

The Canal in its Heyday

Berkhamsted has a dual interest in the Canal Age; not only did it give the district a new, cheap means of transport, but it provided the wealth which made Ashridge one of the most important estates in the Home Counties.

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 "the father of inland navigation." True, he did not build the first canals, and much of his success was due to the engineering genius of James Brindley.

But the Duke's rôle was much more than that of a financier. To build a short canal from his coal-pits at Worsley to Manchester, he exhausted his capital and neglected Ashridge and other estates; but patience, persistence and first-hand knowledge of the difficulties eventually brought rich rewards. Besides making a new and much larger fortune for himself and for his successors, who rebuilt Ashridge on a grandiose scale, he did more than anyone else to found Britain's industrial might.

ONE BARGE, FOURTEEN WAGONS

The Duke of Bridgewater proved that a barge operated by one horse, one man and one boy could do the work of fourteen wagons. But Berkhamsted had to wait many years to enjoy the blessings of cheap water-borne transport. 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.

A quiet waterway did not arouse the bitter opposition which harassed railway pioneers thirty or forty years later. Such resistance as the canal company encountered came not from the landed gentry but from owners of water-mills,

who feared that the Bulbourne and Gade would be emptied. At Berkhamsted and Bourne End the millers had no cause for complaint, but Messrs. Longmore and Dickinson, of Apsley, successfully sued the canal company for damages when the giant water-wheel of their paper mill was left high and dry.

THE FIRST NAVVIES

An army of "navigators" (the labourers who gave the word "navvy" to our language) had a disturbing influence on the sleepy town of Berkhamsted. Special camps were provided for the men, and their drunken orgies on pay nights caused both offence and envy. The evasive ones were poorly-paid farm labourers who were so anxious to join the navvies that farmers complained that the crops could not be gathered, with the result that work on canals was prohibited at harvest time.

As the work proceeded, Berkhamstedians approvingly noted that the canal was draining away most of the stagnant water which caused a visitor of 1776 to comment that the town "stretched along the south side of a swamp." The first hump-backed bridges were built, and in Castle Street the road was raised by several feet, giving a row of half-timbered cottages, formerly level with the road, a curious sunken appearance.

COSTLY SECTION

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.

Whilst it is not known whether the first massive lock gates were made locally, it is interesting to recall that in the present century a large number have been made by East & Son Ltd.

To keep the upper "pounds" (sections) supplied with water (apart from loss by evaporation and leakage, over 50,000 gallons are released each time a lock is negotiated), vast reservoirs were made near Tring, and pumping stations built at Newground and Little Tring. Nevertheless, traffic was brought to a standstill in times of acute drought, and severe frosts have been known to immobilise barges for ten weeks at a time.

NEW TRADING OPPORTUNITIES

The Grand Junction Canal was an immediate financial success. By 1818 the yearly revenue was £170,000, and £100 shares were sold for £250. The directors were sometimes accused of abusing their monopoly, and transport rates were admittedly high; but the shareholders were not the only beneficiaries.

Wharves were built in every town, canal-side publicans and blacksmiths hastened to provide "good stabling" for barge horses, and many a Chiltern craftsman switched from wood-turning to barge-building.

At the busy Castle Street and Ravens Lane wharves, coal began to reach the district in large quantities at reasonable prices. Between the two wharves, Hatton's (afterwards Costin's) barge-building yard employed a large number of men and boys until late Victorian times. Of the many canal-side blacksmiths, the Pecoeks, of Dudswell, were perhaps the busiest; they shod hundreds of barge horses every week.

CRUISING BY CANAL

We have no record of a regular passenger service on the local section of the canal, though for a time packet-boats conveyed passengers and parcels between London and Uxbridge. It was, of course, a painfully slow means of transport, though infinitely more comfortable than a bone-shaking ride by stage coach.

In July, 1806, more than 2,000 soldiers, sixty in each barge, were transported from London to Liverpool via Berkhamsted, in seven days—a remarkable achievement having regard to the large number of locks that had to be negotiated. The voyage was completed "without undue fatigue," though possibly without the short-lived excitement and interest of those happy canal cruises (from Key's wharf to Aldbury bridge) which, in years gone by, were part of our Sunday School outings to the Bridgewater monument.

CHANGE OF FASHION

Little more than thirty years after the Grand Junction Canal was opened, the Railway Age was born. To meet new competition, the canal company reduced transport rates, in the case of some cargoes from 16s. to 2s. a ton. Attempts were made to speed up canal transport, and frequent changes of horses enabled "fly" or express barges to maintain a day-and-night service. Many an over-worked horse collapsed and died on the towpath.

Unlike some other canals, the Grand Junction was not defeated by speedier methods of transport. Steamers were introduced, but until thirty years ago most of the barges were still horse-drawn. In these Diesel days, however, no horses plod along the tow-path; if they attempted to do so they would have many a tumble into the canal, for the paths are sadly neglected.

The horses have gone, and so have the ancient "water gipsy" costumes: tight-fitting coats with high lapels, bell-bottom trousers of buff corduroy, and black hats or caps for the men, and shawls, tight-waisted and often elaborately ornamented dresses, amply-plated ankle-length skirts, and black boots lacing to the calf for the women. Happily, the gay paintwork and gleaming brass ornaments of many a barge still delight the eye.

(To be continued)

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (5-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

May 27—June 2: Dickman.
June 3—9: Taylor.
June 10—16: Ross.
June 17—23: Figg.
June 24—30: Dickman.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Mon., Tues., Thurs. & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—closed all day.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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