

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - February 2019

### History and restoration of the Kennet and Avon Canal

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At Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting, Graham Horn gave an enjoyable illustrated presentation on The History and Restoration of the Kennet and Avon Canal.

Graham began by explaining that he had enjoyed holidays on canals, Work brought him to the Reading area in 1983, and - as a way to meet people in the area - he joined a local canal society. Within a few months, the Society held its AGM, he was elected to the committee - and was asked to take over as secretary. After 13 years in that role, Graham then changed to become the group's chairman - and as such became a member of the Kennet and Avon Trust Council.

The history of the canal goes back to the 18th century. The River Kennet had been made navigable from Reading up to Newbury in the 1720s. Reading was the local centre of commerce, and the local people - fearful that Newbury would take over - would try each night to remove the work done during the day!. At about the same time, the River Avon was made navigable from the west up to Bath. There then came a proposal to link the two as a cross country route by the Grand Western Canal (later renamed the Kennet and Avon). It would enable goods to pass to and from London to Berkshire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Bristol - and beyond to America.

Graham then took us on a 'virtual trip' along the canal from west to east, explaining many of its features. Originally, the River Avon Company and the Kennet and Avon were separate concerns. Each needed a water supply, which they guarded jealously. When the canal company built a pumping station at Bath, the Avon Company thought that the canal company might be pumping their water up into the canal. The Kennet and Avon said no, they only pumped water back up the canal from within their locks - although they did not say if the lock gates between the canal and river were open at the time! The company headquarters were in Bath, at Cleveland House, and built on a bridge over the canal. A trap door set into the bridge roof allowed the clerk to lower any messages so that the next company barge could collect it for carrying along the canal - a system known as the "towpath telegraph".

The engineer for the project was John Rennie, and he decided that the best route was to take the canal over the River Avon to the north side for 3 miles, and then back again. The westernmost crossing was the Dundas Aqueduct - named after the company chairman - and remains much as built in the early 1800s. Graham explained that there was no 'compulsory purchase' for such projects in those days, and that John Rennie had to negotiate with each and every landowner over whose property the line of route passed. That resulted in much extra expense - building ornate bridges so as not to spoil the land owner's view, or disguising the canal as a lake, as well as financial compensation to the land owner. It was not surprising, therefore, that Rennie had to spend well over the original budget.

Water supply is always a critical aspect of providing a canal, and originally it was planned to have a 3 mile long tunnel at the summit, through which water would drain into the canal from the land above. However, making a tunnel was not as advanced then as it later became, and the solution adopted was a shorter tunnel with a pumping station at Crofton to lift water 40 ft up from a reservoir back to the summit level. This had two large steam engines that lifted 80 gallons per stroke - one of these, built in 1812, is the oldest steam engine in the world still doing the work it was built for on its original site. Further along the canal, at Hungerford, many of the original buildings such as workers cottages, and a bonded warehouse

remain, whilst at Kintbury the former Dundas Arms is now a hotel. There was a stables here for post horses. These were provided to allow a rapid journey by exchanging the animals pulling the vessels along the canal. It was considered that a horse pulling a cart on the roads of that time could haul a 1 ton load, whereas if it was pulling a barge on the canal the load could be up to 50 tons. The result was a lowering in the cost of the materials carried - as well as a profit for the canal owners.

The canal opened in 1810, and made profits until 1852, but by then the railways were able to carry the goods both more quickly and cheaply than the canals. The only way forwards for the Kennet and Avon was to sell the canal to the Great Western Railway. The latter, however, invested any profits into railways, not canals, so the latter began a long slow decline, although it was 1948 when the last boat worked right through between Reading and Bristol. At that time, the Government was nationalising the country's transport networks, and the canals were put under the control of the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive. The remit of the latter was to 'close the lot down'.

However, John Gould of Newbury was still had 2 boats on the canal which he used to bring salt from Cheshire to the Hovis mill at Newbury. Finding that he was unable to pass through one of the Kennet and Avon's locks, he served an injunction for loss of earnings on the Executive. The latter decided they should formally close the canal down. John Gould set up a Kennet and Avon Association (later Trust), and told the Executive that they could not close the canal, as the 1793 Act of Parliament created a 'right of navigation in perpetuity'. It would need another Act of Parliament to close it. The House of Commons duly passed that - but the House of Lords rejected it.

The Executive, however, had no funds, but took a 'relaxed' view that enabled local groups of volunteers begin to restore the 108 locks and the waterway between them. Fortunately, nothing had meanwhile been built on its alignment, although a special extra-long and deep lock had to be built at Bath to facilitate the building of a new road. One of the major tasks was the Caen Hill flight of locks near Devizes - so called many of the men who originally built it were from that area of France, having been taken prisoner during the Napoleonic War. The flight has 7 locks near the top, then a set of 16, and a further 6 below. In between each is a pound (reservoir) to store water. These were made of clay, but if allowed to dry out, the clay becomes porous, and so the work had to be arranged so as to keep these wet. Much of this work had to be undertaken by contractors, however, rather than the volunteers.

The work had not been done from one end to the other, so as to help keep the volunteers in the various areas motivated. The last section to be restored was the length of river from Reading to Newbury that had been made navigable about 70 years earlier than the canal itself. As brick making then was not as good as it became later, the locks were made turf sided, which meant they had sloping, rather than vertical, sides. The boats had to be lowered parallel to the sides, and in due course metal guides were installed, made from rails 'left over' when the railway converted from broad gauge to standard. The restoration of one of these locks, at Aldermaston, created a problem. It had become a Grade 2 listed structure, so should be restored 'as it was', but modern health and safety requirements wanted it made 'safe', and a compromise had to be reached. At several places on the canal, the swing bridges had to be replaced by a different style of crossing, as both river and road traffic had increased from the early days, and the delays inherent in an opening bridge would not have been acceptable to either. A true turf sided lock does remain at Garston, however.

Eventually, just one lock remained to be done, at Widmead, near Thatcham. Work had been delayed several times, but in the summer of 1989 the Trust President said that it had to be completed by August 8th 1990, as that was the date set for the official opening. A contract - with an absolute deadline - was let (the time constraint leading to a higher cost), and the Kennet and Avon was duly ready to be officially opened by the Queen. The canal teams from the western end gathered at one end of the Caen Hill locks, and those from the eastern end on the other, to see Her Majesty's boat break the tape at the only lock that had not been used up until then.

Work has continued over the last 29 years, and the canal can be enjoyed by those who use the towpath as well as those in boats, and there are now more species of wildlife to be found along the canal than when it

was derelict.

