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The Story of the Canal

AN express train sped through Berkhamsted station and two aeroplanes soared overhead without diverting the gaze of a group of grown-ups and children standing on Lower King's-road canal bridge. Their interest was absorbed by the progress of two barges through the lock—an everyday scene which never loses its fascination. The shrill clatter when the sluices or "paddles" in the lock-gates are dropped, the ponderous creak when their opposite numbers are raised, the thunder as 56,000 gallons of water pelt into the lock, the pitching and tossing of the barges as they rise or fall to a new water level before gliding off at a modest three or four miles an hour—these are sounds and sights one always associates with the Berkhamsted valley.

By 'BEORCHAM'

Mechanisation has not destroyed the old-world charm of the canal. Horse-drawn barges, it is true, are rare to-day, and cyclists armed with gleaming windlasses for operating the sluices now ride along towpaths once trudged by sturdy horses. But walkers in search of quiet and rustic beauty use the towpaths, too, perhaps in larger numbers than ever before. The graceful arc of olive-green water between Northchurch and Dudswell, the leafy gorge at Tring, the homely vista as one approaches the old rustic bridge by Bank Mill—every prospect pleases! Even among the back-streets of the town the canal has a certain fascination. From the towpath we see a Berkhamsted that is familiar and yet unfamiliar. The little lock-houses, the old wharves at Key's and Cooper's, and the narrow stone stairway beside the Boat Inn are among subjects which make a constant appeal to artists and photographers.

It is easy to sentimentalise over waterways but less easy to tell their story. Volumes have been written about the coaching days and the building of the railway, but many a reference library may be searched in vain for books about the early days of the canal. That is why few townspeople would be able to estimate within 20 years the date when an army of "navigators" (the labourers who introduced the word "navvy" to our language) arrived with their primitive tools.

The "navigators" had a disturbing influence on the town of Berkhamsted. Special camps were provided for the men, whose drunken orgies on pay nights offended the good people of the district—and often aroused the envy of poorly-paid farm labourers! The drift of workers from the land to the canal caused farmers to complain that crops could not be gathered and in 1793 work on canals during harvest time was prohibited.

But Berkhamsted's interest in canals started before the first navvies came to the Bulbourne valley. It was an older, more famous waterway—the Bridgewater Canal in Lancashire—which destroyed the old monastic buildings at Ashridge, paid for the extravagant castle-like mansion, and gave employment to generations of servants and estate workers. Many attempts have been made to rob the third Duke of Bridgewater (whose monument in Ashridge Park is still the district's most conspicuous landmark) of his claim to be regarded as "the father of inland navigation." True, he did not build the first canals, and much of his success was earned by the engineering genius of James Brindley. But the Duke's rôle was much more than that of financier. To build a short canal from his coal-pits at Worsley to Manchester he neglected his estates and exhausted his capital; but patience, persistence, and first-hand knowledge of the difficulties eventually brought rich rewards. He not only made a new and much larger fortune for himself but did more than anyone else of his generation to found Britain's industrial might. The Duke of Bridgewater proved that a barge operated by one horse, one man and one boy could do the work of fourteen wagons. The Canal Age was born.

The Worried Millers

Scores of canals had been cut before the Grand Junction Canal Company was formed in 1793 to link the Thames with the already-flourishing Grand Trunk Canal between the Trent and the Mersey. Twelve years later the "Cut," as it was universally known, was completed.

Unlike the London and Birmingham Railway started some 30 years afterwards, the canal had few opponents, among whom were the owners of Bank Mill and Upper Mill. They feared that the Bulbourne would be completely drained, leaving their water-wheels high and dry; but the millers' rights were safeguarded. The Bulbourne, much reduced in size, proved a blessing to the town. Previously the water-meadows along the Berkhamsted valley were aptly named; for months at a time they were inundated, and a writer of 1776 recorded that "Berkhamsted stretches along the south side of a swamp." When the canal was made the flooding ceased and the town was a healthier place to live in.

The "Sunken" Cottages

Pre-canal times are recalled by the row of old cottages near Castle-street bridge. Until the year 1800 they were level with the road, and their present sunken appearance is due to the raising of the road to provide an approach to the canal bridge.

