigation, than any other that we read of."¹ They compared it favourably with the other famous rivers of Europe. It was "more pleasant and navigable" than the Seine;² it was comparable "with Royal Tiber."³ In 1752, the Earl of Westmorland, on seeing the Garonne, thought it much finer than the Thames, but he confessed that it was a sight which he had never expected to see.⁴ Such men were impressed, not by the river as a stage for water pageants⁵ or for the more barbaric baiting of swimming bears,⁶ but by the "Forest of Ships of all Nations" below London⁷ and the barge traffic above the Capital, where the tide flowed for 70 miles.⁸ The Thames had been navigable from at least the thirteenth century when John granted a license to William FitzAndrew to have one boat to ply between London and Oxford.⁹ The passage was preserved throughout the Middle Ages,¹⁰ but by the end of the sixteenth century, the river was navigable no further than Burcot.¹¹

¹ Delaune, *London*, p. 195.

² Petty, *Works*, ii, 531.

³ Heylyn, *Cosmography*, p. 252.

⁴ *H.M.C. Denbigh*, v, 277.

⁵ Pepys, *Diary*, i, 28.

⁶ *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1623-5, p. 13. This spectacle was in the Paris Garden with the Spanish Ambassador present.

⁷ Macky, *Journey*, i, 44.

⁸ Griffiths, *An Essay*, p. 17. Delaune gives nearly 80 miles as the tide's flow (*London*, p. 195): Leigh gives 60 "Italian miles" (*England Described*, p. 20).

⁹ *V.C.H. Berkshire*, i, 375.

¹⁰ Thacker, *Thames, General History*, pp. 14-27.

¹¹ Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices*, iii, 759.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a determined effort was made to extend the navigation to Oxford once more, and even beyond. An Act of 1605-6 declared that the Thames was navigable to within a few miles of Oxford and by the removal of obstructions could be made navigable to the city and into Berkshire, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. This would redound to the benefit of the counties, would be a great help in carriage to Woodstock and would preserve the highways, "soe worne and broken as the same in Winter Seasons are hardly to be travailed through." The Lord Chancellor was therefore to appoint eighteen Commissioners, one for the University, one for the city and four for the county of Oxford, and four for each of the counties of Berkshire, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, to carry out the improvements, fix compensation and assess the inhabitants for the expenses of the work. Appeal from the decisions of the Commissioners lay to the Justices in Quarter Sessions.¹² On July 7th, 1607, ten Commissioners met in Oxford and decided to take a "view and survey" of the river from Clifton Ferry to Cricklade and to consider all impediments and "as well of the meanes to rectifye the same, as of the Coste and Chardges requisitt for effecting thereof."¹³ The same day the city laid out £1 13s. 11d. "for a bancket at the Beare for the Commissioners."¹⁴ The "view and survey" cost £10 9s., which the city appears to have paid,¹⁵ though two years later it shared a similar expense with, apparently, the University.¹⁶

The work did not proceed and some of the timber intended for the river was used towards building the Bodleian.¹⁷ Something, indeed, must have been done, for in 1623 it was said that the river was navigable many miles west of Oxford.¹⁸ In that year, a second Act was obtained,¹⁹ towards the cost of which the city paid £20.²⁰ It declared that navigation would be convenient for

¹² 3 Jac. I, c. 20.

¹³ S.P.D., James I, xxviii, f. 7.

¹⁴ Salter, *Oxford Council Acts*, p. 396.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 400.

¹⁷ Thacker, *Thames, General History*, p. 65.

¹⁸ 21 Jac. I, c. 32, sec. 1; cf., Salter, *Oxford Council Acts*, p. 408.

¹⁹ 21 Jac. I, c. 32.

²⁰ Salter, *Oxford Council Acts*, p. 421.

the conveyance of freestone from Bullingdon Quarry and of coal and "wilbe very behoofefull for preserving the Highwaies." The Lord Chancellor was to appoint four Commissioners for the University and four for the city who were to make the river navigable from Burcot to Oxford at the expense of the inhabitants of the city and suburbs. Between 1626 and 1635 the University spent 2,000 marks which had been left to it by Sir Nicholas Kempe, though the money was to be made up again from the profits of the navigation.²¹ The actual work appears to have been completed in 1638 for in that year the University and city leased to Richard Farmer, beer brewer, a dwelling in St. Aldates, wharfage and the profits of the passage through Iffley, Sandford and Swift Ditch turnpikes for 7 years at a rent of £60 per annum. If the turnpikes suffered more than £5 damage, the lessors were to repair them. The lessee was to build a crane at the wharf "of oaken Timber" and a weir in Swift Ditch. Attached to the lease were various orders made by the Commissioners. Wharfage was to be 2d. a ton and the charges for passing through a turnpike 4d. for a flat bottomed boat and 1s. 8d. for a barge, for passing a weir 4d. and 6d. respectively.²² Half the rent went to the city and half to the University,²³ but on September 27th, 1647, the executrix of William Farmer, who had died in debt to the city £60 for rent, asked for an abatement "since owing to these troublous times the benefits from it [the navigation] are less than they would otherwise have been." The Corporation agreed that it would be satisfied if £30 and all the expenses incurred were paid.²⁴ The works were a constant source of expenditure. About 1640 Farmer was paid £5 for mending a turnpike²⁵ and in the following year four justices fixed compensation for land at Culham needed for improvements.²⁶ By 1647 the turnpikes and waterworks were in great need of repair²⁷

²¹ Twyne-Langbaine MSS., I; Thacker, *Thames, General History*, p. 68.

²² Twyne-Langbaine MSS., I. See Tanner MSS., 338, f. 63 for a draught.

²³ Hobson and Salter, *Oxford Council Acts, 1626-65*, pp. 422, 428.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

²⁶ Twyne-Langbaine MSS., I. About the same time, 16 bargemen owed £53 19s. 4d. "for their passages." *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hobson and Salter, *Oxford Council Acts, 1626-65*, p. 147.

and in the following year £112 12s. 3½d. was spent on the works in Swift Ditch (£42 10s. for iron work, £23 5s. for timber, £46 17s. 3½d. for labour) and £379 1s. 8d. on Sandford Turnpike (£40 6s. 5d. for iron work, £32 15s. 5d. for timber, £305 19s. 10d. for labour). Of the total of £491 13s. 11½d., the city contributed half.²⁸ Large sums continued to be paid for repairs and upkeep until after the Restoration.²⁹

According to Taylor only half had been done on the Thames that had been promised,³⁰ an opinion endorsed by Yarranton.³¹ On the other hand, to compare Taylor's voyages up the river in 1632 and 1641 is to note considerable improvement. On his first voyage, Taylor found the river "unnavigable, scorn'd, despis'd, disgrac'd,"³² with "weeds, shelves, and shoals all waterlesse and flat."³³ On his second journey, he admitted that there was hardly any stoppage from Staines upward, except by weirs which had locks to open and shut; only between Cricklade and Cirencester was the river really in bad condition and that was a portion which no one had intended to make navigable.³⁴ Indeed there were temporary obstructions to navigation throughout this period. Besides the exactions of lock and weir owners which had to be regulated by statute,³⁵ there were drought and frost. In 1686 barges could not even pass from London to Windsor for want of water.³⁶ In June 1714 it was possible to cross the channel of the Thames between Oxford and Abingdon "without wetting your shoes,"³⁷ while on July 6th, Dr. William Stratford wrote to Edward Harley from Oxford, "No rain yet with us, nor can we tell when our river will be navigable again."³⁸ At London it was not uncommon for the Thames to be blocked with ice. In January

²⁸ Hobson and Salter, *Oxford Council Acts, 1626-65*, p. 459.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 305; Thacker, *Thames, General History*, p. 68; Clark, *Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, iv, 51.

³⁰ *Taylor's last voyage*, p. 8.

³¹ *England's Improvement*, i, 190; cf., Plot, *Oxfordshire*, p. 234.

³² Taylor, *Thame Isis*, p. 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁴ Taylor, *Taylor's last voyage*, pp. 12-13.

³⁵ 6/7 Will and Mary, c. 16; 3 Geo. II, c. 11.

³⁶ Tighe and Davis, *Annals of Windsor*, ii, 420 n; cf., Cal. S.P.D., 1654, p. 11.