The Berkhamsted section was one of the most costly in the 100 miles route of the Grand Junction Canal. In the few miles from Boxmoor to the Cow Roast it was necessary to construct 20 of the 55 locks required to raise barges from the Thames to the Chiltern gap, which, at nearly 400-ft. above sea level, is one of the highest points traversed by any canal in this country. To keep the upper "pounds" (sections) supplied with water, extensive reservoirs were made near Tring and large pumping stations were built at Newground and Little Tring. Nevertheless prolonged droughts have sometimes brought barge traffic to a standstill. In modern times the gradual lowering of the natural water level by increased industrial and domestic consumption made it necessary to provide several auxiliary pumping stations.

Coal—and Passengers!

In its early years the Grand Junction Canal brought valuable trading opportunities to the Berkhamsted valley. Wharves were built beside the new trade route and for the first time coal reached this district in appreciable quantities. There was brisk business for canal-side blacksmiths—the late Mr. Albert Pocock, of Dudswell Forge, once shod hundreds of barge-horses weekly—and stabling fees added to the prosperity of publicans. Berkhamsted, like most "canal towns," had a barge-building yard—Hatton's (afterwards Costin's) works employed twenty men and boys in Victorian days, and some of the original buildings are still standing in what is now part of Key's timber yard. By the way, in recent times Messrs. East & Son have completed large contracts for lock-gates.

It is an interesting fact that for some years a limited passenger service was available on the canal. It was slow yet infinitely more comfortable than riding in coaches over cobbled streets and deep-rutted highways. Troops were sometimes transported by barge, and on a July day in 1806 some 2,000 soldiers, 60 in each barge, passed through Berkhamsted on a seven days' voyage from London to Liverpool. (In more modern times, it may be added Sunday School treats sometimes included a trip by barge to Newground, followed by a walk to the Monument!)

For the first thirty years the Grand Junction Canal produced rich profits—a £10 share then commanded as much as £290—and the directors faced frequent accusations of abusing their monopoly by charging outrageously high rates. Then, in the 1830's, the monopoly was broken. The Railway Age was born, and it is ironical that the Grand Junction Canal helped its new competitor by transporting by barge the first railway engine seen in the district—the "Harvey Combe," which arrived in sections and was assembled in a barn at Bourne End.

The Wendover "Arm"

To meet the competition of the railways, the Grand Junction Canal Company reduced transport rates, in the case of some cargoes from 16s. to 2s. a ton. Then, as in more recent times, attempts were made to speed up canal transport, and frequent changes of horses enabled "fly" or express barges to maintain day-and-night service. Many an overworked horse collapsed and died on the towpath.

From time to time pessimists predicted that our canal would meet the fate that has overtaken many another waterway which now lies derelict and forgotten, with rotting lock-gates and a mere trickle of sluggish water remaining in the man-made "cut." In good days and bad, however, the Grand Junction Canal (amalgamated with certain other waterways and renamed the Grand Union Canal from 1929–47) retained a steady volume of business. Incidentally, lack of trade was not the cause of the abandonment of the "arm" of the canal between New Mill and Wendover; it was closed because all efforts to waterproof the bed of the canal failed to prevent serious leakage. The section from Drayton Bridge to Little Tring Pumping Station is now dry, but a conduit brings a useful water supply from the Wendover hills to the reservoirs.

Characteristic Dress

To-day the canals are not only mechanised but nationalised. Some traditions have gone for ever—the bargees' characteristic costumes, for instance. One no longer sees men in tight-fitting coats with high, old-fashioned lapels, bell-bottomed trousers of buff corduroy and black hats or caps. Their wives, too, no longer favour shawls, tight-waisted and often elaborately ornamented dresses, amply-pleated ankle-length skirts and black boots lacing to the calf. The sombre clothes have gone, but the bright paintwork and glittering brass ornaments of the barges still delight the eye.

With a proud record of active service in two World Wars the canal still plays a useful part in the industrial life of the nation. But in Berkhamsted many of us like best to think of the old waterway as a link between the present and a more restful, more spacious past. That is the charm of the canal and its 150 years of living history.

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