³⁷ *H.M.C. Portland*, vii, 190.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

1649, the river was frozen over³⁹ and again in January 1684, when it became "the common road to Westminster both on foot and in coaches."⁴⁰ In the next century it was sometimes "full of ice."⁴¹ Except for periodic acts of God and the King's friends,⁴² the river seems always to have been passable. In 1625 the Dutch Ambassadors sent their baggage by water to Burcot, when Parliament was held at Oxford because of the plague.⁴³ Eleven years later Henrietta Maria came to within 2 miles of Oxford by barge.⁴⁴ At the Restoration barges were going daily between London and Oxford.⁴⁵ Celia Fiennes found the Thames "full of Barges and Lighters" between Folly Bridge and Abingdon.⁴⁶ Later Defoe saw large barges as high as Lechlade quay.⁴⁷

The trade of this "Noble River"⁴⁸ was dominated by the London market. The Thames was "the foster-mother of this great city."⁴⁹ It was said with exaggeration, "she carries on her surface the greater part of the food that the big town consumes."⁵⁰ The downward freights were timber and agricultural produce, especially corn, malt, cheese and meal.⁵¹ During the Protectorate, the royal forests at Windsor supplied Whitehall with firewood by means of the river.⁵² The beech woods of Buckinghamshire went to make chairs and the fellies for London street cars.⁵³ Reading sent down timber for merchant ships.⁵⁴ The inhabitants of Henley, "which for the most part are Bargemen and Watermen,"

³⁹ Evelyn, *Diary*, p. 235.

⁴⁰ H.M.C. *Le Fleming*, p. 193; cf., Evelyn, *Diary*, p. 570, *News from the Thames*.

⁴¹ H.M.C. *Stuart*, iii, 328.

⁴² In January 1645 it was reported that the locks had been broken down "whereby Barges with Provisions cannot come to the City," *J. H. of C.*, iv, 7.

⁴³ Aerssen, *Verbaal van de Ambassade*, p. 115.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *The Fearefull Summer*, Preface.

⁴⁵ Wood, *Oxford*, i, 427.

⁴⁶ Fiennes, *Through England on a Side Saddle*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Defoe, *Tour*, ii, 432; cf., H.M.C. *Portland*, ii, 299; Delaune, *London*, p. 195; Griffiths, *An Essay*, p. 162. On the subsequent history of the Thames navigation see Jackman, *Development of Transportation*, i, 378-85.

⁴⁸ Sorbière, *Voyage*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Saussure, *Foreign View*, p. 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Cox, *Magna Britannia*, i, 118.

⁵² *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1654, p. 11.

⁵³ Defoe, *Tour*, i, 300-1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

gained a good livelihood by transporting wood and malt.⁵⁵ Malt was also shipped from Staines,⁵⁶ Great Marlow, "a town of very great Embarkation,"⁵⁷ Reading,⁵⁸ Abingdon and Oxford.⁵⁹ Cheese from Gloucestershire and Warwickshire went by land to Lechlade and so down the Thames,⁶⁰ a trade route taken also by bottled cider from Hereford.⁶¹ The upward freights were largely coal, wine and miscellaneous goods.⁶² In 1649, 8,000 cassocks and breeches, 7,500 yards of broad cloth, 8,000 shirts and 8,000 pairs of shoes and stockings were sent from London to Ireland in three stages. They went by barge to Abingdon, from there by wagon to Bristol and from Bristol to Ireland by sea.⁶³ Books came to Oxford by barge,⁶⁴ and probably all towns along the river received, like Reading, their salt, grocery wares, oil, and tobacco by the same means.⁶⁵

It was not until the eighteenth century that the Kennet received attention. Though it was said to be "large and navigable for Barges" as early as 1673,⁶⁶ in 1708 Newbury petitioned for its improvement.⁶⁷ Parliamentary activity over a period of six years finally resulted in the Act of 1715.⁶⁸ The supporters of navigation based their case on the badness of the roads, and the necessity for cheaper carriage, especially of coals. Hungerford declared that malt, meal, and timber for the navy might be sent down the river; Great Bedwyn required improved transport to London, "our common market"; Salisbury and Whitchurch sought an increased supply of coal. The opposition came chiefly from vested interests. Reading and Abingdon declared

⁵⁵ Blome, *Britannia*, p. 189.

⁵⁶ Defoe, *Tour*, i, 144.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 292; *V.C.H. Berkshire*, i, 357-6.

⁵⁹ Houghton, *Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, ed. 1727, ii, 285.

⁶⁰ Defoe, *Tour*, ii, 532, *Complete English Tradesman*, i, 283-4, ii, 174; Maitland, *London*, p. 554.

⁶¹ Yarranton, *England's Improvement*, i, 156.

⁶² Cox, *Magna Britannia*, i, 118; *Report from the Committee appointed . . . to consider the Bill for extending the Coventry Canal to Oxford*.

⁶³ *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1649-50, pp. 556, 558, 593.

⁶⁴ *H.M.C. Portland*, vii, 201.

⁶⁵ Defoe, *Tour*, i, 292.

⁶⁶ Blome, *Britannia*, p. 39.

⁶⁷ *J., H. of C.*, xvi, 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 266, 273, 437, 475; 1 *Geo. I, P.A.*

the proposed navigation prejudicial to their trade, Basingstoke held it would lessen the market. The wharf owners of Reading, the mill owners of St. Giles, Minster and Calcot Mills, and the land owners along the river bank,⁶⁹ all opposed the undertaking. Finally, one Finch, a Pensioner to a turnpike on the Reading Road, opposed on the ground that the navigation would lessen the return from the turnpike duties and so his pension. Failing in open opposition, Finch tried more subtle methods. Ostensibly he supported the Bill, but he advocated such small tolls that the undertakers would never get an adequate return for their outlay. Thus he suggested a capital of £10,000 would be sufficient, whereas £18,000 and £6,000 for compensation were necessary. He exaggerated the tonnage the river would carry in order to support his low rate of toll.⁷⁰

This opposition was defeated in 1715, when Richard and Thomas Cowslade, Henry Martin, Bazile Broadwood, Thomas Pocock, John Hore and Thomas Milsam were appointed undertakers.⁷¹ Six of the undertakers granted away their rights to Henry Martin, except that one of the Cowslades, Hore and Milsam retained one eighth share in the proposed navigation as compensation for their expenses in procuring the Act and other services. On June 29th, 1716, Martin granted one share of three-sixteenths to James Ferne, one of two-sixteenths to Thomas Milsam, Francis Willis and William Martin respectively, and one of one-sixteenth to Edward Martin and John Milford respectively. They were to bear proportionate charges in the cost of the navigation and if any failed to meet his obligations then his share could be sold by the consent of the majority of the remainder.⁷² By 1720 upwards of £25,000 had been spent, but the undertakers, perhaps because of the collapse of the South Sea Bubble, were "lately reduced to great necessities for want of money."⁷³ They proposed to put half of the navigation in trust, in order to raise

⁶⁹ J., *H. of C.*, xvi, 53, 60, 62, 66, 98, 534; xviii, 116, 119, 126.

⁷⁰ *Answers to the (pretended) Reasons Humbly Offer'd for making the River Kennet a Free River (1714?)*.

⁷¹ 1 Geo. I, P.A. The bill, with blanks, is in Bromley, *Parliamentary Papers*, iv, No. 104; the undertakers are named in 7 Geo. I, c.8.

⁷² G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15a.

⁷³ G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15a, f. 2; Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 310.

2,000 shares of £30 each, but the scheme was never carried out. Two years later £40,000 had been spent and by 1724 the work was finished. At the same time the undertakers borrowed £1,500 from George Cheyne, Dr. of Physic, giving one two-sixteenth share and land in Reading and Newbury as security. The loan was eventually repaid by James Ferne. The following year, 1725, they borrowed £2,100 from James Milner, £1,000 from Henry Harwood and £200 from William Tower. A little later the navigation was let at £1,000 per annum for 3 years.⁷⁴ The whole financial aspect of this undertaking is obscure; it is even uncertain whether it ever became a public joint-stock company.

The actual work of improving the Kennet was carried out by John Hore, who, in 1718, was appointed surveyor and engineer at a salary of £60 per annum. On the completion of the undertaking he was to be surveyor for life at the same remuneration as well as being book-keeper or wharfinger at Newbury. Hore claimed to have spent £840 of his own in negotiating with local landowners and upon his application for repayment, he was deprived of his offices for life. This dispute, in the course of which Hore charged the Proprietors with employing an unskilful person and wasting £10,000 and was himself charged with neglecting his duty and refusing to give an account of £24,000 he had received, was not settled until 1732. Two years later Hore was re-instated as surveyor and engineer.⁷⁵ The work was carried out on the principle of pound locks and canalisation. The navigation, when completed, consisted of 11½ miles of cuts, 54 feet wide and 4½ feet deep, and only 7 miles of the natural stream. Twenty pound locks, 122 feet long and 19 feet wide, constructed chiefly of timber, were employed.⁷⁶

The undertakers met with great opposition in their task. In 1720 a mob of 300 men from Reading destroyed part of the

⁷⁴ G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15a. Defoe, *Tour*, i, 286.

⁷⁵ G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15, No. 4. (*The Case of Mr. John Hore and Mr. John Beale*); *ibid.*, 15a, f. 12; Thacker, *Kennet Country* pp. 317-8.

⁷⁶ Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 316; Mavor, *Agriculture of Berkshire*, pp. 438-9.

works.⁷⁷ Floods, too, hindered the undertaking. They caused a shoal between Reading and the Thames where bargemen had to lighten their boats, a process "very inconvenient and chargeable."⁷⁸ Because of these difficulties, the undertakers applied for⁷⁹ and were granted an extension of time until 1723.⁸⁰ Even with the completion of the undertaking, opposition did not cease. On July 24th, 1725, John Usher, a bargemaster of Henley, brought his barge laden with 16 loads of flour worth £240, 30 tons of cheese worth £800 and 4 tons of brass, down from Newbury. He had to lighten the boat to pass Sheffield Mills, which consisted of two paper and a corn mill. When he reached Reading, 300 people stood on the bank and threw stones at the barge, which was in danger of running into the piles in the river.⁸¹ The subsequent depositions showed that the river had been made navigable for barges of 100 tons burden at a cost of £50,000, but they were constantly held up at Sheffield Mills, that 200 men had destroyed the works begun for a tumbling bay and that the rioters were Reading men encouraged by the Mayor, Recorder and some of the Aldermen of that town.⁸² In the following month, August, 1725, Peter Darvall, of Maidenhead, bargemaster, made oath "that he . . . received the Letter hereunto annexed from an Unknown hand and believes it came from some persons of Redding with an Intention to deter this Deponent from working his Barge on the River Kennet in which this Deponent has worked his Barge for some time past." The letter, dated July 10th, ran exactly as follows: "Mr. Darvall wee Bargemen of Redding thought to Acquaint you before 'tis too Late Dam you if y work a bote any more to Newbury wee will Kill you if ever you come any more this way wee was very near shooting you last time wee went with to pistolls and was not too Minnets too Late, the first time Your Boat Lays at Redding Loaded Dam you wee will bore hols in her and sink her so Dont come to starve our Fammeleys and our Masters for Dam You if You do we will

⁷⁷ Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 310.

⁷⁸ G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15a, f. 9.

⁷⁹ J., *H. of C.*, xix, 402.

⁸⁰ *J. Geo. I.*, c. 8.

⁸¹ Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 312.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 313.

send you short home for you have no aceation to come to teak the bred out of Oure Childrens Mouths wee made an atempt wen Your boat Lay at bleaks bridg only Your men must beene all drowned so teake Worning before 'tis too late, for Dam You for ever if you come we will doo it from Wee Bargemen."⁸³

Finally, the undertakers met with considerable opposition from the Commissioners, who held their meetings at Aldermaston, "A middle place between Reading which is an Enemy and Newbury which is a friend to the navigation." The Reading interest appears to have packed the Commission, which granted excessive damages. When the undertakers wished to make a cut of 4 furlongs into Newbury, the majority of the Commissioners refused to grant a precept for a Jury to assess the value of the land, on the ground that the land was not near the river and was unnecessary for the improvement of the navigation.⁸⁴

In 1727, the undertakers, who claimed to have spent more than £40,000, petitioned for a bill to make their Acts more effective. Bargemen owed large sums for toll and millers were obstructing the navigation. Newbury petitioned against the bill on the ground that the undertakers had ill used their powers and done great damage. This was supported by the landowners who maintained that they had never received compensation for their lands.⁸⁵ The bill was not passed, but three years later the undertakers renewed their petition. Their chief handicap was that they could not sue for arrears of toll unless they were unanimous, in other words one proprietor could stop the proceedings of the rest. They suffered also from "vexatious Suits from several of the Country People."⁸⁶ An Act of 1730 remedied these defects.⁸⁷ After stating that more than £50,000 had been spent, it decreed that tolls might be sued for and vessels distrained without the unanimous consent of all. To prevent unreasonable claims for damages, it laid down that if the Commissioners assessed damage above the amount offered by the proprietors, the latter paid

⁸³ G.W.R., MSS., Canal Relics, 15, No. 2

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, No. 6, 15a.

⁸⁵ *J., H. of C.*, xx, 772, 788, 821.

⁸⁶ *J., H. of C.*, xxi, 496.

⁸⁷ *Geo.* II, c. 35.

costs, if equal to or below that amount, the costs were to be paid by those who had complained. With this Act the Kennet was left to enjoy its trade, chiefly in malt, flour, and cheese to London⁸⁸ and coals, deals, iron, and groceries from it,⁸⁹ until the canal era brought fresh changes.

⁸⁸ Defoe, *Tour*, ed. 1742, ii, 58; Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 313.

⁸⁹ Thacker, *Kennet Country*, p. 313.